



U-900

Military fiction thriller

By

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE, 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.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to the novel THE LONE WOLF. It is a proposed alternate history of World War 2 and is strictly a work of fiction.

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CHAPTER 1 – A PAINFUL LOSS

09:24 (Newfoundland Time)

Sunday, February 28, 1943

Control room of the Type IXD3 submarine U-801

Navigating at periscope depth south of Newfoundland

North Atlantic

“A message from BdU¹ headquarters, Herr Kapitän.”

Korvettenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein, in command of the long range oceanic patrol submarine U-801, took the printed message handed to him by one of his radio operators and thanked him before starting to read it while standing near the watch periscope of his Type IXD3. The men presently on duty in the control room then saw his expression become somber all at once, while his shoulders visibly sagged. They however didn't ask him what the message was about and returned their attentions to their individual tasks. On his part, von Wittgenstein, a tall and lean man in his late twenties, walked out of the control room, the message still in his hands, and went aft to his minuscule 'cabin', in reality a private space closed off by a curtain. There, he sat down heavily on his bunk bed and read the message a second time. It announced the death of Fregattenkapitän Otto Kretschmer and the loss of his U-800, sunk eleven days ago off Newfoundland. The only good thing said in the message was the fact that 36 men from the U-800 had been able to escape their sinking submarine and had been taken prisoners by the British.

Ulrich stayed silent and immobile for long minutes as he digested the news of the death of his mentor, friend and combat comrade and of other good men he had come to know well while he himself served on the U-800 for over two years. Otto Kretschmer had been in his opinion the best ever submarine commander in the Kriegsmarine and his talent and tactical genius, allied with the technological marvel that had been the U-800, had brought the British and American navies close to utter defeat in the Atlantic, while his single foray in the Pacific had all but sealed a Japanese naval domination there.

¹ BdU : Befehlshaber der U-Boote. Submarine Command in German.

Right now, Ulrich's own U-801 and the other German submarines operating around the North Atlantic were reaping the rewards from the U-800's hard work, which had broken the British convoy system through the sinking of dozens of escort ships. That was now forcing Allied cargo and tanker ships to navigate as free-runners, without escorts, on their way to Great-Britain. While that made for rarer encounters with the hunting German submarines, that also made those Allied ships sitting ducks if found.

Rereading the message again, Ulrich's sadness progressively turned to hard, cold resolve. Finally getting up from his bunk, he walked back into the control room of his submarine and went to the chart table, where he started calculating a new course. His Second Watch Officer, Leutnant zur See Werner Wendt, who was on duty at this time, approached him and spoke to him in a low voice.

"We are going to move to another location, Herr Kapitän?"

"Yes, Werner! We are going to move to the patrol area that was assigned to the U-800. Read this message."

Wendt, a 27 year old man with a bit of a baby face, took the message offered by Ulrich and read it quickly. When he looked back at Ulrich, it was with shock on his face, but he managed to keep the volume of his voice low.

"The U-800 sunk? Kapitän Kretschmer dead? Mein Gott! And what will we do once there, Herr Kapitän?"

Ulrich's expression was dead serious as he replied to his subaltern.

"The U-800 was a one-of-a-kind submarine with capabilities that were unequalled...anywhere. I am sure that the Americans and British wanted to learn about its secrets, so I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to explore and study its wreck to learn everything they could about it. We are going to make sure that they don't desecrate Kapitän Kretschmer's tomb and steal the secrets of the U-800. Have the helm steer to heading 280 and proceed on diesels and schnorchel at ten knots. Have our electronic warfare keep a vigilant watch for any enemy radar or radio signal, but keep electronic silence on our part."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!" said Wendt before giving out loud orders to the crewmen in the control room. Ulrich then finished reviewing his new course on the chart, calculating the distance and time of travel. In about five hours, he would enter the zone that had been patrolled by the U-800. For their own sake, he better not find any Allied warship snooping over the U-800's wreck.

15:56 (Newfoundland Time)

Rescue and salvage ship U.S.S. FALCON

Floating immobile 220 nautical miles southwest of St-John's

"So, is it the U-800?"

"I strongly believe so, sir." replied via the telephone cable linking the U.S.S. FALCON and its diving bell one of the divers sitting in the steel cylinder. "It is of the right shape and size, from what we know of it."

Commander William McKeoug, in charge of the salvage operation, nodded his head in satisfaction on hearing that. While the British and Canadians had balked at desecrating what was in essence a war grave site, Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations for the U.S. Navy, had quickly decided that the information they could glean from exploring the wreck of the infamous U-800 was too important to be prevented by some moral scruples. He had thus immediately ordered an underwater salvage operation to be prepared and sent as soon as he had learned of the sinking of the U-800 and of the capture of part of its crew. The U.S.S. FALCON had been sent, along with two destroyers as escort ships, and had found quickly enough via sonar the site of the wreck, with the U-800 lying in about 280 feet of water, in the silt covering this part of the continental shelf surrounding Newfoundland. A diving bell with two divers inside had then been lowered from the salvage ship in order to make sure that they had found the right wreck. Now, it seemed that McKeoug was in business.

"Very well! Start taking pictures from inside your bell. We will move forward slowly so that you can picture the whole submarine. How damaged is it?"

"The only damage visible to us is a spot on the port aft section of the hull that partly caved in, probably from a nearby bomb explosion, sir. Apart from that, the submarine looks intact."

"Excellent! First, drop a marker buoy, then start taking pictures."

As he waited for the confirmation from his divers that they had dropped their buoy, in order to more easily find again the wreck's site in the future, McKeoug looked around at the sea surrounding the U.S.S. FALCON. In the distance, about one mile away, he could see the destroyers U.S.S. MAYO and U.S.S. GLEAVES, patrolling at slow speed around the salvage ship and listening for any possible approaching German submarine. The Sun was already quite low on the horizon and darkness would soon fall. However,

McKeoug had already decided that the operation would continue even after dark. After all, the waters at the depth of the wreck were constantly dark anyway and the work conditions for his divers would not change noticeably, as the diving bell was equipped with powerful floodlights, which were already lit, illuminating the U-800. The one factor that would slow down or suspend temporarily the operation was if bad weather came in. Unfortunately, that happened frequently in these waters, something that pushed even more McKeoug in not wasting any time.

15:58 (Newfoundland Time)

Underwater observation dome of the U-801

Ulrich von Wittgenstein had a bitter taste in his mouth and also felt contained rage as he examined visually the wreck of the U-800, barely fifty meters away and well illuminated by the powerful lights of a diving bell suspended over it. His own U-801 was now lying on the silt bottom, parallel to the sunken U-800, and he was using the thick, transparent semi-sphere of his underwater observation dome, situated in the forward top section of his submarine's sail, to look at the U-800 with one of his Zelsaule C38 night director sights. The underwater observation dome concept had originated with the U-800 and, while at first being decried as an extravagant and wasteful feature, had quickly proved invaluable, allowing the crew of the U-800 to visually spot any approaching ship or submarine while staying in silent ambush position on the bottom. It also had proved priceless in helping to map underwater minefields in shallow waters, where the sunlight available was still able to provide a fair amount of illumination. He was now in a good position to get rid of that salvage ship and diving bell and to destroy the wreck, but he wanted to do one thing first. Grabbing the handset of the intercom telephone in the dome, he then spoke in it with a grave voice.

"Misters Koenig, Vormann, Hain, Dollman, Knocke, Bock, Falke, Limburg and Frick, please climb up to the observation dome for a last homage to the U-800 and to Kapitän Kretschmer."

It took only a couple of minutes before the nine other veterans who had served on the U-800 with Ulrich before transferring with him to the U-801 came up to the observation dome, crowding it. They all saluted in unison before they watched with growing emotion the wreck for a good minute, with a couple of photos of the wreck taken as well. Then, Ulrich gave a few orders by intercom.

"Control room, this is the Kapitän! Arm four of our sea mines in our port side tubes and be ready to eject them on my command. Helm, ballast control: take us off gently from the bottom, then use our lateral thrusters to push us towards the U-800. As soon as we eject our mines, you will move away on heading 075 and a speed of seven knots while staying near the bottom. Raise the sub now!"

A short hiss soon afterwards announced the injection of some compressed air into the ballast tanks of the U-801, making it come off the bottom and rise slowly. Under the directives from Ulrich, the helmsman then made their submarine slip sideways towards the sunken U-800, with its ex-crewmembers still watching. Once his U-801 was no more than 25 meters from the U-800 and a few meters higher, Ulrich gave another order.

"Launch the four sea mines now! Helm, get us away from here!"

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

Four compressed air discharges were then heard in quick succession, while four cylindrical dark shapes flew out of their storage and launch lateral tubes, situated just under the deck casing of the submarine. To Ulrich's satisfaction, three of the sea mines landed just beside the starboard side of the U-800, with one even bouncing on its hull before dropping into the silt barely one meter away. As for the fourth sea mine, it actually glided over the deck of the U-800, bouncing on it before dropping in the silt two meters away from the port hull side of the sunken submarine. The U-801 then accelerated forward under electric motor power, taking a safe distance before the sea mines would arm themselves. Being activated via a combined acoustic and magnetic sensor, the mines were designed to arm themselves half a hour after their launch, in order to let their launching submarine time to go away and avoid sinking it by accident.

The watchers on the two destroyers patrolling around the sinking site suddenly saw and heard four powerful underwater explosions, which bodily raised the U.S.S. FALCON out of the water before it splashed back on the surface, its belly ripped wide open. The 1,400 ton ex-minesweeper then sank quickly, giving little time to its 91 crewmembers to escape. As for the divers who had been inside the diving bell, they were already dead, killed nearly instantly when the sea mines had exploded. Both stunned and furious, the commanders of the U.S.S. MAYO and U.S.S. GLEAVES then turned their destroyers around to rush towards the site of the FALCON's sinking. They did order their sonar operators to sweep the depths around them, but the breaking noises and air escaping from the unfortunate salvage ship all but covered any other

noise around. On his part, Ulrich, wanting to confirm the complete destruction of the wreck of the U-800, had gone back in as soon as he saw the flashes of the mines exploding on the bottom. Seeing that the FALCON was now on its way down to the bottom and was going to end nearly on top of the U-800, Ulrich quickly seized that occasion and ordered his submarine to rise to near periscope depth and to flood and open its torpedo tubes. When the MAYO and the GLEAVE approached him, navigating close to each other, they presented themselves as easy targets to Ulrich, who was watching them from the observation dome. Using the torpedo aiming sight normally used for attacks on the surface, he relayed a series of orders via intercom.

"Fire control, heading to first target: 054. Mark! Heading to second target : 087. Mark!"

He then waited a few seconds before announcing a second set of headings.

"Fire control, heading to first target: 051. Mark! Heading to second target : 093. Mark!"

"Fire solution computed on both targets, Herr Kapitän."

"Match bearings and fire tubes one and two on first target, plus tubes three and four on the second target. TORPEDOS, LOS!"

As soon as he had heard all four torpedoes leave their tubes, Ulrich gave more orders.

"Reload forward torpedo tubes! Helm, turn 180 degrees to port, so that we could fire our stern torpedo tubes if needed."

By the time his submarine had turned around, three of his four torpedoes had hit, crippling both destroyers. However, still incensed by what he perceived as a violation of a war grave, he took careful aim and fired his two stern torpedo tubes, hitting again the two wounded destroyers. That was fatal to the U.S.S. MAYO, which broke in half, while the U.S.S. GLEAVES' list to port increased dramatically. Five minutes later, the GLEAVES capsized, watched and photographed by Ulrich. The MAYO was also photographed as both of its halves sank at the vertical. Satisfied and more calm by now, Ulrich ordered his U-801 back down again, so that he could take final pictures of the remains of U-800. What he found was little indeed, the nearby explosions of the four sea mines having utterly crushed or blown open the hull of the big submarine. Taking three pictures of the wreck, Ulrich sighed with regret.

"Sorry to have disturbed your sleep like this, Herr Kapitän. You may now rest in peace."

17:48 (Berlin Time)

Monday, March 8, 1943

'Die Ferkelchen'² restaurant, Munich

Germany

Otto Hannig, wanting to relax a bit on his return from a rather stressful day of work at the food processing plant where he held a position as a production manager, went first inside his family restaurant, 'Die Ferkelchen', intent on having a cold beer. He was a bit dismayed when his daughter Barbara, who worked as a waitress in the restaurant, came to him at a near run, shouting to him.

"FATHER! FATHER! WE GOT A TELEGRAM FROM THE KRIEGSMARINE TODAY, ABOUT DIETER."

"Mein Gott!" said Otto, freezing on the spot. "Don't tell me that Dieter is dead!" Barbara took the time to glue herself to him before answering him.

"No! Thank God for that! However, his submarine was sunk by the British and he is now a prisoner of war. He is said to be in good health."

Otto, a big, tough man, couldn't help have tears appearing at the corner of his eyes as he shared an emotional hug with his elder daughter.

"At least he is safe now for the rest of this war, Barbara. Where is that telegram?"

"Upstairs! Mother has it."

"Then, I will go read it at once. We will talk together about this as a family this evening, once you will have finished your shift at the restaurant."

His heart heavy, Otto then left the restaurant by its side door, which connected it to the entrance and staircase for the apartments situated above it. He already had lost his son Klaus to this war, killed on the Eastern Front two months ago, and Dieter was his only other son, while he also had three daughters. His wife Greta ran to him in tears as soon as he opened the door of their family apartment.

"Otto, we received bad news about Dieter from the Kriegsmarine."

"I know: Barbara told me when I went into the restaurant for a cold beer. Show me that telegram, please."

² Die Ferkelchen : 'The little piglet' in German.

His wife obeyed at once, disappearing for a moment into their bedroom before coming back with a telegram in her hands.

“Here you go, Otto.”

“Thanks!”

Otto sat down in his favorite sofa before reading slowly and carefully the telegram. It was a very terse one, of the kind too many German families received these days. It said little, apart from the fact that Dieter had been taken prisoner by the British after they had sunk his submarine at some undisclosed location in the North Atlantic. Otto closed his eyes for a moment as he digested those words. He himself had been a submariner once, serving as a cook aboard a German submarine during World War One. He luckily had survived that war and the hard, lean years that had followed in Germany, before finally marrying and opening the family restaurant, which was now run by his younger brother Johan. Those years as a submariner had been hard, demanding ones, but he still remembered the strong bond of comradeship that had held him and the other members of his submarine’s crew together. Even today, he still communicated often with the comrades who were still alive, including with a few who also lived in Munich. As his wife sat beside him and hugged him emotionally, a thought formed in his mind. He was no Nazi, but that didn’t prevent him from being a proud and patriotic German.

“Greta, we now have no sons able to serve the Fatherland in this war. My parents, their parents and grand-parents all served when needed in past wars. I believe that it is time for me to volunteer back into the Kriegsmarine. I already am an experienced submariner and a top notch cook: I am sure that they will be able to use my services again.”

His wife looked at him with eyes wide opened, horrified.

“But, but, you are 49 years old, Otto: you are too old to serve! Beside, the family needs you here.”

“Not really, Greta. Johan is there to run the restaurant and our youngest daughter, Ingrid, is now fifteen and studying at the college. As a production manager at the food processing plant, I don’t earn that much more than if I would serve in the Kriegsmarine and I would be fed and housed at my assigned place of duty.”

“But that’s not the real point, Otto!” protested his wife, getting a bit angry with him. “What if you get gravely wounded or, worse, killed? Our daughters have only one father: you!”

"Are we Germans or not, Greta? The Hannigs have always served their country in times of war and I don't intend to hide here in Munich while Dieter is languishing in some British prisoner of war camp. As for my job at the food production plant, I am sure that plenty of men trying to avoid conscription will be more than happy to take my place there. My mind is now made, Greta. Please don't protest anymore."

Greta, knowing how pig-headed Otto could be, didn't insist and instead laid her head on his chest while sobbing quietly.

"Please, Otto, come back alive."

CHAPTER 2 – A NEW ASSIGNMENT

11:13 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, March 23, 1943

Offices of Admiral Dönitz, BdU headquarters

Keroman, Lorient, France

Ulrich von Wittgenstein, closely shaved and wearing a clean, pressed uniform, came to attention and saluted militarily after coming to a stop in front of Admiral Dönitz's work desk. However, despite his best efforts and multiple showers, he still stank of diesel fumes, a universal affliction for submariners just back from sea patrol.

"Reporting as requested with my completed patrol report, Herr Admiral!"

"At ease, my dear von Wittgenstein. Please, have a seat."

Ulrich sat down in one of the comfortable easy chairs near the work desk and handed his report to Dönitz, who eagerly accepted it.

"So, Kapitän von Wittgenstein, how did your patrol go, overall?"

"Quite well actually, Admiral, that is until getting the news of the sinking of the U-800. We lost the best U-Boote commander we ever had out there, but I was able to make the enemy pay for it. When I went to investigate what happened to the U-800, I found three American warships roaming over the wreck: two destroyers and a salvage ship. When I arrived there, there was already a diving bell in the water, suspended just over the wreck and most probably taking pictures of it. I launched four sea mines astride the hull of the U-800, then took some distance until the mines armed themselves and exploded. That sank at once the salvage ship. Taking advantage of the noise created as that ship broke up and sank, I got close to the surface and greeted the two rushing destroyers with six torpedoes, sinking them. You will find the photos of those three American warships, along with a few taken of the U-800 as it lay on the bottom, both before and after the mines detonated. As you will see, Admiral, there is now little left of the U-800 to be exploited by the enemy."

A grim-faced Dönitz looked at the photos for a long moment, concentrating especially on the prints showing the U-800, then looked back at Ulrich.

"You did a truly excellent job there, Wittgenstein. You also showed great initiative at the same time. The service certainly needs more U-Boote commanders like you."

"Thank you, Herr Admiral."

"Now, apart from those three American warships, how many other ships did you sink during your patrol?"

"I encountered and sank nine cargo ships and three tanker ships, for an estimated total displacement of 61,000 tons, Admiral. Unfortunately, one troopship that I spotted proved too fast for my submarine to catch it. No doubt that the U-800 would not have had problems to catch that troopship."

That made Dönitz smile. The tall and lean admiral then extracted a file marked 'TOP SECRET' from a drawer of his desk and offered it to Ulrich while speaking.

"You are probably right, but you won't have that kind of problem during your next war patrol, my dear Wittgenstein. Please read this file."

Opening the file, Ulrich needed only one look inside it before grinning to Dönitz.

"The U-900! It is ready, at last?"

"Yes, and not a moment too soon. The good thing is that it is only the first of a long series of similar boats to be built. In fact, five other Type XXI³ submarines are already under construction, with one to be completed in five weeks. The U-900 now only needs a crew to pass its sea trials, and you will command it, my dear Wittgenstein."

"Uh, talking of its crew, would I be allowed to simply transfer the present crew from my U-801 to the U-900, Admiral? At the least, I would like to take with me the veterans from the U-800 who are part of my present crew."

Ulrich nervously expected to get a 'no' on that, but was quite surprised to see Dönitz nod his head soberly.

"Normally, I would not agree to that, my dear Wittgenstein, but getting the U-900 into combat as rapidly and as efficiently as possible is now a crucial matter for our war effort, in my opinion. The Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy are now teetering on the brink of collapse in the Atlantic and it is critical to keep the pressure on them at sea in order to finally force Great Britain to accept our terms through starvation in war supplies and fuel. Throwing the U-900 in the arena is now even more urgent with the loss of the U-800. Before you ask more questions, I would like you to read the file I gave you and to get

³ The Type XXI submarine class that actually served in World War 2 is not the same as the U-900 depicted in this novel, even though it used many of the same technologies described in this novel.

yourself acquainted with your new boat's capabilities. You should find that beast very impressive indeed, as the designers of the U-900 incorporated into it all the lessons and comments brought forward by Kapitän Kretschmer when he returned from each of his war patrols. As a result, the U-900 promises to be better, faster and meaner than the U-800, apart from being slightly larger."

Two minutes of reading convinced Ulrich that Dönitz was not exaggerating. He had a nearly reverend look on his face as he finally raised his nose from the file.

"Mein Gott! With such a machine and with a good crew, I believe that about anything is possible, Herr Admiral."

"And that is why I will allow you to take your whole present crew with you when you will go take command of the U-900."

Dönitz then looked at his watch and gave Ulrich a warm smile.

"Well, it is now close to noon, I skipped breakfast and am quite hungry. How about you come and have lunch with me at the officers' mess?"

"I would be honored, Herr Admiral." said Ulrich, truly pleased.

"Then, let me lock back that file before we go eat."

With the precious file locked away in the Admiral's safe, the two men walked out of Dönitz' office and went to the officers' mess of the headquarters, which was established in a posh estate with view on the sea. The dining room of the mess itself proved to be well-furnished and convivial, with white-gloved stewards in attendance, ready to serve the officers who came to eat. However, contrary to the situation in German Army garrisons, Dönitz, who truly cared for his submariners, had made sure that the facilities for his enlisted men in Keroman were nearly as good as those for the officers, something that Ulrich could attest from past visits to the enlisted men's mess. In fact, the men's facilities in Keroman included things like an internal swimming pool, a theatre and a ballroom. Taking place at an empty table, the two officers took the time to read the day's menu and order their lunch before continuing to discuss together, setting the modalities and details of Ulrich's transfer of command to the U-900. Their food arrived some fifteen minutes later and Dönitz, who was really hungry, dived on his plate. However, on chewing on his first bite of meat, he had to close his eyes in near ecstasy as he savored the meat and sauce in his mouth. Once he had swallowed his bite, he looked down with respect at his plate.

"Mein Gott! This must be the best veal I ever tasted."

Ulrich, who had ordered the same menu and was also savoring his meat, nodded his head in approval.

"It is indeed excellent, Herr Admiral. It reminds me of the cooking that we enjoyed aboard the U-800. The young cook we had on the U-800 was phenomenal. This is at the least in the same class."

"Is that so?" said Dönitz, who then called to their table the head steward, who bowed to him.

"Yes, Herr Admiral?"

"Did we recently get a new cook for the mess, Helmut? This veal is truly superb."

"Danke, Herr Admiral! We indeed got a new cook only two days ago. I must say that, apart from being a top cook, he is a bit of an oddity."

"Oh!? How so?"

"He actually served as a submariner in the Great War and just enlisted back as a volunteer despite of his age, which would have disqualified him for conscription."

Dönitz opened his eyes wide on hearing that, not a little impressed.

"Ach so! His sense of patriotism and duty is most impressive. I would like to speak a bit with such a dedicated man, Helmut."

"I will fetch him right away, Herr Admiral."

As the steward walked away at a rapid pace, Ulrich shook his head in amusement.

"That cook served on a submarine during the Great War? He must be close to or even past fifty years old."

"Indeed! Maybe I met him once then, when I was serving as well as a submariner."

"Now, that would be one hell of a chance reunion, Herr Admiral."

The two men continued to savor their meal until the head steward came back to their table, a big man with a graying short beard and wearing a cook's apron over his uniform following closely behind. The cook bowed respectfully in front of Dönitz as he presented himself.

"Matrosenobergefreiter Otto Hannig, at your service, Herr Admiral."

Both Ulrich and Dönitz were dumbstruck on hearing his name, but for different reasons. Dönitz got up in a flash from his chair and happily shook hands with the cook.

"Hannig, mein Gott! You volunteered back after all these years? Your sight reminds me of some old souvenirs from my service on the U-39, when we were both young men."

"Indeed, Herr Admiral! It is a pleasure to be able to serve you again."

"And why did you reenlist? You must have a family to take care of."

"I do have a family in Munich, Herr Admiral, but my younger son was killed on the Eastern Front three months ago, while my older son was recently captured after his submarine, the U-800, was sunk by the British. With no sons left to serve the Fatherland, I felt obliged to volunteer, so that my family could continue to serve Germany in this war."

"Your son was serving on the U-800?" asked Dönitz, unable to believe his ears. Otto nodded once and answered in a sober, restrained tone.

"Yes, Herr Admiral! Dieter was the cook on the U-800. Me and my wife taught him everything he knew about cooking."

Dönitz then exchanged a flabbergasted look with Ulrich before facing again Otto.

"Your sense of duty is truly admirable, my old friend. Are you happy with your present post, or do you wish for something else. Ask and you will get!"

"I wished that I could have cooked for my son's crewmates but, since they are now either dead or prisoners of war, my wish would be to serve at sea as a cook, on a submarine, Herr Admiral."

Dönitz was silent for a long moment as he stared at Otto. Ulrich could have sworn then that he saw his admiral swallow hard, while a tear appeared at a corner of one eye. He finally spoke in a low but solemn voice while gently patting Otto's shoulder.

"You will get both of your wishes, my old friend. You will join the crew of Korvettenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein, who is going to take command of the newly built U-900. It happens that he served aboard the U-800 with your son, while some men in his present crew are also veterans from the U-800. Do you accept a transfer to the U-900, Matrosenobergefreiter Otto Hannig?"

"Yes, Herr Admiral!" replied without hesitation the big, graying man, coming to rigid attention.

"Then, after you will have finished your present shift, pack your things and be ready to leave for Kiel with Kapitän Wittgenstein and his crew tomorrow morning."

“Danke, Herr Admiral!” said Otto, a big smile on his face, while the head steward looked on that scene with dismay: he was losing his best cook only two days after the man’s arrival in Keroman!

CHAPTER 3 – U-900

14:36 (Berlin Time)

Thursday, March 25, 1943

Covered boathouse, Germaniawerft Shipyard

Kiel, German Baltic coast

Unlike the U-800, which Ulrich had first seen while it was still on its construction slip, the U-900 was already in the water, floating inside a completion boathouse that hid it from indiscrete eyes and cameras. Another nine similar boathouses, complete with gantry cranes and rail sidings along the quays, were either already built or under construction at the Germaniawerft Shipyard, the same shipyard that had built the U-800. That alone showed to Ulrich that the Kriegsmarine was giving a high priority indeed to the mass production of the new Type XXI submarines, of which the U-900 was the first to be completed. The other thing that was different was the fact that the civilian engineer leading him and his crew towards the gangway linking the quay of the boathouse to the deck of the submarine was not the late Otto Premingen, the genius who had designed the U-800 all by himself. Instead, it was another genius, Professor Hellmuth Walter, who was guiding him today. Walter was in fact talking about his predecessor as he walked beside Ulrich towards the gangway.

“I should have listened to Otto and helped him then to design the U-800, but I was fixed on my own projects at the time. However, when my prototypes showed the potential dangers of using perhydrol as a fuel at sea, I embraced Otto’s ideas and did my best to incorporate some of my better concepts to his own concepts. The U-900 is the result of that fusion of minds, Kapitän von Wittgenstein, and I can say without a doubt that it is even better than the U-800.”

One look at the long, smoothly profiled shape of the U-900 was enough to make Ulrich believe the naval designer.

“I bet it is, Professor Walter. As much as the U-800 looked like a BMW sports car, the U-900 looks like a Maserati racer. The lines of the sail in particular look extremely efficient in hydrodynamic terms. The sail in fact looks as if it grew out of the hull and blends with it, rather than looking as if it was simply dropped on top of the hull.”

"Indeed! Like Doctor Premingen, I was inspired by the body shape of sea mammals. Tests in both wind tunnels and water basins further helped us refine the shape of the U-900. I can tell you from the results of those tests that the U-900's shape is eight percent more efficient hydro-dynamically than the shape of the U-800, while it is a full 56 percent more efficient than the shape of a Type IX submarine when submerged."

"But we did find that there was a price to pay for that in terms of top speed on the surface, Professor Walter. The sea trials of the U-800 showed us that its hull shape, while highly efficient when submerged, limited its speed on the surface, due to the water flowing over and around the forward top deck. As a result, the U-800 could not go faster than 13.5 knots on the surface, even though it could attain 31 knots when dived."

"True! Me and my design team worked long and hard to find a way to improve the top surface speed of the design. The breakthrough came from a young engineer who had watched his son make paper planes out of a folded sheet of paper." Ulrich stopped in his tracks and did a double take on hearing that.

"Paper planes? I don't understand."

"It is actually devilishly simple, Herr Kapitän. In fact, many of the best ideas are devilishly simple. What my young engineer realized while watching his son play was that two-dimensional flat surfaces, like a sheet of paper, can easily be folded to form a multitude of possible three-dimensional shapes, like the vertical rudder of a plane. In this case, we took that idea and designed a system of two very slightly curved steel plates of the appropriate shape and size that married smoothly into the bow outer top casing of the hull of the U-900 when it navigated submerged. However, once on the surface and ready to proceed at speed, those two plates, which are hinged at their base, pivot up and come together along their forward edges, essentially forming a classic surface ship's 'Atlantic' bow shape. When speeding on the surface, the water pushed by the massive bow of the U-900, instead of running over the outer top deck and making the boat pitch down, is split apart by this 'false bow' and flows along the sides, like in the case of a surface ship. The tests in water basins showed us that our false bow should allow the U-900 to attain about fifteen or sixteen knots on diesel power on the surface, or over twenty knots on electric motor power."

Ulrich couldn't help fix Walter in disbelief.

"Twenty knots on the surface? That would be truly fantastic!"

"Isn't it?" replied Hellmuth Walter, smiling, before resuming his walk. "Anyway, you will find plenty of other incredible things about the U-900 during this tour."

More than two hours later, the group of 65 men emerged back on the top deck of the U-900, coming out of a water-tight steel door at the front of the sail. While the enlisted men and junior officers of his crew were chatting enthusiastically about what they had seen and learned inside, Ulrich was nearly stricken dumb by the fantastic capabilities of his new submarine. He then smiled warmly to Walter while shaking vigorously his hand.

"Professor, you have designed a true masterpiece. With such an instrument in the hands of my crew, we will be able to cut Great-Britain off from its maritime supply lifelines."

"Well, if you can achieve that and force the British to sue for peace, then I will consider myself plenty happy, Herr Kapitän. I will follow closely the results of your sea trials. If you encounter any kind of problem, tell me at once."

"I certainly will, Professor Walter." promised Ulrich before leaving the boathouse with his crew and heading towards the barracks building that had been assigned to them on arrival in Kiel.

The next five weeks were busy ones for Ulrich and his men, with three weeks of familiarization training on the U-900's systems, followed by two weeks of condensed sea trials to test the various parts of the new submarine and its actual performances. Those last two weeks pointed at a handful of small problems that took only a few days to correct, but also revealed quite a few pleasant surprises. For one thing, the so-called 'false bow' system more than fulfilled its promises, with an actual top speed on the surface and in moderate seas of sixteen knots on diesel power and of 22 knots on electric motors, a performance that left Ulrich truly ecstatic. Top submerged speed also proved exceptional, beating even the U-800's own performance with a record-breaking speed underwater of 32 knots. However, the greatest surprise had come when, on Admiral Dönitz' request, a Luftwaffe maritime reconnaissance bomber equipped with one of the new centimetric radars flew in the area where the U-900 was sailing, in order to assess its vulnerability to aerial radar detection. To everybody's shocked surprise, that bomber wasn't able at first to see the U-900 on its radar, even though the submarine was on the surface and going at twelve knots. The aircraft had to get as close as four

kilometers from the U-900 before it could start to detect it on its radar. Even then, that radar signature was no bigger than that of a periscope head sticking out of the water. Many German radar experts scratched their heads about that but could not figure out how that could be possible. What they couldn't know was that the racy, smooth lines of the submarine, with its sail blending with the hull, did a lot more than simply cut underwater drag: they also mimicked the radar-avoiding shapes of what was going to be called decades later 'stealth technology', with smooth hull and superstructure surfaces canted inward and with no right angle corners that would reflect strongly radar waves. The final result was a radar signature cut by 84 percent compared to that of a Type IX navigating on the surface, something that made Admiral Dönitz very happy indeed. Then came the time to prepare for the first war patrol of the U-900.

10:05 (Berlin Time)

Saturday, May 8, 1943

U-900's boathouse, Germaniawerft Shipyards

Kiel, German Baltic coast

Ulrich was standing on the forward weather deck of his submarine, watching his men help load a huge 610mm diameter Japanese Type 93 LONG LANCE torpedo into its launch tube, situated outside of the submarine's pressure hull, when Admiral Dönitz showed up with a staff officer, making Ulrich and his men come to attention and salute. Dönitz, returning first their salute, then made a dismissive gesture.

"Please, at ease, men! Continue your work as if I was not there."

The admiral and his aide then stood to one side of Ulrich, watching like him the loading of the big torpedo.

"I must say that adopting and then producing under license the Japanese Type 93 and Type 96 torpedoes was one smart move on our part. Thank God that the Fuhrer immediately accepted the idea of adopting those Japanese designs: that cut a lot of opposition to it. Now, your submarine will be the first one designed from the start to be able to use all models of German and Japanese torpedoes."

"It won't be alone in that for long, Admiral: the second boat of the class is now afloat and completed, while the third and fourth ones are also afloat but still under completion."

“True! But those Type 93 and Type 96 torpedoes will give you weapons that are fast enough to catch even destroyers. With some of our first T5 ZAUNKÖNING acoustic homing torpedoes also aboard your submarine, you should be able to create some serious mayhem in the enemy’s maritime lines of communication.”

“I am confident that I will be able to make the next few weeks quite unpleasant indeed for the enemy, Admiral.”

“That’s the spirit! By the way, here are your sealed mission orders: you will depart on patrol as soon as all your supplies and munitions have been loaded aboard.”

“Danke, Herr Admiral!” said Ulrich at the same time he took the large but thin envelope offered by Dönitz. “May I ask in which area of the World you are sending me?”

The admiral had a sarcastic smile as he answered him.

“You will be close enough to England to smell Fish and Chips from your boat, my dear Wittgenstein.”

CHAPTER 4 – KIPPER ON THE MENU

16:38 (Berlin Time)

Wednesday, May 12, 1943

Wardroom of U-900, Submarine Pen Number Four

Submarine bunker 'Bruno', Bergen naval base

Southern Norway

Ulrich waited that all seven of his officers were seated around the long dining table of the officers' wardroom before starting to speak in a friendly, relaxed tone.

"Well, gentlemen, you must be dying to know by now what is our mission and where Admiral Dönitz is sending us. Since we have a few hours available to us while the base personnel is topping up our diesel fuel tanks, now is a good time to put you in the picture."

Turning over a map that he had laid face down on the table, he gave his officers a few seconds to look at it. There were a few gasps in response, something he had expected and also could understand very well.

"Gentlemen, our mission will be to hit the shipping around the North and West coasts of Great-Britain, including inside the Irish Sea and the Mull of Kintyre, concentrating on hitting the maritime traffic heading to the port of Liverpool. Admiral Dönitz is however giving us carte blanche on how to proceed and on the routes we will take to accomplish the mission. The one thing he wants is to stop cargo and tanker ships from getting to Liverpool with their precious supplies. If we can do that, on top of the damage inflicted on enemy shipping by our other submarines lying off the Canadian coast and Newfoundland, then Great-Britain will have no choice but to sue for peace if it doesn't want to starve in the dark."

"But, Herr Kapitän," objected his first watch officer, Oberleutnant zur See Bruno Barber, "the British coastal waters are lousy with maritime patrol aircraft, patrol ships and coastal observers, plus underwater minefields laid in strategic locations."

Ulrich nodded his head to Barber, a man with enormous experience as a submariner, having enlisted years ago as a simple sailor and who had obtained his commission as an officer two years ago.

“That is all true, Bruno, and that is why Admiral Dönitz gave that mission to us. We are the only U-Boot capable of doing this mission and survive. Our other boats don’t have enough endurance or speed underwater to escape constant British air and sea patrols in the constricted waters around Great-Britain. We also happen to be by far the most heavily armed U-Boot in the fleet, with plenty of torpedoes and sea mines to do lots of damage during our war patrol. Hell, if things allow it, we may even use our twin 12.7 centimeter gun mount to bombard some British coastal installations.”

His officers looked at each other, still concerned, before his third watch officer, Leutnant zur See Heinz Blischke, spoke up.

“And what itinerary will we follow, Herr Kapitän?”

“Well, since we came out of the Baltic and are now in Norway, we will evidently have to round Scotland by the North before we could go down the North Channel and the Mull of Kintyre, in order to enter the Irish Sea. From there, we will play things as they go, alternatively hiding and attacking to inflict maximum damage on the British and escape their patrols. But first, I intend us to leave a few gifts...here!”

His officers collectively held their breaths when Ulrich put his right index on top of the Orkney Islands, where the biggest Royal Navy base and anchorage was situated.

“We are going to attack Scapa Flow, Herr Kapitän?” asked his second watch officer, Werner Wendt. “But, after Kapitän Prien’s daring raid in 1940, the British are liable to have reinforced further the defenses of their harbor.”

“True, but we won’t try to enter the anchorage area proper. Here is what we will do...”

23:11 (London Time)

Friday, May 14, 1943

Forward underwater observation dome of the U-900

Depth of thirty meters, approach channel to Hoxa Sound

Orkney Islands, North Sea

“Helm, three degrees to starboard... Steady! Keep present depth...”

Ulrich, standing beside his helmsman manning the surface helm station inside the forward underwater observation dome of his U-900, kept looking through his own infrared sight as he gave directives quietly, helping his helmsman steer a safe course in the channel between the South Ronaldsay and Swona islands of the Orkney Islands.

His submarine was now less than 4,000 meters from the anti-submarine net blocking the entrance to the Hoxa Sound, one of the three passageways giving access to the Scapa Flow anchorage area. His helmsman also had an infrared sight for himself, but it was mounted on a swiveling mount in front of him, while Ulrich was using a hand-held model. All nine powerful infrared projectors contained within pressure-resistant vessels and ringing the frontal arc of the submarine's sail, plus the four other projectors installed around the bow, were on, 'illuminating' the underwater canyon they were following with infrared light invisible to the naked eye. Those infrared lights and sights, combined with the underwater observation domes of the U-900, now made possible to Ulrich something no other submarine could do: navigate with precision at depth and in pitch black waters. The forward and stern lateral thrusters of the U-900 further helped by helping him compensate for the strong currents pushing his boat sideways as he silently glided at a speed of three knots towards the entrance's defensive net. Right now, however, his two biggest worries were to accidentally scrape the bottom with his submarine's keel and to hit some sea mine that the British could have sown in this entrance channel, even though that last possibility was quite remote. British ships entering or leaving Scapa Flow had to use these entrance channels, which were quite narrow already, so he doubted that they would have placed mines in this location. However, Ulrich preferred to play it as safe as possible tonight: the rest of his mission was going to be at the least as risky as this part.

As the underwater canyon he was in was suddenly widening dramatically, he caught sight of something dead ahead, less than 1,000 meters.

"Dead stop! I see the British defensive net at about 900 meters in front of us. Announce the depth!"

"Our keel is at a depth of 28 meters, Herr Kapitän. We maybe have four or five meters of water under it at present."

"Good! Control room, be ready to launch individual mines on my command. Anything on hydrophones?"

"Negative, Herr Kapitän. We can't hear any ship on the move nearby. We however do hear some faint noises from inside the anchorage area, possibly from a barge or motor boat."

"Excellent! Then, we should have plenty of time to plant our eggs and disappear. Helm, pivot seventy degrees to port and proceed forward at three knots."

“Aye, Herr Kapitän!”

A few minutes later, as they were right in the middle of the entrance channel used by ships passing through the designated gate in the defensive net, Ulrich gave a terse order.

“Control, eject one mine from our starboard tubes, now!”

Praying that the noise of the discharge of compressed air would not alert the British, who may have installed hydrophones to watch the area of the entrance channels, Ulrich was able to see with his infrared sight the long cylindrical shape of the powerful TMC type sea mine as it was ejected out and fell to the nearby bottom. At the depth of 32 meters at which it landed on the bottom's silt, its 1,000 kilo explosive warhead and combined acoustic/magnetic influence mine should be devastating to any British heavy warship passing over it. Ulrich ordered the separate, successive launches of five more mines as his submarine slowly followed a parallel course to the anti-submarine net, leaving a distance of at least 600 meters to it. Once that was done, he made his helmsman go down the western approach channel to the Hoxa Sound. However, he didn't plant more mines there, as the bottom was too deep along it to make TMC mines truly effective. Instead, he waited for his U-900 to emerge from the channel, then directed his helmsman to follow closely the underwater ridge of Hoy Island, to their starboard, while making him accelerate a bit. A bit over two hours later, they arrived in front of the anti-submarine defensive net barring the entrance to the Hoy Sound, the other entrance to Scapa Flow, where Ulrich had six more mines ejected at interval. As his U-900 turned West-southwest and accelerated away from Scapa Flow, Ulrich allowed himself to discretely blow air out in relief: this was definitely not his favorite spot on Earth. He however knew that he was still not safe, by a long shot: the British may have had a shortage of warships lately, mostly thanks to the U-800, but they still had hundreds of aircraft patrolling along the coasts of Great-Britain, ready to drop depth bombs on the unsuspecting submarines they would be able to see from above. Ulrich thus had his U-900 continue deep under on electric motors, as quiet as a ghost.

At around five in the morning, just before Sunrise, Ulrich had his submarine stop and rest on the bottom, at a depth of seventy meters. He was now off Cape Wrath, which formed the northwest tip of Scotland. Grabbing the intercom's microphone hooked near the attack periscope, he pressed the 'talk' switch and spoke in a calm voice.

"Attention all hands! This the Captain speaking! We are now resting on the bottom at a depth of seventy meters, some forty nautical miles off Cape Wrath, Scotland. We will now stay immobile and quiet until nine tonight, when it will be dark again. Then we will rise to periscope depth and recharge our batteries while heading for the second phase of our mission. In the meantime, rest, relax and make as little noise as possible while at minimal stations."

Once that was done, he turned to look at his third watch officer.

"Leutnant Blischke, you have control. I am going to have something to eat and then will go rest in my suite."

In any other submarine except for the late U-800, mentioning a 'Captain's suite' would have made eyes roll. However, as in the U-800, the crew accommodations in the U-900 were downright palatial in comparison to other U-Boote, with each crewmember having his own bunk bed, personal effects locker and one of the two large drawers installed under each double bunk. The petty officers and junior officers each had individual cabins, while he, the Captain, had a small suite with a sleeping cabin, private bathroom and a private office. Many would have called that extravagant but, from his own experience while serving on the U-800, Ulrich could say that this level of comfort did a lot to help keep the morale of the crew high during long war patrols. The other big factor in maintaining crew morale was good food, something that was worked hard on aboard all U-Boote at sea. The cook on U-800, Dieter Hannig, now a prisoner of the British, had rightly said that the cook was the second most important man aboard a submarine, just after the captain. With a galley even larger and better equipped than that of the U-800 and with none other than Dieter Hannig's father presiding in it, the men of the U-900 really had no reasons to complain in that respect.

Going down one deck and going forward through the officers' quarters compartment and past the infirmary, Ulrich stepped inside the vast compartment housing both the galley and the crew cafeteria/mess, where up to seventy men, basically the whole crew, could sit down and eat at proper tables, another uncommon facility aboard a submarine. Going to the self-serve counter along one side of the cafeteria, Ulrich checked what was available there. What he saw made him nod in approval. An assortment of fresh bread, along with jars of fruit jams, was kept on one portion of counter, covered in order to keep their freshness. Next to it was a small refrigerator containing fresh milk, cream, butter and an assortment of cold cuts and cheese. There

was also a salad bar, a fresh fruit bar and a steam table for warm food. There was a big stainless steel pot resting on the steam table and Ulrich raised its lid to see what it contained. The appetizing smell of a nice-looking goulash soup hit his nostrils at once, making his eyes close in contentment for a second. Grabbing the large service ladle hooked near the pot, he found plenty of chunks of meat floating in the soup as he stirred the ladle in it. His mind now made up on his menu, Ulrich grabbed a soup bowl and filled it with goulash soup, then cut for himself a couple of thick slices of fresh bread and grabbed a spoon. He could have gone to eat his soup and bread at the nearby officers' wardroom, or could even have had the assistant cook bring him his food there, but Ulrich, despite his aristocratic name, was no snob and liked to be with his men. He thus went to a nearby table normally reserved for the petty officers in the crew and sat there after exchanging verbal salutes with three crewmembers who were sipping on hot coffee mugs and eating jam-covered toasts. His soup quickly proved as tasty as it smelled good and he ate it with gusto, dipping chunks of bread in it from time to time. He was done eating in twenty minutes and got up to bring his dirty dishes to the large sink sitting near a big, commercial-size dishwashing machine, the kind you saw in big cafeterias and restaurants. Sometime later on, a crewman on kitchen duty was going to scrape off the food leftovers into a nearby trash bin, then rinse those dirty dishes with cold sea water before placing them on the mobile tray of the dishwasher. However, that machine was powered on only when the tactical situation allowed some noise to be made. If not, then other men on kitchen duty would be stuck washing manually the dishes at another pair of sinks. Still, that was a lot better than what the men in other submarines had to live with. His stomach now nicely filled, Ulrich then headed back aft and up to go sleep in his suite.

09:20 (London Time)

Saturday, May 15, 1943

U-900, resting on the sea bottom

Off the Northwest coast of Scotland

Otto Hannig, having climbed up two deck levels from his galley, found himself into one of the four, five meter-diameter pressurized steel towers occupying most of the internal volume of the submarine's sail. Those pressurized towers, lined up back to back along the central axis of the submarine, were also connected together via their adjacent

walls, allowing easy circulation between them through water-tight hatches. Also, two of those towers were topped by the underwater observation domes of the U-900. Apart from the late U-800, no other submarine had such a sail internal architecture, but that was already changing fast as more TYPE XXI Class boats were being built and were entering service. For Otto Hannig and for his comrades, that architecture provided a dramatic increase in the volume available for living facilities and storage, making service aboard even more comfortable and pleasant. Right now, he was in the forward-most pressurized tower, which was topped by an underwater observation dome and which was used to store deck equipment and some ready ammunition for the twin 12.7 centimeter gun mount and for the forward twin 3.7 centimeter FLAK M42U anti-aircraft gun mount. It also contained the top section of one of the two lift cage wells of the submarine, which serviced all five deck levels of the boat, from the Weather Deck down to the Lower Deck. Those two lifts had been incorporated into the boat's design mostly because of the huge number of heavy battery cells stored on the Lower Deck which provided the long endurance underwater that made the U-900 such a formidable boat. Each of those battery cells weighed 800 kilos and, when needing to be replaced or refurbished, lifting such a mass up ladders and through deck hatches was a true herculean task, thus the fitting of two one-ton lifts inside the submarine. Those lifts were also most useful to handle and store away the various supplies needed for a war patrol, or to lift machinery parts or other objects or pieces of cargo that was no bigger than one square meter of bottom surface. Going aft and entering the next tower via an interconnecting hatch, Hannig simply went through that tower, which was used to store away inflatable boats and divers' equipment, to go into the third tower, his destination. That tower, in which the vertical tube wells of the schnorchel system went through from ceiling to deck, was known as the 'underwater smoking lounge' of the boat and was a very popular place for the crew, as a dedicated local air recycling, filtering and conditioning system allowed the smoking of tobacco while underwater. When Hannig stepped inside that tower, also of a diameter of five meters, he had to separate two black curtains that both kept in tobacco smoke and hid the white light from the adjacent tower. The lounge itself was plunged into semi-obscurity, with only a couple of red light bulbs providing artificial illumination. Some more illumination came from the six, sixty centimeter-diameter, thick acrylic viewing ports that gave a view of the ocean outside to the men relaxing in the lounge. When he had first used this lounge underwater, Otto had thought that these viewing ports were pure genius, as they did a lot to break the

claustrophobic feeling created by working for weeks inside a closed steel cylinder. Allied with the freedom to smoke, that made the underwater smoking lounge about the most popular place in the submarine, next to the two underwater observation domes. Taking an empty seat next to one of the viewing ports, Otto took out a cigarette and lit it up as he looked outside through the dark water. With the Sun now up, some of its light was filtering to the bottom, but not much. That was however still enough to allow Otto to watch a few fish swim around on or near the bottom. Enjoying his cigarette and relaxing while watching the marine life around, Otto spent ten minutes in the lounge, then regretfully left, having to return to his galley in order to prepare lunch for the crew.

Eleven hours later, the U-900 got slowly off the bottom and rose to near the surface while taking some speed, heading South-southwest. With his towed array sonar fish reeled out, Ulrich waited until his sonar operators told him that there were no ships nearby before he raised his search periscope, making its head pierce the surface. As he carefully looked around, his electronic warfare operator, sitting in a compartment just aft of the control room, monitored the readings from the passive radar and radio detectors crowning the top of the search periscope head.

"No radar signal detected in the vicinity, Herr Kapitän. There are however a number of radio signals in the HF band that I can hear, but nothing that appears to be communications from a plane."

"Very well! RAISE THE SCHNORCHEL! SWITCH TO DIESELS AND START RECHARGING THE BATTERIES ONCE IT IS UP AND OPERATING. PURGE THE SEWAGE TANKS, REFILL OUR COMPRESSED AIR BOTTLES AND CIRCULATE FRESH AIR THROUGH THE BOAT."

As the men in the control room acted on his orders, Ulrich went to his chart table and called to his side his second watch officer to tell him where they were going.

"We are now here, off Cape Wrath and heading South-southwest. I want us to go down the sea channel between the Outer Hebrides and the Inner Hebrides. Stay over the deepest part of the channel while running on schnorchel, so that we could dive deeply if some threat shows up. If anything untoward is detected, call me at once."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!" replied at once Werner Wendt. Satisfied, Ulrich then went to his suite, where he took the time to write a very brief message, using pre-selected code words, to report to BdU that he had successfully mined the entrances to

Scapa Flow. That made him wonder if anyone had fallen victim yet to his sea mines there.

22:03 (London Time)

Bridge of the British heavy cruiser H.M.S. BELFAST

Exit channel of the Hoxa Sound, Scapa Flow

Orkney Islands

Captain Herbert Lumley banged his fist on the bulwark of his open bridge, furious, as he watched his lead escort destroyer sink in the exit channel, a mere 600 meters away from the protective anti-submarine net defending the Hoxa Sound. His own cruiser had avoided in extremis blowing itself on a mine, thanks to the quick reflexes of its bridge duty officer, who had instantly reacted and effected an emergency stop on seeing the unfortunate destroyer being lifted out of the water and breaking in two from a powerful explosion under its keel. Now, his cruiser and remaining three destroyers were blocked inside the Hoxa Sound, unable to sail out without risking blowing on a mine until minesweepers could arrive and clear the channel. This however would take many hours, hours that would make him miss his scheduled rendezvous with the arctic convoy he was supposed to help escort to the Soviet port of Murmansk, on the Barents Sea. The idea of using instead the Hoy Sound, the other exit channel of Scapa Flow, played in his head for a moment but he dismissed that idea quickly: if a German submarine had been daring enough to mine this channel, then it would probably have mined the other channel as well. Better wait and let the minesweepers do their job. That Arctic convoy was going to make do without him, after all. What he couldn't know then was that his absence would eventually cost the convoy dearly, with German long range bombers and submarines left free to attack it with little opposition, sinking five precious cargo ships and two tanker ships off Norway.

21:29 (London Time)

Sunday, May 16, 1943

Control room of U-900

Coming to periscope depth near the southwest tip of Islay Island

25 nautical miles north of the coast of Northern Ireland

Ulrich barely raised the head of his search periscope above the surface of the sea, wanting first his electronic warfare operator to confirm if any radar was detected nearby. He knew that he was now in a heavily patrolled sector near major British naval bases and airfields in Northern Ireland and along the Scottish coast, so he was especially cautious as he was approaching his second target area.

"Anything on the active radar spectrum, EW?"

"Uh, quite, Herr Kapitän: I have what sounds like at least four different radar ship sets around us, plus one quite powerful coastal watch radar on the Irish coast, to our 85 magnetic heading. We probably could raise our schnorchel head above the water without too much risks but I wouldn't bet my shirt on it, Herr Kapitän."

"Well, discretion will definitely be the better part of valor tonight. We will find ourselves a nice waiting spot as near as possible to the coast and in about 24 meters of water, so that we could recharge our batteries while the coast's background radar reflection will partially hide our schnorchel's radar signature. HELM, HEADING 083 AT FIVE KNOTS! STAY ON BATTERIES AND KEEP PRESENT DEPTH."

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Going quickly to his chart table, Ulrich studied it for a minute, concentrating on the area of the Southwest coast of Islay Island, and finally decided on a spot he wanted to occupy. Using a nearby coastal lighthouse as a navigation point, he calculated his exact location and then a course to the spot he had chosen. Going to his present watch officer, whose seat was close behind that of the helmsman and of the ballast and trim tanks operators, he explained to Leutnant Heinz Blischke where he wanted to go and what were his intentions. Then, he returned to his search periscope, using the same coastal lighthouse as a marker to establish when he would get near his desired location. That soon came up, making Ulrich give a terse order.

"Helm, slow down to three knots! Sonar, start pinging with our high-frequency, high-definition set and find me a nice, flat bottom surface next to the coast, with a depth between 22 and 24 meters."

It took his sonar operator about six minutes before he spoke up.

"Kapitän, I believe that I have a nice spot right ahead, some 400 meters away."

Ulrich immediately walked to the high-definition sonar station, situated beside that of the helmsman so that both men could work in coordination, and looked at the sonar display screen before grinning.

“Just what I wanted! Helm, land us gently on that small plateau, with our bow facing south. Then, we will wait in ambush there while recharging our batteries.”

“Aye, Herr Kapitän!”

Satisfied, Ulrich returned to his search periscope and resumed his visual watch around. His chosen ambush position would allow him to wait and watch in relative safety for the next few hours but, once the Sun would be up, any aircraft overflying him would easily see his submarine in such shallow waters. Thus, he needed to find a suitable target tonight.

A number of ships passed by him in the next few hours, most coming out of the nearby North Channel, which connected the Atlantic Ocean with the Irish Sea, which itself separated Ireland from Great-Britain. The first ship seen going into the North Channel was deemed too small by Ulrich. So was the second one. By then, his batteries were fully recharged and, while he kept his schnorchel mast up to refresh the air inside his submarine, he had his three big diesel engines shut down and switched on his 200 kilowatt auxiliary diesel generator instead. That generator set, not being connected to the propeller shaft or to a gearbox, was mounted on a raft with flexible joints and was surrounded by an acoustically-insulated module. That made the auxiliary generator set very quiet, thus was very difficult to be heard by nearby ships equipped with ASDIC, while the generator was more than enough to provide all the ‘hotel loads’, or secondary electrical needs, of the submarine as it lay on the bottom.

At about three in the morning, the sonar of the U-900 picked up an approaching ship large enough to interest Ulrich. It was in fact coming along the usual route followed previously by convoys from the United States or Halifax heading towards Liverpool. Now that the British and Americans had dropped their convoy systems, such arrivals by single ships were the norm. Ulrich decided to take his chance on that newcomer and ordered his U-900 off the bottom and forward on electric motors. Going south at first to cross the path of the incoming big ship, he then waited a few minutes to let the ship pass by him. What he saw in his periscope with the help of the light from a near full moon made him grin.

"A big, fat 11,000 ton American tanker ship. Normally, it would make an excellent target for one of my torpedoes, but today is its lucky day. HELM, TRANSFER TO THE SURFACE HELM STATION: WE WILL FOLLOW THAT TANKER SHIP RIGHT UNDER IT."

"UNDERSTOOD, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Ulrich himself climbed quickly to the forward underwater observation dome, soon followed by the helmsman, Matrosenobergefreiter Karl Müller, after he had given the helm below to another crewman. He, like Ulrich, could easily see the dark, massive bulk of the tanker's hull above and to one side of the U-900. Müller quickly took place at the surface helm station of the observation dome that was normally used when sailing on the surface, turning the submarine around in order to follow the American tanker ship.

"What depth do you wish us to keep, Herr Kapitän?"

"Stay at a depth of 35 meters, Müller: that will be enough to prevent any danger of collision with that tanker, while it will make our acoustic signature blend with that of the tanker. Adjust your speed to that of the tanker and follow it just under its propellers."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!"

After a minute or so, with the U-900 now going at the same speed as the tanker, Müller spoke again.

"Herr Kapitän, the tanker is on a heading of 110 magnetic and a speed of eight knots."

"Excellent! This will allow me to plot our course accurately. Continue as you are, Müller: you are doing fine."

"Danke, Herr Kapitän!" replied proudly the sailor.

Three hours later, after daylight had come, the tanker and its follower were entering the North Channel proper through the Mull of Kintyre, a narrow strait between the Kintyre Peninsula and the northeast tip of Northern Ireland. The strait itself measured at its narrowest just over twenty kilometers in width, and maritime traffic became quite dense. However, while narrow, the strait was also fairly deep, with a maximum depth of around one hundred meters. That left the U-900 plenty of room to play as it followed the tanker, which had further reduced its speed to six knots in view of the heavier ship traffic. Another 23 nautical miles afterwards, Ulrich finally made his helmsman quit following the tanker, which had provided them such good protection from detection, and made him head southwest at slow speed, keeping him at the surface

helm station. Müller, who had no idea what Ulrich was planning, understood when they entered a fairly shallow bay.

“Are we going to mine the approaches to the port of Belfast, Herr Kapitän?”

“I can’t hide anything from you, Herr Müller. Turn to Heading 165 and keep your present speed and depth: this part of the bay is already shallow enough to make our mines fully effective.”

Ulrich then grabbed his intercom microphone and spoke in it.

“Control room, be ready to start ejecting mines on my command.”

Next, Ulrich instinctively looked up through the transparent dome he was in, the threat of patrol aircraft very much in his mind. At the shallow depth he was now, the large mass of the U-900 would be relatively easy to spot from the air and he was actually taking a risky gamble in order to mine the entrance to the port of Belfast, which was a vital war installation for the British.

“Control room, start ejecting now twelve sea mines at intervals of one minute.”

“Ejecting the first mine now, Herr Kapitän.” came the reply ten seconds later, just as a blast of compressed air could be heard. As more mines were ejected at one minute intervals, Ulrich scanned the underside of the surface with his binoculars to see if any ship was approaching. He saw two ships, a fairly small one that could well be a fishing boat, and a bigger one heading towards Belfast. However, that last ship was going to pass safely before the mines could arm themselves. As for the fishing boat, its wooden hull and small engine would probably save it from the mines, which had been designed to ignore ships smaller than destroyers and minesweepers. Thus, his mines should cause some significant losses to the British. More importantly, they were going to force the British into closing the port of Belfast until they could find and neutralize his mines. With the present state of the war, with Great-Britain nearly starved of supplies and food, losing the port of Belfast, even for a day or two, would have a not insignificant impact.

Ulrich discretely blew air out in relief when his twelve mines had been ejected and he could tell his helmsman to change course and head towards deeper waters. It didn’t take long before the U-900 was in waters over a hundred meters deep. Ulrich then thought about his next move. He finally decided to stick to his original plan, which called for his submarine to stay deep and slow while it headed towards his next major objective: the port of Liverpool.

"Herr Müller, you may return to your main helm station in the control room. Our heading will be 085 magnetic at five knots and at a depth of sixty meters."

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

Ulrich followed his helmsman down the hatch inside the dome, climbing down two levels before entering the control room. Ideally, he should now stay very discreet until he could get to Liverpool, but his mission was a lot more than just drop mines and block ports: his main goal, as stated by Admiral Dönitz, was to sink as many ships bringing war supplies to England as possible. Ulrich then kicked himself when he realized that the big American tanker ship that had been so useful to him in hiding his submarine was exactly the kind of ship he was supposed to sink. Going quickly to his chart table, he did a few quick calculations before shouting orders.

"HELM, NEW HEADING: 080! MAKE YOUR SPEED TWELVE KNOTS! SONAR, KEEP AN EAR FOR THAT TANKER WE FOLLOWED THROUGH THE NORTH CHANNEL. ADVISE ME THE MOMENT YOU HEAR IT."

"AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Ulrich then sat in his elevated command chair, located four paces behind the helmsman's station, and waited for his sonarman to announce that he had detected the tanker. That took about twenty minutes.

"KAPITÄN, WE HAVE THE TANKER DEAD AHEAD, AT A DISTANCE OF APPROXIMATELY FIVE NAUTICAL MILES."

"Very well! Forward torpedo room, flood Tubes Two and Three! Set the fish for a running depth of ten meters and switch them to magnetic firing pistol."

Getting up from his command chair, he had his helmsman go up to periscope depth, but waited until he was much closer before raising the head of his attack periscope above the surface. The large, dark mass of the tanker's stern was plainly visible to him now.

"Target bearing: 003 relative. Set!... Second bearing : 004 relative. Set!"

"Fire solution calculated, Herr Kapitän."

"Then, match bearings and fire Tubes Two and Three!"

"Firing Tubes Two and Three!"

Ulrich stared anxiously through his periscope's lens as the two torpedoes made their way to their target: this would be the first ship he would be sinking with torpedoes in this first war patrol in the U-900.

"Obergefreiter Koenig, come here and get ready to take pictures of our target!"

His gun aimer came to him at once and prepared the camera attached to the periscope, opposite Ulrich's position, taking off its light filters and advancing the film loaded in it.

"Camera ready, Herr Kapitän."

"Good! Stand by!"

Two large water geysers suddenly rose from under the tanker's stern, making the big ship jump up in the water. The muffled noise of two distant explosions came next, making the men in the control room cheer briefly. On his part, Ulrich saw the big tanker's stern section break up from the rest of the ship, dooming it.

"Take a picture now, Herr Koenig, then take another picture in thirty seconds, centering it on the name of the ship on the stern board. SONAR, ALERT ME IF YOU HEAR ANY SHIP NEARBY REACTING TO OUR SHOOTING."

It didn't take long before his sonarman got back to him.

"Herr Kapitän, a ship at heading 016 magnetic has just turned towards us and is accelerating at what appears to be its maximum power."

"A British warship! A civilian ship wouldn't react like that: it would flee instead. Well, that enemy warship sounds like a perfect target for one of our new T5 ZAUNKÖNING acoustic homing torpedoes. Stern torpedo room, load one T5 acoustic torpedo in one tube and set it for a running depth of three meters, then flood the tube."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän! It will be Tube Ten."

"Perfect!"

Ulrich was genuinely curious to see if that new T5 torpedo would fulfill its promises: it was meant to guide itself on the machinery and propeller noise of its target ship and could cover a maximum distance of 5,700 meters at a speed of 24 knots, fast enough to catch smaller escort ships like corvettes, which the British and Canadians were using extensively, especially in their coastal waters. Something then came to Ulrich's mind, making cold sweat appear on his forehead: if his torpedo could guide itself on the noise made by his target, then it could also...

"Helm, go to idle power the moment that we launch our T5. Turn us into a silent fish!"

"Uh, understood, Herr Kapitän."

"Sonar, do you have a distance for that approaching warship?"

"Negative, Herr Kapitän, but judging from the noise level, it can't be more than ten nautical miles away."

"Then, fire a low frequency pulse from our S-GERAT active sonar and be ready to use our NIBELUNG targeting sonar system."

"Aye, Herr Kapitän! Firing sonar pulse now!"

BONG

A few seconds later, the sonarman spoke up again, but in a triumphant tone.

"RANGE ACQUIRED, HERR KAPITÄN! THE ENEMY SHIP IS NOW 4,800 METERS AWAY AND APPROACHING ON A DIRECT PATH AT HEADING 016."

"Torpedo fire control, match bearings and launch our T5!"

"Launching T5 now!... Torpedo on the way, impact due in 22 seconds."

Ulrich unconsciously held his breath as those 22 seconds passed. A muffled explosion in the distance then made him and his men cheer.

"YES! LET'S GO SEE IN WHAT STATE THAT WARSHIP IS NOW! HELM, TURN TO 016 AND ACCELERATE TO TEN KNOTS WHILE STAYING AT PERISCOPE DEPTH."

Taking back his place at the attack periscope and telling his gun aimer to be ready to take more pictures, Ulrich soon had his target in his sight.

"I see the target! It is a FLOWER Class corvette, hull number K95. It is sinking by the stern. Herr Koenig, take a picture now."

"Should we hit it a second time, to finish it off, Herr Kapitän?" asked his first watch officer, Bruno Barber, who was sitting at the torpedo fire control station, near the attack periscope.

"Negative! That corvette is already developing a severe list and its stern section is partially buckled. Let's save our torpedoes as much as possible: this is going to be a long war patrol."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän."

Ulrich had his gunner take another picture two minutes later, as the corvette was capsizing, then gave new orders to his helmsman.

"HELM, STEER PORT TO HEADING 060 MAGNETIC! MAKE YOUR DEPTH SEVENTY METERS AND SLOW DOWN TO THREE KNOTS."

"STEERING TO HEADING 060 MAGNETIC AT THREE KNOTS AND DEPTH OF SEVENTY METERS, AYE, HERR KAPITÄN!"

Ulrich then smiled to Barber, doing his best to look and sound unconcerned.

"Let's play the deep, silent fish for a moment, time for the British to calm down. In the meantime, we will continue to head towards Liverpool until nightfall, when we will get up to schnorchel depth to recharge our batteries."

"Sounds like a plan, Herr Kapitän."

07:55 (London Time)

Monday, May 17, 1943

Headquarters, Royal Navy Western Approaches Command

Liverpool, England

Commodore Arthur McMullen came in to start his duty shift at Headquarters, Western Approaches, only to be greeted by grim faces around the big situation plot map table of the operations center. Bracing himself for bad news, he went to the man he was going to replace on shift, Captain Alan Ferguson.

"What do we have this morning, Captain Ferguson?"

"Some bad news, sir: we have a German submarine inside the Irish Sea, near the Isle of Man. An American tanker, the EXXON VALPARAISO, was sunk south of the Isle of Man about one hour ago. The HMS DIANTHUS, which was close by, reacted to the torpedoing but was itself torpedoed and sank."

"Damn! That submarine is in an excellent position to play havoc with the shipping heading towards Liverpool. What was the EXXON VALPARAISO carrying?" Ferguson's expression soured up, as if he had just bitten into a lemon.

"Over 9,000 tons of aviation gasoline, sir. Its loss is a particularly hard blow to the R.A.F., which is getting desperately short of fuel for its aircraft. In fact, the R.A.F. told me that they are now on their last reserves of high octane gasoline. If it doesn't get more soon, it will be basically grounded."

"Bloody hell! I knew that the fuel situation was bad, but not that bad. Alright, what do we have available to find and destroy that German submarine?"

"Unfortunately, we are nearly as short of patrol ships as the R.A.F. is short of fuel, sir, thanks mostly to the past depredations of the U-800. Right now, we are left with a grand total of five FLOWER Class corvettes and two RIVER Class frigates in the Irish Sea, Northern Channel and St-Georges' Channel. As you know well, sir, all of our destroyers were transferred months ago to either Scapa Flow or to the Mediterranean, to compensate our heavy losses on the high seas. Thankfully, the R.A.F.'s Coastal

Command still has plenty of maritime patrol planes flying around. They told me that they are going to dedicate seven Lockheed HUDSONs and three Short SUNDERLAND flying boats to the search for that submarine.”

McMullen felt better on hearing that.

“That will help a lot indeed. With the shallow waters around the approaches to the port of Liverpool, any German submarine approaching it will be plainly visible from the air. As for approaching at night, it will still be detectable on our aircraft radars.”

As he was discussing further with Ferguson a search plan to find that German submarine, a junior officer approached them with a message in his hands. Stopping near them and saluting, he then handed his message to McMullen.

“We just got a message from the Belfast Harbormaster, sir: a cargo ship leaving Belfast blew up on a sea mine and sank at the mouth of the bay. As a consequence of that, the Harbormaster has temporarily closed Belfast to all ship traffic, until its assigned minesweepers can clear any remaining mines there.”

“Christ! So, either that German submarine which sank the tanker and our corvette also carries mines, or we have a second German submarine operating within the Irish Sea.”

“Most German submarines can launch sea mines through their torpedo tubes, sir.” reminded Ferguson, making McMullen nod his head.

“True! Still, this means that the Germans may attempt to mine the approaches to Liverpool. Alert our minesweeping flotilla in Liverpool and put them on reinforced alert. I want periodic sweeps to be done, starting this morning.”

“Yes sir!”

As his subalterns were carrying on his orders, McMullen contemplated in silence the map board for long seconds, evaluating the threat he was now facing. A few German submarines had managed to infiltrate the Irish Sea in the past, but most of them had then been found and sunk. In fact, this was the first time in over a year that a German submarine had revealed itself inside the Irish Sea. Hopefully, the planes of the R.A.F. Coastal Command will again prove their worth.

CHAPTER 5 – COMRADES OF THE LUFTWAFFE

19 :48 (London Time)

Monday, May 17, 1943

German Luftwaffe Junkers Ju 88D reconnaissance bomber

Flying over the Irish Sea

Hauptmann Rudolph Falke was swearing at his bad luck as he was doing his best to control his badly damaged Ju 88D twin-engine reconnaissance bomber. Sent to take pictures of the port of Belfast, his plane had then been intercepted by a very lucky pair of British HURRICANE fighters that happened to pass over Belfast at the same time he was. In the ensuing air fight, his dorsal gunner, Johan Bolling, had succeeded in damaging one of the HURRICANE fighters and force it to break away, but he had then been hit and seriously wounded by machine gun fire from the second British fighter, which had also shot up as well their port-side engine. While his navigator was doing his best to treat Bolling's wound and stop the bleeding, Falke had gone down from his initial high altitude, to an altitude of less than 3,000 meters. With his remaining engine starting to overheat and with Bolling being unable to parachute out with his three comrades, Falke had decided to attempt an emergency crash landing at sea, to give a surviving chance to his radio operator. To increase those chances further, he had pointed his plane towards the nearest piece of land, the Isle of Anglesey, which formed the northwest tip of Wales. With luck, he would be able to land on the waves without breaking up, thus giving time to his crew to evacuate in their small inflatable rescue raft. However, he was now being trailed by a British Lockheed HUDSON light reconnaissance bomber, which had spotted from afar the long trail of black smoke his Ju 88D was leaving behind. Thankfully, the British pilot of the HUDSON had understood Falke's intentions and had refrained from firing on him, instead simply following him. In a way, that was good news for Falke, as this meant that the British will probably have some boat or amphibian aircraft available nearby to fish his crew out after their crash landing. Right now, becoming a prisoner of war was much less a preoccupation to Falke than the possibility that he would screw his crash landing attempt and kill himself and his crew.

His Ju 88D was now down to an altitude of 900 meters, with the coast of Anglesey visible some sixteen kilometers away, when the port-side aileron, damaged in the previous air engagement, started to vibrate widely. Swearing to himself, Falke understood at once that he would have to ditch into the sea now, before the aileron could shear off completely and make his plane impossible to control. Reducing further his speed while making his descent more steep, he shouted at his three crewmen.

“OUR PORT AILERON IS ABOUT TO SHEER OFF! I AM GOING TO ATTEMPT A CRASHLANDING NOW. BRACE FOR IMPACT AND BE READY TO EVACUATE AS SOON AS WE STOP.”

In the pursuing Lockheed HUDSON, Flight Lieutenant Peter Welling anxiously followed the German bomber with his eyes. Normally, the German bomber crew would already have parachuted out, but its pilot had apparently decided to attempt instead a crash landing at sea. Maybe he had one or more wounded men aboard that could not jump out and he was trying to give them a chance to survive. If that was the case, then Peter could both understand and respect the German pilot's decision, as he would probably have done the same thing in his place. He had already alerted by radio his base to signal the German's intentions, giving as well their present position and asking for a rescue boat or plane to be sent. If the German pilot could succeed in landing on the sea in one piece, then his chance of surviving with his crew would be reasonably good.

“HOLD ON! WE ARE ABOUT TO TOUCH THE WAVES!” shouted Rudolph Falke, cold sweat on his forehead and using all his strength to hold his shaking control yoke as the sea waves were now flying by him a mere few meters below. With Falke holding his aircraft nose up, the tail of the Ju 88D was the first to touch the water. Falke resisted his aircraft nose from coming down at once and used his tail to slow down markedly his plane, until he could no longer hold the nose up. He and his three crewmen were brutally projected forward and were saved only by their seats' harnesses from banging their heads around the cockpit. Rudolph took a few seconds to recover from the shock, then shouted out loud.

“EVACUATE NOW! THROW THE RAFT OUTSIDE!”

Undoing his own harness, Falke went aft to help his navigator, Leutnant Karl Surren, to help take the wounded Johan Bolling out of the plane, while Unteroffizier Hans Zuckerberg was throwing out their inflatable raft, activating its compressed air bottle at the same time. They managed to all come out and get in their raft just before their Ju 88D reconnaissance bomber sank below the surface.

“That German pilot is a pro: he did a really nice landing, considering the circumstances.” Said Welling’s copilot, Flight Sergeant Michael Worthington, attracting a nod from Welling.

“Indeed! I see that all four crewmen are now in their raft. DAVE, CALL THE BASE AND TELL THEM THAT WE HAVE FOUR GERMANS NOW FLOATING IN A RAFT. GIVE OUR POSITION AT THE SAME TIME.”

“CONSIDER IT DONE, SIR!” replied his radio operator, Leading Airman David Pringle.

20:10 (London Time)

Control room of the U-900

“EMERGENCY BALLAST BLOW! SURFACE, SURFACE, SURFACE! ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNNERS TO THEIR POSTS! RESCUE TEAM ON THE DECK ONCE WE WILL HAVE SURFACED! DOCTOR HEINNEMANN, BE READY FOR POSSIBLE CASUALTIES!”

Obedying Ulrich’s orders, the men in the control room blew air in all the ballast tanks while the helmsman pulled hard on his control yoke, sending the big submarine in a steep climb. The 5,300 ton submarine emerged from the ocean at an angle of thirty degrees, jumping out of the water and then splashing back down like a playful whale would have done.

In their small rubber raft, Falke and Surren were doing their best to put back in place the field dressing on Bolling’s leg, which had slipped during the evacuation of the plane, when Surren’s eyes widened and he swore quietly while staring into the distance.

“Mein Gott!”

“What? What is it?” asked Falke before twisting his head around. What he then saw left him speechless for long seconds: a big submarine had just emerged from the

depths like some kind of sea monster, 600 meters away from their raft, and was now speeding on the surface towards them.

"HOLY SHIT! WHERE IS THIS GUY COMING FROM?" exclaimed Flight Sergeant Michael Worthington, getting a sarcastic answer from Peter Welling.

"From Die Fatherland! This is no British submarine. DAVE, SEND URGENTLY IN CLEAR: GERMAN SUBMARINE JUST EMERGED NEAR THE RAFT OF THE BOMBER CREW. GIVE AGAIN OUR POSITION AND REQUEST BACKUP!"

Peter then examined the German submarine, some 2,500 meters away, as it sped on the surface towards the raft with the four German airmen. It was a really big boat, actually the biggest submarine he had seen to date. Furthermore, its shape and lines were like those of a fine purebred horse, with nothing to break the smoothness of its shape save for the two periscope masts sticking out of its sail, whose shape blended with the hull. Overall, a decidedly very impressive design. He knew of only one type of submarine which looked like this: the infamous U-800.

"My God! The Germans have produced more boats of the U-800 type. DAVE, ADD THE FOLLOWING TO YOUR MESSAGE: SUBMARINE IS A TYPE U-800 BOAT." Peter then saw something that made his hair rise on his head: what looked like two anti-aircraft gun mounts were now rising up from under-deck wells.

"ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS NOW VISIBLE ON THE DECK OF THE SUBMARINE. CHARLIE, BE READY WITH YOUR MACHINE GUNS!"

"WE ARE STILL WAY TOO FAR FROM IT FOR MY MACHINE GUNS, SIR." replied their dorsal gunner, Leading Airman Patrick Dundalk. "THANKFULLY, THEIR 20mm ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS SHOULD ALSO BE OUT OF RANGE OF US."

Thirty seconds or so later, a stream of incoming tracer shells proved the dorsal gunner wrong.

"HELL, THAT MUST BE AT LEAST 37mm CALIBER FIRE!" exclaimed Worthington. Peter didn't reply at first, as he was pulling his plane in a tight turn to port. That made him barely avoid a burst of tracer shells.

"THAT FIRE IS TOO BLOODY ACCURATE TO MY TASTE. I..." The HUDSON then shook briefly, while a loud detonation followed by a cry of pain was heard at the same time.

"WE'RE HIT! MIKE, CHECK THE CREW!"

The copilot undid at once his seat harness and got out of it before going aft. He was back after maybe a minute, his face pale.

"We now have a big hole on one side of the fuselage, with lots of shrapnel holes around it. Pat is dead: both of his legs got amputated by the exploding shell and he bled to death."

Just as the copilot was finishing to speak, their plane shook again when a shell went through their starboard wing. Thankfully, it didn't explode, but it still left a big hole with jagged edges in the wing.

"Bloody hell! Those Germans are way too accurate to my liking and they clearly have the superiority in terms of firepower. Anyway, with our present damage, we are no longer fit for combat. We are returning to base. DAVE, ADVISE THE BASE THAT WE ARE DAMAGED AND ARE RETURNING HOME."

He didn't like the answer he got from his radio operator a few seconds later.

"Uh, sorry, sir, but a piece of shrapnel pierced our radio set: it is dead."

Peter tightened his jaws on hearing that: he was going to have to pass in person the information he now had about that German submarine, meaning a good hour of extra delay before it could be used.

"GET THEM INSIDE, QUICKLY!"

While four sailors nearly ran inside the submarine while carrying the wounded Johan Bolling, other sailors helped the three other shivering aviators, making them enter via the forward access hatch at the front of the squat sail structure. With the two twin 3.7cm anti-aircraft mounts disappearing back under the weather deck and their cover plates sliding back in place, the U-900 then crash-dived, disappearing under the surface a mere twenty seconds after all the hatches were closed and secured. Inside the submarine, the wounded Johan Bolling was put inside the forward elevator cabin with one sailor, to save him from negotiating ladders down two levels, while the three other aviators were guided down the steep ladders leading to the level of the infirmary. Falke couldn't help ask a question to one of the sailors who was guiding his aviators.

"Which submarine is this, Gefreiter?"

"The U-900, Herr Hauptmann. It was just recently built and we are on our first war patrol. Do you have any wounds?"

"No! I am a bit shaken and cold but, apart from that, I am okay. Where are we going?"

"To the boat's infirmary, Herr Hauptmann. Your wounded man will be treated by Doctor Heinnemann, who will also probably want to examine you and your crewmen."

"You have an infirmary on this submarine, on top of an elevator cage?"

"Oh, we have lots more surprises for you aboard, Herr Hauptmann." Replied the sailor, a malicious smile on his lips.

In the control room, Ulrich was busy giving orders, wanting to get away from this location as quickly as possible before more British planes and ships could show up.

"HELM, ACCELERATE TO THIRTY KNOTS! STEER ON HEADING 092 AND KEEP DEPTH OF 36 METERS!"

His last order made Bruno Barber look up at him, surprise on his face.

"We are going east instead of west, Herr Kapitän? We are going to be deeper still in enemy waters."

"Exactly, Bruno. Right now, the British will expect us to flee at top speed towards deeper water further down the Irish Sea, not to get closer to them. That was one lesson I learned from Kapitän Kretschmer: do what the enemy least expects from you. It will be completely dark in about one hour, something that will impede the British from being able to see us from the air. Once we will be more than fifteen nautical miles east from our last reported position, we will stop and lay down on the bottom, silent, and will wait for the British to spend themselves before going up to schnorchel and reload our batteries while we continue towards Liverpool at low speed at night."

21:57 (London Time)

Headquarters of Royal Navy's Western Approaches Command

Liverpool, England

"Nobody has seen even a trace of that German submarine yet?" asked Navy Captain Alan Ferguson in an incredulous tone his duty operations officer, Lieutenant commander George Stanmore. Stanmore could only brace himself and answer with what he knew.

"Nobody, sir. We did have over fourteen planes and three coastal patrol boats looking for that sub within half a hour, but they found nothing. Now that night has fallen, five planes equipped with radar have taken over the search, but with no results yet."

Ferguson, most frustrated by this and worried about the shipping presently sailing around the Irish Sea, was about to say something when a junior officer manning a battery of telephones nearby called for him.

"Sir, I have the intelligence officer at R.A.F. Speke. He wants to talk urgently with the senior officer present."

Ferguson frowned at that choice of words: it was sometimes used by officers who wanted to pass urgent or delicate information to another base and who wanted to be sure to be listened to. Walking quickly to the table manned by the young ensign, he grabbed the telephone presented to him and spoke firmly but calmly in the handset.

"Captain Ferguson, Western Approaches Headquarters!"

The young ensign watching him saw Ferguson listen for a few seconds before his face reflected sudden shock and became pale, while his knees nearly gave up.

"Are...are they sure?... Very well! Thank you for the information."

Ferguson then put slowly down the telephone receiver, his expression haggard. Worried by this, Lieutenant commander Stanmore started approaching hesitantly Ferguson but, before he could ask a question, the latter looked up and spoke loud enough to be heard by all the personnel on duty in the operations center.

"The intelligence officer at R.A.F. Speke just debriefed the crew of the HUDSON that first spotted that German submarine near Anglesey. That crew had been shot at by the submarine, which apparently mounted 37mm automatic cannons. Their HUDSON was seriously damaged, with one man killed and with their radio destroyed. They thus were not able to pass on earlier than now what they had seen. That HUDSON crew is adamant that the submarine they saw was of the same type as the U-800."

"Dear mother of Christ!" said softly Stanmore, while many in the room seemed horrified by Ferguson's last words. The souvenirs of the carnage the late U-800 had caused in the ranks of both Royal Navy warships and merchant ships running in convoys between the Canadian East Coast and England were still fresh in their memories. A truly awful thought then came to Stanmore.

"Then, if the Germans have produced another Type U-800 submarine, they could well be producing many more now, no?"

"That's correct, Commander Stanmore." replied Ferguson, feeling deeply depressed now. "I better go call Commodore McMullen to pass that news to him."

As Ferguson walked heavily to his office, two female auxiliaries exchanged a worried glance.

"More U-800 type submarines? Our goose just got cooked!" said in a low voice one of the young women.

15:19 (London Time)

Tuesday, May 18, 1943

Official Residence of the British Prime Minister

10 Downing Street, London

Prime Minister Winston Churchill passed a hand on his face as he tried to digest the news just brought to him by his military secretary, Major General Hastings Ismay.

"Another U-800? And roaming the Irish Sea?"

"Yes, Mister Prime Minister!" replied the tall, graying general. "It apparently entered the Irish Sea via the Northern Channel late on Sunday night, mined the entrance to the port of Belfast, then sank an American tanker ship near the Isle of Man. It was spotted surfacing near the Isle of Anglesey yesterday evening, in order to pluck out of the water the crew of a German reconnaissance bomber that had just ditched. It shot at and damaged at the same time a Lockheed HUDSON of Coastal Command. The crew of that HUDSON was the one that alerted us to the fact that the submarine was a U-800 type boat. Then, we lost contact with that German submarine. In mid-morning today, two merchant ships blew up on sea mines near Liverpool and sank, forcing Western Approaches Command to temporarily close the port until minesweepers could find and clear other possible mines. Unfortunately, the extent and depth of the minefield laid outside Liverpool came as a surprise and one minesweeper hit one mine and sank at around noon. Other minesweepers are continuing the sweeping as we speak, Mister Prime Minister."

"And when can we expect the port of Liverpool to reopen to maritime traffic, General Ismay?"

"Not before at least tomorrow morning, Mister Prime Minister."

"TOMORROW MORNING?" exploded Churchill, angered by that news. "Liverpool is our main port handling arriving merchant ships loaded with supplies and fuel from the United States and Canada. Every hour and day it is closed means that our reserves, which are already dangerously low, dwindle even more."

"I realize that, Mister Prime Minister, but it is still better to delay the arrival of those ships in Liverpool than to lose them to mine strikes."

Churchill's shoulders slumped a bit at those words: the last months of this war had been truly terrible on him.

"And that German submarine? Has it been spotted or reported lately?"

"No, Mister Prime Minister! Our planes and ships are scouring the Irish Sea as I speak, but haven't found it yet. It must have gone deep and silent for the time being, until its commander deems it time to resume his depredations."

A nasty thought then came to Churchill's mind, making him look up sharply at Ismay.

"The merchant ships that were heading to Liverpool with their supplies and fuel, were are they now?"

"Uh, I believe that they were told to wait in an assembly area southeast of the Isle of Man, where the depth is too big to allow German mines to be effective. Three corvettes and two frigates have been assigned to protected the boundaries of that assembly area until Liverpool is reopened to traffic."

Churchill then became truly agitated.

"An assembly area off the Isle of Man? Who is the idiot who thought of that? It's like assembling a herd of sheep in plain sight of a stalking wolf! That German submarine was probably hoping to create just that by mining the approaches to Liverpool. Get the Admiralty on the line right away and tell them to disperse those waiting merchant ships at once!"

"Uh, yes, Mister Prime Minister!"

As Ismay walked out of his large work office, Churchill sat back in his chair and did his best to chase away his anger and frustration.

"More U-800s! Bloody hell!"

15 :24 (London Time)

Control room of the U-900

Navigating some 32 kilometers southeast of the Isle of Man

Irish Sea

"Sonar, ping once to give me a tactical picture here: there are too many contacts around here for me to rely only on sound headings. Bruno, be ready to plot the contacts we will get and stand by with the NIBELUNG sonar fire control unit."

"I am ready, Herr Kapitän." replied his second in command.

“Good! FORWARD AND AFT TORPEDO ROOMS, FLOOD ALL INTERNAL TUBES, PLUS TWO OF OUR FORWARD EXTERNAL TUBES! THIS IS GOING TO BE A REAL TORPEDO FEST!”

“Aye, Herr Kapitän!”

BONG

The powerful low frequency sound pulse of the U-900's active sonar resonated through the submarine, making the crewmembers freeze with expectation. It took only a few seconds before the sonar operators on duty started reporting multiple contacts to Oberleutnant zur See Bruno Barber, who entered their data in his NIBELUNG active-passive sonar targeting system. Barber then resumed out loud the results.

“Herr Kapitän, we have a total of fourteen separate surface contacts within range. Five of them are moving, while the others are immobile and may be at anchor. The moving contacts are all situated around the periphery of a large zone containing the immobile ships and may be escort ships.”

“Excellent! Just as I was hoping for. Target in priority the moving ships, using T5 ZAUNKÖNING torpedoes. Fire them in time-on-target mode.”

“Calculating our firing sequence... Ready to fire, Herr Kapitän.”

“Then, start launching the T5s! Helm, put our motors on idle: we don't want one of our acoustic fish to come back at us.”

“Firing first T5 now!... Firing second T5 now!...”

As soon as the five acoustic torpedoes were announced as fired, Ulrich gave an order via intercom.

“TORPEDO ROOMS: RELOAD AT ONCE WITH TWO FRESH T5 AND THREE T3a TORPEDOES!”

Ulrich then did the only thing he could do now: wait for the results of his first attack move. A bit over six minutes later, the noise of a first distant explosion was heard. However, knowing that they were only starting this battle and that there were enemy warships in the vicinity, the crew of the U-900 didn't cheer loudly, only smiling to each other and exchanging triumphant signs. A total of four explosions were heard within two minutes of each other, prompting a report from Barber.

“Four hits on four separate targets, Herr Kapitän. It seems that one of our T5s either missed or was a dud.”

“Oh well, you can’t win all the time, I suppose. Target the remaining moving target with a fresh T5 and launch when ready.”

Ten seconds later, another acoustic torpedo was on its way. Unfortunately for its intended target, a RIVER-Class frigate, the captain of that warship reacted to the torpedoing of his comrades by pushing his engines to near full power, in order to take speed. That only made him an even more distinctive noise for the T5 to guide itself on. Two minutes and twenty seconds later, the T5 passed under the keel of the frigate, running on an opposite heading to that of the British warship. Its combined magnetic/contact firing pistol then triggered its 274 kilo warhead as it was running under the frigate at the level of its forward main gun turret. The explosion made the frigate jump halfway out of the water before it splashed down, broken in two parts which then sank rapidly.

The nine merchant ships anchored in the assembly area could only watch with horror as their five escort ships sank or capsized one after another within minutes. The reactions of their captains were all the same: they ordered their anchors to be raised and their engines to be restarted. They also cried out for help on the radio, cutting each other off under the effect of panic. All that took time, time that the U-900 exploited to its advantage. One particularly big cargo ship loaded down with tanks, artillery pieces and trucks earned the dubious honor of being targeted by one of the six 610mm Type 93 LONG LANCE heavy torpedoes carried by the U-900 in external tubes hidden under the weather deck. The powerful, Japanese-designed torpedo, traveling at a speed of 48 knots and carrying a 490 kilo warhead, struck the side of the cargo ship near its stern, where the engine room and the superstructures were. The explosion of its warhead split wide open the hull of the ship, flooding nearly instantly the engine room and cutting all power. With hundreds of tons of water rushing in and being loaded down with over 7,000 tons of cargo, the unfortunate American merchant ship took only three minutes to capsize, then sink bottom up. Another merchant ship that earned itself a Type 93 torpedo was actually a passenger ship converted to the troopship role and carrying over 900 replacement aircrews, ground support and administrative personnel meant to reinforce the ranks of the American 8th Air Force, stationed in various airfields in England. In that case, the explosion of the torpedo broke the transport ship in two, making it sink so quickly that there was no time to lower any lifeboats. Nearly all of its

occupants went down with the ship, with the rare survivors finding themselves swimming in the cold waters of the Irish Sea.

Above, flying around the area at an altitude of 1,400 meters, the crew of a Lockheed HUDSON was watching with both incomprehension and horror the ships sink one by one while they could do next to nothing about it. No visual sighting or radar echo from a submarine periscope had alerted them in advance of the start of the attack. Now that there definitely was a submarine inside their patrol zone, they couldn't detect it at all! In that, however, they were not at fault. With the destruction of the British escort ships with the help of its acoustic homing torpedoes, the U-900 could now use freely its advanced sonar systems to target the merchant ships around it, and this without having to pop a periscope through the surface of the sea. Furthermore, by using to the full its underwater observation domes in conjunction with its active-passive sonars and by firing its torpedoes from short ranges, the U-900 could launch its torpedoes from deeper than normal periscope depth, letting the gyroscopes and hydrostatic gauges of its torpedoes bring them up to the correct running depth and heading after ejection from their tubes. The murky waters were also helping the U-900, hiding it from aerial observation once deeper than thirty meters. Aboard the HUDSON, the pilot was about ready to pull his hair out.

"FOR CHRIST SAKE! HOW COULD THIS BE POSSIBLE? WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO SEE THAT BLOODY SUB FROM UP HERE, THROUGH THE SURFACE LAYER OF THE SEA. PAUL, DO YOU HAVE SOMETHING ON YOUR RADAR?"

"NEGATIVE! I JUST HAD OUR OWN SHIPS AT FIRST. NOW, THERE IS NOTHING WITHIN FIFTEEN MILES. THIS IS SORCERY!"

The pilot exchanged a glance with his copilot.

"Sorcery or not, we failed in our mission, big time! How the hell are we going to explain this back at base?"

"Let's think about that later, Ryan. Right now, the important thing is to find the bastard who did all this. That sub will have to come up eventually to recharge its batteries. If we stay on station, we may just be able to find and nail him then."

Unknown to the copilot of the HUDSON, his pious wish was quickly fading away, as the U-900 was already moving underwater to another hunting sector.

18:06 (London Time)

Wardroom of the U-900

Hauptmann Rudolph Falke and Leutnant Karl Surren were greeted in person by Ulrich von Wittgenstein and his seven officers when they entered the submarine's wardroom, where they had been invited to have supper.

"Welcome, gentlemen of the Luftwaffe! I hope that you have a good appetite this evening, as our cook promised us a really nice menu."

"We are indeed fairly hungry, Herr Kapitän von Wittgenstein." replied Falke while shaking hands with Ulrich. "I must say that, the more I see of your U-900, the more I believe it to be a true technological marvel. Your smoking lounge, with its view of the sea outside, is itself quite impressive: I and Leutnant Surren just came from there and the view outside reminded me of Jules Verne's novel '20,000 Leagues under the Sea'. Talking of that view, I noticed that we are now on the bottom, at a fairly shallow depth. I would have thought that you would have chosen a deeper place to rest at the bottom, in order to evade aerial observation."

"A logical expectation on your part, Hauptmann Falke, but I wanted to be able to raise my periscopes and schnorchel above the surface while resting on the bottom. That's why I chose a spot with a depth of only 23 meters. In order to minimize the risks of detection, I chose a resting position within Irish territorial waters. We are in fact not too far from Dublin right now."

"Uh, aren't we breaking the neutrality of Ireland by doing this, Herr Kapitän?"

"Maybe, but who cares?" Replied Ulrich, smiling. "We found out two years ago that the U.S.A.'s so-called neutrality meant little indeed, so we are only leveling the playing field today. But let's take place at the dining table before continuing this conversation."

All ten men then took seats around the long wooden table, with Ulrich taking the head seat. Falke waited for everybody to be seated before asking another question to Ulrich.

"So, Herr Kapitän, when could me and my aviators expect to be back in France?"

Somehow, Falke didn't like much the way Ulrich's expression changed then.

"I am sorry to have to say this, Hauptmann Falke, but you may be stuck aboard my U-900 for a few weeks, at the least."

"A few weeks?" replied Falke, his voice hesitant. "Why so long?"

"Because my mission orders, given to me by Admiral Dönitz, state that I am to interdict and block as much as possible the enemy merchant shipping from arriving in either Glasgow or Liverpool and unload their cargo there. I already started fulfilling that mission by mining the approaches to Liverpool and by sinking nine merchant ships waiting off that port, along with their five escort ships. As long as I will have torpedoes and mines aboard, I will roam the Irish Sea and its North Channel and sink the enemy shipping I will encounter, with a special emphasis on tanker ships."

"And...how many torpedoes and mines do you still have left aboard, Herr Kapitän?" asked Karl Suren.

"I still have 54 torpedoes and twelve sea mines left aboard, so I have plenty for quite a long hunting season, if I may call it like that. Admiral Dönitz doesn't only want me to simply sink enemy ships: he wants me to do it in a fashion that will paralyze the enemy and will make him so fearful of the U-900 that the cargo and tanker ships arriving from North America will not dare enter the Irish Sea, thus starving Great-Britain of supplies for an even longer period. With any luck, we may just be able to force the British into asking for an armistice with us in order to avoid starvation for their people. In turn, taking the British and, hopefully, the Americans out of this war against us, will allow Germany to fight on one front only and concentrate on defeating these damn Soviets."

The two Luftwaffe officers exchanged a quick glance then: that program certainly sounded very ambitious but, strategically, it made perfect sense and it actually had at least an inkling of a chance of succeeding. Right now, no one in Germany was in any doubt that the Soviets were now the most dangerous and immediate foes of Germany. The United States may have been a mighty industrial giant and a rapidly growing military superpower, but it had already been cut to size by the exploits of the late U-800, which had succeeded in destroying a whole set of locks of the Panama Canal, had blocked the port of San Francisco by dropping the Golden Gate Bridge down in the entrance channel and had sunk more American warships around the Pacific than one could count. One concrete result of that Pacific trip was the fact that it had forced the Americans in switching the priorities of their war effort from Europe to the Pacific, where the Japanese Navy was now roaming nearly at will and where Australia was surrounded, with its maritime supply lanes cut off. Also as a result of that long trip by the U-800, the Kriegsmarine had adopted in service three of the best types of torpedoes designed by the Japanese Imperial Navy and was now mass producing them in Germany. Half the torpedo load of the U-900 in fact consisted of Japanese-designed torpedoes, including

initially six of the mighty 610mm Type 93 LONG LANCE heavy torpedoes, with a range of 20,000 meters at a speed of 48 knots and with a 490 kilo warhead.

"That is quite a program to be realized by just a single submarine, Herr Kapitän, no offence meant to you or your boat." said politely Rudolph Falke, making Ulrich nod.

"No offence taken, Hauptmann Falke. I realize how grandiose and demanding that program may sound like, but we won't be alone for long: many more boats of the Type XXI class, of which the U-900 is the first to be produced, are being built right now. At least two of them are already doing their sea trials in the Baltic and will go on their first war patrols in a few weeks at the most. Given another six or seven months, the British Isles and the Atlantic coast of the United States will be heavily patrolled by Type XXI submarines and enemy maritime commerce in the North Atlantic will then essentially shrivel and die."

The assistant-cook of the boat, Matrosen Ernst Mannerheim, who was acting as steward for the officers' supper, then started serving wine to the participants, interrupting for a while the discussion. Falke watched him with an amused expression as Mannerheim poured wine around.

"Wine being served aboard a submarine at sea... That must be a first."

"Not at all!" replied Ulrich with a wide smile. "When I was still serving with Kapitän Kretschmer on the U-800, we had wine, rum, Cuban cigars, Colombian coffee and hot chocolate, among other things."

Falke, like Surren, couldn't help stare at Ulrich with wide eyes.

"Nooo! And how did you manage that? Most of those things are either severely rationed in Germany or are not available at all."

"Simple: we stole supplies from enemy ships we boarded and captured. For example, one British refrigerated stores ship that we seized off the port of Miami was loaded with hundreds of tons of frozen meat, coffee beans and chocolate products. It was a true treasure chest."

"Mein Gott! You will have to tell me more about this one fine day, Herr Kapitän."

"Not before I can add a few more stories of my own during this war patrol, my dear Falke." replied Ulrich while waving his fork and smiling.

"Alright, I will be patient, Herr Kapitän. So, what is on the menu for supper?"

"Kipper?" answered Ulrich on a malicious tone, using what was often a nickname to designate a British person. That joke was greeted by general, spontaneous laughter.

CHAPTER 6 – BOWMANVILLE

08:06 (Paris Time)

Thursday, June 10, 1943

Office of Admiral Karl Dönitz, BdU headquarters

Keroman, Lorient, French Atlantic coast

“Aaah, my dear von Wittgenstein! Welcome back! How was your first war patrol with the U-900?”

“Intense but satisfying, Herr Admiral.” answered Ulrich, dressed in his best uniform. Dönitz gave him a benevolent smile on hearing that.

“Well, it was certainly satisfying to my taste...and that of the Führer. Our intelligence is reporting that the British are getting truly desperate and are close to the bottom of their reserves of supplies. A further cut in food rationing was announced by London a week ago for the British civilians and the R.A.F. has cut down drastically on its routine patrols, thus making life that much easier for my U-Boote. But please, sit down!” Before taking the easy chair offered by Dönitz, Ulrich put on his desk a large, thick brown envelope.

“Here is my patrol report, along with prints of the pictures I was able to take of a few of my British victims, Herr Admiral.”

“Thank you!”

Ulrich then sat down and waited patiently while Dönitz went through his report. The graying admiral finally nodded his head, apparently quite satisfied.

“Thirty-five merchant ships totaling 210,000 tons, plus thirteen British warships confirmed sunk: Kapitän Kretschmer would have been proud of you, my dear von Wittgenstein.”

“Thank you, Herr Admiral: that was the best compliment you could have given me.”

“And you truly deserves it. Just one question: did you seek out those British warships or did you just bumped into them?”

“I bumped into them, Herr Admiral. On the first occasion, I found five British escort ships protecting a group of merchant ships waiting off Liverpool for my mines to be cleared. I had no choice but to sink those escort ships in order to get at the merchant

ships. On the second occasion, as I was slowly heading north up the North Channel, looking for preys, I was confronted by six British frigates and destroyers going down that channel in extended line while pinging on active ASDIC mode. Those warships were obviously sweeping down the North Channel to find and sink me and I decided that the best defense then was a good offence, so I ambushed them. By the way, our new T5 ZAUNKÖNING acoustic homing torpedo is a great weapon, especially against frigates and corvettes, which are not fast enough to evade it. Anyway, I managed to sink all six of those warships before continuing up the North Channel. The twelfth British warship I sank was actually a submarine that was posted in ambush at the opening of the North Channel, near the coast of Northern Ireland. Unfortunately for it, our sonars were clearly superior to their sonar and we were able to detect it first and approach it silently. We shot it at nearly point blank range and were able to take a picture of it through our underwater observation dome as it sank to the bottom. Finally, the last warship we sank was a new construction destroyer that had just been completed at the Vickers Shipyards in Barrow-in-Furness. We encountered it doing its sea trials as we were on our way to mine for the second time the approaches to the port of Liverpool.”

“I see! Normally, I would not be happy at one of my submarine commanders taking such risks, but the sinking of all those escort ships and destroyers have had a dramatic effect for our other submarines operating around the British Isles. In order to find you, the British made the mistake of taking nearly all of their anti-submarine capable ships patrolling the Irish Sea and North Channel, along with redirecting the maritime patrol aircraft of their Coastal Command in the area, concentrating them on finding you. That in turn took off a lot of the pressure on our Type VII boats patrolling in adjacent areas. Since you actually sank all those escort ships, that means that there are now wide gaps in the British anti-submarine defenses of the British Isles, gaps that my other submarines have already started to exploit with great success. You may be pleased to hear that, with your own score included, our total tonnage of enemy merchant ships sunk during the month of May in the North Atlantic was 708,000 tons, a near record. Now that two other Type XXI boats and three Type IXD3 boats have replaced you on station and are blocking the northern and southern accesses to the Irish Sea, the British will continue to starve in the dark for the weeks and months to come. With more Type XXI boats coming out of the shipyards nearly every week now, our blockade of the British Isles will soon be airtight. My main worry right now is to find enough good crews for them. That actually brings me on the subject of your next mission.”

Dönitz then pressed a button on the intercom box sitting on his desk.

“Please have the good hauptmann come in!”

Now quite curious, Ulrich waited in his padded chair while fixing the entrance door. A grin appeared on his face when a Heer⁴ officer entered the office and presented himself to the admiral while saluting him.

“Hauptmann Hugo Margraff, here as requested, Herr Admiral.”

“At ease, Hauptmann Margraff! I believe that you already know well Korvetenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein?”

“I certainly do, Herr Admiral!” replied the army commando before exchanging a strong handshake with Ulrich, who had got up on his feet. The two men then sat down, Margraff grabbing a second chair and approaching it from Dönitz’ desk. The admiral in turn smiled benevolently at both men.

“Two valorous officers indeed! Be assured that I have a worthy mission for both of you, a mission I am sure that you will take at heart. Basically, as you must know already, while Kapitän Kretschmer died in the sinking of his U-800 off Newfoundland, 36 of his crewmembers were able to jump out and were taken prisoner by the British. We now know through our intelligence work that they were subsequently interned in a Canadian prisoner-of-war camp, Camp Bowmanville, situated near Toronto, on the North Shore of Lake Ontario. We have since been able to get more information on that prisoners’ camp, especially through what the prisoners themselves told us by secret codes via their letters to their families. We now know enough about that camp to convince me that we could possibly be able to get to it, enter the camp and bring back to Germany some select prisoners. The priority will be of course to free experienced submarine officers and men, plus experienced Luftwaffe pilots. I thus want you two to take the next few days to study our intelligence on that Canadian camp and to decide if an operation to break free at least some of the inmates is feasible. You will then report to me your conclusions and recommendations. I gave orders for my intelligence staff to help you to the utmost in this. Know that the Abwehr⁵ and the Luftwaffe Intelligence Branch will be helping us in this, as there is some very high level interest in this potential mission...going all the way to the Führer himself.”

⁴ Heer : German Army.

⁵ Abwehr : German Army Intelligence Branch in WW2.

Both Ulrich and Margraff stiffened a bit on hearing that: such high level interest all but guaranteed that they would at least have to try accomplishing that mission, however risky it could turn to be. It was Margraff, as the man who would obviously run the most risks in such a mission, who then spoke up, his voice firm.

“Admiral, you can count on us. We will do the impossible...and more!”

15:41 (Paris Time)

Saturday, June 12, 1943

Office of Admiral Dönitz, BdU headquarters

“So, my good men, do you think that the mission is feasible?”

Ulrich von Wittgenstein, standing at attention with Hugo Margraff in front of Dönitz’ work desk, answered for the pair.

“Yes, Herr Admiral! However, the quality of our false papers and disguises will be primordial for the success of the mission, as we may have to pass through multiple security checkpoints.”

Dönitz nodded his head in agreement to that.

“That is a given. I already have the assurances of Admiral Canaris that his services will provide maximum support to your mission, including by providing false papers, documents, uniforms and civilian clothing. You are thus to go next to Paris, to visit the local Abwehr section there, where your false papers and documents will be made and disguises provided. Hauptmann Margraff, you will have to bring your troopers with you to Paris, so that photos of them could be taken and measurements made for their disguises.”

“That will help us a lot, Herr Admiral.” replied Margraff, who then hesitated for a second before continuing. “Uh, there is one more thing that we will need, which may improve a lot our chances of success.”

“I will do my best, Hauptmann Margraff. What is it?”

What Margraff said then left Dönitz stunned for a moment.

“You are not serious, Hauptmann, I hope?”

“Very much, Herr Admiral!” replied Margraff without hesitation, resolved to get his wishes.

09:52 (Paris Time)

Monday, June 14, 1943

Offices of the Abwehr's Paris division

Hotel Kléber, 7th Arrondissement

Paris, France

"You asked for me, sir?"

"Yes, I did, Oberhelferin Blumenthal. Please, take a seat." replied Major Karl Bock, the commander of the Abwehr's Paris division. As the young woman took place in a chair near his desk, Bock examined her with interest. According to her personnel file, Hanna Blumenthal was 24 years old and had volunteered to serve as an army female auxiliary at the age of 21. However, she had what one could call a 'baby face' that tended to soften the attitude of superiors towards her. Whether that 'baby face' was natural or the result of Hanna having lied about her true age on enrolment was still an open question to Bock. She certainly was a beautiful girl, with a smooth, oval face, big gray eyes and reddish-brown hair. She also had a feminine body and was a bit taller than the average woman, with a height of 172 centimeters. However, the main reason for which she was appreciated at the Paris offices of the Abwehr was not her beauty, but rather her sharp intelligence, quick mind, competence and overall good nature. Bock could bet that many of his male agents and officers secretly wished that they could date or even marry her. Certainly, any man dealing with her couldn't help but like her. That was however a problem for what he wanted to discuss with her, but she was still the best choice for the job, in his opinion.

"Oberhelferin Blumenthal, I must say that your competences as a radio monitoring specialist are well recognized and that you speak and write English perfectly. You are also an expert Morse radio operator and have been monitoring both American and British military radio transmissions for over two years now, demonstrating great efficiency and expertise in that job. What I have for you is a very special temporary assignment in which your English proficiency will be key. I understand that you once visited the United States and Canada with your parents, when you were a teenager. Is that correct?"

"Only partly, Herr Major: I actually visited four times the United States and Canada during my youth. My father was a high level sales representative for the

Telefunken radio manufacturing company and his job required him to frequently visit a number of countries overseas, including the United States and Canada.”

“Oh?” said Bock while raising an eyebrow, now seriously interested. “And what other countries did you visit, on top of the United States and Canada, Oberhelferin?”

“Well, I often travelled to France, Belgium and the Netherlands, sir. By the way, I learned French during my high school years and can say that I am a fluent French speaker. I also traveled a couple of times to Italy and Spain, plus went once to Argentina and Brazil. As I said, my father was highly placed in the company and was able to afford to bring me and my mother along many of his business trips, especially in the Summer, during school vacations.”

“Impressive!” said Bock, meaning it. “Then, the assignment I have in mind for you would fit you to a ‘T’...if you accept it. Please understand that the mission I am talking about will be a very dangerous one, deep behind enemy lines. In fact, you would be accompanying a few of our soldiers from the Brandenburg Regiment, who intend to infiltrate the United States and then enter Canada. Your job would be to help reinforce the false identities used by our soldiers, mostly by lowering the suspicions of local enemy soldiers and police officers: who would think that German saboteurs and infiltrators would bring a woman with them to the United States and Canada?”

Hanna was left speechless by this for a long moment, having expecting everything but that. She finally overcame the waves of emotion washing over her and got up on her feet.

“Sir, I will be honored to participate in that mission.”

“Excellent!” said Bock, also getting up from his chair. “Then, follow me, Oberhelferin Blumenthal.”

Leading Blumenthal out of his office, Bock then walked with her down the main corridor of their floor, then climbing up to the next level and walked down another corridor before entering a large room used by the counterfeiting section. That room was filled with both work desks and storage cabinets, with a dozen men working silently at their desks. There were however as well twenty young men in army uniforms who were obviously not simple desk jockeys, standing or sitting in a corner while reading some documents and papers. Those young men in turn eyed at once with interest Hanna Blumenthal as she followed Bock and approached them. One of the men, a highly

decorated hauptmann, saluted Bock when the latter stopped in front of him, while the other young men came to rigid attention.

“Sir!”

“At ease! Well, Hauptmann Margraff, I believe that I found the perfect person for the job. Let me present to you Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal, from my radio monitoring section. She speaks and writes perfect English and has visited the United States and Canada a number of times when she was a teenager. Oberhelferin, this is Hauptmann Hugo Margraff, of the Brandenburg Regiment.”

“THE Hauptmann Hugo Margraff who raided the American East Coast from the U-800, sir?” replied Hanna, suddenly excited. That made Hugo smile in amusement.

“My! I didn’t think that I had become this famous. I hope that I am not as well known by the enemy.”

“Be reassured, Hauptmann Margraff.” said Bock. “You are well known only inside the Abwehr, but not outside the service. If you accept her as part of your mission, I will then have false papers and disguises made as well for Oberhelferin Blumenthal. So, if you want to ask her a few questions, now is the time.”

“Thank you, Herr Major!” replied Hugo before looking at Hanna and switching to English, speaking with an American accent.

“So, miss, tell me in your best American English about your past trips to the United States and Canada.”

“With pleasure, sir!” said Hanna in English, adopting a New York accent. She then spoke for a good three minutes while Hugo and his men listened carefully to her. At the end of it, Hugo nodded his head, quite satisfied.

“Very good, Oberhelferin! One last question: have you ever fired a pistol?” The blank look Hanna gave him was enough of an answer for him and he smiled benevolently to her.

“I thought so! However, that was to be expected: our female auxiliaries are not normally trained to handle weapons. Well, expect to have to train intensively on pistol handling and firing during the next week, Oberhelferin Blumenthal.”

15:52 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, June 23, 1943

Weather deck of the U-900, Keroman I submarine bunker

Lorient, France

The arrival of the twenty men and one woman of the landing team in the submarine bunker containing the U-900 attracted at once Ulrich von Wigenstein on the weather deck of his submarine, where he greeted Hugo Margraff with a strong handshake.

"Welcome back on the U-900, my friend. Your present team is quite a lot more numerous than your previous one, when you were on the U-800. I also can see that you found what we were looking for to help in our mission."

"I did! I believe that Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal will do just fine on this mission...if the men of your crew don't devour her first with their eyes."

Ulrich had a short laugh at that before replying with a grin.

"I will do my best to keep my crew of perverts on a leash. I will give her a single-occupancy cabin just for her, in the Petty Officers' quarters, which has its own washroom and shower."

"That should do. Know that our disguises and mission kit have been sealed in airtight rubber bags, so that they don't get impregnated with diesel fumes during our trip, something that would give us away at the first sniff by an American."

"A good idea indeed, my friend. As for you and your men, I have twenty bunks available in the passengers compartment and in the aft torpedo room, close to the Petty Officers' quarters. Let me guide your group inside."

The heavily loaded members of the landing team, each carrying at least two full kit bags, then followed Ulrich and Hugo inside the submarine, entering it via the forward airlock, situated inside the forward blunt edge of the sail. Hanna, who had never been aboard a submarine before and who was expecting some kind of steel sardine can, was left stunned by what she saw as they went down two levels via steep ladders.

"Mein Gott! This submarine is quite spacious, contrary to my expectations." Ulrich smiled at that but didn't speak until he stopped in front of the sliding curtain closing off one of the individual cabins usually reserved for senior petty officers.

"Your cabin for the duration of our sea voyage, Oberhelferin Blumenthal. Across the hallway, a few paces back, you will find a washroom with shower reserved for the senior petty officers. You will only need to hook up a special sign saying that a woman is inside to have privacy while you use it."

Hanna pushed open the curtain of her assigned cabin and looked briefly inside the six meter square surface of the compartment before smiling to Ulrich.

"That is perfect. Thank you, Herr Kapitän!"

"You're welcome, Oberhelferin." replied Ulrich, who was starting to find her very cute indeed. Hugo Margraff then asked him a question as Hanna went inside her cabin with her luggage.

"What about the men that we may free from the Bowmanville prisoners' camp? Where will they be accommodated for the return trip?"

"Well, each of my junior officers' cabins have an upper bunk that is normally kept folded away above the fixed lower bunk. Thus, I will have six bunks available for the more senior officers from Bowmanville. The rest will have to share crew bunks in 'hot bunking' fashion. I thus could accommodate up to eighty extra people aboard in still fair conditions. If you bring more ex-prisoners than that, then I will have to break out our reserve of folding camp cots from our storage room and be imaginative about where to put them."

"Well, I doubt that we will be able to travel back to the coast with such a large group without attracting attention. I may have to do some drastic selection once inside Bowmanville, in order to keep my return group to a manageable size. But don't worry, I will keep my promise: every crewmember from the U-800 that I find will be part of my return group."

"Thank you, my friend. Those crewmembers may be mostly of low rank but, together, they formed the most deadly submarine crew we ever had. Germany needs men like them."

"Agreed! Well, let's show to my men the palace they are going to live in, shall we?"

18:09 (Paris Time)

Crew cafeteria of the U-900

Hanna Blumenthal, wearing a dark khaki coverall and an elastic cap covering her hair, meant to prevent as much as possible diesel fumes from impregnating them, shrank at once on entering the crew cafeteria: the large compartment, full of men eating at long tables, had suddenly fallen silent, while over sixty pairs of eyes were now fixed on her. The sudden silence seemingly attracted a large, beefy man with a graying beard out of the nearby kitchen. The man, wearing a cook's apron, had a brief look at her before twisting his head and shouting at the men in the cafeteria.

"DON'T YOU SQUIDS HAVE ANY MANNERS? GET YOUR NOSES BACK INTO YOUR BOWLS BEFORE I START THROWING HOT WATER AROUND!"

The threat from the old cook worked, with the dinners returning their attention to their food. Hanna smiled to the cook, quite grateful for his intervention.

"Thank you very much, mister. That was very considerate on your part."

"Pah! I have three daughters that are around your age, miss. I am accustomed to keep young stalkers away from them. By the way, I am Matrosenobergefreiter Otto Hannig, chief-cook on the U-900."

"And I am Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal." replied Hanna while shaking the cook's hand. "Uh, you seem to be fairly old to have been drafted into service, no?"

"True! I am a veteran submariner from the Great War of 1914. I volunteered to return back into active service."

"Wow! Your patriotism and dedication is truly admirable, Obergefreiter. Uh, I just arrived aboard this afternoon. How does it work here?"

"Just like in a civilian cafeteria, Oberhelferin. You just go to your left and pick up a food tray, a cup and utensils from those bins, then go to the start of the service counter, where I will be able to serve you with your choice of food."

"We can choose our menu, on a submarine?" asked Hanna, floored. Otto grinned to her in response.

"Of course! This is my kitchen and I don't serve swill in it."

"Uh, I see! Give me a second, then."

Hanna made two steps and grabbed a food tray, a cup and a set of utensils before walking to the start of a service counter set across from a large opening in a partition separating the cafeteria and the kitchen, or galley in naval parlance. There, she was able to examine the contents of multiple food containers set over steam tables. Her eyes went wide at the view of the selection available.

"Breaded wiener schnitzel? Beef and vegetable stew? Deep fried cod? Mashed potatoes? Steamed vegetable mix? Mein Gott! Is the menu always this comprehensive?"

"It is!" said proudly Otto. "You will also find a self-serve counter on the other side of the room, which has a pot of chicken and noodle soup, a salad bar, a bread bar and dispensers for milk, fresh water, coffee and apple juice."

"When I think that I was half expecting to eat only soup with some bread and cold cuts while sitting on the floor or on a bunk. I will have a wiener schnitzel, with some mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables, please."

"Here you are, miss. Bon appétit!"

"Thank you!" said happily Hanna before walking away from the service counter with her full food tray. She stopped first at the beverage counter and served herself a glass of fresh milk before going to sit at a table occupied by a few soldiers from the landing team. Like her, they all wore coveralls and elastic head covers and would do so for the duration of the sea trip to the American coast.

"Hello guys! I must say that the food aboard comes as a really nice surprise. I will have to be careful not to put on weight."

"Yeah! You would not want to outgrow your nice British naval auxiliary uniform, Oberhelferin." replied Unteroffizier⁶⁶ Herman Weiss. "On the other hand, I do not regret one minute the field rations we got while serving on the Eastern Front. Half of the time, we ended up with moldy or concrete-hard dry bread and a piece of cheese as our supper."

"And, how were things on the Eastern Front?" asked Hanna, lowering her voice to a near whisper. Weiss understood at once why she did so: things were not going very well on the Eastern Front and propaganda officials didn't like 'defeatist talk'. He thus lowered his own voice before answering her.

"We have managed to stabilize the front...for now. However, I fully expect those damn Soviets to hit us hard next Winter, at a time when our vehicles and weapons are mostly frozen stiff. You have to give that to them, though: these Soviets are truly tough, fanatical bastards."

"And...what are our chances of winning over the Soviets, in your opinion, Unteroffizier?"

Weiss thought his answer over for a moment before speaking.

"It will all depend on whether our submarine campaign can succeed in forcing the British to give up the fight and ask for an armistice. If we can manage that and end up fighting only on one front, then I believe that we will win. If not..."

⁶⁶ Unteroffizier : German Army rank equivalent to sergeant.

Weiss didn't finish his sentence, nor did he have to, as Hanna fully understood what he meant. Her enthusiasm quite tempered now, she concentrated on her food, swallowing back the other questions she had in her mind.

23:30 (New York Time)

Saturday, July 3, 1943

Coast of New Hampshire, between Portsmouth and Hampton

United States

The two inflatable rubber boats and one large, six meter rowboat, were nearly invisible in the obscurity of the moonless night when they beached on the pebble and sand beach of the coast opposite Cedar Island, the latter being some twelve kilometers offshore. As soon as each boat started rubbing against the bottom, booted feet scrambled out to pull them partially out of the water. A total of 21 dark silhouettes got out of the boats, then helped the fourteen sailors that stayed aboard to unload the numerous backpacks, kit bags and suitcases that had been transported along with the passengers of the boats. Those pieces of luggage, all wrapped in airtight rubber or plastic bags, were then carried inside the tree line bordering the beach. Once the boats were empty of luggage, they were pushed back in the water and the sailors manning them started paddling to return to the U-900, which was waiting on the surface some 700 meters away, its deck guns raised and manned in case an American ship or plane showed up. However, as they rowed away, the rudder man in the rowboat unwound a long, thin insulated wire, one extremity of which was held firmly by two soldiers standing inside the tree line next to the beach. After unrolling and dipping in the water some 500 meters of wire, the rudder man arrived at the end of it and threw it and the small watertight metallic box connected to its extremity in the water. As the transceiver box of the underwater telephone sank to the bottom, some fifteen meters deep, the soldiers on the shore carefully attached the other end of the wire, which was connected to an underwater telephone handset box, to the base of a big tree, then took a few minutes to bury the wire running to the waterline, so that it wouldn't be found by some passersby. The telephone box was also carefully camouflaged, then the field team regrouped silently around Hugo Margraff inside the trees. There, they all removed the coveralls and head covers they had been wearing during the ten days needed for the U-900 to sail across the North Atlantic from Lorient and to approach covertly the coast of

the state of New Hampshire. Their final choice for a landing spot had been a section of the coast where no lights were visible. As other sections of the coast showed plenty of houses with lights on, this meant that this section was either uninhabited, or that the houses along it were not occupied. Hugo Margraff was fervently hoping for the second hypothesis, as this would provide them with a place to hide during their first hours in the United States.

With all of his team members now assembled around him, wearing German field uniforms and carrying their weapons, Hugo spoke to them in a low voice.

"Alright, we are now on enemy soil. Never forget that and always think before saying or doing anything while in the presence of Americans. One wrong word will be enough to doom the whole mission, so please be careful. Now, me and Feldwebel⁷ Stein will each take two men with us and will follow the shore in opposite directions, in order to look for an adequate place to hide for a few hours. The rest of you will finish unwrapping our kit here. Be quiet and don't smoke! The burning tips of your cigarettes would be visible hundreds of meters away in this dark night. I should be back in about half a hour."

Hugo then disappeared among the trees, followed by two men, while Franz Stein's group went in the opposite direction, leaving a very nervous Hanna Blumenthal with the remaining team members. She now wore a standard German Army auxiliary field uniform with trousers and was armed with a Walther PPK compact 7.62mm pistol, a small and handy weapon that was very easy to conceal on oneself. Besides her was a civilian suitcase containing her disguises: a British Royal Navy female auxiliary uniform and two female civilian outfits, complete with ankle boots, female shoes and hats. The suitcase also contained her various sets of false documents, plus an official-looking British leather briefcase. On her back, she was wearing a dark civilian backpack containing some field rations, a water bottle and a number of grenades of various types meant to supplement those carried by the commandos.

Stein's group was back first, some 35 minutes later. The second in command for Margraff then reported to the group in a near whisper.

⁷ Feldwebel : German Army rank equivalent to warrant officer or master sergeant.

"We didn't find any house within 400 meters. The first ones we found afterwards were all occupied. Any sign of the Hauptmann yet?"

"Nein!" replied Unteroffizier Michel Drücker, who was third in the line of command.

"Alright! We wait here for him. Sit down and relax as much as possible, but stay quiet."

The team members did so, with Hanna sitting down with her back against a tree. Despite having good eyesight, she still could see very little around her, so dark the night was. The thick forest didn't help either in that matter and her heart was beating fast, due to her nervousness.

"Damn, I never would have believed that I would one day be on American soil while wearing a German uniform, holding a pistol in my hands. Wait till the girls back in Paris hear my story!"

The thought that she may not be able to get back to Germany to tell her story then crossed her mind, making her concentrate back on checking the darkness around her. The Brandenburg soldiers around her were like silent ghosts and were truly impressing her up to now with their professionalism and expertise. To be with them helped markedly Hanna to relax a bit. By the time that Hugo Margraff was back with his two soldiers, some ten minutes later, her heart rate was mostly back to normal. Margraff at once regrouped his team members around him to pass his orders.

"We found an empty cottage some 300 meters away, right along the shore. We were able to get into it and explore it and it should make a perfect hideout for us. Grab your packs and kit bags and follow me."

Following in single file behind Margraff, the Germans cautiously made their way north through the forest, always keeping the shoreline within sight between the trees. Some fifteen minutes later, the 21 Germans arrived near a two-storey cottage which had its own private beach area with a short wooden wharf. There were however no boats tied to the wharf or visible around the house, which was situated at the end of a private dirt road, while no lights were visible inside the house. Going to a back door facing the beach, Margraff easily opened it, the door having apparently been previously unlocked from the inside, then urged his landing team inside. Hanna felt immense relief once inside the cottage, out of sight, and put down her suitcase and backpack in a corner of the living room, situated on the side facing the beach.

"Alright, people, here is what we will do next!" announced Hugo out loud. "First, we will organize ourselves and disperse around this house in order to cover every window and door of it, then will start washing ourselves and particularly our hands, faces and hair, in order to eliminate any odor of diesel on us. We will take a day or two if need be to do that: that smell could instantly betray us despite our disguises. Once we will all smell like roses, we will be able to pass to the next phase of our mission: our move inland towards Bowmanville."

The Germans laughed briefly at his joke, then started dispersing around the various rooms of the cottage, which proved to be fairly large and well furnished, being apparently the property of a family with at least four young children, if Hugo could judge from the few family pictures they found. At one point, Franz Stein came to him with a local newspaper in his hands.

"Sir, I found a newspaper and magazine rack in the living room. This paper is the most recent I found in the pile inside the rack: it is dated from early June."

"Hum... So, that could mean that this house has last been occupied a few weeks ago. That's good news for us. Still, we won't take any chances. Have a warning post established in the forest, near the connection of the dirt road with the coastal highway. Connect that post with this cottage via a field telephone and have two men in German uniforms man the post, with relief every four hours."

"Yes sir!"

As Stein walked away to carry out his orders, Hugo gave a brief glance towards Hanna Blumenthal : the young woman may be completely inexperienced about combat and field situations, but she was soon going to be crucial to their mission.

08:55 (New York Time)

Monday, July 5, 1943

New Hampshire Route 1A (coastal road between Portsmouth and Hampton)

Corporal Andy Sturgis was whistling to himself while driving his big 2½-ton U.S. Army truck down the coastal road, heading towards Boston, where he was due to load a large quantity of supplies and spare parts to be brought back to his National Guard base near Portsmouth. The weather was fine and the coastal scenery was magnificent, making this trip a quite pleasant one. After turning a bend in the road, he spotted something that suddenly made his trip even more pleasant: standing by the side of the

road, a big suitcase at her side, was a young woman with her right thumb up in front of her. A hitchhiking girl! Now, according to Army regulations, he was not supposed to stop and pick up passengers during this duty trip, but who would ever learn about this back at base? As he slowed down, he was able to better detail the girl. What he saw only made him more resolved to stop and pick her up, as she was a truly fine-looking young woman in her early twenties. Slowing down progressively and starting to roll on the side of the road, Andy stopped his truck level with the girl and applied the hand brake before extending his right arm to open the passenger door of the cab. Once the door was wide open, he realized that the girl would have some trouble lifting her big suitcase by herself up to the level of the cab. He thus slid sideways on the canvas bench seat and climbed down via the passenger door. From up close, the girl proved more than simply pretty and she flashed a big smile to him before speaking in a New York accent.

“Thank you very much for stopping for me, mister. You were very kind.”

The woman then fetched something out of a pocket of her light jacket and pointed it at Andy. The young soldier’s eyes bulged with shock and surprise on seeing that she was now pointing a small pistol at him. Looking up from the pistol, Andy saw that her expression was now most serious.

“Sorry about that, mister, but we needed your truck.”

“We? What...”

The cold contact of some metallic object against the back of his neck then shut him up, as a male voice spoke from behind him.

“Don’t even think about pulling some fancy trick now, Corporal, or I will have to shoot you. Put both hands behind your back, slowly.”

As Andy did so, two men wearing civilian clothes rushed out of the nearby bushes and solidly grabbed him before clamping a pair of handcuffs around his wrists. A thick cloth then gagged him before he was forcibly lifted up inside the cab, where his feet were also tied. One of his attackers then jumped behind the wheel, while another one sat and put his feet on top of him, making any move by him nearly impossible. Andy had time to see a third man in civilian clothes, standing near the young woman and holding a pistol, before the passenger door was closed and the truck started moving again. However, it turned nearly immediately onto a private dirt road leading to the shore and rolled for a few hundred meters until it stopped and parked beside a two-storey wood and brick cottage. The driver honked the horn once, making two men come out of the cottage and

go to the cab. Andy opened his eyes wide in stupor when the passenger door was opened, revealing two armed and helmeted German soldiers! The 'civilian' man sitting on him then put the muzzle of his pistol against the tip of Andy's nose and spoke calmly in good English.

"Here is the deal: you behave and stay quiet and we will free you alive and intact once our mission is completed. If you don't, then we will kill you. All our men have silenced weapons, so don't even count on that to raise the alarm. Understood?"

Andy, cold sweat appearing on his forehead, could only nod his head, making the 'civilian' smile.

"Excellent! Carry him inside, men!"

As soon as the two soldiers had taken Andy out of his truck, the man who had spoken to him looked at the driver.

"Let's change the plates and markings on this truck."

"Consider it done, Obergefreiter."

As soon as the army truck had turned into the private dirt road, Hanna and Hugo returned to their hiding place in a thick group of bushes next to the road, bringing Hanna's suitcase with them. They then waited for the next radio reports from the men posted some 400 meters away on both sides from their hiding place. Ironically, the Brandenburg men were now using German hand-held VHF radios which were improved copies of the American walkie-talkie radios captured during their previous raids on American soil, when they were being landed from the U-800. Thanks to superior German engineering, the new radios, now being mass-produced for the German forces, were actually more compact than their American ancestor and also had more range. Hugo, who also had a hand-held radio with him, had to wait maybe ten minutes before receiving a warning that a suitable vehicle was approaching, this time coming from Hampton. Grabbing Hanna's suitcase, he signaled the young woman to follow him before running across the road, to hide in another group of bushes close to the opening of the private dirt road. There, he left the big suitcase on the side of the road and hid, while Hanna took position next to her suitcase. Half a minute later, a black four-door Ford station-wagon appeared out of the next road bend, going at a fairly lazy pace. As it approached her and slowed down, Hanna couldn't help feel bad when she saw who was driving: it was a priest, wearing a traditional black clergyman suit.

"May God forgive me for this." She whispered to herself as the station-wagon was about to come to a halt in front of her. The priest, a man in his fifties with a jovial face, smiled to her from the driver's seat, speaking through the opened passenger window.

"Good day, my child! Where are you going like this with such a big suitcase?"

"To Portsmouth! Is it on your way, Father?"

"It certainly is, my child. Get in!"

"Uh, could you help me put my suitcase in the back first, Father?"

"Of course!" Answered the priest before stepping out of his car and going to the back, where he opened the rear gate. As his back was turned towards him, Hugo quietly approached the priest and gently tapped his shoulder, making him twist his head around in surprise. A momentary flash of fear came to his face when he saw the pistol held by Hugo, but he recovered his cool remarkably quickly and gave a no-nonsense look to Hugo.

"If this is to rob me, then don't expect much: I have little cash with me."

"We only need your car, Father. However, we will have to detain you for a couple of days, time for us to fulfill our mission. If all goes well, you will be able to take back possession of your car on our return."

Two more commandos dressed in civilian clothes then showed up, handcuffing the priest and putting him in the back of his station-wagon before driving the vehicle down the dirt road leading to the cottage. Just at that moment, Hugo received another radio message, this time from his man posted north of his location.

"Collector, this is Watcher One: I have a large movers' van approaching from Portsmouth. I see two men in the front cab. Are you a taker?"

"A movers' van? Hell yes! That would be perfect for us."

Hugo then grabbed again Hanna's suitcase and gave her a curt order.

"To the other side, quickly! A movers' van with two men in the cab is approaching from Portsmouth."

The duo hurried at a run across the road, with Hanna taking her original position, her suitcase at her side. The van that soon showed up was a large one, with a cargo box a good seven meters in length. That made Hugo smile in contentment as he was hiding behind a bush: that truck could easily transport discreetly a good thirty men or more. Again, Hanna's beauty did the trick and the movers' van stopped in a noise of screeching brakes. This time, however, things were trickier, with two men to deal with.

Hugo waited until the passenger in the cab started opening his door, then ran quietly across the rear of the truck while the passenger's mirror was in the wrong angle. As the co-driver of the van was stepping down on the side of the road, next to Hanna, Hugo ran to the driver's door and opened it brusquely, pointing his silenced Walther P-38 pistol in the face of the stunned driver, an overweight man in his forties.

"Shut down the engine, now!"

Sensing that the man's mind was going into overdrive and possibly thinking about a way to drive away, Hugo didn't take any chance and pulled the man by his left arm, making him fall out of the cab and hit face first the road's asphalt. Hugo immediately knelt on top of his back while pressing the muzzle of his gun on the driver's neck.

"No fancy tricks or you're dead!"

One of his men then arrived to help him handcuff the driver, who was then dragged towards the rear of the truck. Opening one of the two large rear doors, Hugo saw that the cargo box was half filled with pieces of furniture wrapped in thick blankets. That actually suited him fine, as those pieces of furniture would be able to hide men from a quick look inside the van. The two movers were then put inside the box and the truck rolled down the dirt road, leaving Hugo to ponder whether he now had enough vehicles for his needs. He quickly decided that he still needed at least one more vehicle, preferably a truck, so that he would have enough transport capacity for both his men and at least sixty escapees. He thus resumed his waiting with Hanna, hidden inside bushes.

Traffic was proving to be rather light this morning along the coastal highway, but Hugo reminded himself that gasoline was rationed for the civilian population, something that cut a lot on the usual travelling. There was also the fact that U.S. Route 1, a major highway, ran parallel further inland to N.H. Route 1A and carried most of the road traffic between Boston and Portsmouth. Finally, after letting pass dozens of unsuitable vehicles, which carried either families with children or were pickup trucks with open rear boxes in which men could not hide from public sight, Hugo hit pay dirt: a solitary U.S. Army bus travelling empty. Again, Hanna's charms worked their magic and the bus driver, a sergeant, promptly stopped, only to be captured and bundled away. With enough transport capacity in his possession to carry over a hundred men, Hugo knew that he would now be able to pass to the next phase of his mission, once the captured vehicles got new plates chosen from the sets of false plates brought from France.

Leaving four of his soldiers who would guard and care for their five prisoners behind at the cottage, Hugo and his remaining soldiers, plus of course Oberhelferin Blumenthal, departed the cottage in their captured vehicles shortly before noon, after everybody had eaten a quick lunch. Each of the four vehicles had aboard a German carrying a hand-held radio, so that Hugo could keep contact with all his men while allowing his vehicle to spread out along the road. The Germans riding in the Army 2½-ton truck and the bus wore U.S. Army uniforms, while two men in civilian outfits rode in the movers' van. As for Hugo, Hanna and Obergefreiter Heinrich Bayerling, they wore British naval uniforms while riding in the black Ford station-wagon, which now sported diplomatic plates and a British flag. Travelling due West from the coast, the four vehicles started making their way towards Albany and then Rochester, in the state of New York.

17:53 (New York Time)

Portsmouth Naval Shipyard

Lieutenant commander Jeffrey Prescott, from the Navy liaison office to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, was already quite pissed when he finally got a telephone line to the Navy's Boston regional headquarters.

"Hello, Boston? Please connect me with your transport section... What do you mean, they probably are out for supper? We are at war, not on a vacation! Try to ring them anyway!... Hello, Transport Section? This is Lieutenant commander Prescott, at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. Where the hell is your bus? It was supposed to pick up the navy band that celebrated the latest ship's launch this afternoon. The musicians are still waiting at dock side to be picked up... What do you mean, you sent the bus this morning? If you did, then your stupid bus driver must have lost himself along the way, or stopped somewhere to visit a girlfriend... Well, check again!"

Prescott then slammed down his telephone receiver, truly angry.

"Bunch of incompetent twits!" He spat out between his clenched teeth.

21:47 (New York Time)

Service station on the eastern outskirts of Syracuse

State of New York

Now that night had fallen, Hugo decided that it was a good time to refill the tanks of his vehicles, before they would jump into the next phase of the mission: the crossing into Canada. Thankfully, they had found on their civilian captives a number of gas rationing coupons, while the two military vehicles contained army requisition vouchers that could be exchanged for gas at civilian service stations. While each of his four vehicles went separately to the service station they had encountered in the outskirts of Syracuse, Hugo thought again about his mission plan. He still could exercise some variants to it while around Syracuse, as he could go from here either North and cross the Canadian border near Watertown, or continue West to Rochester and beyond, to search for suitable boats to steal along the south shore of lake Ontario. One thing that he strongly wished to keep as part of his plan was to be able to use his false British diplomatic identity. His mind finally made, Hugo waited until all his vehicles had filled up, with his two military trucks filling as well their spare jerrycans of gasoline, then met with all of them along a nearby deserted road for an impromptu briefing.

“Okay, lady and gentlemen, we are now at a crucial point in our mission: the final approach to Camp Bowmanville. It actually depended a lot on the type and quantity of vehicles that we would be able to capture near our landing point. I have now decided on how to proceed from here. Here is what we will do...”

03:10 (New York Time)

Tuesday, July 6, 1943

Lake Breeze Marina, Point Breeze Road

Southern shore of Lake Ontario, near Carlton

State of New York

“Pull over, Bayerling, stop the car!”

On Hugo Margraff’s urging, Heinrich Bayerling slowed down and pulled over their Ford station-wagon on the side of the small road that roughly following the outer perimeter of a small marina. They were now near the small town of Carlton and were in sight of a small marina occupied by a number of sailing boats, private yachts and fishing boats. Once the car was stopped, Hugo raised his binoculars to his eyes and examined the largest boat visible in the marina. The few lights around the marina helped him detail that boat, along with a large sign near it on the wharf. After nearly a minute of observation, Hugo lowered his binoculars, a wide smile now on his lips.

“We have a group fishing tour boat in that marina that should be perfect for our needs. At worst, if we can’t secure it for our use later today, there are a number of other boats that could do the job. Let’s return to our inn now: we need some sleep after driving for half a day.”

“Yes sir!” Replied Bayerling, using English. On orders from Margraff, the members of the field team were strictly forbidden to speak in German while under disguise, and this even in private settings. The rest of the team had parked their three vehicles at an inn in nearby Brockport and had rented rooms for the night, in order to take some badly needed rest and be able to shave and refresh themselves in the morning. As for Hugo, Hanna and Bayerling, they had rented rooms at another inn, since their British Royal Navy uniforms would have clashed with the U.S. Army uniforms worn by most of the other members of the team. The happy reactions of the inns’ receptionists at that unexpected influx of customers, along with the mostly empty parking lots of the establishments, had told Hugo that, despite the Summer weather, the local tourism business appeared quite slow. That was actually understandable if you took into account the gasoline rationing and the widespread conscription of men into the armed forces. They were also on a Tuesday, while most leisure travelling normally took place during weekends. All that suited Hugo just fine: less American travelers around meant less risks to his men of being accidentally unmasked.

Going back to the small bed and breakfast inn where they had rented rooms for the night in the tiny town of Hamlin, the trio went up to their respective rooms to catch a few hours of sleep. Hanna occupied a tiny room by herself, while Hugo and Heinrich shared a slightly larger room. Taking off his uniform and getting into bed, Hugo took some time to find sleep: the responsibilities he carried on this mission were truly crushing. To be responsible as well for a young woman with zero combat training or experience while deep behind enemy lines only added to his worries. However, his fatigue finally won over and he was able to get to sleep after a few minutes.

16:30 (New York Time)

Pilot house of ‘FISHING QUEEN’

At quayside in Lake Breeze Marina

Mouth of Oak Orchard River, South shore of Lake Ontario

Kenneth Prentice, already resigned to having another day without customers, was washing the windows of the pilot house of his fishing tour boat, the 'FISHING QUEEN', when he saw two men and one woman starting to walk down the wooden wharf to which his boat was tied. The trio wore good quality civilian clothes, something that raised Ken's hopes of finally having some customers. Dropping his wet sponge and quickly drying his hands, he then went aft to the open rear deck to meet the newcomers. The two men immediately struck him as apparently fit and healthy, while the young woman was a lot more than simply cute. Strangely enough, none of them carried any fishing gear, having only two briefcases, three suitcases and a haversack in their hands. Still, Ken smiled to them and greeted them with a friendly tone when they stepped aboard his boat.

"Welcome aboard the FISHING QUEEN, lady and gentlemen! I am Kenneth Prentice, owner and captain of this boat. What may I do for you today?"

The man who answered him did so with a distinct British accent.

"Hello! I am from the British embassy in Washington and my name is Harry Sutcliffe. Me, my wife Ann and Mister Chadwell, also from the British embassy, would like to sail on Lake Ontario and study its shoreline. It is part of a strategic study ordered by my government but I am taking the occasion to offer a little sight-seeing trip to my wife: the poor lass was dying to get out of Washington for a change."

"I certainly can sympathize with her, Mister Sutcliffe." Said Ken, smiling. This meant a few hours of cruising around, something that would earn him enough money to at least make his day worthwhile. "I can offer you a good four hours of daylight cruising around Lake Ontario for fifty dollars."

'Sutcliffe' nodded his head at once, apparently satisfied.

"The King is paying, so that is quite alright with me, sir. Uh, are you alone to man this big boat?"

"Oh no! I have a mechanic who checks on the engines and also helps me for port handling. Jerry is presently in the engine room, below us."

"And how fast is your boat, sir?"

"The FISHING QUEEN can top thirteen knots, Mister Sutcliffe." Replied Ken proudly.

"Uh, do you have any under-deck accommodations or do you have only this rear open deck available to your passengers?"

"Apart from the crew cabin, there is a small galley, a toilet compartment and two cabins, each with two bunks."

"Then, your boat should do just fine, Mister Prentice." Said the British man while putting one hand inside his vest, as if to extract a wallet. What he took out was however a silenced pistol, which 'Sutcliffe' pointed at a shocked Ken.

"No scream, no resistance, or I will shoot you! Henry, go get the mechanic in the engine room and tie him up in his cabin."

The said Henry, who also had drawn out a silenced pistol, then quickly disappeared down the deck hatch leading to the lower deck. To Ken's shock, the young woman also produced a pistol, pointing it on him.

"Who...who are you, people? What do you really want?"

"The less known by you, the better for your future health, mister. Now, get inside the pilot house, slowly."

As Ken obeyed and walked to the pilot house of his boat, he saw the young woman take out a small hand-held radio from her leather briefcase and talk in it in English.

"Escort, this is Lead: you may come in now... The boat's name is 'FISHING QUEEN', at Wharf Number Nine... Acknowledged, out!"

Once her call was done, the woman went to post herself near the aft access ramp, in plain sight of anyone on the shore. It took only three minutes before a big U.S. Army truck showed up, coming from the nearby Lakeshore Road and then rolling inside the marina, to finally stop near the foot of the wharf to which the FISHING QUEEN was tied up. To Ken's surprise, twelve armed American soldiers in combat uniforms jumped out of the truck and started coming down the wharf in single file. The old fisherman looked with shock at 'Sutcliffe', who spoke before he could.

"Mister Prentice, believe me when I say that our fervent wish is to avoid any unnecessary violence here. If you behave, drive your boat correctly and don't try to raise the alarm, then you will come out of this in good health and with your boat intact and still in your possession. In fact, to prove you that I mean what I say..."

Hugo then took out his wallet and counted out fifty American dollars before offering them to Ken.

"Please take that money, Mister Prentice. We are going to burn your fuel, so it is only fair for us to pay you for your expenses."

"But, I don't understand. You are obviously some kind of spy or saboteur and are probably German. You could have simply shot me and stole my boat, yet you want to pay me for my expenses?"

Hugo gave him a somber look and replied in a neutral tone of voice.

"Yes, I am a German, Mister Prentice, but I am a soldier, not a murderer. I intend to bring my mission to a successful conclusion, but also to do it with the minimum of violence. I have nothing against you personally and am no brainwashed fanatic, so I have no wish to kill you unless you force me to. Please, take the money, Mister Prentice."

After some hesitation, Ken took the money offered by Hugo and pocketed it. By then, the twelve 'American' soldiers, each one carrying a bulging kit bag and a backpack, had stepped aboard and were taking place in the wooden seats around the rear deck, while two of them untied the ropes immobilizing the boat. Ken pointed them with his chin.

"And them? They are also German, I suppose?"

"Correct! Be reassured : our mission is not to kill or destroy, unless forced to. It is to free other Germans."

Hugo then put one finger on a spot of Ken's marine chart of Lake Ontario, laid under a protective glass surface on a small map board fixed in front of the steering wheel.

"You will now pilot your boat out of the marina and onto Lake Ontario, then will head towards Port Darlington, on the Canadian side of the lake. Make your speed eight knots. Start your engine now. Be careful: I know how to navigate a boat, so don't try to trick me by heading in the wrong direction."

Now resigned to not make any fuss or heroics, Ken started the diesel engine of the FISHING QUEEN by pushing a button and took place behind the steering wheel. He maneuvered his boat slowly and carefully at first, time to get away from the wharf and from the other boats tied up in the marina, then accelerated a bit while going down the entrance channel, turning ninety degrees at the end of it to avoid the rocky breakwater forming a 'T' with the channel. Once in open waters, he turned his boat on the heading for Port Darlington, with Hugo checking his compass heading.

"Good! Continue like this, Mister Prentice."

Hugo then shouted at one of the 'American' soldiers sitting around the rear deck.

"FELDWEBEL, PLEASE COME TO THE PILOT HOUSE!"

The soldier in question, who wore the ranks of an American staff sergeant, promptly got up and walked to the pilot house, entering it with his Thompson submachine gun at his side.

“Yes, Hauptmann?”

“I am going down to the lower deck to change. Make sure that Mister Prentice here stays on magnetic heading 266 and a speed of eight knots. If some American or Canadian patrol boat shows up, get me at once.”

“Yes, Hauptmann!”

With Franz Stein posting himself a few paces away from Prentice, his submachine gun at the ready, Hugo went to the deck hatch leading to the lower deck, collecting his suitcase and briefcase at the same time and signaling Hanna to do the same. Both disappeared down the hatch with their luggage, to reappear with Heinrich Bayerling twenty minutes later, all of them dressed in British naval uniforms. Prentice gave the trio a dubious look when they entered the small pilot house of his boat.

“You seem to have prepared quite carefully for your mission, mister.”

“Let’s say that this is not my first mission behind enemy lines, Mister Prentice.” replied Hugo, smiling. “From now on, please call me ‘Lieutenant commander Blake’. My two comrades are Sergeant Henry Barclay and Supervisor Ann Powell.”

“If you say so, ‘Commander’.”

“That’s the spirit! Now, let’s all of us relax and enjoy this trip.”

The trip across Lake Ontario took close to four hours, during which the FISHING QUEEN met only a few fishing boats and sailing yachts and no patrol boat, either American and Canadian. That didn’t surprise Ken, who knew how pressed for men and war equipment the coast guard services of both governments were at present: the ravages by German submarines along the East Coast had forced the transfer during the last year of many patrol boats from the Great Lakes, which had been deemed of lower priority than the Atlantic Coast. The Sun had just disappeared under the horizon by the time they came within sight of Port Darlington and there was only light from a quarter moon as Ken’s boat approached the entrance channel to the small marina. However, contrary to the Atlantic Coast area, the Great Lakes region was not under night blackout regulations, being deemed out of reach of enemy bombers. Thus, Ken was able to use the lights from Port Darlington to guide himself as he sailed into the entrance channel. There was however little to no activity visible around the marina, something which was

understandable in view of the late hour. Only one man wearing the uniform of the Canadian Border Services came to the FISHING QUEEN as it cautiously maneuvered to get alongside one of the wooden wharves of the small marina.

“AHOY, FISHING QUEEN! CANADIAN BORDER SERVICES! I WILL NEED TO GET ON YOUR BOAT TO INSPECT IT.”

It was however Hugo, standing in plain sight on the rear deck in his British naval uniform, who answered the Canadian.

“THIS IS LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BLAKE, ROYAL NAVY ASSISTANT ATTACHÉ IN WASHINGTON. I CAME TO VISIT CAMP BOWMANVILLE. I HAVE LETTERS OF AUTHORIZATION WITH ME.”

“VERY WELL, SIR!” Replied the Canadian after coming to attention and saluting Hugo, who saluted back. As soon as the FISHING QUEEN was secured with ropes to the wharf, the Border Services agent climbed aboard. The man however made a surprised expression on seeing the ‘American’ soldiers sitting around the rear deck. He nonetheless saluted again Hugo and presented himself.

“Corporal Jack Woolworth, Canadian Border Services. May I ask why you came with armed American soldiers, sir?”

“You certainly can, Corporal. The American War Department allotted them to me as an armed escort so that I could effect a transfer of German prisoners of war held in Camp Bowmanville to a special interrogation center in England. That transfer is actually a rather urgent matter. Would there be a way to either call Camp Bowmanville or get a car to carry me there from here?”

The border agent, a bit intimidated by Hugo’s Royal Navy uniform and taking the American soldiers at face value, didn’t deem it necessary to ask for Hugo’s papers at the time. After all, Canada was part of the British Commonwealth and British citizens were free to enter Canadian territory at will. Instead, he pointed a small, illuminated hut situated nearby along the main quay.

“You can call the camp from my duty hut, sir. As for cars, I can get a taxi for you.”

“Thank you, but hold on to the taxi call: I will see first if Camp Bowmanville can send me a vehicle.”

“Very well, sir. Please follow me!”

Followed closely by Hugo, Hanna and Heinrich, the Canadian agent led the 'British' trio to his small duty hut, which barely measured three meters by four meters. To Hugo's satisfaction he didn't see another border agent when he entered the hut behind Woolworth.

"The night shifts here must be quite boring, Corporal."

"They are, but a good book helps a lot to pass the night. Granted, there is little to no boat activity in the marina at night and fishermen usually wait for the morning twilight before manning their boats and going out. The telephone is right there, sir. I will dial the camp for you."

"Please don't give details on the telephone: this matter is highly classified. Just get the camp switchboard and then let me speak to them."

"As you wish, sir." Said Woolworth, shrugging. He briefly consulted a list of telephone numbers near his telephone before dialing a number and waiting for an answer. A female voice came on the line after the second ring.

"Camp Bowmanville switchboard! May I help you?"

"Yes! This is Corporal Woolworth, of the Border Services post in Port Darlington. A British naval officer just arrived here by boat and wanted to call your camp. I am going to pass him to you now."

"Thank you, Corporal!" Said Hugo as he took the receiver presented by Woolworth. He then spoke in the receiver with his best British accent.

"Hullo! This is Lieutenant commander Hughes Blake, Assistant Naval Attaché at the British embassy in Washington. Could I speak with the camp Commandant, please?"

"Uh, I will see if he is in his residence at this hour, sir. One moment, please."

Hugo had to wait a few seconds before the female switchboard operator came back on line.

"I am sorry, sir, but the Commandant's residence is not answering. I am going to try his office."

This time, Hugo had to wait quite a bit longer. He was starting to wonder what was going on when a male voice finally came on the line.

"Major Taylor, Commandant of Camp Bowmanville. What may I do for you, Commander?"

Making his tone reflect some apparent irritation at the delay in getting a response, Hugo replied in a firm, authoritarian voice.

"I would like to come and see you to show you a special order I got from the highest levels. However, I am not ready to discuss this on the telephone: this matter is highly classified. I just came from the American side of the lake and am calling from the Border Services post in Port Darlington. I would need you to send me a vehicle and a driver to bring me to your camp."

"But, I got no advance notification of your visit, Commander Blake. I..."

"Major, it is not my place or yours to discuss the reasons why someone over our heads did not send you a prior notification about my visit tonight. Just send a car to pick me up at Port Darlington, so that we could discuss my mission orders face to face." Hugo then hung up, cutting off the camp commandant, and gave an ironic look at Hanna, acting for Woolworth's benefit while winking to Hanna.

"Another rear area paper-pusher! Well, let's hope that this Major Taylor is going to send a vehicle promptly enough."

Being slightly behind Woolworth, Hanna was able to discretely take out of her service purse a small syringe and, taking the protective cap off its needle, stuck it in the Canadian's neck, quickly injecting the content in the man's jugular. The border agent turned around in a flash and had time to glare at Hanna for a fraction of a second before his eyes became blurred and he started to wobble on his feet. Heinrich Bayerling moved quickly behind him to grab him as he then slumped down like a broken puppet. Hugo watched all that impassively: he would have preferred not to have done this, but the suspicious attitude of that Major Taylor was now obliging him to play one of his options.

"Alright, Heinrich, go lay him down in the back room of the hut, take his uniform off and then tie his hands and feet and gag him. Next, you will go find one of our men who can fit in his uniform, so that he could stand up in his place in this hut. Hanna, go to the boat and tell Feldwebel Stein to send at once Hohenbascher to splice the main coastal telephone line near this hut. He is then to put in place a local relay inside this hut, so that we could intercept and control all the telephone calls to and from the prisoners of war camp. Hanna, you will stay here with Hohenbascher and Stein to act as a false switchboard link."

"Understood, Hauptmann!"

To Hugo's relief, all that was completed before a jeep driven by a graying Canadian reservist soldier finally showed up at the Border Services hut. Going out of the hut with Bayerling before the jeep could stop beside it, Hugo saluted back the driver

and put his briefcase in the back of the jeep, where Bayerling took place, before sitting in the front passenger seat and giving a terse order to the driver.

“To the camp commandant’s office, please!”

“Right away, sir!” Said the reservist, who had time to have a glimpse of a man in a Border Services uniform and of Hannah in her British uniform, visible through a window of the Border Services’ hut, before he put his jeep in gear and turned around towards Camp Bowmanville. Following the narrow coastal road for a bit over one kilometer, the jeep arrived at Camp Bowmanville’s southern gate, which was next to the pebble beach just outside the camp. The jeep then rolled to one of the buildings situated outside of the double barbed wire perimeter fence of the prisoners’ compound. While he stayed apparently impassive, Hugo’s eyes took in every detail of the camp that was visible to him from the jeep, including the nine wooden guard towers around the compound’s fence, occupied by soldiers and equipped with searchlights and machine guns. The jeep’s driver stepped out of his vehicle and pointed the door of the building to Hugo and Heinrich.

“The Commandant’s office is inside the command and administrative building, sir. If you will follow me.”

Not saying a word and looking very ‘British naval officer’, Hugo followed the Canadian corporal inside, with Heinrich close behind him. The trio then found itself inside a fairly large room with a number of work desks and filing cabinets. A lone Canadian Army female auxiliary sitting next to a telephone switchboard and a PA system got up at their entrance and saluted Hugo.

“Good evening, sir! Major Taylor, the camp commandant, is waiting for you in his office.”

As Hugo followed her towards one of the doors visible along a long central corridor, he gave an order to Heinrich Bayerling.

“Please wait in the reception room, Petty Officer Barclay.”

“Yes sir!” Replied Heinrich, who then took position near the telephone switchboard station. That way, if things went south, he would be able to prevent any call for help from getting out.

The Canadian female auxiliary knocked on a door and waited to hear a muffled response before opening it and entering, coming to attention and saluting in front of a Canadian Army major sitting behind a wooden desk.

"Sir, Lieutenant commander Blake has arrived."

"Thank you, miss! You may return to your desk." Replied the major, who then got up from his chair and walked to Hugo as the young woman left the office. While he offered his hand for a shake, his face showed some misgivings and suspicion.

"Major Steven Taylor, Commandant of Camp Bowmanville. What may I do for you at this late hour, Commander Blake?"

"You may assist me in my mission, which is both highly important and urgent, Major Taylor." Said Hugo while shaking his hand. He then made a show of putting his leather briefcase on top of Taylor's desk to open it and extract an envelope from it, presenting it to Taylor.

"Here are my mission orders, signed by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff himself. Basically, recent events around Great-Britain have revealed that the Germans have just put into service both a new and highly lethal class of submarine and a new, very fast fighter, plus a new heavy bomber. Those new German weapons have already started to spread havoc and destruction and we need to learn everything we can about them, in order to devise counter-measures against them. Unfortunately, what we presently know about them is very limited. The Imperial General Staff has thus ordered that select German prisoners of war held here in Canada be transferred urgently to Great-Britain, so that they could be questioned in detail in a special interrogation center. In particular, all the crewmembers of the late German submarine U-800 and the Luftwaffe fighter and bomber pilots held here are to be transferred to my custody at once, to be brought under American escort across Lake Ontario and into the United States, where they will be put aboard a waiting British warship. Unfortunately, the urgency of the situation has precluded the usual, and lengthy, administrative process and staff work. I myself had to wait for the American soldiers due to escort the prisoners, which is why I am now presenting myself at such a late hour. You will find a list of the prisoners of interest at Annex 'A' of my orders."

The Canadian major gave him a quick look before opening the envelope and taking out a folded document. Straightening the pages in his hands, Taylor carefully read the mission order, taking a few seconds to examine the signatures and seals on it. Reading quickly the list of prisoners to be transferred, the Canadian gave Hugo a questioning look.

"Why include all the crewmembers of this U-800, instead of only the officers, Commander Blake?"

"Because the new German submarines now roaming the British coasts appear to be near copies of the late U-800. Even a lowly German submarine machinist or radio operator could know details that could be crucial to us. As for the Luftwaffe pilots on the list, we are hoping that some of them may have seen or heard things about the new German fighter and heavy bomber. I cannot stress enough the urgent need to transfer those prisoners to Great Britain, so that they could be interrogated in detail and at length."

"Still, I would have expected someone from Ottawa to at least call me in advance to inform me that you were on the way, Commander."

Hugo made a show of letting some fake irritation appear on his face as his voice hardened.

"As I told you before on the phone, it is not my business or yours to question why things were done in a certain way, Major. I have my orders and I expect you to help me fulfill them without any waste of time. If you don't, then there will be repercussions...from very high above our heads."

Taylor, while registering that threat, shook slowly his head.

"Not before someone in Ottawa can vet your mission orders, Commander. If you may sit down in that chair, I will place a short telephone call right now."

"As you wish, Major." Replied Hugo, hiding his suddenly heightened anxiety, before sitting down in the easy chair pointed by Taylor. Hoping fervently that Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal and Feldwebel Franz Stein were going to play their roles to the hilt, he watched as Taylor sat back behind his desk and grabbed his telephone receiver.

"Hello, operator? This is Major Taylor, Commandant of Camp Bowmanville. Please patch me with the operator at Army headquarters in Ottawa."

Taylor had to wait some twenty seconds, a normal delay to switch a long distance call with the existing telephone technology, before another female voice answered him.

"Army headquarters switchboard! May I help you?"

"Yes, miss! Please connect me with the senior duty officer at the operations center."

"One moment, please!"

Taylor had to wait a few seconds before a male voice came on the line.

"Army headquarters operations center, Colonel Massey speaking!"

Taylor nearly instinctively straightened up in his chair on hearing the rank of his new interlocutor.

"Colonel, this is Major Steven Taylor, Commandant of Camp Bowmanville, near Oshawa. I have just received the visit of a Lieutenant commander Hughes Blake, of the Royal Navy, who has a mission order concerning the urgent transfer to Great-Britain of some of the German prisoners held in my camp. However, I received no prior notification or warning about such a transfer and wish to make sure that everything is in order."

"Camp Bowmanville, you say?"

"Yes sir!"

"Uh, let me check something for a second, Major."

Taylor then heard 'Colonel Massey' give a few orders around, presumably to his duty personnel, followed by the noise of some paper documents being shuffled through, before Massey came back on the line.

"Hum... Does the mission order in question bears the number '22386', dated July 2, 1943 and is signed by Field Marshal Brooks?"

Taylor checked the mission order in his hand before answering, now reassured.

"Uh, that is correct, sir."

"Then everything is spiffy, Major. Sorry if you were not advised before, but we ourselves have just received a copy of that mission order only a couple of hours ago. It seems that there was some kind of hiccup on the American side of the border that delayed the transmission of the paperwork. You are thus to render maximum assistance to this Lieutenant commander Blake and to expedite the work as quickly as possible."

"I will, sir! Sorry for disturbing you with this."

"You did the right thing by checking, Major. Good night!"

"And a good night to you as well, sir." Said Taylor before putting down his receiver and smiling to Hugo. "Well, everything seems to be in order, Commander. I will have the prisoners on your list assembled and loaded aboard trucks right away. What kind of escort force did the Americans provide you?"

"I have a full infantry squad that came across Lake Ontario with me. They are now waiting in Port Darlington. More soldiers are waiting with buses on the other side of the lake."

"That sounds quite sufficient. Give me a few minutes to get my guard force to collect your prisoners and you will be able to go on your way."

“Thank you, Major!” Replied Hugo, discreetly blowing air out in relief. However, things still could turn sour for him and his mission: some of the prisoners on his fake list knew him and his Brandenburg men and a single wrong reaction or word could be enough to cause the mission to fail.

22:35 (New York Time)

Senior officers' barrack, P.O.W. compound

Camp Bowmanville

Kapitänleutnant Konrad List, ex-medical officer of the late U-800, concentrated for a few seconds as he examined the chess board before moving one of his pieces. Kapitänleutnant Werner Jentz, ex-chief engineer aboard the U-800, frowned when he saw that List's latest move was endangering his queen. With Kapitänleutnant Otto Ites, ex-commander of the U-94, and Luftwaffe Oberst⁸ Hefele watching the chess duel, Jentz took his time to study his counter-move. He was about to grab his queen and move it when a Canadian Army captain entered the communal lounge of the senior officers' barrack, four armed soldiers at his back.

“ALL THE PRISONERS IN THE BARRACK ARE TO ASSEMBLE IMMEDIATELY IN THIS LOUNGE! WAKE UP THOSE ALREADY IN BED!”

“What the...?” Managed to say Jentz, surprised, before the Canadian captain walked quickly to his group, assembled around a table.

“COME ON! LET'S MOVE!”

Hefele, who was the senior officer in the barrack, took exception to the harsh tone of the Canadian junior officer.

“Now, wait a minute, Captain! Stop barking at us and tell me first what is going on!”

The captain took a deep breath, time to restraint the words of his response.

“Colonel, you and a number of other prisoners are being transferred out of this camp tonight as a matter of urgency. Now, could you please get the other officers residing in this barrack?”

“And where are we being transferred?”

⁸ Oberst : Colonel in the German Army.

"I don't know, but you will learn that quickly enough. Now, please get the other officers, sir!"

Both intrigued and a bit worried, Hefele nonetheless looked at Otto Ites, sitting across the table from him.

"Please assemble the other officers here, Kapitänleutnant Ites."

"Right away, Herr Oberst!"

Within two minutes, the twenty German officers living in the barrack were assembled along one side of the communal lounge, some of them in their pajamas or underwear. The Canadian captain then took out of a pocket a document that he unfolded before speaking in a firm, strong voice.

"The following prisoners will immediately pack their things and prepare to leave this camp as part of a transfer: Oberst Hefele; Major Horthens; Major Lechfeld; Major Peschel; Major Sachs; Major Thurmann; Kapitänleutnant Bürgel; Kapitänleutnant Ites; Kapitänleutnant Jentz; Kapitänleutnant List; Kapitänleutnant Steinert; Oberleutnant zur See Graef; Oberleutnant zur See Lindemann and Oberleutnant zur See Schwartz. You have ten minutes to dress, pack up your things and assemble outside. Now, let's move!"

Still mystified by all this, the prisoners who had been called up went to their respective rooms to dress and pack up, leaving the German Army officers of the barrack alone in the lounge with the Canadian captain. Before the latter could leave, a suspicious Afrika Corps lieutenant colonel who had been captured in Libya approached him.

"Captain, you named only Luftwaffe pilots and Kriegsmarine submarine officers. Why?"

"I am sorry, sir, but I can't answer your question: this is coming from above."

The captain then left with his four soldiers and walked to the next prisoners' barrack, which contained some of the German junior officers held in Camp Bowmanville. There, he repeated the routine he had used in the senior officers' barrack, naming eighteen of the residents of that barrack before going to another barrack.

The Captain ended up visiting seven barracks, causing a total of 73 Germans to hurriedly pack up and come out of their barracks with their Canadian Army-supplied kit bags containing what little they possessed in the camp. By then, four medium army trucks had rolled inside the compound and had lined up with their tailgates opened and

with twelve Canadian soldiers at the ready near them. Before the prisoners were told to climb in the trucks, the Canadian captain who had called them out reread his list, making the prisoners come forward to the vehicles one by one. Hugo, standing with Heinrich Bayerling beside Major Taylor and keeping deliberately some distance with the prisoners while lowering his head a bit, in order for his British service cap to project a shadow across his face, watched carefully the proceedings, with Bayerling ticking off each name on the list as the Germans got into the trucks. At the end of the process, with all 73 Germans now in the trucks with their escorts, Hugo shook hands with Taylor while smiling.

“Thank you very much for your cooperation, Major. It was very much appreciated. I will now lead your trucks to Port Darlington, where American soldiers will take over from your men.”

“And I wish you success in getting secrets from those Germans, Commander. Have a good trip back to England.”

“Thank you!”

Hugo exchanged a salute with Taylor, then climbed with Heinrich in the same jeep that had brought him to the camp. The camp commandant watched on as the trucks and the jeep rolled out of the camp, taking the coastal road leading to Port Darlington. While this would lighten a bit his load in administering the camp, he still had over a thousand German prisoners left in it. Walking back inside the command building, he put down his copy of the prisoners transfer order on his desk, then went out at a tired pace to the small house assigned to him as a residence: today had been quite a long day indeed. Tomorrow, he would have ample time to fill a report on the transfer and send it to Ottawa by the next dispatch rider.

23:48 (New York Time)

Port Darlington docks

“COME ON, FRITZ! GET OUT OF THE TRUCKS AND LINE UP IN TWO RANKS OVER HERE!”

Bootsmansmaat⁹ Dieter Hannig, being one of the prisoners nearest the rear tailgate of his truck, climbed out of his vehicle and, carrying his kit bag by its strap, went to join the

⁹ Bootsmanmaat : Kriegsmarine rank equivalent to Petty Officer Third Class or Coxswain.

double line of German prisoners forming up besides the four trucks. Hannig may have been a simple cook aboard the U-800 but he had not failed to see that all the survivors from the U-800 were part of the group called up to be transferred. The rest of the group was formed of other submariners or of Luftwaffe pilots, but there were no Heer¹⁰ officers or men present, something that felt strange to him and had awakened some suspicions in him. Looking around him at the obscure marina, which was poorly illuminated by a few well-spaced lamp posts, he noticed a large fishing boat moored at quay-side and on which stood a number of waiting American armed soldiers. They were still too far to be detailed and were also standing in a part of the marina that was not well lit, but their rifles and submachine guns were plainly visible, held at the ready. To his surprise and that of the other prisoners, a young and very pretty woman wearing a British naval uniform then stepped forward from a small hut and took position in front of their group before speaking up loudly in German with a pronounced British accent.

“Please listen up, prisoners! I will now call up your names. You will then answer ‘present’ on hearing your name and will proceed to the ‘FISHING QUEEN’, the boat moored to the quay at your left, on which you will board. Oberst Hefe!”

“Present!”

With each prisoner called up then walking to the boarding plank of the FISHING QUEEN, where American soldiers escorted him aboard the fishing boat, the roll call went quickly, with Dieter being one of the last prisoners to be called, due to his relatively low rank. Walking at a measured pace towards the fishing boat, he was greeted at the foot of the gangway by an American corporal who spoke in good German to him.

“Get on the boat and go down the deck hatch to the lower deck.”

Dieter didn’t reply to that and simply walked up the gangway, stepping on the open rear deck of the boat, where four other American soldiers pointed to him an open deck hatch. Going down the steep ladder leading to the lower deck, he was met at the foot of the ladder by an American sergeant. There was only one problem with that sergeant: Dieter knew him well, contrary to the other American soldiers he had met up to now.

“Obergefreiter Drücker?! But...”

“It’s now Unteroffizier Drücker, Dieter. Please restrain yourself and don’t shout or look joyful now: one false step now and our mission could end up in failure. Go on to the crew quarters compartment and stay there until the boat is well on its way. Don’t say

¹⁰ Heer : German Army

anything to the other prisoners who were not part of the crew of the U-800. We will brief you all later on about what is happening. With luck, we will all soon be on our way to Lorient by submarine. And, yes, it is also a pleasure for me to see you again.”

The two men exchanged a solid handshake before Dieter walked forward to the small crew lounge, which was already packed with prisoners. While the ex-crewmembers of the U-800 present harbored repressed smiles, the other prisoners, mostly Luftwaffe officers, still looked anxious and worried by their unexpected ‘transfer’. Going through the crowd to the assistant cook of the U-800, Matrosenobergefreiter¹¹ Gustav Bouhler, Dieter whispered in his left ear.

“It seems that our friends from the Brandenburg Regiment are up to their incredible self again.”

“Yeah! They certainly have brass-plated balls.”

The two cooks then clammed up, painting wooden expressions on their faces as more prisoners entered the crew lounge.

On the ground, near the Border Services hut, Hugo exchanged a last handshake with the Canadian captain in charge of the camp guards as Hanna Blumenthal walked to the FISHING QUEEN.

“Well, this concludes this part of my mission, Captain. Thank you again for your assistance and that of your men.”

“It was a pleasure, Commander Blake. Have a good trip back to England with your prisoners.”

The two men then exchanged salutes before Hugo walked away towards the waiting fishing boat. Three minutes later, the FISHING QUEEN was backing away from the quay where it had been moored and slowly exited the marina, to disappear in the darkness of the night, sailing towards the American side of Lake Ontario.

On the FISHING QUEEN, Hugo had Kenneth Prentice push his engine to maximum power, in order to be able to cross Lake Ontario as fast as possible: every hour of darkness was now precious to Hugo and his freed German compatriots, if he wanted to ensure a clean escape. Next, he went to speak to the ex-prisoners crowding the open rear deck, using German.

¹¹ Matrosenobergefreiter : Kriegsmarine rank equivalent to Seaman First Class.

"Gentlemen, please listen to me very carefully. I will also ask you to refrain from shouting or making loud exclamations as I speak. Basically, while you are indeed being transferred out of Camp Bowmanville, it is to go to Lorient, in France, and not to another camp in the United States or Great Britain. My true name is Hugo Margraff, of the Brandenburg Regiment, and the 'American' soldiers around you are my men. However, we are still far from safe yet. A single slip of the tongue, a friendly attitude towards your false guards or a word in German at the wrong time and our cover could be blown while still deep within enemy territory. I want you to look glum and resigned when we will dock at an American marina on the other side of Lake Ontario and, in particular, to avoid speaking in German with me or my men, to avoid attracting attention from American citizens that may encounter our group. To cut to the utmost the risks of our land trip to the American East Coast, we will not stop at restaurants or inns during our ten hour trip by bus and truck. We will however stop a couple of times along secondary roads, in the middle of forests, to let you out to relieve yourselves and will pass some food and water to you. If, by bad luck, we encounter some kind of military or police checkpoint, then behave as if you are really prisoners of war being transferred under escort to a new camp in Great Britain. If asked for more details, simply say that you don't know more than that. Leave the bullshitting to me, please. Another thing: up to now, me and my men have conducted our mission with a minimum use of force and we have not killed or wounded a single American or Canadian yet. I wish for that to continue. You can help me in that by playing your role and by not blowing our cover by speaking German at the wrong time. We will also be travelling with a few prisoners that we are forced to bring with us in order to avoid them giving the alarm early on. I forbid any brutality towards these prisoners, who will be treated humanely and will eventually be released in good health once we will be on our submarine."

"And how do you expect to fit us all aboard your submarine, Hauptmann Margraff?" Asked Kapitänleutnant Otto Ites. "We are close to eighty, not counting your men."

That question made Hugo smile.

"Do not worry about the living space available aboard the submarine we will use, Kapitänleutnant Ites: we will travel aboard the U-900, a new submarine whose design is very close to that of the late U-800. We will be a bit tight but conditions will still be better than that endured by the normal crews of our Type VII and Type IX submarines."

"I have a question for you, Hauptmann." Then said Oberst Hefe. "Our group includes only submariners and Luftwaffe officers, but no Heer members. Why?"

"Why? Because we had to present a plausible reason for the choice of prisoners to be transferred out of Camp Bowmanville. Including Luftwaffe pilots to our list was already tricky to explain. To include Heer officers as well would have blown our credibility in the eyes of the Canadians. You may want to mention the two Heer general officers who were interned with you in Camp Bowmanville and ask why we didn't try to free them as well, to which I will answer that finding excuses to justify their transfer would have stretched credulity too much. Also, past remarks and complaints by many prisoners made in their letters to their families, which were then analyzed by our intelligence experts, mentioned many times that those two generals proved derelict in their responsibilities and duties by refusing to represent their fellow prisoners as senior prisoners and by insisting on living apart from the other prisoners, conducting themselves like some kind of royalty. Their conduct and attitude have been noted at high levels in Berlin and the decision was taken not to risk further our mission by trying to pull them out. Those two generals will however have to answer for their conduct whenever they will return to Germany."

Hefe nodded slowly on hearing that answer, understanding what kind of welcome those two Heer generals could expect once back in Germany. They would probably end up facing severe interrogation by the SD, the SS security branch in charge of national security, rather than get handshakes. Hugo then left the rear upper deck, going down the hatch to the lower deck, where he repeated his warnings to the ex-prisoners crowded on that deck. His last visit was to a small storage compartment near the engine room, on the lower deck. There, he spoke to Corporal Jack Woolworth, the Canadian Border Services agent he had met in Port Darlington, who was tied up and gagged. Hugo had decided to have him transferred to the FISHING QUEEN and to lock up his duty hut behind him before the arrival of the prisoners in the marina. That way, Woolworth's replacement on the morning shift was going to find a locked, empty duty hut, instead of finding a gagged and tied Woolworth inside. Hopefully, that was going to delay by a few more hours the time it would take for the Canadians to become suspicious and understand that they had been duped. Those extra hours could just be enough to have time to reach the coast unopposed and to embark on the U-900 before the alert could be given.

"I am sorry for your treatment, Corporal Woolworth, but the final success of my mission depended on it. I fully intend to free you unharmed once my group will reach the coast and will have a chance to escape by sea. I will now remove your gag for the duration of our trip across Lake Ontario, but will keep you tied up. If you need to go to the bathroom, just call the guard that will be posted next to this compartment. Please, no stupid heroics on your part: my men are well trained and dangerous."

Hugo then took three steps and bent down to remove the rag that was gagging Woolworth. The Canadian looked up at him with a mix of anxiety and curiosity.

"Who are you? Some kind of spy?"

"No, Corporal: I am a German soldier. My mission was to free a number of German prisoners of war from Camp Bowmanville. If all goes well, you will be able to return safely to Canada and your family in maybe two days. I will even provide you with some cash money, so that you can pay for your trip back to Canada."

Woolworth eyed Hugo with disbelief at these last words.

"This is sounding too nice to be true, mister."

"True but, as I said earlier, I am a German soldier, not an assassin. It is actually in the interest of me and my men to use as little violence as possible during this mission."

Woolworth nodded his head slowly, understanding Hugo's reasoning.

"So that you could avoid the rope if caught. I'll buy that, mister. For what it's worth, thank you for your humanity."

"You're welcome, Corporal. Someone will soon come to bring you some food and water and also will guide you to the bathroom. In the meantime, stay calm and everything will be fine."

Hugo then turned around and walked out of the storage compartment, locking the door behind him.

02:55 (New York Time)

Wednesday, July 7, 1943

Seaside cottage near Hampton

State of New Hampshire

"Heads up, guys! A car just parked in the driveway of the cottage."

Alerted by the warning from Gefreiter Wilhelm Stulpnagel, Obergefreiter Emil Heinemann quickly went at a crouch to one of the front windows of the cottage's lounge and took a peep through it. What he saw was two men in civilian dark clothes step out of a Dodge light pickup truck and then walk quietly towards the front entrance door. The way the men moved cautiously made Heinemann frown.

"These guys are acting a bit weird. Alright, Wilhelm, go quickly wake our two other men and return here quietly. I will be watching the front door in the meantime."

"On it, Obergefreiter!"

As the young trooper moved silently away to go wake the two other commandos that had been left with them at the cottage to care for and watch their five prisoners, Heinemann silently moved to the front door and posted himself right behind it, gluing his ear to the door panel. He soon heard two men whispering at each other in English.

"I told you that this cottage would be unoccupied, Fred. We should have a few hours free for us to take what we want and leave before the Sun will rise."

"Okay, let me try the door lock first."

Heinemann had a hard time not to giggle on understanding the irony of the situation: those two robbers, as they could be nothing else, had certainly chosen badly their target for this night. He then saw someone try the door handle. However, it was locked and the man on the other side only tried briefly before taking his hand off it. A few seconds later, Heinemann heard the faint metallic noise of a crochet being inserted inside the key hole. By then, his three men had joined him, with their silencer-equipped assault rifles pointed and ready. Grabbing his own silenced MP43, Heinemann looked briefly at his men, speaking in a whisper.

"Don't shoot unless necessary. I will now open the door."

Grabbing with one hand the locking handle of the door's lock, Heinemann slowly turned it, then pulled the door wide open all of a sudden. The two civilian men crouched in front of the door found themselves facing four armed German soldiers in full field uniforms, complete with steel helmets and web gear.

"Oh shit!" could only say one of the robbers, his eyes nearly bulging out, making Heinemann grin ferociously.

"Yes, you are definitely shit out of luck, assholes! Get inside and don't try anything smart."

09:06 (New York Time)

Lake Breeze Marina, at mouth of Oak Orchard River

Near Carlton, State of New York

Elizabeth Prentice, having just frantically searched the whole of the FISHING QUEEN while looking for her husband Ken, returned on the open rear deck of the fishing boat, not knowing what to do next. To make matters even more gloomy, a light rain then broke out of the low clouds covering the sky, forcing her to retreat under the roof of the forward half of the rear deck. Elizabeth saw a moment later a silhouette approach the boat along the quay, holding an open umbrella. That silhouette then shouted out towards the boat.

“JERRY! JERRY! ARE YOU ABOARD?”

Elizabeth understood at once that the silhouette was that of Mary Brown, the wife of Jerry Brown, the mechanic who worked the FISHING QUEEN with Ken.

“MARY, THIS IS ELIZABETH! COME ABOARD!”

Mary did so at a near run and soon joined Elizabeth under the overhanging roof, closing her umbrella as she anxiously asked her a question.

“Have you seen Jerry, Elizabeth? He didn’t return home at all last night. I thought that he had stayed on the boat overnight to do some repairs.”

“I didn’t see him, Mary, and neither did I see my Ken. I just searched the boat and found no traces of them, even though everything aboard looks alright and in its place.”

“But, they should have come home then after leaving the boat. Where could they have gone?”

“I...I don’t know! This doesn’t make sense at all.”

“Maybe they went to eat something at the Black North Inn...or to drink something?” Suggested Mary, making Elizabeth frown.

“If Ken did that and scared me for nothing, then he will hear me. Let’s go to the inn!”

“I’m with you! Stay under my umbrella while we walk.”

The two women, braving the rain, walked quickly off the fishing boat, then went at near charging pace to the Black North Inn, a large historical establishment that had been opened around 1850 near the entrance channel of the marina. When they got there and

entered the main dining lounge and bar area, they found only a bartender cleaning glasses and five customers eating a late breakfast, none of whom were their husbands. Going to the bar counter, Elizabeth leaned against it while speaking to the barman.

"Bill, did you see Ken or Jerry last night or this morning?"

"Uh, I can't say about last night, as I was not working at that time, but I haven't seen them here since I unlocked the doors this morning. Why?"

"They apparently went out with the FISHING QUEEN yesterday afternoon but they never returned home. The boat is moored at the quay but is empty and Ken didn't call me to warn me of anything. The same goes for Jerry and Mary. We are growing quite nervous and just don't know what to do next."

The old barman's face became somber as he listened to Elizabeth, then pointed to two of the customers having breakfast, who happened to be wearing police uniforms.

"Then, I believe that the safest thing would be for you to go talk with those two deputy sheriffs eating at that table. Better play it safe, Elizabeth."

"Thank you, Bill!"

Followed closely by Mary, Elizabeth walked quickly to the table occupied by the two patrolmen, who looked up at them with questioning looks.

"Can we do something for you, ladies?" asked the older policeman, a beefy man in his late forties.

"Yes, Deputy! My husband, Ken Prentice, and Mary's husband, Jerry Brown, went out on their fishing boat yesterday afternoon. They however never returned home, yet I found their boat moored at quayside, empty. We are really getting worried about them and were hoping that they had come here for a bite, but they didn't. Could you please help us find them, sir?"

The older patrolman glanced quickly at his partner before putting down his cup of coffee and looking back at Elizabeth.

"We certainly can help you both, ladies. How thoroughly did you search their boat, miss?"

"Quite thoroughly, sir. There was no trace of them on board."

"Still, I believe that it would be a good idea for me and my partner to go look up that boat. Maybe we will find some clue on where your husbands could have gone. Could you please show us the way to their boat?"

"Of course, sir! Thank you so much for helping us."

Getting up from his chair and leaving some money on the table to pay for his breakfast, the older deputy then signaled Elizabeth to lead the way, then walked out with her, Mary and his fellow patrolman to go to their patrol car. The drive to the marine took only a few seconds. However, as Elizabeth half expected, the two policemen found nothing of worth aboard. Now looking thoughtful, the older officer returned on the open rear deck, where Elizabeth and Mary had been waiting as they searched the boat.

"We found nothing that could point to where your husbands could be. Would you mind waiting here on the boat while me and my colleague go around the marina to ask questions?"

"Uh, of course not! We will be inside the pilot house."

"Good! We should be back in less than one hour."

On that, the two patrolmen walked down the gangway, leaving the two women alone aboard the boat.

The deputies actually came back to the boat within half a hour. Elizabeth didn't like the puzzled look now visible on the older officer's face.

"Miss Prentice, according to the harbormaster and a few more witnesses who saw your husband's boat leave the marina yesterday, a group of U.S. Army soldiers boarded the FISHING QUEEN at around four thirty, along with a civilian trio of two men and one woman, with the boat then leaving the harbor. However, nobody was present when the boat came back, suggesting that it returned very late last night or in the early morning."

"American soldiers, boarding my husband's fishing boat?" Said Elizabeth, completely mystified. "Why would they do that? My husband had no government contract to carry soldiers around."

"Well, according to witnesses, those soldiers came to the marina aboard an Army truck, which then left towards the Black North Inn. We are now going to return to the inn to ask more questions there. In the meantime, I would suggest that you and Misses Brown return to your houses and wait there for the results of our inquiries. Could I have your addresses, plus your telephone numbers, if you have any?"

The older patrolman, taking out a pencil and a small notebook, then wrote down that information before promising to make diligence and to inform them of any progress quickly. Elizabeth had a pinch in her heart as she watched the two policemen leave.

She had already been scared for Ken a number of times in the past, when he had gone on the lake during a strong storm, but this was completely different.

13:42 (New York Time)

County Sheriff's station, Carlton

Kent County, State of New York

"This way please, Misses Prentice and Misses Brown." said Deputy John Hurst as he kept the door of the County Sheriff's station open for the two women. "As soon as you will have filled your missing person declarations, I will drive you back home."

"Thank you, sir." Could only say weakly Elizabeth Prentice, by now dying with worries about her husband. Hurst, with his partner Peter Wyatt following behind the two women, was guiding Elizabeth and Mary towards his work desk when his boss, Sheriff Mike Murphy, came to him in quick steps.

"Hurst, where were you all that time? You were not responding to our radio calls."

"I know, Boss, and I am sorry about that: I myself tried to call the station but our car's radio transceiver is on the fritz...again. We really should replace that piece of junk, Boss. Is something going on?"

"I'm not sure actually. We got a rather cryptic call from the F.B.I. about twenty minutes ago. They would not give me any details but they said that they are acting on an urgent request from the Canadians about an American fishing boat that visited Port Darlington last night. The F.B.I. wants us to check on that boat...if it even exists." Hurst and Wyatt exchanged a quick glance on hearing Murphy's last couple of sentence, while Elizabeth and Mary froze and stared at the Sheriff.

"Uh, what is the name of that fishing boat, Boss?"

"The FISHING QUEEN! You look like you heard about it, right?"

"You could say that, Boss: we just spent a few hours helping these two ladies try to find their missing husbands, who happen to form the crew of that FISHING QUEEN. It is presently moored at the Lake Breeze Marina, where it returned sometimes late last night or in the early morning after leaving the marina yesterday afternoon. We searched the boat and asked questions around and were told that it left the marina yesterday after about a dozen U.S. Army soldiers went aboard."

"Soldiers...on a fishing boat? That doesn't make much sense."

"I agree, Boss, but the fact remains that two men are now missing. I brought their wives here so that they could fill a missing person declaration."

"I see!" Said Murphy before giving a compassionate look to Elizabeth and Mary. "Be assured that we will do everything to find your husbands, ladies. I will now let you in the good hands of Deputy Hurst, while I..."

"SHERIFF, TELEPHONE!" shouted the female receptionist of the station from her desk. "IT'S THE F.B.I. AGAIN!"

Grumbling to himself for the interruption, Mike Murphy walked quickly to the receptionist's desk and took the telephone receiver presented by her.

"Sheriff Murphy speaking!... Yes, we actually have located your FISHING QUEEN: it is presently sitting in the Lake Breeze Marina, just north of Carlton, in Kent County. However, its two-man crew is missing. Could you finally tell me what is going on with that boat?... WHAT? DISGUISED GERMAN INFILTRATORS? YOU MUST BE KIDDING?"

A few steps away, John Hurst was just in time to catch Elizabeth Prentice as she was crumbling to the floor, having suddenly passed out on hearing the Sheriff's last words.

15:19 (New York Time)

Seaside cottage near Hampton

State of New Hampshire

"The U-900 is ready to risk surfacing in daylight because of the low cloud cover?... Very well, Feldwebel Stein, tell the U-900 to surface in one hour time and to immediately send ashore all its boats. The ex-prisoners will be waiting near the beach by then. Stay near the underwater telephone unit and arrange the ex-prisoners in boatloads as they arrive from the cottage. I will stay in the cottage until the last minutes to make sure that our own prisoners don't break free too soon."

Hugo, quite satisfied, then put down the receiver of the field telephone linking the cottage with their embarkation point and looked at Michel Drücker, standing beside him.

"Unteroffizier Drücker, I am putting you in charge of leading the ex-prisoners to the embarkation point. Be careful and be quiet: we would need only one indiscrete pair of eyes to blow our mission away."

"Understood, Herr Hauptmann!"

Hugo next turned towards Oberst Hefe, also standing near him.

"Herr Oberst, please impress on your fellow pilots the need to move with caution and stealth when they will leave for our embarkation point. The next couple of hours will be critical for all of us, including for the U-900."

"I will make sure that they understand the importance of staying quiet, Hauptmann Margraff. Again, I want to state my admiration for the professionalism of you and of your men...and woman."

Hugo couldn't help smile at that mention of Hanna Blumenthal.

"To be frank, her conduct during this mission truly impressed me, Herr Oberst. Without her, our mission may well have failed. I will certainly commend her on my return to Germany."

"And so will I...for all of you! See you on the U-900, Hauptmann Margraff."

The cottage then emptied pretty quickly as Drücker and a few of the commandos, all now back in German combat uniforms, started leading a long file of ex-prisoners out of the building and into the nearby forest. Soon, Hugo was left with only four of his men in the cottage, with him staying by the side of the field telephone in order to answer any call from the embarkation point. Some ninety minutes later, the field telephone rang, making Hugo grab the receiver in a hurry, his heart beating faster now.

"Margraff speaking!"

"Hauptmann, this is Stein. The first boatloads of ex-prisoners are now on their way to the U-900. No signs of shit disturbers yet in the area. I calculate that the second batch of ex-prisoners will be able to get aboard the boats in about forty minutes. We will need a total of three trips to get all the ex-prisoners to the submarine. Then, the fourth trip will be for us. The last of us should thus leave the beach in about two hours."

"Excellent! What about Oberhelferin Blumenthal?"

Hugo was able to hear the sigh from Stein then.

"I had assigned her to the first batch to embark, but she gave her place at the last moment to our youngest submariner. I however intend to force her to get in a boat for the second trip."

"Good! Be firm with her on that. As one who was seen in British uniform by the Canadians, she is at risk of execution if she is caught today. Make her understand that."

"I will, Herr Hauptmann. Stein, out!"

Hugo slowly put down his receiver, thoughtful.

"Damn! That woman will truly have earned her Iron Cross for this mission."

About ninety minutes later, Hugo got another call from Stein, this time to be told that the last boatloads of ex-prisoners were now on their way to the U-900. It was now time for him and his four last men to move out, but he had one last thing to do first. Retrieving a small holder from his field pack, he took out of it a small object, then went down to the basement room where his ten prisoners were being held under guard. Making his soldier there stand in his back at the ready, Hugo unlocked the door of the dusty storage room where the prisoners were tied up and gagged and crouched in front of the priest from who he had 'borrowed' his black station wagon.

"Father, me and my last men in this house are about to leave. Since I don't want to hurt either you or the other nine men here and don't want you to starve to death while tied up, I am going to cut your ties and take off your gag, so that you can free the other prisoners afterwards. I will however counsel you to free first Mister Woolworth, then the two soldiers here and to free last the two robbers we caught trying to burglarize this cottage: those last two are liable to leave the rest of you high and dry while they take the few valuables here and flee."

Taking out a sharp combat knife, Hugo quickly cut the ropes surrounding the priest's ankles, then the ropes around his wrists, finishing by pulling out the rag gagging the cleric. The latter grimaced a bit while he rubbed his wrists, then looked up at Hugo.

"I must thank you for your humanity and compassion, my son: you and your men could have easily killed us to ensure our silence."

"Father, I am not a murderer, just a soldier doing his duty to his country."

"Still, you acted like a good Christian would have done."

"I am actually a Lutheran and a good Christian, Father, but most of all I am a good German."

Hugo then pricked the needle of a small syringe in the veins visible in the priest's left wrist and quickly emptied its content into the cleric's bloodstream.

"Sorry about this, Father, but I will need an extra hour of peace and quiet from you and your fellow prisoners in order to ensure my safe departure. This injection will put you to sleep for about one hour. When you will come around, you will feel disoriented and wobbly for another half hour before you will be able to stand on your feet. Then, you will be free to liberate the others and call for help. Goodbye, Father!"

The priest was already half passed out when Hugo walked out of the basement room, deliberately leaving its door wide open.

17:10 (New York Time)

**Cafeteria of the U-900, on the surface off Cedar Island
Coast of New Hampshire**

Dieter Hannig sat down with a sigh of relief at one of the tables of the U-900's cafeteria, so alike the one where he had worked in the U-800.

"God, what an adventure! I really could use a good cup of coffee right now."

"WELL, THEN STOP SLOUCHING LIKE THAT AND GO MAKE A POT OF COFFEE, SON!"

Stunned, Dieter looked up at his father, standing in the door of the galley and wearing both an apron and a severe expression, his fists on his hips. Dieter then jumped out of his seat and ran to his father, to embrace him in a tight hug.

"FATHER? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, ON A SUBMARINE?"

After returning his son's embrace, Otto Hannig grinned to him in response.

"Me? I was simply taking up the slack while you were having your vacation in Canada. Come on: get in this galley and prove to me that you haven't lost the Hannig touch for cooking."

09:05 (New York Time)

Friday, July 9, 1943

Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

President Roosevelt slapped down on his Oval Office desk the short report that he had just read and gave a discouraged look at his military secretary and advisor, Admiral Leahy, who had brought him the report.

"So, the Germans have managed to make us look like idiots...again! I suppose that this camp commandant must be in serious trouble right now, Admiral?"

"He is indeed facing some very hard questions in Ottawa, Mister President. However, I must remind you that we are as guilty, if not even more guilty, of negligence in this case. Those German infiltrators did land on our coast in New Hampshire and travelled all the way to Lake Ontario without being spotted or stopped. The response by

the units concerned when those two military vehicles disappeared near Portsmouth was woefully inadequate and way too slow before somebody finally reacted, by which time it was already too late. I have directed a complete public censure about this incident, to avoid generalized panic and paranoia within the country. After this, our citizens would be excused to see German infiltrators everywhere.”

“You did well, Admiral. About those Germans, I must reluctantly give them credit for both imagination and guts. Their plan was masterful and well conducted. What especially surprised and impressed me was the fact that they didn’t kill or wound a single American or Canadian during their mission.”

“Those German commandos were indeed very professional, on top of proving to be humane in the treatment of their prisoners held in that seaside cottage, Mister President. I was actually pointed two things by our military intelligence just before coming to see you. First, this raid has all the hallmarks of the Brandenburg Regiment soldiers who travelled aboard the U-800 in the past and blew up the Boston Naval Munitions Depot and the Panama Canal locks, among other things. Second, and this is a first, a German woman participated actively in that mission.”

Roosevelt gave a questioning look then at Leahy.

“Is that really noteworthy, Admiral?”

“Indeed, Mister President! German agents or infiltrators travelling with one or more women will tend to attract much less attention and suspicions than single young men. This means changing our security procedures accordingly, thus complicating things further for us, as we will now need to have female agents or auxiliaries available to search female suspects when needed.”

“I see! One last thing : how beneficial to the Germans was that raid, really?”

“A lot more than the mere figure of 73 escapees would suggest, Mister President. First, the Germans now know that infiltrating saboteurs and spies inside the United State, or even Canada, is definitely possible, if well planned and executed. This means that we need to reinforce our coastal defenses without delay if we don’t want to suffer more such raids. Second, the 73 escapees were made up of all the surviving submariners from the U-800, plus six experienced U-Boat commanders and 21 experience bomber and fighter pilots. Just those six experienced U-Boat commanders, once given command of sister ships of the U-800, will be enough by themselves to cause untold havoc and losses to our maritime traffic. You know already how precarious our maritime situation and that of the British is in the Atlantic, Mister President. In fact,

the latest reports state that the supply situation in Great Britain is now dire and that their military is running on their last reserves of fuel. Only two tanker ships have managed to slip through the German submarine blockade around the British coastal waters during the last two months and the British are becoming truly desperate. Unfortunately, with our own situation in the Pacific being dire, we can't spare more ships or planes to help the British further than we already do, Mister President. Some British officials are even said to have started to quietly advocate for a negotiated armistice with Germany, to save their country from starvation."

Those last words acted like a pin prick on Roosevelt, who eyed Leahy with disbelief.

"You can't be serious, Admiral. Churchill would never approve of such negotiations."

"No, but Prime Minister Churchill could still be deposed by the British parliament via a vote of no-confidence, Mister President. If the food situation becomes too dire, then anything could become possible."

That left Roosevelt in deep, dark thoughts as he pondered Leahy's words.

21:45 (Paris Time)

Sunday, July 18, 1943

Shelter Number Two, Keroman I submarine bunker

Lorient, Occupied France

Ulrich von Wittgenstein had fully expected that a military band would be on hand to greet the return of his U-900 in Lorient's Keroman I submarine bunker. However, as he directed the slow, cautious maneuvers needed to dock his submarine inside one of the heavily protected shelters of the giant bunker system, his heart skipped a beat when he was able to see the crowd of dignitaries and the honor guard waiting on the dock of the submarine shelter: no less than the Führer himself was present, with Admiral Dönitz, Grossadmiral Raeder, Minister Goebbels and Minister Speer standing behind Hitler! Going over his surprise, Ulrich discretely spoke in the intercom unit of the open upper bridge, passing a warning to his crew.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain! Be sure to look sharp when you will step out on the weather deck: the Führer himself is present for our arrival."

Ulrich then got close to the transparent canopy covering the upper bridge and saluted as the band started playing the German national hymn, 'Deutschland Uber Alles'. Giving

the last orders needed to dock his submarine, he then hurried inside the underwater observation dome and down to the level of the forward access airlock, where his crew had started to line up in order to be ready to step on the forward weather deck. After a quick, ultimate inspection of his sailors, Ulrich opened the heavy forward access hatch and swung it wide open, engaging its safety retaining mechanism before walking out on the forward weather deck and stopping at attention. His crewmen then formed up in two ranks behind him, with the members of the field team forming a third line in front of the sailors. Ulrich waited that the 73 men freed from Camp Bowmanville had also come out, forming a thick block near the access hatch, before shouting orders to his men.

“CREW OF THE U-900 AND OF THE BRANDENBURG REGIMENT, GENERAL SALUTE...SALUTE!”

With the soldiers of the Brandenburg Regiment presenting arms with their MP43 assault rifles, Ulrich looked straight at Adolph Hitler, still standing on the dock, while saluting him, getting a salute back from the Führer in response. Hitler then started moving towards the gangway now in place between the dock and the submarine, followed by a number of the more senior dignitaries. Ulrich saluted him again, this time in the Nazi fashion, once Hitler stopped in front of him. As a number of official photographers and cameramen filmed the scene, Hitler returned Ulrich's salute, then presented his right hand, which Ulrich shook.

“Kapitän von Wittgenstein, you and your men did Germany proud by your exploits on your mission.”

“Thank you, Mein Führer, but I would have accomplished mostly nothing if not for the members of our field team that infiltrated all the way to Canada. May I invite you to review those brave soldiers, Mein Führer?”

“It would be a true pleasure for me to do so, Herr Kapitän.”

Taking his cue from Hitler, Ulrich pivoted on his heels and turned towards Hugo Margraff, standing at the extreme right of the front rank formed by his soldiers. Ulrich, Hitler and his senior followers then walked to Margraff, with Ulrich then letting Hitler face directly the Brandenburg Regiment officer. They exchanged Nazi salutes before Hitler shook hands with Hugo, grinning as he spoke.

“Hauptmann Margraff, you and your men accomplished an incredible feat during your mission. You both brought great pride to Germany as well as scorn and ridicule on our enemies. For this, it is only just that I personally hand you and your men their just rewards. Herr Volkers!”

The aide called up by Hitler then stepped forward, followed closely by a more junior aide carrying an opened leather briefcase. On Hitler's request, Volkers took out of the briefcase a decoration hooked to a black, white and red neck ribbon, waiting for Hitler to remove the decoration already hanging around Hugo's neck before passing the new decoration to his Führer, who then hooked it around the young officer's neck.

"Hauptmann Hugo Margraff, for outstanding bravery and leadership in the field, I am proud to upgrade your Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves with the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Crossed Swords. Congratulations, Hauptmann Margraff!"

"Thank you very much, Mein Führer!"

"Please accompany me as I meet each of your men, so that you can present them to me."

"With pleasure, Mein Führer!"

Followed closely by Dönitz, Raeder, Goebbels, Speer and Ulrich von Wittgenstein, Hitler and Margraff slowly went down the line of armed soldiers, with Hitler upgrading the Iron Crosses they already wore and also pinning on those who didn't have it already a U-Boote Combat Badge, then cementing the award with a solid handshake. Hitler however hesitated for a moment when he arrived at Hannah Blumenthal: according to his own beliefs, the responsibility of German women lay in staying home, procreating and raising children, not in participating directly in combat. However, Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, whispered in his ear, making Hitler nod his head before smiling to Hannah and pinning the Iron Cross Second Class and the U-Boote Combat Badge on her uniform's tunic.

"Oberhelferin Blumenthal, you did all German women proud by your actions behind enemy lines. Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Mein Führer!" Replied Hannah with difficulty, the emotion of the moment nearly rendering her speechless. Hitler then went behind her to tour the ranks formed by the sailors of the U-900, also upgrading their decorations. Once that was done, Hitler went to the block of ex-prisoners of war to chat with them and shake their hands. His handshakes and words then were however much less warm, even though he kept a polite tone and smiled: being captured by the enemy was considered by him to be quite a negative qualifier. However, he stayed polite for the needs of the propaganda that this ceremony represented. Finally, Hitler concluded the ceremony by asking to Ulrich a guided tour of the U-900, to which the latter of course agreed.

After a good hour touring the boat and being genuinely impressed by the U-900, Hitler asked Ulrich to meet with him, Dönitz, Räder, Goebbels and Speer in the officers' wardroom of the submarine. Expecting this meeting to be a purely social gathering, Ulrich was surprised to see Hitler ask Admiral Dönitz to speak first once they sat around the long dining table.

"Herr Kapitän, a number of significant events and developments occurred while you were gone for nearly a month on your covert mission. I will thus let Admiral Dönitz brief you on them before speaking further. Admiral!"

"Thank you, Mein Führer! Kapitän von Wittgenstein, I am pleased to tell you that our submarine blockade of British maritime supply lines, to which you contributed greatly with your U-900 in the past months, is starting to bear serious fruits. First, did you encounter or detect any British maritime patrol aircraft on your way back to Lorient?"

"Actually, none, Herr Admiral, something that quite surprised me. Normally, my radar detectors would pick up British radar emissions a number of times while transiting the Bay of Biscay. However, I detected only a lone British cruiser as it transited from the south coast of Great Britain towards the Strait of Gibraltar, with no airborne radar detected. Do you know why it is so, Herr Admiral?"

"I do!" Said Dönitz while smiling. "Basically, the British are running out of fuel. They are now burning their last reserves and, as a consequence, had to take a number of very drastic actions. First, their remaining aviation fuel is now strictly reserved for the use of their Fighter Command and of one maritime coastal patrol group protecting the sea approaches to their North Channel, where the supply ships from Canada and the United States have to pass to get to Liverpool. The British fuel situation is so dire that they had to ground the planes of their Bomber Command and restrict their heavy warships to port, unless to respond to an imminent naval surface threat. Even the heavy bombers of the American Eight Air Force are being affected. In fact, the Luftwaffe has started to detect a comprehensive withdrawal out of England of American heavy bombers, with B-17 and B-24 bombers using the fuel already in their tanks to fly to Iceland, where they take on more fuel and then fly back to the United States. To date, nearly half of the American heavy bombers previously stationed in England have left back for the United States in the past two weeks, because they had no more fuel to conduct bombing missions over Europe. With the British Bomber Command grounded for lack of fuel, this means that no German city, port or industrial center has been

bombed during all of last week, something that has proved to be tremendous good news for all of us, as you can imagine.”

“But, this is indeed great news, Herr Admiral!” said Ulrich, genuinely happy.

“Indeed! But the good news don’t stop there. The cuts in fuel supplies to the British Coastal Command and to the Royal Navy have in turn started a nasty closed loop effect for the British: with less maritime patrols being done, the job of our submarines presently blockading the British Isles is being made that much easier and less risky, something that in turn helps us tighten even more our grip on British maritime traffic. Our losses in submarines during the last month have dipped significantly, with us not losing a single submarine around Great Britain during the last week. We are basically well on our way to starve the British into submission, my dear von Wittgenstein, thanks to our submariners.”

Ulrich, observed carefully by Hitler, was left open-mouthed by those last words.

“Then, we could well be close to victory in this war, Herr Admiral.”

“Close but not quite! Even if we succeed in taking Great Britain out of this war, something that is still not done, that still leaves us facing both the United States and the Soviet Union. While our Japanese allies are doing a good job of cutting the Americans to size in the Pacific, we cannot underestimate the tremendous war production capacity of the United States. The Americans still could come back to haunt us, notably if they establish themselves in force in Northern Ireland, where their supply ships can get to with less risk than to England proper. As for the Soviets, they are proving to be a much tougher nut to crack than what we originally estimated. If and when England will be out of the war, we will certainly switch our efforts to defeat the Soviets next, notably by cutting and destroying the Allied convoys bringing weapons and war supplies to the Soviets via Murmansk. However, our nation has right now some more immediate needs concerning the Soviets, needs that you may well be able to satisfy, Kapitän von Wittgenstein.”

“Uh, I don’t understand, Herr Admiral. How could my submarine help in fighting the Soviets, except by helping to sink supply ships heading for Murmansk?”

“A good question, and one I will let the good Minister Speer answer.”

Now completely mystified, Ulrich looked at Albert Speer, the Armaments Minister, as the latter opened a file on the table in front of him.

“Herr Kapitän, the equation of the problem we are facing is simple. One of the major problems our invasion has been facing from the start is the unexpected toughness

and performance of the Soviet tanks, particularly their T-34 medium tank and their KV-1 heavy tank, plus the astronomical numbers in which they build those tanks. Right now, only our best, most powerful guns are able to pierce and stop a T-34 or KV-1 tank. Unfortunately, the number of such guns that we have is much lower than the number of T-34 and KV-1s the Soviets are throwing at us. To improve the situation in this case, we would need to either greatly boost the production of our high-velocity tank and anti-tank guns, or to somehow improve the penetrating performance of our lighter guns against Soviet tank armor. The first solution is unfortunately unrealistic, as I am already pushing to the maximum our war production. That leaves us with the second solution: improve the penetration of our lighter guns. That can be done mostly by producing anti-tank projectiles employing tungsten-tipped armor-piercing shells. The problem is that Germany is facing a severe shortage of tungsten, along with shortages of a number of other strategic metals and materials. Right now, we simply can't obtain more tungsten from our allies. I however remembered the occasion when you and Kapitän Kretschmer came back to Lorient with the U-800, and this after capturing and escorting back three enemy supply ships loaded with refined fuel and aluminum products. My hope is that you can repeat that exploit with your U-900 and steal for us some extra tungsten."

"You will of course be able to work again with Hauptmann Margraff and his men for that mission and will get the maximum support from our military intelligence services." Added Admiral Dönitz. "This mission is in fact to be considered as a national level top priority."

"And it will enjoy my full personal support, Kapitän von Wittgenstein." Said in turn Adolph Hitler before getting up from his chair, immediately imitated by the others around the table. Hitler then shook hands with Ulrich, who was still going over the shock of his next mission.

"Good luck to you and your men, Kapitän."

"HEIL!" Shouted in unison the officers present, giving the Nazi salute as Hitler walked out of the wardroom.

CHAPTER 7 – OPERATION PICK-POCKET

23 :12 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Friday, September 10, 1943

Port refueling services dock

Port of Antofagasta, Chile (Pacific Coast of South America)

As the large fuel barge and its towing boat came to a rest alongside the quay used by the port refueling services, run by the Petrolina Chileno company, the night shift supervisor came out of his control hut, set at one extremity of the quay, and went to greet the pilot and captain of the tug boat as the latter climbed the wooden stairs leading up from the lower wharf to the top of the quay.

“Pedro, what took you so long? You had only one ship to refuel. And why didn’t you answer your radio?”

Pedro Castillo, a grizzled man in his fifties with a short beard and moustache, shrugged his shoulders as he answered his boss and friend.

“Sorry, Baltazar, but that idiot in charge of the M.V. MERMAID forgot to switch on his navigation lights and didn’t answer my requests by signal lamp to identify his ship in the dark, so I ended up searching for him at night for a good hour. Then, he compounded that by having a faulty fuel valve that needed repairing before we could transfer our diesel fuel into the tanks of his ship. To top it off, he requested more fuel than he initially asked for by radio, so my diesel fuel barge is now nearly empty. As for my radio, it is broken...again!”

“Did he at least pay for all that fuel, Pedro?” Asked the supervisor, concentrating on the most important point for him and his company. Pedro smiled and presented a fat envelope taken from one of the pockets of his rubber raincoat.

“Well, the man may not have brains, but he at least had lots of American dollars with him. You have here the full price for 1,136 metric tons of diesel fuel. Feel free to count the money.”

“I certainly will, Pedro!” Said the supervisor, now in a better mood, while taking the envelope from the pilot of the tug boat. “Once I have counted and certified the

amount of cash you received, we will close shop for the night: no other ship is expected to either arrive or depart until the morning. You can send your crewmen home now.”

“Thanks, Baltazar!”

Returning on his tugboat, Pedro went to see his four crewmen, who were waiting for him in the small pilot house of the boat. Looking in turn at each man directly in their eyes, Pedro then spoke up in a sober tone of voice.

“Compadres, I don’t need to tell you again how important it is to not tell anyone what you saw tonight, even to your wives. You were well paid for the extra you did tonight and I know that you have little sympathy for those greedy Americans. The best you can do now is to forget what happened tonight and go home.”

“You can count on my silence, Pedro.” Replied one of the crewmen, echoed at once by two other crewmen. The three men then left the tugboat, climbing the stairs to the top of the quay and disappearing among the poorly lit streets and alleys of the port. That left one man facing Pedro. That man was supposedly a replacement sailor for one of the regular crewmembers who had called sick, but Pedro knew better and spoke to him in a deferential tone.

“Well, your refueling problem has been taken care of, señor.”

“Indeed, Pedro!” Said the fit, handsome man in his thirties, who then took out a thick envelope out of one pocket and gave it to the tugboat captain. “Promise made, promise kept! Here is the second part of your payment. Be assured that I will keep you in mind if I need again something done in this port. You may now leave: me and the others will discretely leave the boat a bit later, when nobody will be around. Again, thank you for your assistance.”

“It was my pleasure, Señor Santiago. Good luck on your mission.”

Pedro Castillo then left the pilot house and climbed on the quay, leaving ‘Santiago’ apparently alone on the tugboat. Going to the deck house situated behind the pilot house, the crewman knocked on its door in a prearranged code, getting someone to open the door to him after a few seconds. Walking quickly inside to let the man who answered his knocks close the door behind him, Carlos Stein smiled at the man and woman now looking at him.

“Everything went according to plan, my friends. We will wait a bit, time for the docks to be deserted, then I will bring you to a safe house, where you will be able to wait for your target ship and also wash off any remaining diesel fumes smell from your bodies and hair.”

"You did a hell of a job, Carlos, as usual." replied Hugo Margraff, wearing a set of informal civilian clothes, like Hannah Blumenthal. Carlos Stein, a Chilean national of German descent who worked for the Abwehr, the German military intelligence service, nodded his head, acknowledging the compliment.

"Thank you, Hauptmann Margraff. If I may, I must say that I was surprised to see a young woman come out of the U-900 with you."

That made Hugo smile and he then patted gently Hanna's left shoulder.

"Aaah, but this is not the first field mission for our good Oberhelferin Blumenthal. She proved herself two months ago, inside the United States and Canada. Did you hear news of our raid in Canada, or was the thing censored?"

"Nothing like such a raid appeared in the local press or on the radio, so censorship must have been tight about it. What was that raid about, anyway?"

Hugo took a few minutes to describe his infiltration up to Camp Bowmanville and back, making Carlos look at him and Hanna with renewed respect.

"Wow! That took some big coholes¹², Hauptmann. Well, hopefully, your coholes will do their magic again in a few days."

16:30 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Monday, September 13, 1943

Abwehr safe house, Antofagasta

"Good news, my friends! I just found the schedule for the loading of your tungsten, along with some details about the ship that will carry it."

Hugo and Hanna, who were growing seriously bored by now, grinned at the announcement from Carlos, who had just entered the safe house.

"Excellent! Come and tell us, Carlos."

Walking to the dining table around which Hugo and Hanna were playing chess to pass the time, Carlos took out of a vest pocket a couple of folded documents and a map, spreading the lot on the table before taking a chair. He then handed one of the documents to Hugo.

"Sorry if this is in Spanish, but I will translate this as needed for you. Basically, the mining complex in Chojilla, near La Paz in Bolivia, is going to ship by rail to

¹² Cohones : 'Balls/testicles' in Spanish.

Antofagasta a major shipment of tungsten metal products, to be then sent by sea to the American port of Seattle. The train is due to arrive in Antofagasta in six days, with the tungsten and other metals then stored in a port warehouse until the arrival of the Panamean cargo ship M.V. BUENAVENTURA, which is due in port on September 22. The BUENAVENTURA is due to take two days to load its cargo and will sail for Seattle on the 25th, a Saturday.”

“And how much tungsten are we talking about, Carlos?” asked Hugo, making the operative smile.

“About 690 metric tons of tungsten metal, or close to a quarter of the annual production of tungsten in Bolivia, which is the sole producer of tungsten for the whole of South America and also the fourth biggest producer of tungsten in the World.”

“Wow! That should make Minister Speer happy.”

“Wait! That’s not all! Since it would be quite uneconomical to ship only that tungsten by itself, the BUENAVENTURA will also load up 5,500 metric tons of Chilean metallic copper products, 430 metric tons of molybdenum, 310 metric tons of Brazilian manganese and 575 metric tons of Brazilian nickel, all going to the same smelting plants around Seattle. In total, the ship will be carrying some 7,505 metric tons of strategic metal products, many of which are essential to the making of specialty steel alloys that are extensively used in war industries.”

“Even better! I will compose a short, encrypted message after this to pass this information by radio to the U-900. This is too vital to be delayed. After that is done, we will discuss the details of our plan of action concerning that cargo ship.”

“Fair enough! In the meantime, I will make myself a good cup of coffee.”

As Carlos started percolating some espresso coffee, Hanna went to the suitcase radio set she had brought with her and prepared it for transmission, while Hugo wrote quickly a condensed message, using code words and some encryption to make it opaque to anyone intercepting it. That took him less than five minutes, with Hanna, who was a practiced and efficient Morse code and radio operator, then contacting the U-900 with her HF radio set and passing on the message. She was able to shut down her radio and make an announcement by the time that Carlos sat back at the table with a steaming cup of strong coffee.

“Message sent and acknowledged by the U-900.”

"Excellent!" replied Hugo, quite happy now. "Next, let's talk about our plan of action concerning the BUENAVENTURA."

The group had been discussing for a good ten minutes their plan when the telephone in the house's living room rang, making the trio look at each other in surprise.

"Were you expecting a call, Carlos?" asked Hugo, making the agent shake his head.

"No! Nobody is supposed to call here, unless an emergency occurs. Stay quiet while I answer."

Going quickly to the telephone set, Carlos picked up its receiver just as it was ringing for a third time.

"Hola¹³!"

He then heard a female voice which he knew very well.

"Carlos? This is Juanita! I am afraid that we have an emergency here in Valparaiso."

"What kind of emergency?" asked Carlos, stiffening at once. In his line of business, about anything could happen, including some very nasty things.

"I believe that some Americans are watching your house. One of your neighbors who owns a hotel warned me that a bunch of suspicious men have rented two days ago two of the rooms giving a view of your house. They speak with an American accent and, according to your neighbor, look quite intimidating. They also seem to do nothing but stay in their rooms, with one of them going out periodically for food. They came in two cars, which are now parked in front of the hotel, and they have been asking questions about you around. What shall we do?"

With his mind now in overdrive, Carlos thought furiously for a few seconds before answering Juanita.

"How many of these Americans are there exactly?"

"Your neighbor told me that a total of six Americans have been coming in and out of their rooms since they arrived."

"Alright, here is what you will do until we could speak further: do not approach my house under any pretext and do not go meet my neighbor. Just call him to tell him briefly to avoid those Americans as much as possible and that he is not to call the police

¹³ Hola : Hello in Spanish.

about them. As for you, continue to go to your work as usual but be on guard for any sign of surveillance or tailing against you. I am going to return to Valparaiso and will be there by tomorrow. I will contact you once I am back in town. In the meantime, exercise extreme caution. Do you understand me, Juanita?"

"Y...yes! I will feel better once you will be back. Be careful yourself."

"I will! See you tomorrow."

Carlos then hung up, prompting a question in a worried tone from Hugo.

"Something is wrong, Carlos?"

"Possibly! One of my agents in Valparaiso called to warn me that a group of six Americans apparently put my house there under observation. It sounds like the American O.S.S¹⁴. is on my trail."

Hugo frowned on hearing that: if Carlos had somehow been compromised, then the mission of the U-900 could well have been compromised too. On the other hand, things may still be salvaged...if prompt action was taken without delay.

"Do you have anything compromising hidden inside your house, Carlos?"

"My radio set, code books and stash of weapons are hidden in my house. They would be pretty hard to find, but a thorough search could still uncover them. My worry now is that, with my house being obviously empty at this time, that those Americans may well decide to take the chance to break into my house at night to search it. I believe that I have no choice left now than to return as quickly as possible to Valparaiso and try to deal with this problem on the spot."

"Then, I am coming with you." announced Hugo in a resolute tone. "You will need some backup if you are to deal with six American agents."

"I'd like to come as well." said Hanna, making the two men snap their heads towards her, shock on their faces.

"NO WAY!" nearly shouted Hugo. "You are not a trained fighter and would actually impede us in any fight with those Americans."

"Who is talking about me fighting those Americans?" protested Hanna. "What I had in mind was to help you by acting as an inconspicuous observer and to watch your back while you check Carlo's house. We brought a pair of handheld radios with us: let's use them for something where they could be truly useful. I could stay near the house

¹⁴ O.S.S. : Office of Strategic Services. The predecessor of the C.I.A. and the American foreign intelligence service during World War 2.

with one radio, hidden, to make sure that no Americans could surprise you while you are in.”

Hugo hesitated for long seconds then before nodding his head.

“Very well, Hanna. You can play the distant watcher in Valparaiso...but nothing else.”

“Thank you, Hugo.”

As for Carlos, he eyed Hanna for a moment before breaking into a smile.

“Decidedly, you are reminding me of my Juanita, Hanna. Now, I suggest that we pile into my car right away: we have over a thousand kilometers to do by road between here and Valparaiso. Bring whatever weapons you have with you, along with your suitcase radio: we can't tell for sure what we will encounter at my house. We have twelve days before the BUENAVENTURA sails. Hopefully, that will be more than enough for us to go to Valparaiso, deal with the situation there and then return to Antofagasta before the 24th.”

Hugo went at once to the suitcases he and Hanna had brought with them and opened one of them, then foraged through the clothes filling it, extracting a Walther P38 pistol equipped with a silencer, plus three spare magazines, each with eight 9mm rounds, and gave the lot to Hanna.

“I hope that you won't need this in Valparaiso, Hanna, but I will feel better with you being able to defend yourself.”

“Thank you, Hugo. Are you going to bring your silenced MP43?”

“With possibly six armed American agents to deal with, I believe that it would indeed be the prudent thing to do, Hanna. We will stuff our suitcases in the trunk of the car. If somehow this safe house becomes compromised, at least we won't leave behind things that could help trace us.”

The trio took only a few minutes to gather their things and carry them to Carlos' Ford sedan, parked alongside the safe house, where the suitcases and bags were stuffed in the trunk. With Carlos at the wheel and Hugo sitting in the front passenger seat, the sedan soon backed out of its parking spot and drove off, heading towards the nearest access junction with the coastal national highway that linked Antofagasta with Valparaiso and Santiago. While Carlos drove at the maximum legal speed on the highway, he refrained from pushing his car's engine to its maximum, in order not to overtax it: now was not the time to have a car breakdown.

06:49 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Tuesday, September 14, 1943

Port city of Valparaiso

Having reclaimed the driver's seat before entering Valparaiso, and this after letting Hugo drive for more than half of the way from Antofagasta, Carlos drove towards Juanita's home once inside the city, hoping to catch her before she left for her work at the port. However, he stopped and parked his car one block away from her residence, turning around in his seat to speak with Hugo and Hanna.

"I am going to go on foot, to check if anyone is watching Juanita's building. I will then enter by the back door as an extra precaution. I will call you by radio to report if the way is clear. Hugo, you better take place at the wheel, just in case."

"A prudent thing to do, indeed."

Stepping out of the car and raising the collar of his trench coat, as if to ward off the fresh September wind, Carlos then started walking at a fair pace, his hat sunk low over his eyes. With all his senses on alert, he soon walked past Juanita's apartment building. Not seeing anything suspicious, he nonetheless continued on without slowing down, turning at the next street corner and then turning again in a narrow alley on which the rear entrance of Juanita's building gave. Again, he saw nothing suspicious there, so he entered by the back door and quickly climbed to the second floor level, where Juanita's apartment was situated. Discretely taking out his silenced pistol and hiding it inside his opened trench coat, Carlos knocked lightly on her door, using a code long arranged with Juanita. A hesitant female voice then answered his knocks.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Carlos."

It took only a few seconds before the door was opened, with Carlos immediately slipping inside. Juanita took the time to close and lock the door behind him before embracing him for a kiss.

"My God! I was so scared for you! Did you just arrive from Antofagasta?"

"Yes! I brought two friends with me. Have you noticed any suspicious people or activities around your building lately?"

"No! It seems that, while the Americans are suspecting you, they don't appear to know about me."

“Good! That’s the way I want to keep it. Look, I intend to go check out my house today and empty it of any compromising item or document. Then, we will return to Antofagasta together. Plead the need to visit a very sick relative in order to skip work for a few days. If things turn sour here, it will put you far from the danger and, if things really go bad, we will then be in good position to disappear via submarine.”

Juanita gave him a somber look, fully realizing the seriousness of the situation.

“I would hate to have to leave Chile, but it would still be much better than being captured and interrogated by enemy agents.”

“True! First, pack two suitcases and gather your special equipment, then call your boss to say that you must go visit a sick relative for a few days. If he refuses to let you go, then too bad for him: there are other jobs available around. I will now go check my house. Stay here and don’t answer the door until I come back. You still have your revolver handy?”

“Uh, yes!”

“Then keep it near you. If some American agents try to break into your apartment, shoot them and then tell the police that they were robbers.”

“Got it! Please, be careful, Carlos.”

Carlos smiled tenderly to Juanita before kissing her while glued to her.

“I will, I promise. Now, call your boss and start packing.”

Carlos felt his heart heavy as he walked out of Juanita’s apartment and went back down to street level. She was supposed to be a simple agent in his espionage network, but things between them had become a lot more than that in the last couple of years. Again using the back door and the narrow back alley, he walked back to his parked car and sat in the front passenger seat, giving an order to Hugo, who was in the driver’s seat.

“Start the car: we are going to my house to check it and take out the compromising things inside it, then will come back here to pick up Juanita. I will tell you which way to go.”

“Understood.”

Starting the Ford’s engine, Hugo then rolled out of his parking spot and into the early morning traffic of Valparaiso. With Carlos directing him, he ended up crossing the city center, then entered a sparsely populated suburb, rolling along a road following the

coast. At one point, Carlos pointed at a sort of small hotel or inn that they were approaching.

"Slow down a bit. This is the inn from where the Americans are supposedly watching my house, which is only a further hundred meters down the road, on the right." Hugo obeyed him and slowed down, as if looking for an address, while eyeing discretely the inn.

"Should we pass by your house or park near it?"

"Simply pass in front of it: I want to see if there are any suspicious activities there."

"Got it! Hanna, avoid looking at the houses along the road for the moment. Let's not look suspicious ourselves."

"Understood, Hauptmann."

"And, please, don't speak German, even in private."

"Sorry...Hugo." Said Hanna in English, blushing with embarrassment at the mild rebuke. She thus sat back in silence on the rear bench seat as their car rolled past a small house situated on the side nearest to the sea.

"Here is my house... Shit! There is a car parked alongside it and I don't recognize it."

Hugo tightened his jaws on hearing that.

"Those American agent probably decided to go search your house when they saw no activity or movement inside it. We should go park somewhere nearby and approach your house on foot to investigate. We can't let those Americans find your radio set and code books."

"Then, continue on for about 200 meters and turn right on a dirt trail that leads down to a beach. We can hide the car among the trees there and then approach my house on foot."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Uh, what about me?" asked Hanna from the rear seat, making Carlos twist his head to look at her.

"You stay in the car and monitor your radio. We will call you as needed, Hanna."

Seconds later, they turned right on a narrow dirt trail and entered a patch of trees, where Hugo turned off the trail and parked between two trees. As soon as the car was stopped, Carlos stepped out and grabbed his Astra 400 pistol, loaded with eight

9mm Largo rounds, then screwed quickly a silencer on its muzzle while Hugo went to the trunk to get his silenced MP43 assault rifle, along with two spare magazines for it. Carlos looked resolutely at Hugo as the latter was chambering a 7.62mm Kurz round in his rifle.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

“Then, follow me!”

Walking quickly at a crouch, with their weapons at the ready, the two men went deeper among the trees, heading in the general direction of Carlos' house. They soon started to see it through the trees and slowed down to a cautious pace, still crouched. Stopping briefly near the tree line next to his house and taking a few seconds to examine it, Carlos saw through a window of his main bedroom a fleeting movement inside. Not saying a word, he made a hand signal to Hugo and ran as quietly as he could to the rear of his house. The two men were soon positioned on either side of the rear door, which Carlos cautiously unlocked with his house key. Nodding his head first at Hugo, Carlos then opened slowly the door and slipped inside, followed closely by the German soldier. As soon as they were inside, in the hallway connecting the front and the back of the house, Carlos saw a big man standing in a corner of his lounge, which faced the road. That man was discreetly watching through the window of the lounge and had a pistol in his right hand. The man then caught from the corner of his left eye the next movement by Carlos and snapped his head towards him, looking at him with alarm while starting to raise his pistol and shouting.

“WATCH...”

The man didn't have a chance to finish his warning, a 9mm Largo bullet striking him directly in his left eye, killing him instantly. However, the man's shout and the muffled but still audible shot from Carlos' pistol was enough to attract some attention. A shouted question came from up the stairs to the upper floor as Carlos, swearing quietly at his bad luck, took a few steps forward to give some clear firing space to Hugo.

“JACK? JACK? WHAT IS IT?”

Showing a shocking lack of professionalism for an undercover agent, the man who had shouted from the top of the stairs then rushed down to investigate, giving a second target to Carlos. He fired twice, hitting squarely in his left side the man running down the stairs. Both bullets penetrated the left side ribs area and traveled upward, one of them piercing the left lung and the second one cutting in two the man's aorta. Fatally

wounded, the man crumbled down and rolled down the last steps before ending up spread face down at the bottom of the stairs, his Colt M1911 pistol coming out of his dead hand. As Carlos kept his pistol pointed up, Hugo quickly ran past him and then turned around, pointing his MP43 at the balcony of the upper floor. He was in time to see another man rush out of an upper room, pistol in hand. Before that man could point his weapon, he was hit by a short but well aimed three-round burst from Hugo's assault rifle and crumpled across the door opening of the upper room, his head slumping forward and down. Hugo then made a quick sign to Carlos to tell him to hold still for the moment. Both men, weapons still pointed, froze on the spot and stayed silent, listening for any noise. Their tactic worked, as the noise of wooden stairs cracking came half a minute later from a staircase leading down to the basement of the house. The fourth intruder, despite being more cautious than his three dead colleagues, was still caught in a deadly crossfire when he emerged from the staircase, receiving no less than four 7.62mm Kurz and two 9mm Largo bullets in quick succession. The man was dead before he dropped on the floor of the hallway, letting go his short-barreled pump-action shotgun. Again, Hugo and Carlos waited quietly, hoping that no other intruder would show up. After two stressful minutes, the two men relaxed a bit, with Carlos speaking in a near whisper.

"I will go up to check out the rooms upstairs. Cover me from here."

"I have your back."

Moving as silently as he could, Carlos took a good fifteen minutes to cautiously search his whole house, making sure that there were no other intruders. He didn't find any but was angered at the way the dead intruders had searched his house, trashing the rooms and spilling the content of drawers everywhere on the floor. Professional secret agents would have at least tried to keep their search discrete, in order not to awake suspicions in him whenever he would have returned to his house. The amateurish side of the intruders was further confirmed when Carlos searched the four dead men, finding plenty of papers on them, including American passports and even a small notebook. Sifting quickly through the notebook, he saw many pages of scribbling, with some being obviously addresses and telephone numbers. Carlos showed those notes to Hugo, who shook his head in disbelief.

"I thought that the American O.S.S. was more professional than that. Either these guys were supremely arrogant and assured of themselves, or they were supremely stupid."

"I would say that they were both." replied Carlos, a smirk on his lips. "Remember that the Americans believe that they own the whole of Central and South America and can thus politically and militarily intimidate the various governments of the continent. Unfortunately, they are too often right about that. However, despite what the Americans may think, the Chilean government and people are no stooges of theirs."

"That is well and good, but I must remind you that we found only four Americans in your house. There is probably still at least two other Americans watching this house from your neighbor's inn. I propose that we go eliminate that threat before they have the chance to raise the alarm about their friends not coming back. We will then have plenty of time to study this notebook and decide our next actions."

"Good thinking, Hugo. May I suggest that you advise Hanna by radio before we move to the inn, so that she doesn't worry for nothing?"

"Right!"

Calling Hanna and informing her of what had happened in the house and telling her to stay in the car took a couple of minutes. Carlos and Hugo then exited the house by its rear, seaside door. Using to the maximum the cover available, the two men made their way to the inn, making their final approach from the beach side, out of the field of view of the rooms facing Carlos' house. Hugo, who had left his MP43 rifle hidden in Carlos' house and had taken out his silenced Walther P38 pistol instead, removed the silencer and hid it and his pistol under his vest before following Carlos inside the inn. To his surprise, Carlos went directly to the reception desk of the inn and spoke with the graying man behind the counter before coming back to Hugo, who looked at it crossly.

"Isn't it a bit dangerous to go see the receptionist like this?"

"Not if he is a member of my network, which he is. Why do you think he called Juanita to warn her about these Americans? They occupy the rooms number 23 and 25, by the way. Let's get rid of the remaining snoops...quietly."

Going up the stairs of the main staircase and following a fairly short corridor dimly illuminated by a couple of low power lamps, Carlos soon arrived at the two rooms that were of interest to them. Carlos whispered to Hugo as they stopped on each side of Rom 23.

“The receptionist told me that the two rooms are intercommunicating, which is probably the reason the Americans chose them. Let’s listen to find out if anyone is in.” They needed only a minute of listening to establish the fact that at least two men occupied the room, exchanging a few words from time to time. Carlos then took out a key from one of his pocket, showing it to Hugo.

“The hotel’s spare key for this room, courtesy of my friend the receptionist. Let’s screw our silencers back on before jumping inside.”

That took only a few seconds, being done under their vests in order to hide their weapons from any customer of the inn who could show up in the hallway at an inappropriate moment. With their pistols now ready, Carlos very slowly inserted the hotel key in the door’s lock and turned it. When he heard the ‘click’ of the lock being activated, he very cautiously pushed the door open by two centimeters, to see if the internal safety chain had been put in place. When he saw no chain, Carlos gave a last nod to Hugo before quickly opening the door and rushing in, his pistol pointed. Inside, he encountered two big men standing in front of a window, with a tripod-mounted still camera equipped with a telephoto lens pointed outside. Both men were in shirt sleeves, revealing the fact that they wore handgun holster rigs. One of the men who had a pair of binoculars in his hands reacted at once, with his right hand going in a flash for his holstered revolver. Hugo didn’t give him time to draw and shot twice, hitting him in the heart and then in the head. The second American, who also tried to draw his weapon but was slower than his colleague, was shot between the eyes by Carlos before he could pull his Colt 1911 pistol out of its holster. As Hugo cautiously advanced to check the two Americans, Carlos hurried to close the door of the room and lock it. Once that was done, he went to check the adjacent, connecting room, but found nobody there. Returning in the first room, he saw that Hugo was already searching the two bodies, emptying their pockets onto the carpet. Carlos thus decided to return in the second room and searched it for documents, maps or papers of interest.

That search was actually fruitful, producing two American passports found in the pockets of two suit jackets suspended in the room’s closet. Two suitcases found under the large bed yielded some handgun ammunition, four grenades and one M3 submachine gun, commonly nicknamed ‘Grease Gun’ because of its shape, along with four spare magazines for the M3. However, the most interesting thing Carlos found was a map of Valparaiso with some markings in red grease pencil on it. Returning to the first

room with the map and the two passports, Carlos presented them to Hugo, who had completed his search of the bodies and was sifting through a small notebook.

"Look at what I found, Hugo: a marked map and those two passports, one of them a diplomatic one."

Grabbing first the two passports, Hugo examined the personal information in them, along with the various entry and exit stamps in them. He then pointed the man he had shot.

"This one is supposedly a diplomatic attaché from the American embassy in Santiago. The stamps in his passport shows that he has not been out of Chile for the last nine months. On the other hand, his partner came to Chile recently, a week ago, on a regular passport. The four men we shot in your house also had regular passports, with entry stamps dating one week, on the same day as this one. I believe that those last five men were a hit team called up by the local O.S.S. cell to find and either capture or kill you. The diplomatic guy was probably either a member or the leader of the Santiago O.S.S. cell and a resident agent. Now, let's see this map."

"Just hold on that for a second, Hugo. I need to do a call right now. Could you gather and put away temporarily the things they had in their pockets, while I do my call?"

"And what do you intend to do, Carlos?" asked Hugo, a bit mystified.

"Get rid of those bodies." Answered the Chilean Abwehr agent before picking up the receiver of the room's telephone and composing a three-digit number. He got a response nearly immediately in Spanish.

"Reception desk! May I help you?"

"Yes! This is Carlos, in Room 23. I need you to send two dependable employees to come change the carpets: some wine was spilt on them. Oh, and sorry if my car backfired a minute ago."

"No problem, señor: I will send a cleanup crew right away."

"Thank you! There will be a good tip for them, along with money to pay for the damage."

Carlos then hung up and went to search the two wallets found on the dead Americans. There were few cards in them but quite a lot of cash money, both American dollars and Chilean banknotes. He took all the money and pocketed it before returning to Hugo.

"So, let's see this map."

Holding the map with both hands, Hugo looked at it for a moment before nodding his head slowly.

"I see now how they found you, Carlos. You see those two red straight lines on the map? They intersect right over the location of your house. My bet is that the Americans detected your radio transmissions the last time you emitted, then used radio direction-finding techniques to triangulate the position of your house. Also, look at the base point of each of the two lines: one starts from the location of the American embassy in nearby Santiago, a logical place to expect a listening station operated by the O.S.S.. The other line starts over this point on the map, which appears to be some kind of building near Santiago."

Carlos exchanged a look with Hugo on hearing that.

"Well, I believe that we should find and clean up that nest of bedbugs if we want to avoid that future transmissions from the U-900 be detected and triangulated."

"Agreed! All this however means one thing: you and your house are burned. You can thus expect more O.S.S. attention in the future. I am sorry, but you will have to go into hiding and change identity. Your house is unfortunately a goner."

Carlos passed one hand on his head, brushing his hair as he felt deep discouragement.

"Damn! I liked that house."

Someone knocked on the door at that moment, making Hugo tense up. Carlos however signaled him to lower his pistol, then went to the door and spoke through it in Spanish.

"Who is it?"

"The cleanup crew! Roberto sent us."

Carlos, reassured by those words, unlocked the door and opened it, long enough for two local men to come in while carrying two long, rolled carpets. He then closed and locked the door behind them and showed them the two dead men on the floor, lying on top of a now blood-soaked carpet.

"Do you think that you could make those two Americans disappear, guys?"

"No problem, señor! Just give us a few minutes."

"Then, take these car keys: they are for one of the cars used by these Americans. It should be parked in the inn's parking lot. Also, take this money, to pay yourselves and help Roberto cover the costs of the cleanup."

One of the two men gladly took both the car keys and the thick wad of American dollars, then started to roll one of the bodies in the blood-stained carpet of the room. Carlos and Hugo left the room at that time, taking with them the papers, weapons and other items of interest they had found and giving some working space for the two employees.

After returning the hotel master key to the receptionist, Carlos and Hugo went to the small parking lot of the inn and, using the second set of car keys found on the Americans, looked for the car corresponding to the keys. They quickly were able to unlock a big Studebaker sedan and briefly searched it, but found little more than the car registration papers and two boxes of handgun ammunition in the glove compartment. Jumping in, with Carlos at the wheel, they started the sedan and drove off the lot, briefly following the main road and then parking alongside Carlos' house, where they stepped out and entered the house. They also called Hanna by radio, making her drive Carlos' car up to the house, so that they could join up again as a team. Hugo called Hanna to the kitchen table as soon as she was in and showed her the map, documents and papers found on the six dead Americans.

"Hanna, me and Carlos are going to get rid of the four bodies in this house. Could you go through this stuff in detail and see what you can make out of it. By the way, that map bears radio DF triangulation lines."

"No problem, I am on it."

Carlos, who stood nearby, nearly snapped his head around on hearing that exchange. However, he waited until he and Hugo were out of earshot of Hanna before whispering to him.

"You are letting HER analyze these papers and documents?"

In response, Hugo gave him a no-nonsense look.

"Look, Carlos: I gave her that job because she is the most qualified for it. She may officially be a simple female auxiliary but she also happens to be a highly qualified and experienced radio traffic monitor and analyst, on top of being fluent in English and French and of being an excellent Morse code operator. She worked at the Paris office of the Abwehr, where she was monitoring daily radio traffic between London and American and British clandestine agents in France. If there is a pattern to be read in those papers, she will find it."

Carlos was left speechless for a moment by that, his soft macho side having some difficulty accepting those words. He however went over his prejudices and nodded his head once.

"Very well: you know her better than me. I propose that we load the bodies in the trunk of the car we took, so that we could drive them away from my house and then dump them in some isolated spot."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's start with the two stiffs on the upper floor."

The two men ended up taking a bit over an hour to get rid of the dead Americans, driving to a seaside cliff three kilometers away and dumping their bodies into the sea. On returning to the house, they took Carlos' large and heavy radio set out of its hiding place in the attic and carried it down before loading it into the stolen car's trunk and covering it with a thick wool blanket. His code book and reserve of weapons, ammunition and explosives were also hauled out in suitcases, which were stuffed around the HF/LF radio set in the car's trunk. The first to return to the dining room afterwards was Carlos. There, he looked with interest at the notes taken by Hanna.

"So, what did you find of interest out of all this, Hanna?"

"Quite a few things, actually. First, that location at the base of one of the lines on the map is most probably the site of a radio DF station. Furthermore, in view of the bulk and weight of such equipment, it will be either a fixed installation inside a house or building, or a vehicle-borne set inside a van or a truck. However, a vehicle going around with a DF loop antenna on its top would attract a lot of attention, especially in view of how frequent Chilean Army checkpoints and barrages are. I thus believe that it will be a fixed set inside a building. Furthermore, such a listening station is typically manned by more than one man and is possibly doubling as a safe house or clandestine command post. Such a place thus could well contain much valuable information about the O.S.S. network in Chile. If we could raid and take out that station, it could constitute a hard blow against the Americans in Chile."

"Uh, why are you saying 'we', Hanna?"

"Because she could be our backup support when we will raid that DF station, the same way she was part of my backup team during our mission inside Canada." cut in Hugo, who had just entered the dining room and had heard the last sentences. "Please continue, Hanna."

"Thank you, Hugo. I found Carlos' name mentioned in a number of notes, plus his home address and telephone number and the name of the company where he works. I am sorry to say this, Carlos, but your present identity and address are totally burned. That information has probably been passed on to Washington by now and possibly to the British as well. You will have to either change your identity and find a new home and new job, or you will have to leave Chile entirely in order to evade capture."

Watched by Hugo and Hanna, Carlos sat slowly on a chair, visibly discouraged.

“What about Juanita? Is there any indication that the Americans are after her as well?”

“The only thing I found was her first name, followed by a question mark, mentioned once by itself. However, her address was nowhere to be found in all those papers. The one name and address I found a few times in those notes are that of a man named ‘Otto Müller’, who has a house in Santiago. Do you know him?”

Hanna and Hugo didn’t miss the way Carlos paled on hearing that name.

“Hell! That’s the name of the German embassy attaché who actually directs the Abwehr network in Chile. If they know about him like they knew about me and if the Americans decided to come and get me...”

Carlos didn’t have to complete his sentence, as Hugo understood too well what it could mean.

“Then, Herr Müller could be in grave danger. Since he has diplomatic immunity, any action against him would have to be purely clandestine and anonymous. The Americans will certainly try to capture him alive in order to question him about his spy network. The question for us is: where would the Americans bring him in order to interrogate him away from witnesses? They certainly wouldn’t do that at the American embassy: that would be more than simply dumb.”

“What about there?” Said Hanna, putting her index on the spot in the map at the base of one of the triangulation lines. “A place discrete enough to deploy a DF loop antenna would certainly be discrete enough to interrogate someone, especially if that place has a basement.”

Hugo exchanged a stunned glance with Carlos at those words.

“Scheisser! She is right! At the least, we will have to seriously check that place out.” said Hugo, making Carlos nod his head once.

“Absolutely! However, we will need some serious backup before rushing there.”

19:43 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Hillside villa, northeastern suburbs of Santiago

“So, Mister Müller, are we becoming more reasonable now?... No?... Too bad! Jamie, send more juice!”

The man tied naked to a solid wooden chair suddenly arched up, his face red and his jaws clenched together, as a man sitting at a nearby table vigorously turned the handle

of a manual dynamo. After turning his handle for a few seconds, the dynamo man stopped to let the prisoner a chance to breathe. Müller needed long seconds to gulp air and recover a bit from the horrible pain caused by the electric shocks to his genitals. The man who had been standing in front of him and asking him questions then bent forward.

“You want higher voltage? TALK! WHO ARE YOUR AGENTS IN AND AROUND SANTIAGO?”

“You...you are mistaken: I am only a diplomatic attaché, not a spy.”

“And you think that we will believe that? We already uncovered your main agent in Valparaiso. He should soon join you here for some fun conversation.”

“Again, I don’t know what you are talking ab...”

BOOM

“What the...” started to say the interrogator, as he craned his neck to look up at the ceiling, from which direction the muffled explosion had come. That explosion was nearly immediately followed by multiple gunshots fired in quick succession. At the same time, as all the O.S.S. men were still looking up while starting to take out their handguns, the door of the basement room was violently thrown open and Hugo Margraff jumped in, his MP43 pointed and with Carlos close behind him, holding the pump-action shotgun captured from one of the O.S.S. men killed in his house. The Americans present had no time to point their weapons at the newcomers before Hugo started firing deadly, short 3-round bursts from his assault rifle. The interrogator was the first to be hit, receiving three bullets in his chest and belly that dropped him like a broken puppet. The second American to die was the one closest to the door, who got a shotgun blast in his face from a distance of two meters. The man at the manual dynamo, who had previously put his pistol on the table supporting the dynamo, was still reaching for it when two bullets from Hugo’s second burst struck him in the right side ribs area. One bullet went through his liver and continued on to pierce his left kidney before exiting his body, while the second bullet ripped through his intestines. Mortally wounded, the O.S.S. agent slowly collapsed to his knees, his arms over the table top and his eyes already glazing. The last American left standing in the room was pointing his revolver at Hugo when Carlos’ shotgun barked for a second time, peppering his torso, arms and head with buckshot pellets. The man had time to cry out in pain before an aimed burst from Hugo’s MP43 exploded his head like an egg hit by a hammer.

Hugo, his MP43 still raised to eye level and pointed, quickly looked around the room to make sure that there were no other Americans in it, then spoke to Carlos.

"Free Herr Müller and find his clothes while I keep watch."

Carlos hurried to do so, knowing that they would need to hurry and drive away before the Chilean police could be alerted. His first move was to detach the electrodes fixed to Müller's genitals and to undo the ropes tying him to his chair. The German diplomat and secret agent, a mature man in his fifties, managed to speak weakly to him as Carlos was untying him.

"D...danke! How did you find this place?"

"It's a long story. Let's get you dressed up first. We will be able to speak while driving away."

Searching quickly the basement room, Carlos found a cardboard box in one corner that contained a set of men's clothes that had to belong to Müller. Bringing the box near the interrogation chair and putting it down, he looked at him with concern.

"Are you able to dress up by yourself?"

"I...I think so. That man that was interrogating me: he was the head of the O.S.S. for Chile. There were at least another five men upstairs."

"I know! My men took care of them at the start of the fight. They were the ones who threw a grenade. Now, get dressed while I go search this house for interesting papers. My friend here will watch over you."

Carlos then walked out of the room at a hurried pace, his shotgun still in hand. As he started to slowly put on his clothes, Müller looked at Hugo, who was in the door frame and was watching the corridor beyond the room.

"Thank you to you as well, mister. That was some nice shooting on your part."

Hugo nodded his head once at the compliment.

"Danke! I am Hauptmann Hugo Margraff, of the Brandenburg Regiment. I came with the U-900."

"Ah yes! Is your mission still on track?"

"It certainly is, Herr Müller. The urgent question now is: where could you go to be safe."

"The embassy." said at once Müller. "It is well guarded by the Chilean police and army: the Americans will never attack it."

"Well, don't be so sure about that, mister. Our next move may just convince them to try."

"Your next move? What do you have in mind, Hauptmann?"

A mean smile appeared on Hugo's face before he answered Müller cryptically.

"Something that will mostly end the present danger to Carlos' network, Herr Müller. The Americans chose to play rough but they will now find out that it is a game two can play."

09:51 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Wednesday, September 15, 1943

Chancellery building of the American embassy

Downtown Santiago de Chile

John Tisdale walked into his secretary's office, which served as an anteroom to his own office of U.S. Police Affairs Attaché, and stopped in front of her desk to ask her a question on a polite tone.

"Miss Gates, have you seen Mister Spencer this morning? He is not in his office and is not at his home either."

"I haven't seen him today, sir, nor has he called or left any message." answered the middle-aged secretary, stopping for a moment her typing. "Should I place a few calls to try to locate him for you, sir?"

"Uh, that won't be necessary, Miss Gates. Thank you!" replied Tisdale, who then retreated back in his office, a bit worried. As a senior agent of the F.B.I., he was the legitimate Police Affairs Attaché of the embassy, but it was a different thing where Jim Spencer was concerned. Officially, Spencer was Tisdale's assistant, but the latter knew too well that the man was in reality the O.S.S. head of station for Chile and that Spencer was involved in a number of unsavory things Tisdale would rather not know about.

A bit less than one hour later, his desk intercom buzzed, making him press the 'speak' button.

"Yes, Miss Gates?"

"Mister Tisdale, the Assistant Chief of Police for Santiago and a Chilean Army officer are here to see you."

Tisdale suddenly felt his stomach turn sour: this was probably not going to be a routine or even a friendly visit. At the start of the war, the United States had basically steamrolled the various countries of Central and South America into toeing the American

line and had grabbed control of much of their main export items, which was in the case of Chile its production of copper and of nitrates. However, a number of spectacular events during the last two years had considerably hurt both the prestige and the influence of the United States in Latin America, notably the blowing up of the Pacific side locks of the Panama Canal by a German commando unit and the destruction of the Golden Gate Bridge and blocking of San Francisco Harbor about a year ago. Now that Great Britain was rumored to be close to collapse due to the German submarine blockade of its coasts and with the Japanese running roughshod over the American Navy in the Pacific, various Latin American countries, notably Chile, were now reasserting their rights with the United States.

"Very well, let them in, miss."

A few seconds later, his secretary opened the door of his office and let two men in. One of them wore a good quality civilian suit, while the other wore the uniform of a colonel of the Chilean Army. Both carried leather briefcases and had closed expression as Tisdale came to shake their hands.

"So, gentlemen, what may I do for you this morning? But, please, sit down first!"

"Thank you, Mister Tisdale." Said the man in a civilian suit, who then took place in a sofa with the army officer. He then waited until his host had taken place in an easy chair facing them before speaking again.

"Let me present myself first: Jorge Mazar, Assistant Police Chief of Santiago. I came with Colonel Valmont, of the Army Counter-Intelligence Department, to discuss a serious matter concerning a number of American citizens."

Mazar then opened his briefcase and took a file out of it, extracting a sheet of paper from it and passing it to Tisdale, who saw that it listed seventeen names.

"The men whose names you see in that list were all American citizens, according to the papers found on them. They were found dead in various locations, either shot, stabbed or strangled. They also all happened to have illegal firearms on or near them. Do you recognize any of these names, Mister Tisdale?"

Realizing instantly what this could mean, the F.B.I. man gave Mazar a cautious answer.

"None of those names sound familiar to me, Mister Mazar. I am sorry."

Mazar fixed him for a moment, then took out what appeared to be an American diplomatic passport and gave it to Tisdale.

"Then, could you explain to me and Colonel Valmont why we found the body of your own assistant attaché, Mister Jim Spencer, in the same house where we found

eight other dead Americans, dozens of illegal weapons, a clandestine long range radio transceiver and a radio direction-finding set?"

Looking inside the passport and seeing the photo of his assistant, Tisdale did his best to look surprised and shocked.

"But... I don't understand! I..."

Valmont then spoke up for the first time, cutting off Tisdale's attempt at an explanation.

"Well, we do, Mister Tisdale! Your so-called assistant attaché was obviously involved with an American clandestine intelligence cell here in Chile and may in fact have been running it, if we can believe the papers and documents seized by us at the locations where we found those dead Americans. That cell had dozens of completely illegal firearms in its possession, along with the unregistered radio transceivers we found. Right now, my services are busy rounding up more men in various parts of Chile, men whose names and addresses were found in the documents we seized. All this proves to me and my government that the United States was engaged in espionage and clandestine work on Chilean territory, something that we take very seriously. Would you care to explain or comment, Mister Tisdale?"

Cold sweat broke on Tisdale's forehead as he realized the extent of the disaster that was now striking the American intelligence network in Chile. Those agents captured by the Chilean counter-intelligence were no doubt going to face harsh interrogations and torture and may in turn reveal more secrets in the process.

"Gentlemen, I assure you that I know nothing about this alleged clandestine work by American citizens. This must be a setup, possibly organized by pro-German elements in the country."

"I very much doubt so, in view of all the equipment, weapons and documents found with those dead Americans, Mister Tisdale." replied Valmont, a cold expression on his face. What he didn't say then to Tisdale was that one of the documents found by his men happened to be the radio code book used by the O.S.S. clandestine service. However, what Valmont didn't know himself was that there originally had been two such code books at the suburban villa. The second code book had not been found for the simple reason that Carlos had taken possession of it, deliberately leaving behind the other one, so that the Chilean intelligence services could find it and deal further blows to the O.S.S. in the future. Tisdale then tried to walk away from that subject, adopting an angry tone.

"And what about those who killed all those American citizens? Are you at the least trying to find their murderers, or are you only concerned about finding faults with American citizens?"

Those words, influenced partly by a long standing attitude shared by all American officials about the United States interests having to prevail no matter what over those of their host countries, had the opposite effect to the one hoped for by Tisdale. Luis Valmont, his face now as hard as rock, bent forward and raised his own voice.

"Mister Tisdale, your country may have become accustomed in the past in taking my government for granted and in forcing its policies and interests on Chile, but I must remind you that the United States is presently losing the war in the Pacific, while your British allies are close to collapse due to the German submarine blockade against them. Very soon, Germany, Italy and Japan will be able to send their merchant ships where they want, without interference from American or British ships. Then, Chile will be able to sell its copper, nitrates and fish products to whoever it will want to, instead of being forced to sell them solely to the United States at deflated prices imposed by your government. When that moment will come, I will be one of the first ones to applaud. Concerning you, I have started the procedure to have you and a few other American diplomats here declared 'Persona Non Grata' on national security grounds, and I can tell you already that my government will approve it. Be prepare to be booted out of Chile soon, Mister Tisdale. As for the other American citizens residing in Chile who were engaged in illicit activities, they will have to face the full force of the Chilean justice system. Finally, know that the entry of more American citizens in Chile will be severely restricted and controlled from now on. Don't expect to be able to introduce more clandestine agents into Chile in the future."

Both furious and feeling deeply insulted, Tisdale jumped on his feet and pointed an accusing index at Valmont.

"Feel free to act like a stooge for the Germans, Colonel, but expect to have to pay for it. The United States has many ways to make Chile regret any hostile gesture against its citizens and its interests."

Both Valmont and Mazar then got up from their sofa at those words, with Mazar replying to Tisdale in an icy tone.

"You will soon come to regret your attitude, Mister Tisdale. I hope for your citizens whom we arrested that they have very good lawyers: they will need them. Goodbye!"

The two Chilean officials then walked out of the office, leaving John Tisdale both boiling mad and worried. As infuriating as it had been to him, the statement from Valmont about the United States losing the war in the Pacific was unfortunately correct. Australia was now alone and isolated in the Pacific, with Japanese air raids hammering it with increasing frequency and with what remained of American forces in that theater unable to do much about it. The locks on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal were taking longer than expected to be rebuilt, forcing American ships from the East Coast to continue to take the long trip around Cape Horn in order to enter the Pacific. As for the British, their navy was now all but immobilized by a severe lack of fuel, while Allied bombing raids over Germany had been curtailed for the same reason.

15:04 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Friday, September 24, 1943

M.S. BUENAVENTURA, docked in the port of Antofagasta

Chile

The first officer of the M.S. BUENAVENTURA, seeing from the bridge of the big cargo ship a young couple climb the access ladder positioned along the port side of the hull, hurried down to meet the couple at the top of the ladder, where a sailor was posted to control the access to the ship. Ramon Feliciano arrived there in time to greet the man and woman, who were carrying a total of three suitcases and one large handbag, as they were about to set foot of the ship. Ramon discretely admired the smooth and very pretty face of the young woman before nodding his head once at the couple and speaking in his fair English.

“Welcome aboard the M.S. BUENAVENTURA, lady and gentleman. I am the ship’s First Officer, Ramon Feliciano. You must be Mister and Misses Worthington?”

“That’s correct, sir.” replied the man, while presenting to Ramon two Canadian passports and two tickets. “Here are our passports and our boarding tickets for Seattle, all paid up.”

“Thank you!”

Ramon examined quickly the two passports, which bore exit stamps from the customs office of the port, as well as the two travel tickets delivered by the shipping company to which the BUENAVENTURA belonged. Finding everything to be in order, he gave back the passports and tickets to the couple.

"We are due to leave early next morning. I will show you to your cabin, where you will be able to drop your luggage. The Captain will of course be honored to have you at his table for supper."

"And we will be honored to accept his gracious invitation, sir." said 'Mister Worthington'.

Picking up their luggage, the couple followed Ramon to the ship's aft superstructure, which they entered via a steel door on its port side. Going down a narrow corridor, they then turned into a second corridor, with Ramon stopping in front of one of the wooden doors lining the passageway. opening it.

"Your cabin for your trip to Seattle. The officers' mess is situated one deck above your cabin. Supper will be served at six."

"Thank you very much, Mister Feliciano." replied 'Harry Worthington'. Ramon then left the cabin, closing the door behind him. Going first to the door and locking it, Hugo Margraff spoke in a low voice to Hanna Blumenthal, using English.

"Okay, let's unpack part of our things. We will keep our weapons and your radio briefcase hidden for the moment. We won't need to act until this ship leaves port."

"That's when I will have to warn the U-900 by radio that we are leaving Valparaiso, right?"

"Exactly! We seem to be the only paying passengers on this trip, so our job should be relatively easy. Let's unpack, then we will go do a little promenade on the open deck."

Twenty minutes later, with their things in place, Hugo and Hanna left their cabin and went out in the open on the weather deck. A harbor crane was still at work, lifting from a rail car small but seemingly heavy pallets loaded with wooden crates and winching them down to the bottom of one of the cargo holds of the BUENAVENTURA. Hugo nodded his head with satisfaction when he was able to read the inscriptions on one of the crates being loaded in the ship.

"There's the tungsten we need so much."

"Yes! The copper that is already loaded aboard will also be most welcome by our industries, along with the other metals this ship will carry. Overall, a mission that we will be proud of."

Hugo looked at Hanna, who was leaning like him on the guardrails alongside the deck's edge, smiling to her.

"And a mission in which you killed your first enemy, which makes ME proud of you."

Hanna reddened a bit with embarrassment at Hugo's compliment. During the raid against the hillside villa used as a safe house by the American O.S.S., when they had freed Otto Müller, Hanna had stayed outside, posted by Hugo near one of the doors of the villa and armed with the M3 'Grease Gun' submachine gun taken from the men who had watched Carlos' house. One of the O.S.S. men occupying the villa had tried to flee via that side entrance, only to be cut down by a burst from Hanna's M3. That submachine gun, a very compact weapon that was also easy and quick to disassemble into a small package, was now hidden inside Hanna's suitcase, wrapped within her spare clothes.

"I really had little merit in that: I emptied a whole clip just to hit that man twice. In truth, my shooting was lousy."

"Maybe, but it was shooting done under the stress of combat, with no prior training on that particular weapon. You did well, Anne." replied Hugo, using her cover name. The 'couple' then fell mostly silent while watching the activity around the ship's weather deck and around the port. There were only a few merchant ships in the port and harbor, most of the boats present being fishing trawlers or whaling ships. One large tanker ship moored at a quay near the BUENAVENTURA quickly attracted Hugo's attention, making him nudge Hanna discretely.

"Anne, have a look at that big tanker ship two quays down to our bow. You notice anything about it?"

Hanna focused her eyes for a moment on the said ship before answering him.

"Yes: it is an American merchant ship. I thought that ships from combatant nations could not enter neutral countries during a war."

"That applies only to warships, actually. However, we both know that the American government posted a ship advisory a year ago, after the Panama Canal locks on the Pacific side were blown up by raiders from the U-800. That advisory enjoined American-flagged ships to avoid stopping in Chilean ports, which were declared 'unsafe for American ships'. Yet, this big tanker ship is here, at quay. Furthermore it certainly isn't here to load up on oil or other fuels: Chile does not have sizeable oil deposits, while this tanker is loaded to the hilt, judging by how low it rides in the water. It apparently

isn't here either to unload, as I see no fuel lines connecting it to the shore. In fact, the quay it is moored to is not designed to be a fuel transfer quay. It all makes me wonder about why it is here at all."

Hanna, who had been examining the American tanker ship while Hugo spoke, then said something in a low voice, in order not to be heard by the crewmembers working on the weather deck.

"I see something else, Harry. There are two large objects that are covered with large canvas tarps, one on the bow and one on the stern. The crew also tried to hide them further by piling crates around them. This may not be a warship, but I could bet that it has two deck guns, and large ones."

"Damn, you're right!" said Hugo after eyeing the two covered masses. "Nicely done, Anne. Let's see if we can find more about that 'S.S. CHARLES FINLEY'."

Looking around the weather deck and seeing Ramon Feliciano, the First Officer of the BUENAVENTURA, Hugo told Hanna to stay by the side rails and went to the merchant marine officer, giving him a warm smile.

"You seem to be loading up some pretty heavy stuff on your ship, Mister Feliciano."

In response, Ramon rolled his eyes up and made a face.

"Tell me about it, Mister Worthington: one of my sailors made a stupid bet that he could lift one of those small crates of powdered metal and sprained his back as a result. Now, I am one man short for at least a few days."

"Oh, that's never good for a typically small merchant ship crew. Talking about merchant ships, I was surprised to see an American tanker ship in the port. Last time I was in Seattle, I learned that there was a government advisory for American merchant ships to avoid Chilean ports, calling them 'unsafe'. I believe that it was as a result of the blowing up of the Pacific side locks of the Panama Canal, over a year ago."

"You are correct, Mister Worthington. The American cargo ship transporting nitrates that blew up inside the Miraflores Locks was hijacked by Germans in the port of Valparaiso. That prompted the American government advisory. In a way, that provided my ship and its trading company more contracts, as American merchant ships could not come to Chile anymore."

"Then, what is that 'S.S. CHARLES FINLEY' doing here, loaded down with oil?" Ramon sneered in response, while looking at the American tanker ship.

"It didn't have much of a choice, actually. It suffered some engine trouble as it was passing by Antofagasta, heading South, and had to call for the help of a local tug boat to come here to do repairs. I actually talked with its captain and helped him get some spare parts from my shipping company local office. I believe that they are nearly finished with their repair work and that it should in fact leave port at about the same time as us tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I see! But why go South, towards the Cape Horn, with a cargo of oil? The United States has plenty of oil available to them in the Caribbean Basin. They have no need to ship oil from a Pacific port towards the Atlantic."

"Again, you are basically correct, Mister Worthington. Normally, their trip would not make commercial sense. However, the captain of the CHARLES FINLEY told me that he was bringing his cargo of fuel oil and of diesel fuel to the Falkland Islands, which is still being used as a mid-point refueling stop for ships going around Cape Horn."

"Oh, that explains things! Thank you for your time, Mister Feliciano."
Very satisfied with the results of his short conversation with Feliciano, Hugo returned by the side of Hanna along the guardrails and spoke to her from the corner of his mouth.

"We will need to discretely send a radio message to the U-900 before supper. That tanker ship is bringing fuel oil and diesel fuel to the Allied mid-point refueling stop in the Falkland Islands. I will tell you more once back in our cabin."

01:50 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Saturday, September 25, 1943

American tanker ship S.S. CHARLES FINLEY

At quay in the port of Antofagasta

Feldwebel Franz Stein, leading a twelve-man boarding team, let the young Max Landau, who was an accomplished athlete, climb first the grappling hook and rope they had thrown up from their inflatable rubber boat. Landau, who had dragged behind him a thin rope attached to a rope and wood ladder, then pulled up the ladder and fixed it to the side railings of the tanker ship. The other eleven German men, each carrying silenced weapons and waterproof bags containing their kit, then climbed silently the ladder, crouching behind various cover once on the weather deck. As four sailors from the U-900 paddled their rubber boat back towards the high sea, taking some distance before starting again their outboard engine, Stein looked around the poorly lit weather

deck. The Americans had posted two armed sentries on deck guard duty, but those two men had been posted near the top stairs of the access ladder linked to the quay. Stein smiled at that: the Americans had justly considered the threat of infiltration from the shore a serious one, but had in turn neglected the possibility of infiltration from the water side, a mistake that was going to cost them dearly. However, he was not planning to take out those sentries right now. Rather, his primary concern now was to find a good hiding place for his team on this ship. The time for real action would come tomorrow, after the CHARLES FINLEY will have left the port of Antofagasta. There was however one thing that he wanted to have done before going into hiding. He pointed at two of his commandos, then at the bow deck gun nearby, which was covered with canvas tarps and partially surrounded by piles of crates.

“Go remove the firing pin from the breach block of that gun. However, don’t break it and don’t throw it away. Go!”

As the two men silently approached the bow deck gun at a crouch, Stein sent three more men to do the same with the aft deck gun. He waited until his first two men were back from the bow deck gun and had given him the stolen gun firing pin, then cautiously led his group towards the stern, to be closer to his three-man team when they would have finished their job. Then would be the time to find a good hiding place for the night.

07:51 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Bridge of the M.S. BUENAVENTURA

Sailing north out of the port of Antofagasta

Chilean coastal waters

Captain Alfredo Chavez was on his bridge, standing near the helmsman, when his two lone paying passengers knocked on the starboard outside door, with Harry Worthington then sticking his head in.

“Permission to come on the bridge, Captain?”

“Granted, Mister Worthington.” Replied Chavez, smiling back at the Canadian businessman. His smile widened when the very cute young Madam Worthington followed her husband inside. Her youthful beauty had quickly charmed his whole crew and Chavez had truly enjoyed hosting her and her husband for supper last night. The couple then approached the captain, with Harry addressing him.

"Captain, I know that we maybe should have done that when still in port, but would it be possible to telegraph a personal message to my head company in Vancouver? I would of course be ready to pay a fee for that service."

"Uh, if your message is kept short, I believe that I could accommodate your request, Mister Worthington. However, please understand that our radio operator has to monitor a couple of key frequencies and cannot tune out one of them for very long...or often."

"I completely understand, Captain. This will be an exception and I will keep my message short. Uh, where is your radio cabin, by the way?"

Chavez half turned around and pointed a door on the back wall of the bridge.

"Take that door, then enter the first door to your left in that short passageway. That will be the radio room."

"Again, thank you very much, Captain."

"You're welcome!"

Passing through the door shown by Captain Chavez, Hugo and Hanna nearly immediately encountered a door opening on the left side of the short, narrow passageway they were now in. Hugo gave a nod to Hanna, then pulled out his Walther P 38 pistol and started screwing on a silencer on its muzzle. Hanna did the same with her Walther PPK compact pistol, then took a deep breath to prepare herself: this may be her second clandestine mission overseas, but she was still a novice at this armed work.

"Ready!"

Hugo then opened the door of the radio room and entered, taking a few steps to let space for Hanna to enter as well. The lone radio operator present in the compartment, who was reading a book while wearing a radio headset, looked up from his book, surprise on his face.

"May I help you with something, sir?"

"Yes!" replied Hugo while pointing his pistol at the radioman, "You can give your place to the lady. Take off your headset, raise your hands and go stand in that far corner. One shout or one false move from you and I will not hesitate to shoot you. Now, move!"

The stunned man, thoroughly intimidated by Hugo's pistol, complied quickly enough and went to the farthest corner of the cabin, his hands held up. The radioman's eyes bulged when he saw Hanna sit at his original position and change the frequency on one of his

two HF radio transceivers, to then start sending a message in Morse code, demonstrating an efficient, practiced hand at it.

“Who...who are you, people?”

“High seas pirates!” answered Hugo with a big smile. “Don’t worry: there will be no violence unless you or another member of the crew do something stupid.”

Hanna soon got up from her chair, having just received an acknowledge from the U-900 to her very short, coded message.

“Done, Hugo!”

“Good! Let’s all go to the bridge now.”

As soon as they walked onto the bridge, Hugo made the radioman sit down against the back wall and left Hanna in charge of watching him before pointing his pistol on the stunned Captain Chavez.

“I am truly sorry about all this, Captain, but we have to hijack your ship. Please go sit down next to your radioman. Your helmsman can stay at his post for the moment.”

“But, but, what is going on?” Could only say Chavez, eyeing the pistols held by his two ‘passengers’.

“What is going on is that someone else than the Americans need the cargo of tungsten metal you are transporting. I promise you that nobody will get hurt if you stay reasonable and obey my orders. Now, please go sit down.”

Chavez reluctantly did so, giving at the same time a dark look at Hanna, standing a few paces away with her silenced pistol. That prompted an apologetic smile from her.

“I am sorry to have had to deceive you like this, Captain. It is nothing personal, believe me.”

“And who are you really, ‘Misses Worthington’?” asked Chavez, putting irony in his two last words.

“I am a German serving her nation, Captain. Again, relax: we wish you and your crew no harm.”

In the meantime, Hugo approached the now sweating helmsman, his pistol pointed.

“Start a very gradual turn towards the West, so that the rest of the crew won’t feel the change in heading. You will then follow the heading 260.”

“Yes, señor!”

The helmsman did as he was told, with the M.S. BUENAVENTURA soon heading away from the Chilean coast and towards the high seas. A tense silence reigned on the bridge for the next forty minutes or so, until a big, dark shape emerged from the deep in a sea of foam and bubbles, to then adopt a parallel course close on the cargo's port side. Hugo went to the engine telegraph and rang a 'Full Stop' to the engine room, then ordered the shocked helmsman to go sit down with the captain and the radioman before looking at Hanna.

"Hanna, you may now go lower the port side access ladder."

"Right away, Hauptmann!"

Walking out of the bridge and climbing down the steel stairs leading to the weather deck, Hanna then hurried to the port side access ladder, which had been winched up in stowed position before their departure from Antofagasta. She and Hugo had taken some time the day before to examine the winching mechanism of the ladder and to watch as two sailors raised and stowed it, so she knew what to do. A rubber inflatable boat had already been put in the water by the U-900, with six Brandenburg soldiers and seven sailors aboard, by the time the access ladder started coming down. It was halfway down when Spanish words screamed at her made Hanna jerk, her heart accelerating at once. Snapping her head around, she saw one of the crewmembers of the cargo ship running at her, obviously intent on stopping her from lowering the ladder. With fear gripping her as the big man charged at her, Hanna grabbed her silenced-Walther PPK pistol from her right side coat pocket and pointed it at the man, then shouting.

"HALT!"

Either because he was a brave man or either he simply believed Hanna to be incapable of shooting him, the Panamean sailor kept running at her, his face distorted by stress. Now approaching panic, Hanna pressed the trigger of her small pistol, shooting the man in his belly from a distance of nine meters. The 7.62mm Walther PPK may have been the perfect pistol for a woman, due to its small size, light weight and weak recoil, but its bullets were no man-stoppers. The sailor winced briefly with pain and hesitated for a fraction of a second, then continued his run towards Hanna. One of the Brandenburg soldiers in the approaching rubber boat saw that and, alarmed, raised and pointed his MP43 assault rifle. However, before he could fire, Hanna fired a second shot from a distance of four meters, hitting her opponent in the chest. Again, the Panamean sailor

apparently ignored the bullet impact and fell on Hanna, both of his hands aiming for her throat even though he was already dying. Taken off balance by the charge of the much bigger man, Hanna fell down on her back, the sailor on top of her. With two strong hands squeezing her throat, a desperate Hanna emptied her pistol into the man's belly. Her attacker's grip finally weakened, while the sailor's head slumped down on her chest, his eyes glazed and immobile. Nearly hysterical and pumped full of adrenaline, Hanna frantically pulled herself from under the dead man and got back up on her feet, taking some distance while staring at the sailor, hyperventilating and her empty pistol held with both hands. The first German soldier to climb the access ladder, Unteroffizier Herman Weiss, found her frozen like a statue, breathing quickly. Rolling over the dead sailor with one boot and checking him for a pulse, Weiss then straightened up and looked at Hanna, speaking in a calm tone in order to make her relax a bit.

"He is dead, Oberhelferin Blumenthal. You are now safe."

The soldier's words and sight appeared to finally take Hanna out of her trance and she acknowledged him with a nod.

"Thank you, Unteroffizier! The Hauptmann is on the bridge, with three prisoners. The rest of the crew is dispersed around the ship."

"We will take care of them now. Uh, you should reload your pistol now: it is empty."

Looking down, Hanna saw that Weiss was right. She also saw that her coat and dress were now smeared with large patches of blood.

"Mein Gott! I am covered with blood."

"That can happen in combat." replied Weiss, smiling to her. "You did well, Oberhelferin."

With his five soldiers and six armed sailors now arriving on the weather deck, Weiss then dispersed them in order to find and detain the rest of the crew, with three armed sailors going up with him to the bridge. Her knees weak and her hands shaking, Hanna needed a few seconds to change the empty magazine in her pistol for a full one. Her next move was to go sit down on top of a steel deck storage bin, where she did her best to regain her composure.

More armed sailors, supernumeraries to the normal U-900 crew who were meant to serve as prize crews for captured enemy ships, arrived aboard the BUENAVENTURA sixteen minutes later, as the crew of the cargo ship was ordered into the small officers'

mess, which had its own adjacent washroom and a small kitchen and pantry. The merchantmen were then locked up there, with the sole access to it guarded by two German soldiers. As a crew of sixteen German sailors and naval officers started running the cargo ship, more sailors went to work to transfer to the U-900 a few tons of the precious tungsten metal carried by the BUENAVENTURA. At least, if the cargo ship sank or was recaptured by the Allies, some of that tungsten would still get to Germany. That cargo transfer work was still ongoing, with the U-900 clinging to the port side of the ship's hull, when the American tanker S.S. CHARLES FINLEY showed up and sailed to a stop near the BUENAVENTURA. Ulrich von Wittgenstein, who had climbed aboard the BUENAVENTURA in order to pass a few directives to its prize crew, took hold of a bullhorn and shouted from the open bridge wing at the tanker ship.

"AHOY, CHARLES FINLEY! HOW DID THINGS GO ON YOUR SIDE?"

Franz Stein answered him from the tanker's bridge, also using a bullhorn.

"WE HAD SOME ACTION ABOARD, BUT WE HAVE FULL CONTROL NOW. TWO AMERICANS WHO TRIED SOMETHING STUPID ARE NOW DEAD."

"WE ALSO HAD SOME ACTION ON THIS SHIP: OUR GOOD OBERHELPERIN SHOT AND KILLED HER SECOND OPPONENT ON THIS MISSION."

That left Stein speechless for a second before he replied.

"TEUFFEL! MY HAT IS OFF FOR HER! COULD YOU SEND A SIZEABLE PRIZE CREW ON THIS TANKER? I WOULD ALSO NEED MEN ABLE TO MAN TWO HEAVY GUNS IN AN EMERGENCY. THAT SHIP HAS TWO FIVE INCH DECK GUNS."

"I WILL TAKE CARE OF THAT RIGHT AWAY! HOW MUCH AND WHAT KIND OF FUEL DO YOU HAVE ABOARD?"

"I HAVE 9,000 METRIC TONS OF NAVY FUEL OIL, PLUS 5,600 METRIC TONS OF DIESEL FUEL. WE ALSO CAPTURED A SET OF THE CURRENT U.S. NAVY CODES. YOU ARE WELCOME TO HAVE THEM AS WELL AS THE FUEL."

"AMERICAN NAVY CODES? HELL, I WON'T REFUSE THAT! SEE YOU IN A FEW MINUTES."

Ulrich then turned around and looked at Hugo Margraff, who was also standing on the open bridge wing.

"Hauptmann, you and Oberhelferin Blumenthal did an outstanding job. This tanker full of fuel will greatly help us complete our mission. How is Blumenthal holding after having to kill that Panamean sailor?"

"She is still a bit shaken but I believe that she will soon be over it. Up to now, I am very impressed with her."

"Good! I will make sure that she gets her proper dues once back in Germany. Well, once we will have transferred a prize crew to the tanker ship, we will be able to sail South as a group. We should be able to go around Cape Horn before the Allies realize that two of their ships are missing."

12:14 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Sunday, October 3, 1943

Electronic warfare compartment of the U-900

Sailing eastward on the surface, southwest of Cape Horn

Drake Passage, off the southern tip of the Americas

Ulrich von Wittgenstein went at once to his electronic warfare and intelligence officer, Leutnant zur See Werner Schultz, on his arrival in the large but still densely packed radio section of his submarine. An urgent call from Schultz via intercom had made him come down from the open upper bridge, where he had just finished taking a sextant measurement in order to confirm his precise position.

"So, what do you have for me?"

"Possibly something very big, Herr Kapitän. We have detected a large number of radars, all coming from the same heading and approaching us on a reciprocal course. In view of the number and types of radars, I would classify them as the radars of an American Navy task group comprising at least two large units. However, they are still quite far away and are unable yet to detect us or our two prize ships."

"And what category of warship could these two large units belong to, Werner?"

"Certainly cruiser size at the least, possibly carrier or battleship size, Herr Kapitän. If we want to avoid eventual detection, then we will need to start rerouting to the South now."

That left Ulrich with a tough dilemma. Normally, an enemy aircraft carrier or battleship would constitute a priority target for him. An enemy carrier heading towards the Pacific would be even more of a priority target, since aircraft carriers were playing such an important role in the fighting around the Pacific and since the Americans were desperately short of such carriers in the Pacific at this moment. On the other hand, his top priority was to escort the BUENAVENTURA and its precious cargo of tungsten safely

all the way to France and Lorient. If attacking that American naval group resulted in the loss of the BUENAVENTURA, then Admiral Dönitz would have his head on a platter, even if he sank a carrier. He was still thinking about his options when one of the radio operators manning the extra radio intercept and jamming equipment installed in the U-900 before their departure from Lorient made an announcement.

“Sir, I am intercepting a coded radio transmission from that suspected enemy surface group.”

That attracted at once Ulrich and Werner Schultz to his station, squeezed with another station between multiple electronic equipment racks supporting a variety of radio transceivers, direction-finding sets and radio jammers. The two officers however let the man finish writing down the intercepted message and waited until the operator had decrypted the message, using the code book found on the CHARLES FINLEY. The operator finally handed a paper note to Schultz while grinning.

“We have something really big approaching us, Herr Leutnant.”

Schultz, with Ulrich reading over his shoulder, took the note and read it, quickly straightening up on seeing the content.

“Teuffel! This is a routine position report sent by a Task Group 43.6 headed by the fleet carrier U.S.S. INTREPID. This is certainly a very juicy target, Herr Kapitän.”

“Indeed! If we were to attack that task group, do you believe that you could jam its transmissions, so that they could not send an alert message before sinking?”

“With the extra equipment that was installed in Lorient? Yes, Herr Kapitän! Washington and Hawaii would still get a radio signal, but it would be so garbled by our jamming that it would be completely unreadable, especially if it was sent in Morse code.”

“Then, be ready to do so on my command.” Said Ulrich, having taken a decision. “I will order our two prize ships to immediately turn South at top speed, in order for them to stay out of radar detection range from those American warships. As for us, we will take an ambush position and wait for that task group. There are a few icebergs floating around that will help us hide from the American radars. I will now go plot that reported position, to determine how far those Americans are and to help choose a good ambush point for us. Keep up the good work, Werner.”

“Danke, Herr Kapitän!”

16:42 (Santiago de Chile Time)**Bridge of the fleet aircraft carrier U.S.S. INTREPID (CV-11)****Sailing westward through the Drake Passage with Task Group 43.6**

The junior bridge officer who had gone out on the open starboard bridge wing of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. INTREPID returned inside the bridge after ten minutes. His temporary opening of the steel door was sufficient to send a blast of freezing air swirling inside the bridge that made its occupants shiver. Patting his frozen face with his gloved hands to regain some sensation in his cheeks, the young lieutenant apologized to the Captain, who was sitting in his command chair.

"Sorry about the cold draft, sir. The wind outside is fierce and will chill you to the bone in minutes. All the ships are maintaining formation as of now."

"No need to apologize, Lieutenant: everybody knows that the Drake Passage is about the worst expanse of sea to navigate in the World. You better go get yourself a hot cup of coffee to regain some colors."

"Thank you, sir!"

As the young officer walked out through the back door of the bridge, which led to the chart room, radio room and a few other compartments, Captain Thomas Lamison Sprague returned his eyes to the front armored windows of his command bridge. His Task Group 43.6 had been plowing westward in this rough, freezing sea for over two days now and he was going to be happy when they would finally hit some more friendly weather. Unfortunately, because of the length of the trip facing his task group, his naval formation had to go at economical cruise speed in order to save fuel. That meant that Sprague could not go faster than twelve knots, well below the top speed of his brand new aircraft carrier and only two knots faster than a typical merchant ship convoy, resulting in a long transit time through the forbidding waters of the Drake Passage, the expanse of sea between the southern tip of South America and Antarctica.

Two minutes later, the bridge signaler manning the TBS¹⁵ transceiver set spoke up.

¹⁵ TBS (Transmissions Between Ships) : VHF-band type of radio used to communicate between surface ships within a relatively short range. TBS transmissions were heavily used by the U.S. Navy during WW2.

"Captain, the GATLING is reporting more icebergs ahead, some of sizeable dimensions. Its captain counsels that we make a temporary course change of four degrees to starboard in two minutes, in order to avoid them."

"Very well! Pass to all ships: be ready to alter course by four degrees to starboard on my command."

"Yes Captain!"

"Damn icebergs!" Muttered Sprague to himself. Those giant floating ice cubes, much of which was under the surface of the sea, had been filling his long range radar screens with a multitude of large blips, while ship sonars were next to useless, their sound pulses bouncing constantly against the huge masses of underwater ice surrounding the task group.

16:44 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Electronic warfare section of the U-900

At periscope depth in ambush position behind an iceberg

Drake Passage

"Nine...ten... I confirm ten ships as part of that American task group, Herr Kapitän. We are facing the carrier INTREPID, the battleship IOWA, the light cruiser CLEVELAND, the destroyers GATLING, DORTCH, COTTEN and CLARENCE BRONSON, the attack transport VIRGO, the fleet oiler ASHTABULA and the troop transport GENERAL JOHN POPE. Thankfully for us, they are all transmitting in clear over their TBS net."

"Which is not surprising, as they think that no one is near enough from them to intercept their VHF calls." said Ulrich von Wittgenstein, standing behind his radio operator. "So, we will have to deal with four FLETCHER-Class destroyers in this battle: serious odds but nothing that we can't handle, especially if we manage to keep surprise on our side."

Ulrich then thought furiously about how he was going to conduct his attack. Surprise was the main advantage of a submarine, followed by firepower, meaning the number of torpedo launch tubes available to do the attack and the number of reload torpedoes for them. Thankfully for him, he had an unprecedented sixteen tubes at his disposal, ten of which could be reloaded, while the six others were external tubes that could only be reloaded in a port. He also had a total of 64 torpedoes inside his automated reload

carrousel, enough to create some impressive chaos and destruction. Ten targets, including two big warships that would probably need multiple hits before sinking, were going to demand some finesse on his part. However, he had learned quite a few tricks while serving under the expert hands of Otto Kretschmer.

17:02 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Bridge of destroyer U.S.S. DORTCH (DD-670)

On starboard side flank guard position of Task Group 43.6

"Bridge, this is Sonar: I thought that I just heard something from our port side. Could we reduce speed a bit so that we could conduct a proper sonar search?"

Lieutenant commander Young, the captain of the U.S.S. DORTCH, grabbed at once the microphone of his intercom system.

"Negative, Sonar! We have to keep our place in the formation. What did you hear?"

"I am not sure, sir. At this speed, and with the noise from those strong waves, it is very hard to make out anything. I may... Hold on! I may have something now... OH SHIT! TORPEDO APPROACHING!"

Those last shouted words made Young freeze for a moment with complete surprise and stupor before he could start shouting orders at his bridge crew.

"HELM, STEER HARD PORT! ENGINES TO FORWARD FULL! SOUND BATTLE STATIONS!"

As the bell of the battle station was just starting to clang around the ship, a powerful explosion made the rear half of the destroyer rise partly out of the water, sending its crewmen crumbling down on the various decks due to the force of the shock. Young was nearly ejected from his bridge command chair but somehow managed to hold on to it. At the same time, the whole ship went dark, its main power distribution system taken out. Emergency batteries then took over, but they could only supply a few emergency lights and electronic systems. Young realized at once that his ship was probably mortally wounded, something that a panicked watchman confirmed by shouting as he entered the bridge.

"SIR, OUR STERN HAS JUST BROKEN OFF!"

Young clenched his teeth on hearing that: in this kind of rough sea, this meant the death warrant of his newly-built destroyer. Furthermore, the freezing waters of the Drake

Passage would mean the quick death of any sailor who would jump into the sea. He then turned his head towards his bridge signaler.

“CONTACT THE INTREPID ON THE TBS! TELL THEM THAT WE HAVE BEEN TORPEDOED!”

“YES SIR!”

17:04 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Control room of the U-900

Submerged at periscope depth within the American formation

“Hit confirmed on the DORTCH, Herr Kapitän: we can hear sounds of hull breaking.”

“Excellent! Our ZAUNKÖNING did its work. How much time left before our other torpedoes will hit?”

“Our two torpedoes fired at the CLEVELAND should hit in any second now. Those fired at the IOWA and at the INTREPID are due to hit in fifteen seconds, Herr Kapitän.”

Ulrich nodded his head to acknowledge that information. Having slipped inside the American formation when the DORTCH was still too far to detect him, Ulrich had then adopted an ambush position on the starboard flank of the main enemy column. At a carefully calculated moment, he had launched an acoustic-seeking T5 ZAUNKÖNING guided torpedo at the DORTCH from one of his two reloadable stern tubes, then had fired a total of eight TYPE 96-D torpedoes at precise times from his bow tubes, aiming at three separate targets: the light cruiser CLEVELAND, the battleship IOWA and the aircraft carrier INTREPID. In doing so, he had used a tactic learned from Otto Kretschmer: the ‘Time on Target Salvo’. By calculating in advance the time his respective torpedoes would take to run to their targets and by firing first at the most distant targets, it was possible to arrange that all the torpedoes of a full salvo could hit at about the same time. That preserved the element of surprise until the last moment and also prevented the enemy from reacting in time to his attack.

“ONE HIT ON THE CLEVELAND, HERR KAPITÄN!”

While a bit disappointed to see that one of his torpedoes had missed its target, Ulrich consoled himself with the thought that even only one TYPE 96-D would be enough to cause severe damage to a cruiser and cripple it. The TYPE 96-D was a German

license-built model of the Japanese TYPE 96 533mm torpedo, modified with the addition of a dual contact/magnetic detonator. That dual detonator permitted the torpedo to be set to pass under a ship and to detonate beneath it when the magnetic field of the target would trigger the detonator. Allied to the devastating 550 kilo warhead of the TYPE 96, which was twice as heavy as the one equipping German-designed torpedoes, that ensured that one hit would either cripple or sink a ship of up to cruiser size. Ulrich's disappointment however evaporated when his elated hydrophone operator shouted in triumph.

"HITS ON BOTH THE IOWA AND THE INTREPID! I COUNT THREE HITS ON EACH SHIP, HERR KAPITÄN."

While happy, Ulrich knew that a lot was still left to do and he shouted a number of orders around him.

"RELOAD IMMEDIATELY ALL TUBES, SAME MIX! HELM, MAXIMUM SPEED FORWARD! GO DOWN TO DEPTH OF ONE HUNDRED METERS AND CROSS TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MAIN ENEMY COLUMN! FIRE CONTROL, BE READY TO FIRE ONE ZAUNKÖNING FROM OUR STERN TUBES AT THE U.S.S. COTTEN ONCE ON THE OTHER SIDE."

17:05 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Bridge of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. INTREPID

Captain Sprague needed a moment to recuperate from the tremendous shock felt across his whole ship from the three stupendous explosions underneath its keel. One bridge crewman had even sprained an ankle, while a few more now sported a collection of bruises. Conscious that his men needed his leadership, he then shouted orders in a firm, controlled voice.

"SIGNALER, CONTACT THE GATLING AND THE BRONSON TO START SONAR SWEEPS ALONG OUR STARBOARD FLANK. THE COTTEN IS TO TURN AROUND AND GO PROVIDE CLOSE ESCORT TO THE VIRGO, ASHTABULA AND GENERAL JOHN POPE. BRIDGE OFFICER, GET ME A DAMAGE REPORT, QUICKLY! AND SOUND BATTLE STATIONS!"

Leaving his command chair, Sprague went to one of the armored windows of his command bridge and raised his binoculars to his eyes to examine how the IOWA and the CLEVELAND were doing. He had seen huge multiple geysers of water blow

upwards from under the keels of the two warships just before his own INTREPID was hit. In his mind, only a pack of submarines could inflict so much damage in so short a time. The extreme precision of the torpedo firings and the fact that they exploded under his ships rather than against the sides of their hulls, the mark of magnetic triggers, denoted one thing in his mind: those were German torpedoes. However, those torpedoes were also proving to be much more powerful than usual German models. There was certainly a mystery there.

“SIGNALS OFFICER, SEND IMMEDIATELY TO PACFLEET HQ AND WASHINGTON NAVY HQ IN CLEAR: TASK GROUP 43.6 AMBUSHED BY SUBMARINE WOLF PACK IN DRAKE PASSAGE. FOUR SHIPS HIT. ADD ALSO OUR PRESENT POSITION.”

“IN CLEAR, SIR?” Asked the lieutenant commander, hesitant. Sprague snapped his head around to glare at him. Normally, the objection of the signals officer would have made sense, but right now Sprague wasn't sure about how long his ship would survive. Time was thus of the essence.

“YOU HEARD ME, MISTER! GET TO IT, QUICKLY!”

Thoroughly intimidated, the poor lieutenant commander ran out of the bridge through its back door, heading to the nearby radio room. Just seconds later, the bridge duty officer came to him, his expression grim.

“Sir, Damage Control reports that we have three huge holes in our hull bottom. Five main compartments, including two boiler rooms and our Number Two turbine room, flooded nearly instantly, while four more compartments have sprung major leaks. Our damage control teams are doing their best but are not optimistic.”

Sprague felt discouragement fall on him for a moment: in this rough, freezing sea, a ship sinking would mean the quick death by drowning or hypothermia of its whole crew. Right now, over 7,000 of his men were now at such a risk. He however shook himself quickly and pointed an index at his subaltern.

“Assign every man available to help the damage control parties. I want those leaks plugged!”

“Yes, Captain!” Replied the bridge officer before going to the nearest bridge telephone.

17:08 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Radio room of the M.S. BUENAVENTURA

Coasting with the CHARLES FINLEY at two knots behind an iceberg 61 kilometers south of Task Group 43.6

Hanna Blumenthal had been carefully monitoring for the last three hours the frequency used by the American task group to send its routine position report. She knew that, once the U-900 would start its attack, it may have to dive deeper than periscope depth, thus would be incapable of listening anymore to the American radio transmissions. With the consent of Hugo Margraff, she had thus taken on herself to be ready to supplement the efforts of the U-900 to jam the enemy long range transmissions. Sitting patiently in the radio room of the BUENAVENTURA and with a radio headset over her ears, she was able to catch on the start of the radio message being sent in clear by the U.S.S. INTREPID. As nearly all naval long range messages of the time, it was being sent in Morse code, which was less subject to deformation than human voice over long distances. Hanna's job in the Paris headquarters of the Abwehr had been the monitoring of such Morse code transmissions from American and British sources, so she instantly caught on to it and started at once to punch her own Morse keypad, doing it in a completely random manner while transmitting at maximum power. Those extra dots and dashes, mixed haphazardly with those sent by the INTREPID, created an incomprehensible jumble for anyone listening to the Morse message from the INTREPID, hopelessly jamming it just as the aircraft carrier was quickly running out of time to send the alert to Hawaii and Washington.

17:12 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Control room of the U-900

Now on the port flank of the American task group

"Fire Tube Ten!"

On the command of Ulrich von Wittgenstein, a T5 ZAUNKÖNING acoustic homing torpedo was ejected from one of the stern tubes of the U-900, running towards the destroyer U.S.S. COTTEN, which was dashing at speed towards the three support ships forming the tail of the task force. With the intense noise created by the machinery and

screws of the destroyer as it rushed to take position near the support ships, the T5 had no problem detecting it and homing on it. The T5, with a maximum speed of 24 knots, may have been a lot slower than the 31 knots the COTTEN was straining to do in the rough sea, but it was actually on a near reciprocal course to the destroyer. The two speeds nearly adding up, the T5 soon started running along the underside of the American warship. Its magnetic pistol detonated the 274 kilo warhead as it was passing under the forward five inch guns magazine. The whole destroyer jumped up under the force of the underwater explosion, while its bottom hull was ripped wide open like a sheet of paper punched by a fist, opening a huge hole in the thin steel hull. However, that was not the worse from the torpedo hit, as the shockwave of the explosion was transmitted to the shells stored in the forward magazine, initiating a devastating chain-reaction via sympathetic detonation among the hundreds of five inch shells and their propellant charges. The unlucky American destroyer then disintegrated in successive explosions from within, ending up with only its mangled aft section left floating for another minute before sinking.

As the T5 was running towards the COTTEN, Ulrich pointed his attack periscope towards the three support ships of the American task group, which were in the process of turning around and accelerating as fast as their machines permitted.

"Oh, you are not going to escape me, you three big boys." said Ulrich, smiling, before starting to feed target azimuth information to his second in command, Bruno Barber, who was manning the tactical plot table and torpedo fire control calculator. He chose as his first target in the group the troop transport ship U.S.S. GENERAL JOHN POPE, which was by far the fastest of the three support ships, launching two T-96D torpedoes at it. With the present short engagement range of 3,100 meters and the 51 knots maximum speed of the T-96D, the GENERAL JOHN POPE stood little chance of escaping. The attack cargo ship U.S.S. VIRGO was next to be targeted with two T-96D torpedoes, with the fleet oiler U.S.S. ASHTABULA last to have two torpedoes launched at it. As his torpedo men frantically reloaded his 533mm tubes while the six outgoing torpedoes were making their runs, Ulrich searched for the two remaining destroyers of the task group with his periscope. He soon saw them on the opposite flank of the now decimated task group, running on near reciprocal courses towards what they believed to be the probable position of his submarine while their sonars were pinging in active mode. Unfortunately for them, their sonars had a strictly limited detection range. That,

added to the 'Alberich' anti-sonar hull coating of the U-900, made the German submarine nearly undetectable by active sonar, except at very short ranges. Even though their sonars didn't pick up their expected target, the two destroyers still started throwing in desperation dozens of depth charges in the water, hoping to at least force their invisible opponent to dive deep and stop its attacks. Ulrich took that opportunity, while the two remaining destroyers of the task group were busy wasting their depth charges on the opposite flank of the main column, to speed towards the three main warships, all of which seemed gravely wounded but were still afloat. Ulrich wanted badly to make sure that such prizes could not escape by some miracle. He could have used the four massive, powerful T-93D 610mm long range torpedoes contained in his bow outer tubes, but decided to continue on using T-96D 533mm torpedoes. His six 610mm external torpedo tubes, sandwiched between his pressure hull and the upper deck casing, could only be reloaded in port. Also, his T-93D had a very long range unmatched by any of his other types of torpedoes he carried and he wished to save them for occasions when their maximum range of up to 40,000 meters at 38 knots, or 20,000 meters at 50 knots, would be truly useful. As he was speeding at twenty knots underwater towards the U.S.S. INTREPID, Ulrich started hearing a string of explosions marking hits by his torpedoes against the three American support ships of the task group.

17:23 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Bridge of the troopship U.S.S. GENERAL JOHN POPE

"NOOO! GOD NO!"

Captain George D. Lyon was near tears as his 11,500-ton converted passenger ship's list to starboard started increasing dramatically, signaling its impending capsizing. Two powerful torpedo hits had ripped wide open the thin belly of the troopship, with massive and uncontrollable flooding ensuing. While a big ship, the GENERAL JOHN POPE was not as heavily compartmented as typical warships were and its damage control arrangements were limited. The flooding had thus spread very quickly to adjacent compartments, accelerating an already alarming rate of listing, and there was nothing that Lyon could do to prevent that. Now, 5,000 men from an Army infantry regiment meant to act as reinforcements for the beleaguered defenders of Australia were going to die in the icy waters of the Drake Passage, along with Lyon and his 450 crewmen. With

a last groan of tortured steel, the U.S.S. GENERAL JOHN POPE capsized belly up in the next seconds. Lyon had time for a last thought about his wife and children before his bridge flooded with freezing seawater.

17:24 (Santiago de Chile Time)

Bridge of the destroyer U.S.S. CLARENCE K. BRONSON (DD-668)

On the starboard flank of the task group

Navy Commander William Veeder clenched his teeth together while he watched the U.S.S. GENERAL JOHN POPE capsize in the distance. The fleet oiler U.S.S. ASHTABULA, cut in two by torpedo hits, was now burning fiercely, while the U.S.S. VIRGO was sinking by the bow, a large section of which had been blown away. What made Veeder even more furious was the fact that he had left the three support ships without protection only to go chase after a ghost. The fact that he had done so on orders did little to diminish his fury. Charging to the bridge TBS transceiver set, he nearly ripped its handset from the hand of the bridge signaler and pressed its transmission switch.

"INTREPID, this is the BRONSON, over!"

He had to repeat his call twice before getting an answer.

"This is INTREPID! Go ahead, BRONSON!"

"From BRONSON, pass me Captain Sprague."

"Wait one, BRONSON!"

Veeder only had to wait a few seconds before a new voice came on the TBS set.

"This is Captain Sprague. Speak, Commander Veeder!"

"Captain, our sonar sweeps have not been able to find a single submarine on the starboard flank of the formation. Either it withdrew, or it crossed over to our port flank."

"It is quite probable that we are dealing with a whole submarine pack, as the continued enemy radio jamming from the South may indicate. I need you and the GATLING to come to me and to give some close protection to my carrier and to the IOWA and CLEVELAND. Let's try saving what can be sav..."

The voice of Captain Sprague was suddenly drowned on the radio by the noise of a powerful explosion, with the channel then becoming silent. A shocked Veeder snapped his head towards the INTREPID, some 4,500 meters away, in time to see the water from two imposing geysers falling back on the already damaged aircraft carrier. Those

additional torpedo hits proved to be too much for the unfortunate warship, with the INTREPID starting to sink at the vertical four minutes later, as the BRONSON and the GATLING were running to its help. The demoralized crews of the two destroyers then found themselves surrounded by floating debris and frozen bodies, with very few men still alive in rescue rafts. While the BRONSON stopped to retrieve those few survivors from the INTREPID, the GATLING went to post itself on the port flank of the IOWA and of the CLEVELAND. The light cruiser appeared the most seriously damaged of the two, with its screws and rudders ripped off or deformed by a torpedo hit. The immobilized warship was now rolling and pitching uncontrollably in the two-meter waves and in the eighty kilometer per hour cold winds. Realizing that his cruiser was now condemned, with no realistic hopes left of being towed to a safe port in the present conditions, the captain of the CLEVELAND decided to call the BRONSON to his help, so that he could start evacuating part of his crew to the destroyer.

The BRONSON was only 300 meters away from the CLEVELAND and was approaching it at six knots when a new wave of torpedoes struck. No less than four torpedoes struck the battleship IOWA, giving it the coup-de-grace, while the GATLING was blown in two by a torpedo exploding under its keel. As for the CLEVELAND, two torpedoes finished to break away its aft section, making it sink in less than a minute. The BRONSON received the ultimate torpedo from that last salvo, breaking in half and sinking only minutes after the IOWA and the CLEVELAND. About 200 American survivors freezing to death while either swimming or riding in rafts were then left alone in the oil-covered water, debris from their once powerful task group floating around them.

Ten minutes later, a huge dark shape emerged from under the surface, some 400 meters from the sinking point of the CLEVELAND. Ulrich von Wittgenstein, very conscious of how many men he had killed today by his actions and unwilling to let more men die now that the American warships had been destroyed, had decided to rescue the few pitiful survivors from the task group. As his radio operators recalled the BUENAVENTURA and the CHARLES FINLEY to his position, he had his helmsman cautiously steer his U-900 towards the few life rafts bobbing on the surface of the sea. Unfortunately, all the survivors who had been swimming in the water were now dead, killed by hypothermia, while a few more men in the exposed rafts were dead as well. The grim German sailors of the U-900 deck rescue team were able to save only 48

Americans still alive in the rafts, bringing them inside and down to the submarine's cafeteria, where Otto Hannig and his assistant cook, Ernst Mannerheim, hurried to serve them cups of hot coffee and bowls of steaming soup, while other submariners distributed wool blankets to the shivering Americans. However, Ulrich wasn't ready to take unnecessary risks with his captives and had six of his embarked Brandenburg Regiment soldiers closely watch the Americans.

Four hours later, the American prisoners were transferred to the CHARLES FINLEY, on which the other prisoners taken on the tanker ship and on the BUENAVENTURA had been put together in a secondary storage compartment, watched by Brandenburg soldiers. Ulrich von Wittgenstein and Hugo Margraff had been in agreement about not leaving any prisoner aboard the BUENAVENTURA, whose cargo of tungsten was too precious to risk with a possible prisoners' mutiny. With the U-900 back in the lead, the three German-controlled ships then resumed their eastward course around the Cape Horn.

CHAPTER 8 – A RARE OPPORTUNITY

14:25 (Falkland Islands Time)

Monday, October 4, 1943

Captain's suite, U-900

Navigating at schnorchel depth, 155 kilometers east of Cape Horn

Awakened from his nap by the knocks on the door of his suite, Ulrich sat up with a sigh on the edge of his bed before calling out.

"COME IN!"

His signals officer, Leutnant zur See Karl Munchausen, then entered and saluted him.

"A top priority message from Lorient, Herr Kapitän. I just finished decoding it."

"Very well! Please show it to me."

Munchausen took a few steps to cross the small office of the suite and entered the adjacent sleeping cabin to hand over a sheet of paper, which Ulrich took. A first quick reading of the message suddenly chased away his remaining fatigue.

"Thank you, Karl. Tell the other officers that I will hold a command meeting in the wardroom in half a hour."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!" replied the young signals officer while saluting. He then left, closing the door behind him. Now alone again, Ulrich reread the message, impregnating his mind with the implications of the new orders from Admiral Dönitz. While he still had to ensure that the BUENAVENTURA and its precious cargo of tungsten arrived safely in France, he was now asked to also effect a potentially risky coastal raid on the Falkland Islands, this in coordination with something that had become a rarity indeed in this war: a German naval surface action.

"Well, that will make for a nice change."

23:03 (Falkland Islands Time)

Tuesday, October 5, 1943

British submarine H.M.S. TALLY-HO

Patrolling on the surface 83 kilometers southeast of Port Stanley

"Five months, five months of patrolling around that freezing shit hole! We couldn't possibly have drawn a worst assignment than this!"

Seaman Second Class Harvey Belthram, on topsail watch duty with Seaman First Class William O'Rourke, gave a dubious glance at his whiny comrade. O'Rourke always had to complain about something, which made him a rather annoying watch partner.

"Look, Bill: here we at least get full rations, thanks to the Americans' logistical support for the refueling station in Port Stanley, rather than the near starvation diets our mates in England have to live on. So, quit whining and concentrate instead on watching."

"Careful, mate: I am senior in rank to you." replied O'Rourke, a bit of threat in his voice. He however only managed to attract a look of near contempt on the face of Belthram, but didn't see it due to the dark night around them.

"Actually, I still wonder why you have not been busted down yet, with all your perpetual whining."

"Now, wait, you little..."

"CUT THE BULLSHIT, O'ROURKE, AND GET BACK TO WATCHING BEFORE I FIT MY BOOT UP YOUR ARSE!"

The harsh voice of Chief Petty Officer Second Class Peter Martin, the senior non-commissioned man on the H.M.S. TALLY-HO, made both O'Rourke and Belthram jerk with surprise. The two sailors then promptly concentrated back on scanning the horizon with their binoculars. Martin checked them for a moment, then looked himself around as he stood in the tiny open bridge situated on top of the submarine's sail. The sea was rough, as usual in this part of the South Atlantic, and the winds were both fierce and icy, making for miserable conditions for the men doing top watch duty. With this kind of sea and with the low height of their radar mast, the detection range of their centimetric wavelength radar was limited to only a dozen miles or so, less in the case of enemy submarines. As for the sonar and hydrophones used by the TALLY-HO, their already limited range was further cut by the noise from the high waves on the surface. It was thus a necessity to also maintain a visual watch while on the surface. Martin mentally reflected with envy at the capacity of the vaunted and feared new German submarines to stay submerged for hours and days and to quietly listen to their hydrophones while avoiding the bumpy, sickening ride of surface navigation. Those new German submarines, starting with the infamous U-800, were in fact the main reason the TALLY-HO was stuck patrolling the seas around the Falkland Islands in the company of another

submarine and of five minesweepers and frigates. The raid on Port Stanley a year ago by the U-800, apart from costing more than two dozen ships, had awakened a lot of admirals in Washington and London as to how both truly vital and vulnerable the Falklands were following the destruction of the Pacific-side locks of the Panama Canal. That disaster had forced all the maritime traffic between the Atlantic and the Pacific to go all the way around the Cape Horn, a detour many ships were unable to do without at least one refueling stop on the way. Still, what O'Rourke had said was basically correct: Port Stanley was indeed a freezing shit hole!

Martin was about to call up two replacements for the shivering watchmen when a powerful underwater explosion under the twin propellers of the submarine made its whole aft section jump out of the water. Both Belthram and O'Rourke, who had been standing in open baskets fixed to the base of the search periscope housing, were literally ejected from their baskets, screaming. Belthram, who had secured his safety line to the railing of his basket, ended up swinging at the end of his line, bumping repeatedly against the steel plates of the sail. O'Rourke, who had neglected to secure his own safety line, was thrown clear in the dark, icy waters. Martin, who had one hand gripping the handle of the armored access hatch and was about to shout down the steel tube, barely managed to hold on and avoid O'Rourke's fate. That was however little consolation for him, as the TALLY-HO had its stern section blown open to the sea by the T5 ZAUNKÖNING acoustic homing torpedo launched from its rear sector by the U-900. With its engine room flooding completely in mere seconds, power went out as men desperately scrambled to get to the apparent safety of the forward compartments. The captain of the submarine then faced a horrible dilemma: to let time to his mechanics to evacuate the engine room, thus risking to flood the whole submarine through the open engine room access hatch, or to close that hatch and condemn those men to death by drowning. He finally decided to try saving his submarine first and ordered the engine room hatch closed. However, that gained him only seconds, as the weight of the water filling the engine room quickly dragged the TALLY-HO under the surface. The captain's ultimate order to abandon ship came too late to save his crew. Only two men, Martin and Belthram, were able to swim away from their sinking boat, only to die from hypothermia within fifteen minutes.

In the control room of the U-900, Ulrich von Wittgenstein detached his eyes from the attack periscope and slowly lowered his head, realizing full well to what kind of death he had just sent over sixty British sailors. Also, this had felt like a simple execution to him, not a battle. That British submarine had stood next to no chances against his U-900. Simply said, his submarine was overwhelmingly superior to all the Allied submarines presently in service in terms of underwater speed, endurance and sensors. The U-900's towed array sonar had detected the British submarine from over sixty kilometers away, allowing Ulrich to make a wide hooking maneuver and then place himself in the rear quadrant of the British boat, where its own propeller noise all but masked other noises to the limited performance sonar equipping the T-Class boat. Then, Ulrich had approached at periscope depth, going upstream of the propeller wake of the British submarine, until he had been close enough to launch a single T5 acoustic homing torpedo, whose electric motor made it difficult to hear. The crewmen in the control room of the U-900 were also sober and were not cheering this latest victory. Ulrich took a moment to regain his composure and issue fresh orders around him.

"Helm, turn to Heading 320, make speed ten knots. Stay at periscope depth and on batteries. Forward torpedo room, reload Tube Two with a fresh T5. The commando team is to start preparing for a night coastal insertion."

02:10 (Falkland Islands Time)

Wednesday, October 6, 1943

Shores of Rookers Bay, south of Port Stanley Airfield

East Falkland Island

The fourteen dark silhouettes wearing German Army camouflaged uniforms and steel helmets, barely visible even from up close in the half-moon night, moved like silent ghosts as they carried their two inflatable rubber boats across the pebble and sand beach and up the rocky slopes of Rookers Bay, situated on the south shore of the peninsula on which Port Stanley Airfield was located. A thick fog had facilitated the approach of the U-900, which had hugged the coast as much as it was safe to do without grounding itself. Leaving the submarine some kilometers short of Rookers Bay and using at first the small outboard motors of their assault boats, Hugo Margraff and his thirteen commandos had sailed up to Rookers Bay while following closely the shoreline, shutting down their engines a few hundred meters short of the beach and using paddles

for the last part of the trip. Contrary to their previous land raid on Port Stanley, made over a year ago from the U-800, Hugo and his men were loaded down with backpacks full of ammunition, rations and water, while more supplies were inside their boats: this was going to be an extended raid, not just a short infiltration. Hugo wished that he could have brought all of his men with him, but five of them had to stay on the CHARLES FINLEY, now heading with the BUENAVENTURA towards the distant, mostly uninhabited South Georgia Island, in order to watch over the more than seventy prisoners being held in a storage hold of the tanker ship. However, Hugo had compensated that partly by having his team carry two MG42 medium machine guns, two Japanese-made TYPE 89 50mm light mortars and plenty of ammunition and explosives, including a few land mines. As a result, his men were much more heavily loaded than usual, but Hugo fully counted on getting rid quickly of much of that ammunition and explosives...in a useful way. First, though, he had to hide his two assault boats before starting to approach his first target, the airfield.

Hugo soon decided to use a clump of bushes surrounded by long grass, situated just off the beach, to hide his boats. His men used the camouflage nets that had been carried in the boat along crates of ammunition, explosives and food and quickly covered the two boats, which had been turned bottom up, adding some long blade grass to finish camouflaging them. Once that was done, Hugo assembled his men around him for a quick briefing.

"Alright, you all know what our mission and our objectives are. Again, our first priority target is the airfield and its aircraft. We need to take out those planes in order to neutralize the air threat to the U-900 and to our incoming ships. Once close enough to the airfield, we will take some time to observe it, so that we can finalize our attack plan. We will try as much as possible to operate covertly and to sabotage silently those planes but, if discovered, don't hesitate to use your weapons. Questions?"

When nobody spoke, Hugo got up and quickly took a compass bearing with the help of his map, then started walking north, his men following in single file, all their senses on alert.

A mere two minutes later, the German raiding group crossed the single road linking the airfield with the town of Stanley. Looking up and down the gravel road, Hugo decided to bury four anti-tank mines in it, a job that took only a few minutes. He then

continued on along the treeless, desolate and cold landscape, whose mostly flat features were swept constantly by a frosty wind. After another five minutes of walking at a crouch, the raiding party arrived at the foot of a small hill close to the airfield. Hugo climbed with Feldwebel Franz Stein the gentle slope of the hill, which rose barely ten meters above the surrounding grounds, and approached its crest at a crouch, finally lying down on his belly once he had the airfield in sight. Using his binoculars, he carefully examined the buildings of the airfield and the long row of planes parked alongside the single runway, which seemed to have been surfaced with American-produced 'Marston Matting', holed steel plates made to be assembled side by side to form large, solid surfaces on the ground.

"I count eight B-24 LIBERATOR heavy bombers, probably maritime patrol variants with radar, plus fourteen Bristol BEAUFIGHTERS fighter-bombers. Such a group of aircraft could indeed give a lot of trouble to the U-900 and to our incoming surface ships, if not destroyed on the ground. I also see a radar antenna atop a lattice mast beside the airfield's control tower building. As well, there are two large wooden hangars and a double row of Quonset Huts¹⁶. I can't seem to be able to find the fuel and ammunition dumps, though."

"I think that I found them, Herr Hauptmann." said Stein after a few seconds. "I see multiple piles of barrels near the eastern end of the runway, while there are a number of earthen scrapes that were dug on the opposite side."

"Ah, yes! I see them now. Thanks! Now, let's find the defenses of this airfield... Aaah, thank you for smoking on duty at night, Mister Allied soldier: I have a sandbagged position beside the airfield's entrance, probably an access control point."

"I count four...no, six Bofors 40mm single antiaircraft guns in sandbagged revetments along the sides of the runway: three on this side and three more on the opposite side." added Stein, making Hugo nod.

"A fair amount of antiaircraft protection, but a bit weak on the land defense side." replied Hugo. "However, there should be some coastal defense guns around to defend against surfaced submarines and ships. Where are they?"

¹⁶ Quonset Hut : Prefabricated building made of metal sheeting and having the form of a barrel cut in half along its long axis. Used extensively by Allied forces when building new bases during WW2.

"My bet is that they would be close to Cape Pembroke, to the East of the airfield, where they could have wide arcs of fire over the ocean, Herr Hauptmann."

"A very logical assumption, Feldwebel. They will however be our third priority, after the parked aircraft and the fuel and ammunition dumps. Here is what I propose that we do..."

05:30 (Falkland Islands Time)

Living quarters lines, Port Stanley Airfield

Flight Lieutenant Philip Robertson, the meteorologist specialist assigned to Port Stanley Airfield had set his alarm clock for 05:15 as per his usual routine: he had to wake earlier than the flight crews, so that he could review the latest meteorological data available before they took off on their patrol missions. He was only half dressed and was brushing his teeth in the Quonset Hut used by the R.A.F. support arm officers living and working at the airfield when a series of loud explosions started reverberating outside his hut, making him jerk in shock and surprise. Quickly rinsing his mouth, Robertson then rushed to the nearest window to look outside as the other seven officers occupying the hut woke up with grumbles and exclamations. What he saw made blood rush to his brain.

"Dear God! Our aircraft are exploding one after another!"

"But, how?" started saying a younger officer, who acted as assistant aircraft maintenance officer.

"How? Sabotage, of course! You think that those planes could just explode like that by themselves, at about the same time?" replied Robertson, sarcastic. He then quickly finished putting on his uniform, adding a thick wool greatcoat before rushing outside through the front door. He did only three steps before he put his foot on top of the initiating plunger of a German S-MINEN bounding anti-personnel mine. The warhead canister of the mine, filled with explosives and steel shrapnel, jumped out of the ground and exploded at chest level, killing instantly Robertson and gravely wounding two other officers who were following him outside. More than a dozen other R.A.F. men inside the hut lines were either killed or seriously wounded by other 'S' mines before the British understood what was going on and became more cautious. When they manage to come out and look around, they found all the parked planes destroyed, apparently by explosive charges placed inside them. The fuel dump was a raging inferno, while the

ammunition dump was now providing a spectacular and very loud fireworks show, projecting high in the air unexploded ordnance items that then landed all around the airfield. The lattice mast that had been supporting the antenna assembly of the airfield's surveillance radar was also decapitated, with the radar antenna now resting as a deformed mass at the feet of the mast. Group Captain Charles Endicott, who commanded the airfield, swore violently to himself on seeing all that mayhem and ran to the radio hut, intent on sending a warning message out. However, when he pushed the door of the radio hut open, he unknowingly pulled out the pin of a hidden incendiary charge. Endicott was extremely lucky then, as he didn't receive any burning white phosphorus particle from the bursting charge. He barely had time to see in a flash the dead bodies of the two night shift radio operators, sprawled on the floor of their hut, before he hurriedly closed back the door. What he didn't see at that time was that the radio transceivers and radio beacon emitter installed inside the hut had already been smashed with steel bars. The ensuing fire that engulfed the radio hut also hid to him the fact that both the Royal Navy and R.A.F. code books that had been kept inside were now missing, along with a stack of classified messages either sent or received during the last month.

Back at the location where they had hidden their assault boats near the coast of Rookers Bay, Hugo and his men grinned while watching the series of explosions and fires ravaging the airfield.

"Nice! Really nice!" said to himself Hugo before looking at his thirteen soldiers. "Okay, men: time to hide and catch some sleep. We will resume our activities after sunset. Haussmann and Spritzer, you take the first watch duty."

The Germans then slipped under their two overturned rubber boats, which had been raised off the ground by putting them on top of rocks before being camouflaged. With these rain-proof shelters over their heads and with cut squares of grass and earth patches laid around the sides to both camouflage the boats and cut out the wind, the Brandenburg men quickly went to sleep, bundled tightly together under their wool blankets to keep warm. They were awakened some twenty minutes later, when two trucks full of British soldiers coming from Port Stanley and rushing towards the airfield along the single road leading to it blew up on the anti-tank mines laid earlier on. However, on seeing that the surviving British then simply withdrew on foot with their

wounded men, going back to Port Stanley without initiating any sweep, Hugo ordered his men back to sleep.

07:58 (Falkland Islands Time)

Command center of British Garrison, Falkland Islands

Government House, Port Stanley, East Falkland Island

“What do you mean, the TALLY-HO and TANTALUS are not answering our calls?”

The young Royal Navy lieutenant did his best not to show on his face what he thought about that question. Commodore Arthur Duncastle, who commanded the Falkland Islands garrison, could be described as ‘not the swiftest thinker in the lot’ and probably owed his present rank more to family relations than to simple merit. In fact, that was probably the reason why he had been posted to the Falkland Islands, the reasoning being that he could not do much damage there. Unfortunately, Lieutenant William Meacham was the one now stuck with an obtuse commander.

“Just what I said, sir: both of our submarines have failed to answer our latest calls, made half a hour ago. We are presently contacting our five surface ships patrolling in and around Port Stanley and got answers from the HMS SWALE, ROWENA, HOUND and HYDRA. We are however still waiting for an answer from the frigate HMS SPEY. I strongly suspect that one or more German submarines are roaming around and have landed sabotage teams, sir.”

“And I suppose that you deduced that with the help of your vast experience, Lieutenant?” replied Duncastle in a sarcastic tone. Meacham then had a strong urge to knock out that pompous ass, but managed to restrain himself.

“No, sir! I simply used the facts at hand, sir.”

“Alright, return to your watch, Lieutenant. I will have a priority message for you to send in a few minutes.”

“Yes sir!”

As Meacham returned to the radio room, Duncastle pivoted to face back his land and air component commanders, Major Sweeney and Group Captain Endicott.

“So, resume again for my benefit what you know, gentlemen. You first, Group Captain!”

"Well, sir, I am pained to have to tell you that all our planes were destroyed on the ground by explosive charges connected to timers, which blew up nearly simultaneously at about 05:30. Also blown up were our aviation fuel dump and our aircraft ammunition dump, which contained bombs, aerial depth charges and rockets. The men manning the two Bofors guns nearest to the dumps were found dead, their throats cut and their guns sabotaged. Anti-personnel mines had also been sown near the entrance doors of our barracks and we lost a number of our men because of them. Our radar and radio huts were destroyed as well and I am now blind and deaf. My total casualties at the airfield are 21 dead and eleven wounded. Whoever did all this proved itself to be very dangerous and professional, sir."

Major Adam Sweeney then took the relay from Endicott.

"Those Germans were indeed pros, sir: they seem to have disappeared completely, despite the lack of natural cover on the island. They thus may have already returned to their submarine, especially since they did such a good job at neutralizing our air component. However, they had time to also plant four anti-tank mines on the airport road, which blew up the two trucks full of troops I had sent to help the airfield's garrison. I lost nearly half of my available infantrymen to those mines."

"And what about our coastal defense guns? Have they been attacked too?"

"No, sir!"

Duncastle took a minute or so to digest all that information and take a decision, nearly making his subaltern officers squirm with impatience.

"Alright, I will send a message to advise London that at least one German submarine is roaming the waters around Port Stanley and that it landed a team of saboteurs. We will then have to see if London or the Americans can send us replacement planes and men. You are dismissed, gentlemen."

Sweeney and Endicott, who had expected to get some orders or directives from Duncastle about what they would do next, were left dumbfounded when the old commodore pivoted around and went to his private office, leaving them standing next to the map table sitting in the middle of the operations room.

08:16 (Falkland Islands Time)

Open bridge of U-900, 74 nautical miles north of Port Stanley

South Atlantic

Ulrich von Wittgenstein watched closely from atop the sail of the U-900, which was immobile on the surface with his big twin 12.7 centimeter deck gun manned and pointed, as the six meter long boat carrying ten armed sailors was about to reach the big American tanker ship he had just forced to stop. Those ten armed sailors were in fact the last available ones from the group of boarding party men that had come aboard in Lorient. The others were already gone, manning the CHARLES FINLEY and the BUENAVENTURA, which were still on their way to the South Georgia Islands, where they were to hide until the U-900 could rejoin them. After this, Ulrich was going to have to start depleting his own regular crew if he wanted to put more prize crews on captured ships. One other ship captured by him earlier in the morning, after he had sunk the British frigate HMS SPEY, did not need a prize crew, as it was an ammunition ship that Ulrich had no interest in bringing to Lorient. That ship had been abandoned after its sea cocks had been opened wide, starting a gradual flooding that would ultimately sink it. A call on the bridge intercom from the control room then made Ulrich switch his attention away from the S.S. ESSO GALVESTON and grab the intercom's handset.

"Yes?"

"Herr Kapitän, our radar is showing three large ships approaching fast from the Northeast, sailing in close formation. Distance is 55 nautical miles and closing, coming from Heading 040. We are also detecting their radar emissions."

Ulrich stiffened on hearing those words: these had to be warships, possibly cruisers or even battleships. The big question now was: who did they belong to?

"Can you identify the radar types by their emissions?"

The tone of his watch officer then changed, nearly becoming exuberant.

"Yes, Herr Kapitän! They are German, types FuMO 26 and FuMO 23!"

Ulrich relaxed at once then.

"Thank God! That must be the surface action group announced two days ago by Admiral Dönitz. I am curious to see which of our big combatants have been sent. As soon as our men will have control of that tanker ship, we will send it on its way to the South Georgia Islands, then will wait for those German warships, so that we could then coordinate our future actions together."

About three hours later, with the American tanker ESSO GALVESTON on its way to South Georgia Islands with its cargo of 7,800 tons of aviation gasoline, Ulrich was able to see the distant silhouettes of three approaching ships on the Northeast horizon.

His heart jumped in his chest and he shouted with joy when he was able to identify them visually.

“THE TIRPITZ, SCHARNHORST AND GNEISENAU! THEY SENT OUR THREE MOST POWERFUL WARSHIPS TO THE FALKLAND ISLANDS!”

He then passed by intercom the good news about the battleship and two battlecruisers to the rest of his boat, causing loud cheers from his crewmen. Up to now, the submarine arm of the Kriegsmarine had felt like it was bearing alone the brunt of the German naval warfare effort, with the big and costly surface warships of the Kriegsmarine too often staying in port for various reasons. Many submariners had even hinted that Kriegsmarine admirals of the surface fleet, starting with Grossadmiral Raeder, were scared of the British Royal Navy and didn't want to risk their precious big ships at sea.

A few minutes later, Ulrich saw the battleship TIRPITZ launch one of its four reconnaissance floatplanes, which then flew south, towards Port Stanley. That brought a couple of misgivings in his mind, the biggest one being that the British would know that German surface warships were approaching as soon as they spotted the Arado 196. On the other hand, Ulrich could not fault the German squadron commander for being cautious and wanting to know what to expect in and around Port Stanley. Hopefully, his landed commando team would have by now dealt already with any enemy fighter planes based at Port Stanley Airfield. If not, that poor floatplane could get a rough reception. As the surface squadron continued approaching, Ulrich ordered his six meter long boat to be readied to carry him to the TIRPITZ. His sailors thus reopened the top panels covering the floodable dock that contained the long boat and turned back on its keel the small craft, then fitted its outboard engine, which was normally stored inside a pressure-proof steel vessel connected to the dock. Eleven minutes later, Ulrich was leaving his submarine in the long boat, with two sailors to man the small craft.

12:44 (Falkland Islands Time)

Forward starboard access ladder of the battleship K.M.S. TIRPITZ

Dead stopped 76 nautical miles north of Port Stanley

Ulrich came to attention and saluted as soon as he stepped on the weather deck of the TIRPITZ: a full admiral was waiting for him, along with a navy captain.

“Permission to come aboard, sir!”

"Permission granted!" replied the commanding officer of the battleship. "I am Kapitän Hans Meyer, captain of the TIRPITZ, and this is Admiral Wilhelm Marschall, commander of our flotilla."

"Korvettenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein, commander of the U-900. I must say that I am happy to see such a powerful German force here: me and my commandos have started working on the defenses of Port Stanley, but there is still much to be done...and lots to be looted."

"What do you mean, Korvettenkapitän?" asked Marschall, a tough-looking man in his late fifties. Ulrich acknowledged his question with a nod: Marschall was known as an aggressive commander and a competent naval tactician who, as commander of the battlecruisers SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU, had sunk the British aircraft carrier GLORIOUS in 1940, during the Norway Campaign. He was thus a commander that Ulrich could truly respect.

"I mean that there are sizeable reserves of both fuel oil and diesel fuel in Port Stanley, which has been transformed into a midpoint refueling station by the Americans and the British, plus seven merchant and navy cargo ships and tankers anchored there, Herr Admiral. If we could threaten enough the British there to surrender without scuttling their ships and sabotaging their installations, we could then collect some very useful prizes there. As part of my original mission, I already captured three ships, one of which carries tungsten metal products, along with other strategic metals. The two others are tankers that were targets of opportunity. I sent all three on their way to the South Georgia Islands for their safety, while I was landing a commando team near Port Stanley and sank some of the ships defending it."

"You have done well, Herr von Wittgenstein." said Marschall, looking pleased. "But let's go up to my flag operations room, where you will be able to brief us all in full about your mission."

"With pleasure, Herr Admiral."

With Captain Meyer in the lead, the trio went to a nearby steel hatch and walked inside the forward superstructures block of the battleships, then started climbing a series of steep steel ladders. By the time that they had climbed six levels, Ulrich was starting to breathe quicker.

"Please excuse my lack of fitness, Herr Admiral: there isn't much space available on my submarine to do fitness exercises or running."

Marschall grinned at that, genuinely amused, and patted him on the back.

“That is most understandable, Korvettenkapitän. I am sure that, in your place, I would die of claustrophobia aboard your U-900.”

“Actually, Herr Admiral, you could be surprised at how relatively roomy my submarine is.”

“And I will certainly want to visit your submarine...when time will allow. Well, here we are, at my chart house cum operations center. Let’s take place around that table with a chart of the Falkland Islands on it, then you will be able to brief us on your mission so far.”

Going to the side of the chart table pointed by Marschall, Ulrich then took seven minutes to brief him and Meyer on his mission to date, concentrating mostly on his actions around Port Stanley. At the end, Marschall nodded his head slowly, obviously impressed.

“Two British frigates and two submarines sunk, plus your commandos destroying on the ground all the planes at Port Stanley Airfield? Well done indeed! Our reconnaissance floatplane should be returning soon from its overflight of Port Stanley, then we will have a precise picture of the place. If there are indeed large quantities of fuel stored in Port Stanley, I will certainly do my best so that we could grab them intact. Do you think that your commandos could discretely secure those reserves, to prevent the British from blowing them up when we will show up?”

“I am sure that these men will be able to do so, Herr Admiral: they are the best, literally.” answered Ulrich without hesitation. “They are presently in hiding during the daylight hours, since there is so little ground cover available around Port Stanley, but are due to attack and take out the suspected British coastal defense guns around Cape Pembroke tonight. I can contact them by radio, so that they could then find the fuel storage tanks in Stanley after taking out the coastal guns.”

“That would be perfect. Could you also call your three prize ships and make them turn back? Tomorrow, after we do our attack on Port Stanley, I intend for you to leave for Lorient with your prize ships: that cargo of tungsten is too precious to be either risked or delayed.”

“But, wouldn’t you need my U-900 to act as anti-submarine screen for you, Herr Admiral? You don’t have any destroyers with you and the Americans are liable to send a strong counter-attack force to the Falklands, including fleet submarines, once they learn that you are here.”

An enigmatic smile then appeared on Marschall's face.

"Aaaaah, but I already have better than destroyers, my dear Wittgenstein: I have three Type XXI submarines already in position to the North of the Falkland Islands, forming a submarine barrier and detection line in prevision of enemy reactions to our raid."

"Oh! Which ones, Herr Admiral?"

"The U-913, U-914 and U-915, commanded respectively by Korvettenkapitän Ulrich Heyse, Korvettenkapitän Carl Emmermann and Kapitänleutnant Klaus Bargsten, three confirmed submarine ace commanders. With such deadly boats to watch my back, I fully expect to be able to gain and keep the initiative in the Southwest Atlantic." Ulrich was left stunned for a moment, only now realizing how ambitious the Kriegsmarine's plan actually was.

"You are going to make a stand in the South Atlantic and fight off enemy attempts to retake the Falkland Islands, Herr Admiral?"

"Yes! With the Panama Canal still under repair for many more months, all the American supplies sent to the Pacific from the Atlantic coast must go around the Cape Horn. That trip is so long that most ships cannot make it to Australia without at least one refueling on the way. Yes, part of the supplies for the Pacific Front can be shipped via American ports on their West Coast, but not all. Especially, most of the fuel comes from the Caribbean Basin and the American South Coast and has to go around the Cape Horn. By holding on to the Falkland Islands, we will choke in a major way the American supply lines to the Pacific. As well, we will prevent any attempts by the British to get reinforcements from Australia and New Zealand. On top of that, we will be able to stop and seize the tanker ships and cargo ships trying to pass by the Falklands and then send them to Germany. The past actions of the late U-800 has convinced many in the Kriegsmarine that such seizure and rerouting of enemy shipping could be a good way to alleviate some of the shortages we have in Germany."

"Wow! Grossadmiral Raeder has conceived quite a bold operation with this."

Ulrich was then surprised to see Marschall shake his head at his last sentence.

"Not Grossadmiral Raeder, but Grossadmiral Dönitz. Grossadmiral Raeder was relieved of command by the Führer when he resisted the idea of sending our three most powerful warships to the South Atlantic. Grossadmiral Dönitz is now the commander of the whole Kriegsmarine and he is the one who selected me to lead this force into the South Atlantic."

Ulrich nodded slowly his head at that, understanding what could have happened. Instead of congratulating Marschall in 1940 for sinking the British carrier GLORIOUS, Raeder had reprimanded him for disobeying his orders about not to put at risk the SCHARNHORST and the GNEISENAU and had then sidelined him. Since then, Raeder had further shown on a number of occasions how risk averse he was with his big surface combatants, while being too willing to let the submarine arm do most of the work at sea. In truth, Ulrich was happy to hear about Raeder's demise. Maybe now the Kriegsmarine as a whole would act a lot more boldly with such a commander as Dönitz at its head. Opening the leather briefcase he had been carrying by a strap slung across his chest, Ulrich took out a booklet and presented it to Marschall.

"Then, Admiral, I believe that this will seriously help you in your task: it is a current copy of the American Navy code, found on the American tanker CHARLES FINLEY, which we grabbed as a prize ship off the Chilean port of Antofagasta. That tanker was in fact heading to Port Stanley, where it was to replenish the fuel reserves kept there for passing ships."

Marschall took the booklet and examined it with a near reverend expression, as if it was some kind of religious relic. He then broke into a grin as he looked back at Ulrich.

"Herr Korvettenkapitän von Wittgenstein, you just made my day. Be assured that my radio intercept services will make full use of this. I will however have photos made of each page right away, so that you could bring a copy of this code book to Germany. You will get those photocopies before you depart tomorrow."

At that moment, a young naval officer showed up and saluted upon entering the chart room.

"Herr Admiral, our reconnaissance floatplane has just returned and is being winched back aboard. It sustained some light damage from British anti-aircraft fire but its crew is unhurt."

"Excellent! Have those two aviators sent here with their maps and camera films as soon as they are aboard."

Marschall then smiled to Ulrich as the naval officer walked out.

"Well, we will soon have more information about our mutual target. Then, I will be able to give you more definite orders for your submarine and your commandos."

20:35 (Falkland Islands Time)

Cape Pembroke, East Falkland Island

Having moved at first in two parallel columns and advancing cautiously at a crouch through the high grass of the treeless peninsula, Hugo Margraff signaled his men to go on all fours as the first British coastal guns appeared in the half-moon night. Taking five minutes to advance silently a further hundred meters, Hugo then made his men stop and lie down in the grass while he grabbed his binoculars. In this case, he was using them because they improved his night vision by collecting more light through its wide lenses, not because of their optical magnification. Sweeping slowly his surroundings with his binoculars, Hugo was able to locate a total of six large guns mounted on four-wheel carriages. The guns were grouped in three widely dispersed pairs along a North-South line, with about fifty meters between pairs and twenty meters between guns of each pair. Some distance behind the guns were a number of parked and camouflaged British Army heavy trucks, which were probably used to tow the guns when needed or to carry ammunition. Near behind each pair of gun, Hugo saw the top half of a dugout shelter, its roof covered with earth and grass and with a vertical pipe sticking out that let out some smoke.

"Hmm, a gun crew shelter with a stove." Whispered Hugo to himself before resuming his visual sweep, looking for sentries. He actually was able to locate only two British soldiers in the open, both standing in a shallow trench supplemented to its front by a low wall of sandbags and rocks. One soldier was manning an artillery optical rangefinder mounted on a tripod, while the other soldier scanned the sea around Cape Pembroke with a pair of binoculars. Both soldiers kept looking outward and never turned around to inspect their rear area, something that pleased Hugo: while being poor watch routine, that was going to make it a lot easier for him and his men to sneak up on these British soldiers. Concentrating his attention on one of the big guns resting on its lowered carriage, Hugo quickly identified the piece, which was covered by a turret-like shelter structure that rotated with the gun.

'A QF Mark II 4.5 inch heavy anti-aircraft gun, a weapon used frequently by the British as a coastal defense gun. We will definitely have to take these guns out.'

Quickly making up a plan in his head, Hugo then signaled Feldwebel Franz Stein, his second-in-command, to join him. Stein did so on his knees and hands, careful not to make any noise that would alert the British soldiers presently on watch duty. Once Stein stopped next to him, Hugo whispered to him.

"I can see only two soldiers on watch outside, in a trench situated between the two guns of the nearest pair. There is also a dugout shelter behind the guns, where the rest of the gun crew must be resting and warming up. The two other pairs of guns probably have the same kind of setup, with trucks camouflaged some distance behind the guns."

"Do we go the silent way or do we raise a raucous, Herr Hauptmann?"

"Normally, we would go the silent way, but a good raucous could actually help us for the second part of our mission tonight. We will split in three groups, with each group assigned to eliminate a pair of guns. Drücker will lead the third group. Our men will take position so that they could shoot from close range the sentries and also throw grenades inside the dugout shelters. Fighting will start when I will fire the first shot. Once all the British are taken out, we will sabotage the guns, so that they cannot be used afterwards. I will give ourselves half a hour to split and crawl quietly to each gun pair. We start moving now."

"Understood!"

Splitting the team in three groups of four to five men each took one minute. Then the Brandenburg men started crawling towards their respective objectives. Hugo personally led four of his men, including his signaler and radioman, Obergefreiter Hellmuth Golding, towards the central pair of guns. All that time, the British soldiers on watch never looked anywhere but outwards, at the sea around Cape Pembroke. Hugo concluded that the British probably assumed that he and his men had already returned to the U-900, which would explain their lack of precautions against land intruders. With that and the howling cold wind helping his covert approach, Hugo was able to get to one of the guns of the central pair, where he hid with one man behind the mass of the gun. His three other men in turn positioned themselves on each side of the door of the dugout, ready to throw grenades inside. With only fifteen meters between him and the two British sentries and with the light of the half-moon helping his aim, Hugo waited for the assigned half hour to be past, then patted gently the shoulder of Gefreiter Paul Langsdorf.

"Get ready to shoot the man to the right. I will take the man to the left. On the count of three, one, two, three!"

They fired their MP43 assault rifles nearly simultaneously, downing both British standing in the observation trench. Hugo's three men posted around the dugout then abruptly

opened its door and threw inside two primed German stick grenades, then closed back the door, with one of the commandos lying on the ground in front of it and using his feet to block the door. The noise from the double explosions was partly muffled but was still quite audible. As soon as the grenades had exploded, one German opened the door again, with another German then emptying his MP43 in full automatic mode inside the dugout to make sure that all the British soldiers were down. That ruthless treatment proved successful, with all but two of the eleven British soldiers inside killed outright, leaving two men gravely wounded. Anxiously looking to his left, then his right, Hugo saw that his other men had also started their attacks. The firings and explosions however stopped after only a few seconds, a sign that the German attacks had achieved surprise and had eliminated quickly all the British gunners. Not wasting time, Hugo pointed the trucks parked nearby to two of his men.

"Heinemann, Stupnagel, put on British overcoats and steel helmets and get two of those trucks started. The others will help you take off the camouflage nets covering them."

As his two men started running towards the trucks, Hugo activated his handheld VHF radio and called his two other groups.

"All strikers are to spike the guns before assembling at the central pair. Execute!"

Preaching by example, Hugo ran to one of the two 4.5 inch guns nearby and, using its elevation mechanism, raise its long barrel up by fifteen degrees. Opening the heavy breechblock of the gun, he nodded to Paul Langsdorf.

"Prime a thermite grenade and throw it up the tube, but not too strongly."

"Understood, Herr Hauptmann."

The commando took a grenade out of one pocket and pulled its safety pin, then threw the grenade through the open breechblock, with Hugo immediately closing it back afterwards. Five seconds later, the grenade burst, with the thermite mixture starting to burn at very high temperatures against the inside of the gun chamber. The steel of the gun breechblock and barrel soon started to soften and melt, welding the two parts together and rendering the whole gun impossible to use. While the first grenade was still burning inside its gun, Hugo and his soldier ran to the second gun, where they repeated the process.

With both guns now sabotaged, Hugo ran to the two trucks being prepared by his men and helped them pull away the large camouflage nets covering them. A couple of minutes later, the rest of his men arrived, having finished their job at the other two pairs of guns. Hugo, having just grabbed a British steel helmet and a greatcoat, shouted orders to his men in English, adding to his planned subterfuge.

“QUICK, WE MUST GET THOSE WOUNDED MEN TO THE INFIRMARY IN PORT STANLEY! GET IN!”

His men understood him at once and climbed in the back of the two trucks, some of them wearing British helmets and greatcoats and holding rifles captured at the gun positions. With Hugo and Franz Stein each riding in the cab of separate trucks, with Hugo's truck leading the way, the two vehicles soon started rolling westward. After covering nearly two kilometers of flat, grassy ground, they started rolling past the airfield, staying close to the shore and away from the light anti-aircraft guns defending it. They however had to stop at the access control point situated along the airfield road, where three agitated British soldiers waved them to stop. Rolling down his window, Hugo shouted in an angry tone in English at the British sergeant approaching his truck.

“FOR CHRIST SAKE, RAISE THAT FUCKING GATE! I NEED TO URGENTLY BRING WOUNDED MEN TO THE HOSPITAL IN STANLEY.”

The British sergeant, seeing little more than a dark silhouette wearing a British helmet, hesitated for a moment before asking a question.

“Uh, what happened exactly over at Cape Pembroke? We heard gunfire and explosions.”

“That was those bloody German commandos attacking our battery. We were able to repel them, but it cost us many men. Now, will you raise your bloody gate or not?”

Thoroughly intimidated by the authoritarian tone used by Hugo, the sergeant made a sign to his two soldiers manning the barrier gate.

“RAISE THE GATE! LET THEM PASS!”

As soon as the barrier was raised, Hugo's two trucks rolled through, accelerating along the road linking the airfield with Port Stanley. They drove down another three kilometers before starting to approach the fuel tank farm built near the shoreline at the eastern end of the town of Stanley. The fuel depot was actually a substantial installation which had obviously been built fairly recently, maybe only months ago. It consisted of a double row of large storage tanks, with a total of seven fuel tanks, plus three smaller storage tanks

for lubricants, an open storage area filled with piles of steel drums, a pump house and a control house. Two widely separated floating jetties flanked the fuel depot, with flexible pipes linking the pump house and the refueling stations at the end of the jetties. Two ships were presently moored at the refueling stations, one a cargo ship, the other a tanker ship. Hugo saw with the help of the lamps fixed to the jetties and on the ships' superstructures that a few men were actively working on the jetties and the ships, apparently in the process of refueling them. One detail then made Hugo frown: the cargo ship moored at one of the refueling stations was a U.S. Army transport ship armed with two medium caliber deck guns. Such army transport ships were manned by military reservists who were armed, something that could complicate greatly his planned takeover of the fuel depot later next morning. While Hugo knew how good his men were, he also was a realistic man: his thirteen men could not be expected to fight close to a hundred armed men and win. Surprise had played in his favor up to now but, the moment he would unmask his commando team at the fuel depot, he would be on his own. Studying the fuel depot as much as he could as his truck rolled past it, he then pointed a street junction to his driver after rolling another 300 meters.

"Turn left here! We are going to do a loop and return towards the fuel depot."

"Yes sir!" Replied in English Emil Heinemann, who soon turned left on Nebe Street. Another 150 meters and he turned left again, this time on Davis Street. Up to now, Stanley was proving to be more like a big village, with dispersed houses situated in large individual lots and with a population that had to turn around one thousand civilians, at the most. However, the British military presence and, possibly, an American one as well, had to count in the hundreds, if one counted logistician specialists and aviation personnel. Hugo finally made his driver stop and park their truck behind a wooden shed at the eastern limit of the town, where they had a good open view of the fuel depot, some 200 meters away. He signaled his second truck to park close behind him, then grabbed his binoculars and started examining in detail the depot, trying to think of a plan that would give at least a few chances to his men to succeed in their mission and survive.

"Heinemann, tell the men to stay in the trucks and to make themselves as comfortable as possible. They are to take some sleep while I think about a plan. One man in the rear of each truck is going to stay up and watch for approaching British soldiers."

"Right away, sir!"

As Heinemann, still wearing his British helmet and greatcoat, stepped out of the cab to pass his orders, Hugo looked for a moment at the open sea, visible a few kilometers away to the East. He still didn't know what kind of surface force had been sent or when it would show up on the horizon: the radio message received from the U-900 a few hours ago had been very brief, only telling him to secure the fuel depot before next sunrise. He had seen the Arado 196 when it had overflowed the Port Stanley area and the airfield, so that surface force had to be composed of at least one heavy cruiser. The question of if that surface force would be powerful enough to intimidate the British in Stanley into surrendering was an open one at this time. A bright flash of light on the eastern horizon then attracted his eyes. That flash then turned into a rising fireball that illuminated the night sky for many seconds before fading away. Some thirty seconds later, a long rumbling noise came from the same direction, making Hugo smile.

"There goes the last British minesweeper guarding Port Stanley. Well done, U-900!"

21:01 (Falkland Islands Time)

Admiral's sea cabin, light cruiser U.S.S. OMAHA (CL-4)

Sailing 260 nautical miles east of Porto Alegre (Brazil)

South Atlantic

Rear-Admiral Owen Read, Commander of Task Group 42.2, was relaxing by reading a book in his sea cabin after a fairly uneventful day at sea when someone knocked on the door of his cabin.

"Come in!"

A young signals officer opened the door and came to attention while saluting.

"Sir, we just received an urgent message from the headquarters of the Fourth Fleet¹⁷."

"Very well, show me that message, Lieutenant."

The young officer obeyed and handed an envelope to Read, who extracted a folded message form from it and looked quickly at it.

¹⁷ Fourth U.S. Fleet : The numbered American fleet responsible to patrol the Caribbean Basin and both coasts of South America.

"Hmm, a German submarine has been causing serious trouble around Port Stanley and now there is as well a suspected German cruiser near the Falkland Islands. We are ordered to make best speed for Port Stanley and to find and sink both the cruiser and the submarine. Sounds like a perfect job for our task group. Thank you, Lieutenant! I will keep this message for the moment. Dismissed!"

"Yes sir!" replied the young officer before saluting again and leaving the admiral's cabin. Once alone, Read looked a second time at the message. Even if that suspected cruiser turned out to be real and to be one armed with eleven inch guns, like on the battlecruiser SCHARNHORST and the pocket battleship LÜTZOW, the four light cruisers and two destroyers of his fast task group should be more than enough to deal with that cruiser. The one true worry he had was about that submarine. The new German TYPE XXI had a fearsome reputation as a very dangerous marauder and murderous opponent. He couldn't recount anymore how many horror stories he had heard in the past from his fellow admirals about how the infamous U-800 had wrecked havoc along both American coasts and in the Atlantic as well as the Pacific. Getting up from his easy chair, Read put on his service cap and, the message in one hand, left his cabin to go to the chart room, next to the bridge of his light cruiser. On entering it, a young officer shouted 'ROOM!', making the personnel in the compartment come to rigid attention.

"At ease, men! Navigator, please come to the chart table."

Lieutenant commander John Kaiser walked at once to the chart table sitting in the center of the room and rested both hands on it as he listened carefully to Read.

"Commander Kaiser, we just received a new mission from the Fourth Fleet: we are to go at best speed to Port Stanley, where we are to find and sink a German submarine and a suspected German cruiser. That submarine already sank two British submarines and two frigates that guarded the approaches to Port Stanley. It also apparently landed a commando team that destroyed on the ground all the aircraft stationed at the Port Stanley Airfield. As well, a German floatplane was seen overflying Stanley Harbor today, thus the suspicions about a German cruiser being around the Falklands. What? You seemed to have reacted to my words about a German submarine and commando team."

"Yes, Admiral, I did." Answered the tall, 27 year-old blond officer, his expression sober. "That's because me and my little family were rescued at sea near Cuba in January of last year...by a German submarine. That submarine was the infamous U-

800, commanded by Captain Otto Kretschmer, and it carried a commando team from the elite Brandenburg Regiment at that time. We were thankfully well treated during our short stay aboard, until the U-800 dropped us off on a beach of the island of Curacao, off the Venezuelan coast. Then, in August of the same year, when I was serving in the Pacific, the U-800 sank my ship, the heavy cruiser NORTHAMPTON, and six other ships of the USS HORNET task force near the Santa Cruz Islands. It could have easily sunk the remaining ships then, but chose instead to declare a truce and allow those surviving destroyers to rescue the hundreds of men floating in the water. I was sent back to the United States afterwards for a period of rest before being reassigned to the Fourth Fleet and the OMAHA.”

“Well, I’ll be!” said Read, both impressed and curious. “What could you tell me about that U-800 and its embarked commando team, Mister Kaiser?”

“Well, much of the initial intelligence assessments about the U-800 stemmed from my observations while I was aboard that submarine. It was very heavily armed, with a total of twelve torpedo tubes, twenty or more sea mines storage and launch tubes, a 105mm deck gun and two anti-aircraft cannon mounts. It had an incredible top speed submerged, along with a very long endurance on batteries and was unbelievably agile. It fought with a number of warships as I was still aboard and it maneuvered underwater like a fighter would do in the air. A secondary point was its very comfortable and spacious crew facilities, which made it that much more efficient on long combat cruises. Now, I have seen the few intelligence reports published about the new German submarine class and it felt to me like the new German boats are near copies of the U-800, with the same kind of underwater performances, heavy armament and long range. I don’t want to appear like a defeatist, Admiral, but our two destroyers will stand little chance against one of those new German submarines, especially if it is commanded by a competent captain. When the U-800 attacked the HORNET task force, it played with our escort destroyers and sank our ships one by one.”

Somewhat shaken by that, Read hesitated a bit before asking another question to John Kaiser.

“And those German commandos, how good are they really?”

“The best!” answered John without hesitation. “Their exploits speak by themselves, sir. One thing I would add is that, despite being deadly, those commandos proved to be correct and humane towards me and my family while we were held aboard

the U-800. They also didn't strike me as being Nazi fanatics. I would simply call them 'patriotic', sir."

"I see! Well, we still have orders to find and sink that sub and the presumed cruiser roaming near Port Stanley. At what maximum speed could we go there and still have enough fuel for a couple hours of chase at 35 knots and for a return to Recife?"

"Let me make a few calculations first, Admiral."

"Take your time, Commander."

Read had to wait only a bit over a minute before getting an answer from John Kaiser.

"We are presently some 912 nautical miles north-northeast from Port Stanley. Our task group could get there in 36 hours at a speed of 25 knots and have enough fuel left still for a few hours of combat before returning to Recife. However, that will leave our two destroyers very low on fuel and they may need to get some fuel from our cruisers in order to make it back to Recife."

"I can live with that. Calculate a course to Port Stanley at a speed of 25 knots and pass it to the helm. We will launch a float plane once within 300 nautical miles from the Falkland Islands, so that we won't rush blindly into some German trap."

"Understood, sir!"

03:29 (Falkland Islands Time)

Thursday, October 7, 1943

Rookers Bay, three kilometers east of Stanley

East Falkland Island

As soon as the first of twelve long boats and cutters started scrapping against the bottom of the sandy beach, men started jumping out of them, to then run across the beach to take defensive positions up the rocky shoreline. Major Harald Mors, Commander of the Fallschirmjäger Lehr Battalion, was one of the first to step out in the surf and run across the beach, followed by close to 500 German paratroopers. As soon as the paratroopers were all out of the boats, the German sailors manning them pushed them back afloat and started rowing back towards the three armored warships standing some distance away from the shore, dark shapes nearly invisible in the night. The sailors then switched to their outboard motors once far enough at sea not to be heard from the Port Stanley Airfield. Waiting a few minutes to give time to his subordinate officers to regroup their men, Mors then gave the signal to advance.

At the road checkpoint guarding the access to the airfield, five very nervous British soldiers either stood or sat inside their sandbagged positions, not knowing what to expect next. By now, everybody at the airfield knew that the coastal battery at Cape Pembroke had been wiped out by German saboteurs and everyone was wondering where those Germans would strike next. Unfortunately, the destruction of the radar at the airfield meant that German ships and submarines could now approach at night with little risk of being detected. The British soldiers manning the checkpoint thus fervently hoped that those German saboteurs had already left, returning to the submarine that had sunk one after the other the remaining three minesweepers defending Stanley Harbor. One of the soldiers suddenly stiffened and nearly shouted to his NCO.

“Sergeant, I think that I saw some movement over there.”

The NCO quickly joined the soldier behind his sandbag parapet and tried to locate what his man had seen.

“Where exactly, Goldman? I see nothing but long grass.”

“Over there, about fifty meters at our ten o’clock, sergeant. I swear that I saw something move.”

“Well, I still can’t see anything suspect. I think that your nerves are playing tricks on you.”

The sergeant then got back on his feet to return to his initial position. The sound of something impacting the ground nearby made him look down, in time to see with horror a German stick grenade roll in front of him.

“SHIT! GRENADE!”

He was about to violently kick the grenade away when it exploded less than one meter in front of him. The blast killed him outright and projected his body backward, while the explosion deafened his four soldiers and wounded one of them. The British survivors, their ears ringing madly, were barely able to hear the concert of ferocious war screams pushed by fourteen German paratroopers rushing at their checkpoint. That was the signal for the start of a brutal surprise attack on the airfield by hundreds of seasoned German paratroopers.

The sudden cacophony of explosions and gun shots coming from the airfield made Hugo Margraff nearly jump in his seat. He had been close to falling asleep in the cab of his stolen British Army truck, his fatigue and the quiet of the night rendering him

drowsy, when the noise of the fight at the airfield had started. Shaking himself awake, he then patted the shoulder of his driver.

"Our reinforcements have arrived. Start the engine and drive to the entrance of the fuel depot."

"Yes sir!"

Heinemann was on his way mere seconds later, with the second captured truck following close behind. Looking at the fuel depot and at the nearby refueling jetty, Hugo was relieved to see that the U.S. Army ship that had worried him earlier was no longer at the jetty and had returned to the middle of Stanley Harbor, joining there the five other ships now trapped in the bay. In fact, no ship was moored at the jetty presently, something that was going to greatly facilitate his job of securing the depot. That left to be secured the three large fuel barges docked at the next jetty, situated about 200 meters to the west, which were used to refuel ships that were too large to maneuver easily inside the harbor. However, those barges would have to wait a bit for now.

Hugo's truck stopped at the main entrance to the fuel depot three minutes later, its cab level with the two British soldiers on guard duty there. The senior guard, a corporal, approached to within two paces of Hugo's door, looking up at him.

"What is going on at the airfield?"

"Those pesky German infiltrators are back." responded Hugo. "We are here to reinforce security at the fuel depot."

On saying those last words, Hugo raised his silenced pistol to just above the sill of his opened window and fired once, hitting the British soldier in the chest. Heinemann imitated him half a second later, shooting dead the other British soldier. Hugo then gave orders to his men in the back of the truck.

"Rickman, Golding, you jump out and take the place of those dead sentries. The rest of us will secure the control hut and the pump house."

As soon as his two designated men had jumped out, Hugo made his driver roll up to the control hut, where he parked on one side of the wooden building. Jumping out on the ground, Hugo quickly removed his British steel helmet and greatcoat and put back on his German steel helmet.

"Alright, men, from now on we will fight as German soldiers. Drücker, you take three men and secure the pump house. Make sure that there are no prepositioned demolition charges there, then do the same with the storage tanks. Arnim, you take one

machine gun team and one grenade launcher and take position along the western perimeter line. Dörthmunder, you take our second machine gun team and grenade launcher and go cover the eastern approach to the depot. The rest, with me!”

With seven men behind him, Hugo ran around the control hut to get to the main door, which he pushed open before charging in, his MP43 up and pointed forward.

“HANDS UP, EVERYBODY! ONE STUPID MOVE AND YOU’RE DEAD!”

The three British inside, two civilians and one soldier, froze like a deer illuminated by the headlamps of a car. The one soldier then slowly put down his rifle on the floor, while the two civilian men rose their hands high, terrified.

“Don’t shoot: we surrender.”

“A sensible choice, gentlemen.” replied Hugo in his best British accent. “Feldwebel Stein, search them and tie them up. I will go inspect the refueling jetty for demolition charges.”

“Understood, Herr Hauptmann.”

Stepping out of the control hut with one soldier, Hugo took ten minutes to make sure that no explosives had been rigged on the jetty or on the fuel pipes and valves, then ran to the main entrance, where he gave new orders to his two men there.

“Okay, time to look like German soldiers. Take positions behind the best cover you will find nearby but don’t stay in that guard hut: our incoming soldiers are liable to pepper it the moment they see it. The way the fighting seems to be dying down around the airfield, I expect our troops to be here in the next few minutes.”

“Gee! Give us more credit than that.” said a voice to their right, making Hugo and his two soldiers jerk nervously and pivot at once, weapons pointed. They then saw the three German paratroopers that had just stepped out from behind a half-ruined low stone wall some ten meters away. One of the paratroopers grinned to Hugo.

“A good thing you came here now, Herr Hauptmann: we had two nice garrotes ready for your men.”

Hugo let out a breath, his nerves as tense as piano wires.

“Glad to see you here, men: it was getting lonely here. How many of your men are here?”

“Our battalion split in two upon landing in Rookers Bay, Hauptmann: 300 of our men, led by Major Mors, went to take the airfield, while our remaining 200 men advanced on the town and its harbor facilities. But let me present myself: Hauptmann Ferdinand Frech, of the Fallschirmjäger Lehr Battalion.”

Hugo happily shook the hand of Frech, who had walked up to him.

“And I’m Hauptmann Hugo Margraff, of the Brandenburg Regiment. My men have just secured this fuel depot and checked it for any possible demolition charges, but found none to date. Could your men occupy this depot and safeguard it? There are three fuel barges moored some distance away that I would like to secure as soon as possible.”

“My men will be most happy to help you, Hauptmann Margraff. You may assemble your men right now.”

“Thanks! We took three prisoners inside the control hut, by the way.”

“We will take care of them as well. Well done, you and your men.”

“Thank you! Gefreiter Rickmann, lead Hauptmann Frech and his men to the control hut and then bring back all our men here.”

“Right away, Hauptmann.”

As Rickmann left with Frech and a large group of paratroopers, Hugo felt optimism rising in him: up to now, they had secured all their objectives, and this without a single casualty, that last point being the most important to him. However, the future sea battle to be fought in the next few days would probably end up being a lot bloodier.

09:25 (Falkland Islands Time)

Control room of the U-915

At periscope depth, 620 nautical miles north of the Falkland Islands

“Sonar, give me again the heading for that fast contact!”

“Heading 280, Herr K apitan. I can hear at least four large ships going fast. I estimate their speed to be at least twenty knots: too fast for commercial ships.”

K apitanleutnant Klaus Bargsten, master of the U-915, a recently built Type XXI submarine, made a grimace when he was able to spot the said ships in the distance through his search periscope.

“Damn! They are too far and too fast to allow me to attack them: I would nearly drain our batteries just to catch up with them. No doubt about their intentions, though: those warships are rushing towards Port Stanley. OBERLEUTNANT SCHWARTZ, WRITE THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE DOWN, TO BE SEND TO KMS TIRPITZ, SCHARNHORST, GNEISENAU AND U-900: ENEMY TASK GROUP HEADING TOWARDS PORT STANLEY AT SPEED OF AT LEAST TWENTY KNOTS. GROUP

CONSISTS OF AT LEAST FOUR UNITS, POSSIBLY CRUISERS. GIVE ACTUAL POSITION AND SEND IN ENCRYPTED FORM AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.”

“AYE, HERR KÄPITAN!” replied Schwartz, the second watch officer of the U-915, while scribbling down that message. Until three months ago, Schwartz had been like Bargsten a prisoner of war in Camp Bowmanville, as a result of being captured following the sinking of the U-800. In fact, nearly a third of the crew of the U-915 were veterans from the U-800 who had been freed by Hugo Margraff’s commandos. As for Bargsten, while he had not served on the U-800, he had served in the capacity of first watch officer under Kämpitan Otto Kretschmer aboard his old U-99. As a result, the U-915 could be said to have one of the most seasoned and competent U-Boot crews, if not the most competent. With a major battle at sea now predicted, the men of the U-915 fully counted on proving their mettle to all during the next few days.

11:46 (Falkland Islands Time)

Command bridge of the battleship KMS TIRPITZ

Sailing off Port Stanley with KMS SCHARNHORST and KMZ GNEISENAU

Admiral Wilhelm Marschall, standing on the port open bridge wing of the TIRPITZ, looked down with satisfaction at the fuel barge as it detached itself from his battleship and returned to Stanley Harbor. His three armored warships now had their fuel tanks topped off, thanks to the fuel captured in Port Stanley, and so did the U-900. He could thus look forward to the incoming surface battle without having to worry about his fuel state. Even better was the fact that even more fuel would be sent to Germany via the tanker ships and cargo ships captured to date. Close to 43,000 tons of fuel oil, plus some 16,000 tons of diesel fuel and 25,000 tons of aviation gasoline, were now aboard a total of five large tanker ships and four cargo ships that would soon depart towards Occupied France, manned by German prize crews and escorted by the U-900. Just the fact that so much refined fuel had been captured intact would have been enough to justify this whole operation, but the true prize was still the tungsten loaded aboard the BUENAVENTURA. As for Port Stanley itself, there was soon going to be little left there that could serve to replenish American and British ships or planes in the future: German demolition teams had been placing explosive charges at the now empty fuel depot, refueling jetties and repair facilities in Stanley. Government House, which had been both the residence of the governor of the island and the main military

command post, had been flattened with a dozen 280mm shells from the SCHARNHORST after the British there had refused to surrender to the German paratroopers surrounding it. With no viable port installations and fuel facilities left and with all long range radios destroyed, the future for the civilian population of Stanley now looked grim indeed.

On the U-900, with Margraff's commandos and their two rubber boats back aboard, Ulrich von Wittgenstein was about ready to sail away to go take a watch position some 200 nautical miles north of Port Stanley. This was going to be his ultimate task around the Falklands before he would join up with the convoy of nine prize ships already on its way to Lorient. However, that task promised to be a crucial one: by giving an advance warning of the approach of the American task group presently sailing towards Port Stanley, he would give some precious time for the German surface combatants to take the best positions possible to ambush the incoming American warships.

06:44 (Falkland Islands Time)

Saturday, October 9, 1943

Bridge of light cruiser U.S.S. OMAHA

Sailing south at 21 knots, 180 nautical miles north of Port Stanley

"On its way, at last!" said to himself Rear admiral Read as he watched the cruiser U.S.S. MILWAUKEE launch one of its Vought OS2U-3 KINGFISHER reconnaissance floatplanes. That launch should have happened last afternoon, but the task group had encountered a bad local storm that had prevented any floatplane launch before nightfall. It was now launched much closer to Port Stanley than Read had wanted. Read followed the lone plane with his binoculars until it was out of sight.

"Come on, guys! Find out what is waiting for us around Stanley."

Some fourteen kilometers away, too distant and too small a target to be detected by the American radars, Ulrich von Wittgenstein had observed via his search periscope the launch of the American floatplane. Estimating first the heading and speed of the KINGFISHER, he then wrote a very brief encoded message that was then sent to the TIRPITZ, alerting it about the launch.

07:12 (Falkland Islands Time)

Launch catapult, battlecruiser KMS SCHARNHORST

Sailing 26 nautical miles northeast of Port Stanley

“Ready, Kurt?”

“Yes!” replied the observer who occupied the rear seat in the spacious cockpit of the Arado 196A-3 floatplane. The pilot, Leutnant Henrik Knobel, then made a thumbs up signal to the operator of the launch catapult, who then pressed a button, sending compressed air into the piston of the catapult. The Arado 196A-3 flew off the launch rail, with Knobel nearly immediately turning north afterwards and starting to climb. Knobel waited to have climbed to an altitude of 500 meters to call the air controller aboard the SCHARNHORST, who was following both him and the incoming American floatplane on his radar screen.

“Green Two to Barn, give me an intercept vector for the intruder, over.”

“Green Two, this is Barn. Take heading 010 and climb to 2,000 meters. You will then pass above and on the port flank of the intruder. He should soon have to go down, to pierce through the low cloud cover. We will advise you when to turn and dive, over.”

“Understood, Barn. Green Two out!”

Knobel felt excitement as he kept climbing, soon going through the low cloud cover : he had a number of reconnaissance missions under his belt but this would be his first chance to score an air kill. Contrary to what its somewhat ungainly aspect, due mostly to its twin floats, would suggest, the Arado 196 was a very agile aircraft and was actually a joy to fly. It also had a respectable armament of two fixed 20mm cannons and one fixed 7.92mm machine gun, plus a trainable pair of 7.92mm machine guns in the rear, manned by the observer, whose seat was facing aft. It also could carry two small bombs under its wings when attacking submarines or merchant ships. The Arado 196 was routinely used over the Atlantic and North Sea to either chase away British maritime patrol planes or even shoot them down, something it had achieved a few times already. A fact that encouraged Knobel's hopes was that the floatplanes embarked on American cruisers and battleships were all slower than his Arado 196A-3, something that appreciably boosted his chances for success. Some twelve minutes later, Knobel received another radio call.

"Green Two, this is Barn. The enemy intruder is now on your left flank and under the cloud cover, with a separation distance of fourteen kilometers. Start a moderate dive on Heading 250, over."

"Green Two, understood. Will call you back when I will have the intruder in sight, out."

Performing a tight turn to the left and pushing forward his control yoke, Knobel activated his intercom to speak with his observer/gunner.

"Kurt, the intruder is forward and under us, some fourteen kilometers away. Be prepared to fire your guns the moment we emerge below the clouds."

"Understood, Heinrich! I am arming my machine guns now."

His heart beating faster from the excitement and anticipation, Heinrich soon went through the thick cloud cover, emerging from it at the same time as he received a fresh call from the SCHARNHORST.

"Green Two, from Barn: you are now two kilometers from the intruder. Turn to Heading 098 for final intercept, over."

"Acknowledged, Barn... I HAVE THE ENEMY IN SIGHT! ATTACKING NOW!"

With the American plane, which he recognized as a Vought KINGFISHER, still flying lower than him, Heinrich was able to dive and take some extra speed as he approached the enemy plane from behind, hoping to fire his cannons from as close as possible. His cannons each had only sixty rounds, so he was going to have to be sparing and accurate while firing.

"KURT, WE ARE NOW DIVING ON THE ENEMY PLANE. IN CASE I MISS, BE READY TO PEPPER HIM FROM BELOW."

"GOT IT!"

Heinrich's eyes were now glued to his gun sight, in which the American plane was steadily becoming bigger. Up to now, the American aviators didn't seem to have noticed him yet, probably because they were concentrated on scanning the surface of the sea around them. When he came to within 150 meters, Heinrich savagely pressed his gun trigger, firing both of his cannons and his forward machine gun and sending a stream of tracer rounds towards the Vought KINGFISHER. The first projectiles missed, but not by much, and Heinrich was able to correct his aim with the help of his tracer rounds. At least five 20mm shells and a few 7.92mm slugs impacted on the fuselage and wings of the KINGFISHER, making pieces fly off it. The Arado 196 then dived behind and under the

tail of the KINGFISHER, missing it by a mere twenty meters. Henrik leveled off his plane at once and craned his neck up, trying to stay under the enemy plane.

"HE'S ALL YOURS, KURT!"

His observer didn't reply to that, instead opening fire with his twin machine guns while aiming at the belly and central float of the KINGFISHER. More pieces flew off the American floatplane. It turned into a big flying torch after Kurt's second burst, its fuel tanks probably hit. Henrik turned his plane in order to follow the unfortunate KINGFISHER, which was now diving towards the sea surface, some 1,200 meters below. He could see its rear observer trying desperately to open his canopy.

"Come on, you poor bugger, jump!"

The enemy observer never had a chance to do so, his cockpit filling with flames before he could slide his canopy open. Henrik shivered with horror at the thought of the kind of horrible death this had to be. Right now, he felt no hatred towards those American aviators, just pity. Still, he followed visually the falling floatplane until it impacted on the surface of the sea, then activated his radio.

"Barn, this is Green Two: one Vought KINGFISHER shot down and splashed. There were no parachutes, over."

"Good job, Green Two! Turn to Heading 280 and try to locate the approaching enemy ships. They should now be within 110 nautical miles from you, over."

"Acknowledged, Barn. Turning now on Heading 280, out. Kurt, we are going to try to find those American ships. Keep your eyes wide open! And nice shooting by the way."

"Thanks, Henrik!"

08:01 (Falkland Islands Time)

Bridge of the light cruiser U.S.S. OMAHA

"TO ALL SHIPS: CEASE FIRING! CEASE FIRING! THERE IS NO POINT IN WASTING OUR AMMUNITION."

Rear admiral Read gave a last black look at the German Arado 196 that was now flying away, intact, after triggering a barrage of three inch and five inch anti-aircraft shells from the task group. It was now evident that his own floatplane did not survive its mission, while the Germans would now know the precise composition of his force. In a foul

mood, he walked into the armored bridge of his flagship and went to the captain of the OMAHA.

“Captain Chandler, do we have something on our radars yet?”

“No sir! Right now, we only have the outline of the northern coasts of the Falkland Islands at the limit of our scopes. This would mean that the German warship that launched this floatplane is keeping its distances and staying close to Port Stanley. Either that German is a cautious one, or he has landed troops on the island and is loathe to leave them without naval support.”

“Or he wants to stay clear of us while recuperating his plane.”

“That too, Admiral.” recognized Theodore Chandler. “Should we launch another KINGFISHER, sir?”

“No! I don’t want to run the risk of having to slow down to recuperate it afterwards and thus make us vulnerable to a submarine attack. Remember that four British ships and submarines have reportedly been sunk by a German submarine during the last few days. There is also this business of the mysterious disappearance without a trace of the U.S.S. INTREPID and of its whole escort group while it transited the Drake Passage. My feeling is that there is a most dangerous shark waiting for us around the Falkland Islands. We will have to keep our speed up at all times in order to minimize the chances that this German submarine could ambush us.”

“But, Admiral, the sonars on our two destroyers will be next to useless at anything above fifteen knots.”

Read stopped for a moment to drill his eyes into those of Chandler.

“And did you get the impression that our sonar sets have been helpful in our past encounters with the U-800 and its ilk, Captain? Personally, the reading of past action fleet reports didn’t convince me of that. We will keep a minimum speed of twenty knots until I say otherwise.”

Chandler was tempted to protest further but decided not to. The frustrating truth was that the Allied sonar technology, at first considered a life-saver in defending Atlantic convoys against German submarines, was now hopelessly outclassed by the new generation of German U-Boats. Something much better than the present ASDIC sets was needed to redress the balance. Unfortunately, that took time, time that was quickly running out for the Allies, with Great Britain all but strangled by the German submarine blockade and the supply lines between the Atlantic and the Pacific in danger of being cut.

10:18 (Falkland Islands Time)
Bridge of the U.S.S. OMAHA
Ninety nautical miles north of Port Stanley

"Admiral, we finally have a contact on our radars."

"Aaah, at last! Where is it?"

"About thirty nautical miles northeast of Port Stanley, cruising at slow speed. It appears to be a single large surface ship."

Read looked for a moment at the screen of the radar repeater console installed in a corner of his flagship's bridge, trying to decide on a strategy to engage that lone German warship.

"Change course to come directly at that contact, Captain Chandler. We will approach it in double parallel files, then will turn to port once within effective gun range and form a single line, crossing the enemy's 'T'. With 26 six inch guns firing simultaneously at the enemy, we should be able to smother that German cruiser under a rain of shells."

Chandler gave him a dubious look, obviously not convinced.

"Admiral, if what we are facing turns out to be a battlecruiser or a pocket battleship armed with eleven inch guns, then we will be outranged by over ten miles, ten miles during which we will be under fire and unable to respond."

"Then, we will have to cover those ten miles as fast as we can, Captain."

That was when a bridge signaler manning the TBS VHF transceiver set on the bridge shouted a warning.

"SIR, THE JOUETT IS SIGNALING A VERY WEAK RADAR CONTACT ON OUR PORT FLANK. IT IS GOING TO SLOW DOWN AND PROSECUTE IT."

"A very weak radar contact... Shit, a submarine periscope!" exclaimed Chandler, alarmed, before starting to give orders to his bridge crew. "HELM, START ZIGZAG COURSE! SOUND BATTLE STATIONS!"

On his part, Read didn't stay inactive, grabbing his signals officer.

"Signal immediately to all our ships: suspected submarine on our port flank. Start zigzag course."

"Right away, sir!"

Some 3,000 meters from the U.S.S. JOUETT, Ulrich von Wittgenstein swore at himself under his breath: he had raised his periscope too close from the American destroyer covering the port flank of the task group, counting on its small size and radar-absorbing coating to keep it undetected. The sight of the American ships suddenly starting to zigzag was now telling him that he had made a mistake. However, he already had four torpedoes on their way. Hopefully, they would still hit their intended target despite the fact that it had now started zigzagging. Right now, however, he had to contend with an American destroyer coming straight at him.

“HELM, PUSH THE DIVING PLANES TO FULL DOWN! EMERGENCY DIVE TO DEPTH OF 350 METERS, THEN LEVEL UP AND SLOW TO SILENT SPEED!”

Within seconds, his U-900 nosedived steeply enough to force Ulrich to hold on to his periscope in order not to slide down the deck of the control room. He however remembered to lower it, so that it could return into its pressure-proof housing before the pressure became too great. The thick steel cap of the periscope housing closed as the U-900 was passing the depth of 75 meters. Then, as it reached a depth of 260 meters, a series of muffled explosion reverberated in the water.

“Depth charges, set way too shallow to hurt us.” said Ulrich aloud in a calm voice, trying to relieve some of the stress in the control room. A separate explosion, much more powerful but still distant, then made him smile.

“Hell, I still got a hit after all.”

Of the four TYPE 96-D torpedoes fired at the light cruiser U.S.S. MEMPHIS, three missed their target due to it suddenly starting to zigzag. The fourth one very nearly missed as well, but passed under the cruiser at the level of its propellers and rudders. Its magnetic influence exploder then reacted and ignited its 550 kilo warhead right under the stern of the cruiser. The powerful underwater explosion made the rear of the MEMPHIS jump out of the water and ripped off or deformed its rudders and propeller shafts. The stern then slammed down back in the water and split away from the rest of the hull with a scream of tortured metal, opening huge holes in which seawater rushed in furiously. Main power went out nearly at once, plunging the inside of the ship in the dark, while the cruiser started sinking by its stern. The bow of the MEMPHIS, now nearly at the vertical, disappeared under the surface a mere two minutes after the torpedo hit, dragging all but a handful of its crew to the depths.

On the open bridge wing of the U.S.S. OMAHA, Rear admiral Read could only watch with a mix of rage and grief as the bow of the MEMPHIS disappeared under the surface. Many of his friends were now dying as he watched the drama unfold.

"Damn you, you German bastard!" he hissed, referring to the German submarine responsible for this tragedy. However, he still had his other ships to lead into battle and could not afford to linger too long on this. Returning inside his command bridge, he pointed an index at the operations officer.

"Commander, have the DAVIS join the JOUETT in chasing after that German submarine. They are to hound it until it is sunk. Our remaining cruisers will continue on at twenty knots towards that German cruiser near Port Stanley."

"Yes, Admiral!"

Read next grabbed the signals officer.

"Send the following message to Fourth Fleet Headquarters: U.S.S. MEMPHIS torpedoed and sunk by German submarine. Am going to engage a lone German cruiser off Port Stanley. Add the time and location of the sinking."

"Right away, sir!"

As the signals officer was disappearing into the radio room adjacent to the bridge, Read gave a somber look at Captain Chandler.

"Hopefully, our two destroyers will be able to rid us of that damn German submarine. If not, we may end up going into a surface battle with our rear unsecured."

"Those new German submarines may be good, Admiral, but they are not invincible. I am confident that the JOUETT and the DAVIS will do the job."

"I fervently hope so as well, Captain."

Inside the U-900, now running silently at a speed of three knots and a depth of 350 meters, Ulrich went to see his sonar operators in their cramped compartment aft of the control room.

"So, what are you hearing, Bock?"

His chief sonar operator listened through his headset for a moment before answering Ulrich.

"We now have two American destroyers searching for us and pinging in active mode around them. We are however under the thermal layer and they thus cannot ear us, especially while we are running silent."

"If we rise back up to near the surface, will they be able to detect us?"

"If they continue to ping on active mode and keep their own speed down, then yes, Herr Kapitän. I am afraid that we will have to take some risks if we want to sink those two destroyers. We could always take some distance discretely, then attack again, but that would take time."

"Agreed! We have a major surface battle about to happen and I would hate to miss it. On the other hand, while chasing after us, those two destroyers won't be available to launch torpedoes at the SCHARNHORST. Are those two destroyers moving as a pair or independently?"

"Independently, Herr Kapitän. One of them is on our port flank, while the other is ahead of us."

"Alright then, we will start with the one ahead of us. Be prepared to power on our bow active sonar on my command: we will use its return echoes to feed our 'Nibelung' active-passive sonar targeting system."

"I will be ready, Herr Kapitän."

Ulrich then returned in the control room and spoke to his First Watch Officer, Bruno Barber, sitting at the tactical plot table.

"Bruno, I intend for us to rise back silently to near the surface, then ping once in active mode and use the return data to launch a T5 at one of those destroyers. Be ready to use our 'Nibelung' targeting system and have two bow tubes and one stern tube loaded with T5 torpedoes."

"I'm on it, Herr Kapitän."

Next, Ulrich returned to his command chair, situated just aft of the helmsman and ballast operators seats, from where he gave a series of orders.

"Ballasts, start us on a slow rise to periscope depth. Helm, keep our speed at three knots and continue on present heading. We are going to execute a Nibelung-directed attack on the destroyer ahead of us and will shoot a T5 acoustic-homing torpedo."

The helmsman, Karl Müller, nodded his head in acknowledgement: when firing a T5 torpedo, the submarine had to be as silent as possible, in order to prevent the torpedo from turning around and guiding itself back via the machinery noise of its launching submarine, something that had already happened at least once with other German boats.

Nerves tensed up in the control room as the ballasts operator, Rudolph Dollmann, announced their changing depth.

"We are now passing 200 meters on our way up, Herr Kapitän... Now at 150 meters... One hundred meters... Fifty meters! Starting to equilibrate balance... Forty meters..."

"Stop our ascent at thirty meters! Sonar, give me a ping!"

BONG

"I have two return echoes!" soon announced the chief sonar operator. "One at relative heading 020, 2,400 meters away, the other at relative heading 175, distance 3,900 meters. Passing data to Nibelung fire-control system!"

"Match bearings and launch T5s from Tubes One and Fourteen!" ordered at once Ulrich. Seconds later, he heard the two compressed air discharges from those tubes. Now, he could only hope that they ran true. Bock's voice then came again on the intercom.

"The target ahead is now turning towards us and taking up speed. The target abaft is still on its original heading... Correction: target abaft now turning towards us and accelerating. We have two destroyers gunning at us from opposite directions, Herr Kapitän!"

"You should have become a sports radio commentator, Bock." joked Ulrich. "You do have a flair for the dramatic."

"Sorry about that, Herr Kapitän." replied the sonar operator as laughter went around the control room. "The targets don't seem to have detected our torpedoes yet. Our two weapons are still running true."

Three minutes later, a distant underwater explosion from ahead made the crew cheer.

"We have a hit on the destroyer ahead of us, Herr Kapitän. It is now slowing down, with its machinery noise drastically cut."

"What about the destroyer to our aft, Bock?"

"It is still accelerating straight at us. They are not hearing our torpedo...yet."

"Good! Torpedo control, be ready to launch two TYPE 96-D torpedoes at each target if I deem it necessary."

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!"

When he heard his second torpedo explode, Ulrich took a decision and gave an order.

"RISE TO PERISCOPE DEPTH!"

Taking place behind the attack periscope and rising its head above the surface, Ulrich did a quick panoramic check before concentrating his attention forward and aft. What he saw made him grin with glee.

"We made solid hits on both targets! The one ahead of us has broken in two, while the one abaft is developing a serious list to starboard. Helm, steer to Heading 220 and accelerate to ten knots: we are going to finish off the destroyer aft of us."

However, before the U-900 could approach within 2,000 meters, the second destroyer capsized belly-up, victim of the notorious high center of gravity of the SOMERS-Class destroyers. Feeling relief on seeing that this fight was over, Ulrich pivoted his periscope around to locate the remaining three American cruisers of the task group. He soon saw them some distance away to the Southeast, sailing towards Port Stanley.

"Good job, men!" he then announced to his crewmen in the control room. "We are going first to take a couple of pictures of our two latest victims before they sink under the surface, then we will trail the American cruisers from a distance. We will go on schnorchel and diesel then and adopt a speed of twelve knots while recharging our batteries. If and when the enemy attempts to turn back and flee once they will realize in what kind of trap they fell, then we will be in a good position to bar their withdrawal."

On the OMAHA, a thoroughly discouraged Rear admiral Read walked into the chart room and joined Lieutenant commander John Kaiser at the chart table, speaking to him in a near whisper.

"You were right about those new German submarines, Commander: we just lost both of our destroyers and the cruiser MEMPHIS to the submarine roaming around. Do you know how the infamous U-800 finally got sunk?"

"Yes I do, Admiral: it was surprised on the surface by a patrol aircraft as it was stopping a cargo ship near Newfoundland. We learned later on from prisoners' debriefs that the U-800's radar warning set was malfunctioning at the time, thus the Germans did not detect the patrol aircraft until it was too late to dive."

"Well, the systems on the bastard who sank our three ships seem to be functioning just right. We will have to take account of that submarine during and after our incoming surface fight."

John Kaiser then gave him a worried look and spoke in a low voice.

"Sir, I know that our mission is to intercept and sink that German cruiser near Port Stanley, but is it prudent to engage in a surface fight with a cruiser possibly armed

with eleven inch guns, and this with a roaming German submarine in our back? Don't get me wrong, Admiral, as I am no coward, but I saw my fill of disastrous battles in the past and this one is definitely starting on the wrong foot."

Read in turn gave a sober look at Kaiser. The young officer was essentially correct in his tactical assessment. Unfortunately, refusing to do battle at this point would most certainly result in himself being relieved of command afterwards...or worse.

"Son, I sincerely hope that the future will prove you wrong, although I would tend to agree with you."

Read then returned to the bridge, leaving behind a morose John Kaiser. The navigator couldn't help then think about his wife and two young children, who were waiting for his return from this cruise in their base port of Bahia, Brazil.

14:03 (Falkland Islands Time)

Bridge of the light cruiser U.S.S. OMAHA

Rounding Macbride Point, East Falkland Island

"SHIP DEAD AHEAD ON THE HORIZON!"

Read and Chandler, on hearing the warning from the lookout, both ran out on the open port side bridge wing in order to examine that distant ship with their binoculars. After a moment of observing, Read lowered his binoculars, his heart sinking.

"It is a SCHARNHORST-Class battlecruiser." he said to Chandler, who nodded his head in agreement.

"I concur! Those eleven inch guns are going to hurt us, unless we are damn lucky."

"Well, I am afraid that this 'Second Battle of the Falklands' will have little to do with luck and a lot more to do with how accurate our gunners will prove to be. Call our ships to Battle Stations, Captain."

"Yes, Admiral!"

As Chandler walked back inside the command bridge, Read tried to be objective about his chances of winning. In truth, they were not good at all. The six inch guns of his three light cruisers could fire a 48 kilo shell to a maximum distance of 23,100 meters, while the eleven inch guns of the SCHARNHORST could fire a 336 kilo armor-piercing shell to a maximum distance of 40,900 meters. Even worse was the imbalance in ship armor between the modern German battlecruiser and his nearly twenty year-old light

cruisers. The SCHARNHORST sported a fourteen inch-thick main armor belt, up to 3.7 inch of armor over its decks and fourteen inch of armor around its conning tower. In contrast, Read's OMAHA sported a three inch-thick main armor belt, a maximum of 1.5 inch of armor over its decks and 1.5 inch of steel around its conning tower. The sad fact was that the SCHARNHORST's main guns could penetrate the armor of the OMAHA all the way to their maximum range, while the American six inch shells could not pierce the main belt of the SCHARNHORST even from point blank range. The only thing that Read could hope for was to deluge the German battlecruiser with shells and chew up its less armored superstructures to the point of rendering it ineffective. However, that equation didn't even take into account the numerous secondary guns of the SCHARNHORST, which comprised twelve 150mm guns and sixteen 105mm dual purpose guns, all of which could pierce the armor of the OMAHA. There was also the matter of the superior quality of the Germans' range-finding optics, which were considered the finest in the World and which gave the Germans a marked edge in gunnery accuracy. This job should rightly have gone to the much more powerful Task Force 3 of Vice admiral Ingram. Unfortunately for Read, Task Force 3 was presently over 1,800 nautical miles away to the Northeast. It would take it over seven days to get here, by which time this battle would be long over. Well, he still could count on the high speed of his cruisers in order to close the range quickly and have the best chances to survive and win this battle. Going inside the bridge, Read gave a series of orders to his staff officers present.

"Signal officer, signal by lamp to our cruisers to fall into a single file behind the OMAHA and to accelerate to 35 knots. Captain Chandler, push your ship to maximum speed and charge the SCHARNHORST."

"Aye, Admiral!"

Everyone on the bridge seemed to brace themselves mentally as the trio of light cruisers fell into a single file, the OMAHA in the lead. Theoretically, they were already well within the maximum range of the German eleven inch guns, but Read expected the enemy commander to wait until he would be within a more reasonable distance before opening fire, in order not to waste his ammunition. The SCHARNHORST finally opened fire at a range of 27 kilometers, still well over the maximum range of the OMAHA's guns. Only one eleven inch shell was fired then, probably to verify the range. Read wished that he could do like a turtle then and retract his head between his shoulders, as a sinister screaming noise marked the passage overhead of a heavy shell. It splashed

harmlessly into the ocean between the OMAHA and the MILWAUKEE, but it was in line with the file of cruisers. A second shot was fired by the Germans some fifteen seconds after that. It also missed, but Read did notice that it had done so by much less than the first one. The German firing already was proving to be uncomfortably accurate. A third eleven inch shell soon sprayed seawater all over the starboard side of the forward superstructures of the OMAHA, while its underwater explosion shook the whole light cruiser. Then, things got worse, much worse.

"Admiral, we have two new surface contacts emerging on radar from four o'clock." nearly shouted the bridge duty officer.

"What? What kind of ships are they and where are they coming from?"

"We can't identify them yet, as they are still over the horizon, Admiral. They must have been hidden in some cove along the northern coast of the island. They are doing approximately thirty knots and are apparently trying to take position in our back, sir."

"A TRAP!" shouted Read, furious. "How big are they?"

"Unknown, Admiral, but their radar echoes are solid."

All eyes on the bridge suddenly were on Read as he desperately thought about his options. He doubted very much that the two new enemy ships would prove to be smaller than light cruisers, making an already unequal fight this much harder. The screeching of a fourth heavy shell that missed the OMAHA by less than eighty meters then returned Read to reality.

"We will take the enemy ships one at a time! Let's cripple this battlecruiser first, then we will face those newcomers."

Read's ships never had a chance to hurt the SCHARNHORST, as eleven inch shells from the German battlecruisers started to register hits on the three American light cruisers at a range of 25,000 meters. The German fire then became much denser, switching from ranging shots to fire for effect. One eleven inch shell hit the top of the rearmost funnel of the OMAHA, but thankfully simply went through it without exploding. It however still killed most of the turret's crew with the splinters the impact created. The next one to hit hurt a lot more, however, penetrating two decks before exploding in the forward starboard boiler room of the light cruiser. The whole ship shook under that impact and speed immediately decreased to 22 knots. That was when a young watch officer came to Read, his face as white as a sheet.

"Sir, bad news: the two ships now in our backs are the battleship TIRPITZ and the battlecruiser GNEISENAU."

Read could only stare at him for a moment, speechless, before he regained some of his composure.

"Lieutenant, go see the signals officer and tell him to send the following to Fourth Fleet Headquarters: Have been ambushed near Port Stanley by German battleship TIRPITZ and battlecruisers SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU. Will attempt tactical withdrawal. You got that?"

"Uh, yes, Admiral!"

As the young officer walked away to go to the radio room, Read went out on the open bridge wing to have a look by himself at the two newcomers. Maybe, with luck, the lieutenant had been mistaken. However, one long look through one of the powerful, swivel-mounted binoculars used by bridge watchmen was enough to tell Read that the young officer had been right. His mind made up, he returned inside the command bridge to give new orders to his ships. That was when an eleven inch armor-piercing shell hit the forward six inch turret of the OMAHA, flying clean through it and killing its crew before entering the forward bridge superstructure and exploding inside. The bridge deck literally jumped upwards, projecting the occupants of the command bridge against the steel ceiling and either killing or wounding them all. Read was lucky enough to survive, but he woke up a few moments later, dazed and in pain, to find himself trapped under an overturned radar console and with acrid smoke filling the devastated bridge.

"Can...can anyone help me? HELP!"

Two men came to him after his third call for help and, with some effort, managed to take the radar console off Read. The latter then recognized the ship's navigator, along with a bridge lookout. When he tried to get up, a sharp pain made Read grimace and stop.

"Aaaah, my hip! It must be broken. How is the ship, Commander Kaiser?"

"I am not sure, Admiral, but the bridge was in essence destroyed, with most of the senior officers killed."

The shock and explosion of another heavy shell hitting the OMAHA then interrupted John Kaiser, who looked at the sailor helping him.

"Find a stretcher, so that we could carry the admiral. Make it quick!"

"Yes sir!"

John then returned his attention to Read.

"What are your orders for the ship, sir? We are being cut to ribbons by these eleven inch guns and can't even reply yet."

"Our ships should withdraw immediately at top speed and escape this trap. Against those three armored German heavy ships, we have no chances of winning. Go pass that message, now!"

"I will get on it, Admiral." promised John before leaving Read and going to the nearby radio room. Unfortunately, he found it pierced by multiple shell fragments, with its radios damaged and the radio operator dead at his post. Clenching his teeth, John went out on the bridge port open wing and ran to a large signal lamp mounted on a swivel. Powering it, he pointed it at the CINCINNATI, which had also been hit a number of times, and started sending a message in Morse code.

FROM ADMIRAL READ, ALL SHIPS ARE TO WITHDRAW IMMEDIATELY AT TOP SPEED TOWARDS NORTHEAST.

John repeated his message until the CINCINNATI acknowledged receiving it. The MILWAUKEE also acknowledged his message a minute later. John felt his heart accelerate when he saw both light cruisers starting to turn around. Running back inside, he found that the sailor who he had sent to get a stretcher was back in the bridge with both a stretcher and three more sailors, who were delicately lifting Rear admiral Read and putting him on the stretcher. John smiled to the lookout while patting his shoulder.

"Well done, sailor! As soon as the admiral is secured to the stretcher, carry him to the sick bay."

The man in turn gave him a pained look.

"The sick bay is on fire, sir, while Doctor Benning is dead. That stretcher was one of the rare things still intact there."

"Damn! Did you see any other senior officer between here and the sick bay?" Before the lookout could answer, two more eleven inch shells slammed into the aft section of the cruiser and exploded within the hull, projecting high in the air the aft twin six inch gun turret. That ignited the shells and propellant charges in the aft magazine and started a hellish chain reaction of explosions that tore the rear half of the ship wide open. Feeling the ship sinking quickly by the stern, John shouted an order to the four sailors surrounding Read's stretcher.

"The ship is going to go down soon. Let's bring the admiral to the boat deck! Follow me!"

Thankfully, they were still able to use the series of ladders along the sides of the forward superstructures but, once at the level of the boat deck, found the two boats stored there mostly reduced to splinters. Looking around him, John saw a pair of life rafts still stowed at the vertical against the walls of the superstructures, at weather deck level. He would have preferred a row boat, so that the admiral would not be bathing in cold water, but those life rafts were apparently all that was left.

“Okay, men: let’s go down to the weather deck and use those life rafts. Once there, those without life jackets will put some on before we put a raft into the water.”

Read, who was still conscious, then touched his left arm to attract his attention.

“Commander, I’m afraid that the OMAHA is finished. Pass the order to evacuate the ship.”

John nodded his head after a short hesitation.

“I will, Admiral. Okay men, carry the Admiral to the nearest raft and get it in the water. I will join with you shortly.”

Climbing back up the ladders at a run, John returned to the destroyed bridge and went to the ship’s intercom box there, hoping that it was still functional. To his immense relief, it was and he switched it to ‘ship-wide address’.

“ATTENTION ALL HANDS! ATTENTION ALL HANDS! ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN : ABANDON SHIP!”

John then switched the box off and ran down to the weather deck, where his group of sailors had lowered one raft in the water and were tying ropes to Read’s stretcher in order to lower him as delicately as possible in the waiting raft. Looking around him, John saw a few sailors aft who didn’t seem to know what to do, so he shouted at them over the din of exploding ammunition.

“AHOY, MEN! PUT A RAFT IN THE WATER AND ABANDON SHIP, NOW!”

Thankfully, those men heard him and obeyed him. By then, the unfortunate light cruiser was half under the water, with its bow up at an angle of over twenty degrees. John, a strong and fit man, helped the sailors lower Rear admiral Read’s stretcher in the waiting raft, then grabbed and put on a life jacket before climbing down in the raft to join his four sailors and the admiral. Using the oars that had been tied to the open floor of the raft, they paddled as hard as they could, trying to take enough distance to avoid being sucked down when the OMAHA would sink under the surface. Two minutes later, the bow of the OMAHA disappeared under the waves, leaving on the surface a mix of floating debris and sailors, many of them swimming on the surface. John, seeing that

his raft could still accommodate more occupants, started paddling around, going in priority to the sailors who didn't have a life jacket and then pulling them aboard. The South Atlantic waters were cold but thankfully not as frigid as in the North Atlantic, something that gave hope to John that they could be rescued before most of the men died of hypothermia.

With the OMAHA gone, the SCHARNHORST had moved away at top speed to catch up to the two fleeing American light cruisers, leaving the survivors of the OMAHA alone at the surface of the sea. Going to Read, still lying on his stretcher, John examined him quickly and frowned: the combination of his wound and of the cold water he bathed in had put him in a near state of shock. The admiral would probably not survive more than one hour in the present conditions. Another raft full of sailors and with one junior officer aboard then paddled up to his raft to join up with it. Taking a quick count of the men inside the rafts or clinging to them, John counted a total of 31 men, the admiral included, something that made him lower his head in sadness: 31 survivors out of a crew of 572 men. Hopefully, there were more men around, floating on the surface, whom he could not see from his low raft. The worst part was however the total lack of potable water for the survivors, the life rafts not having any emergency supplies aboard them, contrary to the rowboats and motor boats of the OMAHA. Looking out to the West, John managed to see the tips of the hills on East Falkland Island, maybe twenty miles away. With the currents around the coast, he knew that they would never manage to paddle all the way to the shores of Port Stanley before freezing to death. Their only hope now was that the German ships would come back to search for survivors. In that, John had some reasonable hopes: contrary to the Japanese, who were known to machine gun American survivors in the water, the Germans had a mostly clean record on that subject. Looking at the men surrounding him, John spoke in a calm, sober tone.

"Men, the only thing we can do now is wait to be rescued. Stick closely together in order to share body warmth: that will help against hypothermia."

"What about paddling to Port Stanley, sir?" asked a young sailor, making John shake his head.

"Too far, plus the coastal currents will be against us. We would burn all of our energy for nothing."

"What if the Germans come back and fish us out, sir?" asked another sailor. "How will they treat us, do you think?"

"I believe that they will treat us according to the Geneva Conventions, contrary to the Japanese, and will then intern us as prisoners of war. If a German ship or boat shows up, do not resist and simply follow their directives and everything should be fine. Contrary to what you may have seen in propaganda films and news at home, not all Germans are Nazi fanatics. Now, speak as little as you need: we don't have any potable water with us, so save your saliva, but keep your eyes open for any approaching ship."

Silence then fell in and around the two rafts, which were constantly rocked by waves and swept by cold winds. Nearly one hour passed, by which time Rear admiral Read was close to sinking into a coma. John was despairing of saving his admiral's life when one sailor suddenly screamed, joy in his voice.

"I SEE SOMETHING APPROACHING US FROM THE NORTH!"

All eyes immediately turned in that direction. John, helped by two sailors, got up on his feet on the raft in order to look better. What he saw approaching filled him with a mix of relief and sarcasm.

"Here I go again!" he said to himself as he remembered the two previous times when he had been stranded at sea and had been either rescued or spared by a German submarine, namely the U-800. What was approaching the rafts now looked somewhat different to the U-800 but still had a strong family look to it. If anything, it looked even racier and more impressive than the U-800. Waving wildly his arms above his head to attract attention, he also shouted as loud as he could.

"HEY, OVER HERE! OVER HERE!"

Someone inside the open bridge of the submarine, situated under a transparent canopy on top of the finely profiled sail, apparently saw him, as the submarine then turned directly towards the two rafts. Half a dozen men soon stepped out of the sail and onto the forward weather deck of the submarine as it approached the rafts at slow speed. A hull cover plate was then raised on the forward port side, uncovering a set of wide stairs extending down into the water. More Germans came out of the sail as a submariner threw a rope to the occupants of the rafts. However, those Germans proved to be armed soldiers, complete with combat uniforms and steel helmets and wielding some kind of impressive-looking weapons. One of the German soldiers suddenly froze, staring at John, and shouted to him in good English.

"MISTER JOHN KAISER? IS THAT YOU AGAIN?"

All the American sailors looked with incomprehension at John as he grinned, savoring the irony of this moment.

“YES, IT’S ME AGAIN, HAUPTMANN MARGRAFF. BUT LET’S CUT SHORT THE GREETINGS, PLEASE. REAR ADMIRAL READ IS WOUNDED AND IN A STATE OF SHOCK AND NEEDS IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION.”

“WE WILL GET HIM TO OUR INFIRMARY IN A FLASH, MISTER KAISER.”

“How the hell could you know that German, sir?” asked a chief petty officer to John as the rafts were being pulled alongside the submarine.

“Easy: he fished me and my family out of the sea some two years ago, off Cuba. You can relax now, Chief: this German crew is a decent bunch.”

As promised, Rear admiral Read was among the first to be carried into the submarine, with John and the rest of the survivors from the OMAHA soon following inside under German escort. Hugo Margraff chose to stay near John and talked with him as the prisoners were being led down to the boat’s cafeteria.

“So, Commander, how are your wife and two lovely kids doing?”

“They are fine and my kids are growing up just nicely, Hauptmann.” replied John, as the other American sailors near them listened on with growing bemusement. “And you, have you married yet?”

“Not yet, but I recently met a nice prospect. I am however still exploring my options with her.”

“I see! And which submarine is this, if I may ask?”

“You certainly may: it is the U-900 and you may meet some ex-crewmembers of the U-800 that you knew.”

“Oh? That would definitely please me to meet them later on. May I ask what will happen to my men now?”

“Well, right now you are being led down to the crew cafeteria, where you will get a hot meal and hot beverages. Since a full admiral is in command of the German squadron that came to Port Stanley, Kapitän von Wittgenstein is still waiting for detailed instructions to come about the handling of our prisoners. You may be brought to Germany and be interned there as prisoners of war, or you may be dropped in Port Stanley, where your forces could eventually come pick you up. As you know already, having to hold many prisoners on our submarine would present us with some complicated problems, least of which are concerns about ship’s internal security.

Hopefully, our admiral will decide to drop you in Stanley, in which case you will be able to see again your family soon.”

“That would certainly be my preferred option...and that of my men. Is your cook Mister Hannig? He was a really talented chef aboard the U-800.”

Hugo Margraff grinned wide at that question.

“We have even better: his father! Herr Otto Hannig decided to reenlist after the U-800 was sunk and his son was taken prisoner. However, I and my men recently played tourists in Canada and went to break out the survivors of the U-800, including Dieter Hannig, from their prisoners of war camp. Dieter Hannig is now fattening the crew of another boat of our new class of submarines.”

John pointed an accusing index at Hugo, faking outrage.

“YOU are the buggers who hijacked and stole your way through the Massachusetts and New York States?”

“Guilty as charged!” replied a smiling Hugo. “As you can see, we didn’t slouch on the job during the last couple of years.”

“Yeah! Your name and face must be on the FBI’s most wanted list by now.” By now, the chief petty officer following behind John couldn’t restraint further his curiosity.

“Excuse me, sir, but who the hell is this German who seems to know you so well?”

Stopping briefly at the top of the next set of stairs going down to the cafeteria, John put on a serious expression while pointing Hugo.

“Chief, this is Hauptmann Hugo Margraff, of the elite Brandenburg Regiment. He and his men specialize in commando raids, sabotage operations and infiltrations behind enemy lines. I first met them when me and my family were saved at sea near Cuba by the U-800. Their victory scores include the blowing up of the Pacific-side locks of the Panama Canal, the blowing up of the Boston Naval Ammunition Depot and the mass evasion of German prisoners of war from a Canadian camp on the shores of Lake Ontario. They are extremely dangerous men, but they are also decent guys...when they want to be.”

Hugo nearly laughed at that and patted John’s back.

“Well said, Commander! But let’s continue on our way to the cafeteria. I am sure that your men are anxious to get some hot food.”

Once down the flight of stairs, the prisoners ended up in a large, comfortable compartment with rows of long tables and fixed, swivel chairs. The German soldiers made the American sailors sit down at the tables on one side of the cafeteria, which still left 32 empty seats on the other side. As the American sailors threw disbelieving looks around them, a big, jovial man close to fifty came out of what had to be the kitchen, pushing a service cart supporting a big, steaming pot and a collection of bowls and spoons. The eyes of the Americans then all fixed on the young and beautiful blonde that followed the cook out of the kitchen, pushing another cart loaded with coffee urns and cups. That was when Hugo Margraff spoke up loudly, so that all could hear him.

"Gentlemen, this is our cook, Matrosen Obergefreiter Otto Hannig. He will serve you one of his specialties: Gulash Suppe! Since he doesn't speak English, Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal volunteered to act as liaison between you and the rest of the crew."

"You have women serving as submariners?" asked Chief Petty Officer Clarence Wilson, utterly shocked, making Hugo grin in amusement.

"No, but I am sure that the men of the U-900 would love that. Oberhelferin Blumenthal is an occasional passenger on this submarine, like me and my men." That last sentence made John Kaiser look at the cute blonde with more than simple appreciation for her good looks. He however didn't make any comment about that then, instead asking a question to Hugo.

"Would it be possible for me to see Rear admiral Read after this, Hauptmann?"

"Of course, Commander! He is presently being treated by our ship's doctor, Kapitänleutnant Adolph Heinnemann, who by the way speaks excellent English. Now, enjoy your Gulash Suppe and hot coffee."

After eating a bowl of the Gulash Suppe, which proved excellent, and drinking a hot cup of coffee, John was escorted by Hugo to the nearby infirmary, where they found Doctor Heinnemann busy putting on a cast around Rear-admiral Read's right upper leg. Read, who was fully conscious, made a weak smile on seeing John enter the treatment room.

"Aaah, Commander Kaiser! Luckily, I was mistaken about having broken my hip : it appears instead that I broke my right leg. It is still painful, but is a lot less complicated to treat than a broken hip. So, are the men being treated correctly?"

"Most correctly, Admiral. They just finished eating one of the best goulash soups I ever tasted and have been provided with dry clothes."

"Good!"

A tall and thin Kriegsmarine senior officer entered the infirmary then, prompting Hugo Margraff into coming to rigid attention. However, the newcomer's attention went straight to John and he walked quickly to him to shake his hand, a warm smile on his face.

"Mister John Kaiser! And a lieutenant commander to boot! We really should stop meeting like this."

"I wholeheartedly agree with you on that, Captain von Wittgenstein. Am I to deduce that you command the U-900?"

"You certainly may! But let me present my salutations to your admiral before we speak further."

Facing Read, lying on his back on the treatment table, Ulrich came to rigid attention and saluted him the military fashion.

"Rear admiral Read, I am Korvettenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein, Captain of the U-900. I have finally received instructions from my force commander about the handling of our prisoners of war and came down to inform you officially about them."

With Read's attention now fully focused, Ulrich went on.

"Admiral Wilhelm Marschall, in command of our fleet aboard the KMS TIRPITZ, admired the bravery of your men as you charged while hopelessly outgunned. As a consequence and in view of considerations about internal ships security if we had to sail back to France with hundreds of prisoners aboard, Admiral Marschall has decided, with the express accord of Grossadmiral Dönitz, to drop off in Port Stanley all the American and British military personnel captured during this operation. Also to be dropped there will be the civilian merchantmen of various nationalities captured during the taking of prize ships by us. Before you are left in Stanley, however, its installations and its airfield will be thoroughly demilitarized, with all the weapons, refueling and repair facilities destroyed, in order to render Port Stanley useless as a refueling point for your navies. Once the demolition work will be completed, our fleet will then send a radio message to the Brazilian Navy, telling it to send a hospital ship clearly marked with Red Cross flags to Port Stanley, to pick you up and repatriate your men and the British soldiers we had captured. I suspect that most of the civilian inhabitants of Stanley will want to leave as well then, as there will be little left there to sustain a decent living. A warning, though: any Allied ship other than hospital ships trying to approach the Falklands in the coming days and weeks will be sunk on sight. Do you have any questions about the terms I have just listed, Admiral Read?"

"No! In truth, I am quite surprised to hear that we won't be brought to Germany as prisoners of war. Your admiral is being quite lenient and considerate in this matter."

"Admiral Read," said Ulrich in a most sober tone, "this leniency is also meant to be a message from Germany to your government. You and I know that Great Britain is close to total military collapse, due to our submarine blockade. You also know how bad the situation is for you in the Pacific, with Australia isolated and besieged by the Japanese. Continuing this war will only cause more bloodshed, with Germany and Japan now holding the advantage at sea and with the British Empire falling apart. Start considering peace talks, unless you want the dying and suffering to continue."

"I will pass that message on, Captain von Wittgenstein," said a somber Read after a couple of seconds. "However, I can't guarantee what the answer of my government to this will be."

"We fully realize that, Admiral. Just passing the message will make us content." replied Ulrich, equally somber.

CHAPTER 9 – DEAL OR NO DEAL

10:39 (Washington D.C. Time)

Tuesday, October 19, 1943

Bethesda Navy Hospital

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

A male orderly was helping Rear admiral Read to get back in his bed after he had gone to use the bathroom of his private hospital room, when Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations of the U.S. Navy, entered the room, followed by two other navy officers and one man wearing a civilian suit. King, a tall and solidly-built man with an air of supreme authority about him, waited until the orderly had left before approaching Read and stopping beside his bed.

“Admiral Read, let me first tell you how sorry I am about the loss of so many of your men. And please don’t take that as an indirect blame: you were hopelessly outgunned and did the best anyone could in the circumstances.”

“Thank you, Admiral!” replied Read in a tired voice, being still under the lingering effects of painkillers. King then continued on.

“I came this morning with two of my staff officers, Commander Arthur Renquist, from my Intelligence Department, and Captain Roger Halle, my Assistant Operations Officer. Also with us is Mister Harry Hopkins, political and economic advisor to the President. Would you mind telling us first how the battle near Port Stanley went?”

“Not at all, Admiral.” answered Read before spending over six minutes to describe the battle, from its preparation phase to its aftermath. His recounting left his visitors in a somber mood, with King then asking a question.

“This U-900, could you describe what you saw of it?”

“Yes, Admiral, but I actually didn’t see much of it. It was a really big submarine, bigger than our own GATO-Class fleet submarines, and had to be at least 350 feet long. Its hull was shaped like that of a whale and its lines were very smooth, making it look like a racer. The top of the sail had transparent canopies forward and aft and there was a curious-looking sort of pod attached to the top of the upper vertical rudder, which stuck partly out of the water. The inside proved to be very spacious and comfortable by

normal submarine standards and it had a fully equipped infirmary, with a treatment table and a double bunk rack for patients. The crew had a large dedicated cafeteria, with a capacity of at least sixty seats, and I can attest that the food was of top quality. I was unfortunately not allowed to see the various combat systems of the submarine.”

“And how were you and your men treated while aboard that U-900, Admiral Read?” asked Commander Renquist, who had taken out of his briefcase a notepad and a pen and was scribbling down notes.

“We were treated very correctly at all times, Commander. The commander of the U-900, Captain von Wittgenstein, struck me as a true gentleman, on top of having proven earlier his tactical competence by sinking both of my destroyers in a fair fight. He genuinely cared for our wellbeing as prisoners and didn’t strike me at all as being some Nazi fanatic. Even the German commandos embarked aboard the submarine, while obviously competent and dangerous, showed restraint towards my men.”

“You saw German commandos on that submarine, Admiral?” said Renquist, his interest redoubling. Read nodded his head once.

“Yes! I saw at least a dozen of them, all wearing camouflage field uniforms and steel helmets. They were armed with some kind of rifles with long, curved magazines. Their leader was a Hauptmann Margraff. That Margraff actually knew one of my officers, Lieutenant commander John Kaiser, the navigator aboard the OMAHA, and seemed in friendly terms with him. When I later asked Kaiser about that, he told me that the same Margraff and his commandos were aboard the infamous U-800 when that submarine saved Kaiser, his wife and his two young kids, after their transport had sunk in a storm off Cuba in January of 1942. Kaiser and his family ended up spending a few days aboard the U-800 before they were dropped on a beach of the island of Curacao, off Venezuela. Kaiser also told me that Margraff confessed to him that he and his men had been the ones who had infiltrated our East Coast in order to go break a number of Germans out of a prisoner of war camp in Canada, on the shores of Lake Ontario.”

King and his two officers, along with Hopkins, exchanged quick glances on hearing that, prompting another question from Renquist.

“And did your Commander Kaiser tell you anything else that he would have learned about those commandos, Admiral?”

“Well, he did tell me that they belonged to the Brandenburg Regiment, something that he had already reported back in 1942. He did tell me something a bit weird, though. There was a young and very pretty German woman aboard the U-900 who spoke

excellent English and helped our men communicate with the crew of the submarine. I saw her from up close a number of time while she was wearing what appeared to me as a German Army uniform. Kaiser told me that, when he asked Margraff about her, Margraff answered that she was only an occasional passenger, like him and his men. Kaiser deduced from that that this woman may have participated in one or more infiltration or sabotage mission. However, I found that hard to believe: the Germans are not known to use women in combat, at least up to now.”

Read’s answer seemed to touch a nerve in Renquist, who opened wide his briefcase and searched in it before extracting a file marked ‘SECRET’ and opening, then showing one page in it to Read. The page was actually a copy of an artist’s sketch of the kind made by police about suspects.

“That young woman, did she look like this sketch?”

“Yes, that’s her!” said at once Read, who gave a surprised look up at Renquist. “How did you end up with her portrait, Commander?”

The intelligence officer had a most somber look on his face as he answered him, while Admiral King looked over his shoulder at the sketch.

“Admiral, this sketch was produced by a FBI artist, using the descriptions given by witnesses involved in the July infiltration of our New Hampshire coast by a German commando team that then traveled under disguise all the way to Lake Ontario, where they stole a boat, crossed to the Canadian shore and broke nearly a hundred German prisoners of war out of a Canadian camp. That woman was seen there, both in civilian clothes and in a British naval uniform. Now, you said that you saw her from up close while she was wearing a German uniform. Can you describe to me as best as you can recall the various insignias and badges on her uniform. Any detail that you could remember will prove very useful to me.”

“Very well!” said Read before concentrating for a moment in order to recall mental images from his memory. “First, she presented herself to me as ‘Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal’. She wore a gray uniform consisting of a double-breasted jacket, skirt, gray silk stockings and black shoes, plus a gray field cap and a white shirt worn with a black tie. There were a number of insignias, patches and badges on her jacket and cap.”

Read had to slow down then, as he did his best to remember the smallest details about those insignias, patches and badges, while Renquist wrote down everything he said. At the end, the intelligence officer consulted a small military publication carried in his

briefcase to try to identify the various things described by Read. The puzzled look that appeared on Renquist's face then attracted a question from Admiral King.

"Is there something unusual about that German woman, Commander?"

"Uh, you could say that, Admiral. Overall, her uniform appears to be that of a German Army female auxiliary wearing the trade specialty patch of radio direction finder operator. Those auxiliaries are typically employed by the Abwehr, the German Army intelligence service. That would jive with the fact that she was with members of the Brandenburg Regiment, an elite unit controlled by the Abwehr."

"So?" said King, not seeing anything special in that.

"Two of the things that Admiral Read saw jumped at me, Admiral. That woman was wearing both the U-Boat Combat Badge and the ribbon of the Iron Cross, Second Class. First off, this is the only time I ever heard of a woman wearing the U-Boat Combat Badge, which is normally awarded to submariners who completed at least two war patrols or who distinguished themselves at sea. And that woman is not even part of the German Navy! Second, German women who earned the Iron Cross are very rare indeed. Your Oberhelferin Blumenthal must have accomplished some truly valorous service to earn those two awards. However, going undercover in an infiltration mission deep into American and Canadian territory would probably have helped her earn those awards. For your info, Blumenthal was seen helping to hijack a number of vehicles and also helped to hijack a fishing boat on the shores of Lake Ontario. She was also armed with a pistol and looked ready to use it. If she is ever captured by us, she would risk execution as a saboteur and a spy."

Read couldn't help stare at the artist portrait of Blumenthal, utterly stunned.

"But, she was so sweet and polite."

Renquist made a bitter smirk at those words.

"The best female spies are usually sweet and polite, Admiral, on top of often being at least pretty. That makes them more dangerous and effective. About this Hauptmann Margraff, did he look like this?"

Read only had to look one second at the other sketch shown to him by Renquist before nodding his head.

"That's him alright! I suppose that he has quite a pedigree attached to him?"

"You could say that, Admiral. This Hauptmann Margraff and his men seem to have made the boarding and hijacking of Allied merchant ships their specialty, along with sabotage operations on American soil. They were the ones who blew up the Boston

Naval Ammunition Depot, the army fort guarding the entrance to Portland harbor, kidnapped the Governor of Massachusetts in his own capitol building, blew up the Panama Canal locks on the Pacific side and crossed all of the New York and New Hampshire states to break Germans out of a Canadian prisoner of war camp. And that Blumenthal girl is traveling along with them, probably using her female charms to help reinforce the false identities used by these commandos when wearing civilian clothes.”

“Damn, such a beautiful girl, yet so dangerous!” said Admiral King while looking again at Blumenthal’s portrait. “Personally, I would hate to have to shoot her.”

“But she probably wouldn’t hesitate to shoot you if ordered to, Admiral.” replied Renquist, dead serious.

“So, why would she have been on the U-900 for a raid on Port Stanley?” asked Read, still doubtful. “I can’t see how she could have been helpful to these Germans then.”

“Admiral,” said Renquist, “I received only this morning some information gathered from the debriefs of the civilian merchantmen whose ships were taken as prize ships by the Germans, ships that are now probably in a German base in Occupied France. One of those ships, the Panamean-flagged BUENAVENTURA, was hijacked just after leaving the Chilean port of Antofagasta, with its intended destination being Seattle. A young couple that had paid for a one-way passage to Seattle forced at gunpoint the ship to stop, allowing a German boarding crew to come aboard and take control of it. While those boarders most probably came from the U-900, the young couple was none other than Hauptmann Margraff and Oberhelferin Blumenthal. The latter even shot dead a crewmember who was trying to resist the hijacking. The Germans then sailed south with the BUENAVENTURA, in the company of another hijacked ship, the American-flagged tanker CHARLES FINLEY. The timeline of those events in turn helped us to clarify a mystery that was bugging us: the utter disappearance of the U.S.S. INTREPID battle group while transiting the Drake Passage. Our ships were probably detected by the U-900 and then ambushed and sunk there in a surprise torpedo attack. Heavy radio jamming by the Germans at that time made any message from our ships totally unreadable during that attack and our eight ships sank without being able to give the alert.”

Read’s mouth opened under the effect of shock as he digested all that.

“And what did the BUENAVENTURA carry to warrant such German attention?”

With Admiral King and Captain Halle listening closely, Renquist answered Read in a somber tone.

“The BUENAVENTURA was carrying no less than 690 metric tons of tungsten, a rare strategic metal that is in critically short supply in Germany. The ship also carried 5,500 tons of copper, 575 tons of nickel, 430 tons of molybdenum and 310 tons of manganese, all types of metals of high strategic importance. Another merchant ship that was seized by the Germans, this time in Port Stanley, was the S.S. MATILDA, an Australian bulk cargo ship loaded with over 8,000 tons of pure bauxite, from which aluminum is produced. Overall, the Germans seized enough various metals and refined fuel during their raid to cover the needs of their war industries for two months or more, on top of sinking many of our warships in the process. From the German perspective, the hijackings by the U-900 and the destruction of Port Stanley were significant strategic successes.”

There was an oppressive silence for a moment in the hospital room, until Harry Hopkins cleared his voice before speaking up, looking at Read.

“Admiral Read, the main reason I came here with Admiral King is because of what Captain von Wittgenstein told you about us needing to think about stopping the fighting. What were your impressions when he told you that? Was it his own personal wish or was he expressing the wishes of his government?”

Read took his time to respond, thinking over his answer carefully.

“Mister Hopkins, I believe that this came from his government. Why do I think so? First, he obviously didn't have himself the authority to decide to drop off all the prisoners taken by the Germans in Port Stanley. That would have needed the authority of at the minimum the admiral commanding their fleet from the TIRPITZ. Second, for the Germans to let go so many prisoners after a battle, especially when one of these prisoners is of flag rank, is unprecedented. The argument that they didn't want to compromise the internal security of their ships may have had some weight, but they could have easily dealt with that. Now, let me be brutally frank with you and Admiral King on one point: from what I saw and learned, the new family of advanced German submarines presently hold a large advantage over our present destroyers and sonar systems. With these new submarines, the Germans can basically take control of large portions of oceans, like when they put in place their maritime blockade around the British Isles, and interdict both our maritime commerce and our military supply lines. The only way not to fall prey to them right now is to keep our ship speeds high, at a minimum of

twenty knots. However, going that fast burns fuel like crazy and drastically cuts the range of our ships, thus exacerbating our supply problems. Right now, they only have a limited number of those new submarines, but the more time goes, the worse the situation will become for us. Tell me, Mister Hopkins: how long do you think that Great Britain can realistically still fight before the German submarine blockade starves the British into submission?"

The presidential advisor seemed to suddenly age at that question.

"To be frank, there are voices in England that have already started talking about possibly discussing an armistice with Germany. As can be expected, Prime Minister Churchill is still resolved to fight to the end, but the British situation is nearly untenable, with their ships and planes now severely rationed in fuel and with food rationing getting stricter by the week."

"And what do you think would happen when the Germans eventually have enough of their new submarines to establish a blockade around our East Coast and in the Caribbean Basin? How many men, ships and wasted supplies will we lose then while trying to sustain our war effort and support our forces in the Pacific? Unless we soon find a counter to these new German submarines, then we may just bleed ourselves to death. We need better sonars and better anti-submarine weapons, and fast!"

"Our specialists are working hard on that, Admiral Read." said Admiral King, his expression severe. "However, we can't give up, not now, not ever!"

His answer only managed to make Read more adamant about his opinion and he stared back at his redoubtable chief.

"Sir, we have been getting promises of better sonars and weapons for over a year now, with little showing up in the front lines. A single one of the new German submarines sank in quick succession the cruiser MEMPHIS and my two destroyers. How many more of our ships will we lose when faced with half a dozen of those submarines deployed along our East Coast?"

King was struck hard by that question but didn't reply to it, unwilling to openly acknowledge how bad things had been in the last few days. The truth was that all the efforts to regain control of the South Atlantic had ended in disaster, something that had been heavily censored and which even Admiral Read didn't know about yet. A battle squadron formed of the old battleships NEW YORK, TEXAS, NEW MEXICO and IDAHO and accompanied by two heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, nine destroyer escorts, four fleet destroyers and one escort carrier had tried to clear the lanes between the Brazilian

coast and the Falkland Islands. That massive naval force had then been ambushed repeatedly by at least three German submarines, losing in quick succession all its major combatant units and most of its destroyers and destroyer escorts. The 'coup de grâce' to the surviving American ships had come when the German battleship TIRPITZ, leading the battlecruisers SCHARNHORST and GNESENAU, had caught up with them as the battered American ships were attempting to withdraw. The American patrol bombers based in Brazil had done their best to hit back at the Germans, but their bombing had proved mostly ineffective, with only a couple of near misses against the fast and heavily armed German surface warships. With the U.S. Fourth Fleet now essentially destroyed, the Germans had been free to wreck havoc among the heavy maritime traffic circulating up and down the Brazilian coast. Then, the German surface units had withdrawn, disappearing in the middle of the South Atlantic. As for the German submarines, nobody knew if they had also withdrawn or were still lurking around. The final result, which was still in effect, was a virtual paralysis of the Allied maritime commerce along the Atlantic coast of South America.

17:03 (Paris Time)

Friday, October 22, 1943

Submarine Pen Number One, Keroman One submarine bunker

Lorient, French Atlantic coast

After getting received by a full military band playing the German national anthem inside the giant submarine bunker in the port of Lorient, Ulrich was pleased to see that both Grossadmiral Dönitz and Minister of Armaments Albert Speer were present as well to greet him and his U-900. However, as happy as he was to be back at base after such a long mission, he insisted on bringing the two dignitaries as quickly as decency allowed to the officers' wardroom of the U-900, where he pointed to Dönitz and Speer three booklets marked 'SECRET', three sorts of typewriting machines, an opened wooden crate and what looked like a military instruction manual, all laid on the long table of the wardroom. Dönitz felt his heart jump in his chest when he recognized the three classified booklets.

"Enemy code books? Three of them? Mein Gott, my good von Wittgenstein, you are positively spoiling me today! Which ones are they?"

"Admiral, you have here the latest code books for the United States Navy, the British Royal Navy and the British Royal Air Force, along with the code machines for their use. Now, as important as these things may be, they pale in my opinion compared with what we found by pure luck aboard an American Army cargo ship transporting various munitions and which we sank just out of Port Stanley after taking it out of the harbor. If you and Minister Speer may approach that crate on the table."

A bit mystified, the two dignitaries came close enough to be able to look inside the opened crate and read the cover title of the military manual. Ulrich then explained himself.

"Admiral, Minister Speer, we were intrigued to find thousands of similar crates on that American cargo ship, all of which contained artillery shell fuses designed to fit on American five inch anti-aircraft shells, but not finding a single five inch shell aboard."

"An improved fuse model meant to upgrade their existing anti-aircraft shells, maybe?" proposed Speer, making Ulrich nod his head once, his expression most sober.

"Correct, Herr Minister, but when we looked further into that, we found hundreds of copies of the military instruction manual now sitting beside that crate. Reading quickly through one of those manuals made me fall hard on my bum, and for good reasons: these shell fuses you see contain a miniature radar circuit that is meant to detect aircraft around the shell and detonate it when it passes within a certain minimum distance to an aircraft. It is called a 'proximity fuse', with the coded designation being 'VT Fuse'. With such a fuse, American anti-aircraft gunners no longer need to set a specific altitude or time delay to detonate their shells: they just need to aim, fire and let the fuse find out by itself when is the best time to detonate its shell. You can imagine how much more accurate and deadly a shell would be against an aircraft if equipped with this fuse. It seems that the Americans have now perfected such a fuse to the point where it has been put into mass production and is now being shipped to American combat ships in the Pacific."

With Dönitz staring down with disbelief at the fuses inside the crate, Speer took one of the fuses in his right hand and examined it closely with an expression approaching awe.

"The American radar technology is this advanced? Mein Gott! I must call in experts from Telefunken and the Luftwaffe on this at once."

"We took care of loading twelve crates of those new fuses aboard the U-900, along with twelve instruction manuals, Herr Minister. You may use them as you wish." Speer gave a thankful look to Ulrich and spoke in a solemn tone.

"Kapitän von Wittgenstein, I don't know what kind of reward would be sufficient to acknowledge the full importance of what you brought back from your mission. And I am not talking only about the tungsten metal and the thousands of tons of refined fuel you brought back, all of them very precious to our war industries."

A malicious smile appeared on Dönitz' face as he stared at Ulrich, visibly most pleased.

"Well, I am pretty sure that he will refuse a promotion that would put him in a land-based staff position, even though I would kill to have him teach our future U-Boote commanders, but I can think of one thing."

Dönitz' expression then became most serious and he shouted two words.

"KAPITÄN, ATTENTION!"

Ulrich came at once to rigid attention, following which Dönitz continued in a very official tone.

"Korvettenkapitän Ulrich von Wittgenstein, in view of your exceptional services at sea at the commands of the U-900, I now promote you to the rank of fregattenkapitän, effective immediately. You will continue to command the U-900 while wearing your new rank. Furthermore, there will be more awards and distinctions for you and your crew, which will be arranged by me in the next few days. Once those awards will have been distributed, you and your crew will then get a full month of home leave, something you all richly earned. In turn, that month will give me time to have your U-900 fully reviewed and refitted and to install a couple of new little gadgets in it. Congratulation, Fregattenkapitän von Wittgenstein."

Ulrich enthusiastically shook the hand offered by his admiral, being most happy about the month of leave at his home town rather than because of his promotion.

14:11 (London Time)

Thursday, October 28, 1943

Lead Dornier Do 217 K-3 medium bomber

German air armada arriving over Scapa Flow's main anchorage

Scapa Flow, Orkney Islands, off northern tip of Scotland

North Sea

Generalfeldmarschal Albert Kesselring would not normally be part of an air combat mission, in view of his rank and value as a strategic commander, but this

mission was not a normal one. If all went according to plan, it would effectively end British dominance of the seas for years to come and destroy the Royal Navy as a major fighting force. The fact that Albert Kesselring, a veteran aviator, loved flying had also been a factor in deciding the generalfeldmarschal to ignore the objections of his subalterns to his presence on this mission. Looking left and right from the pilot's seat of the twin-engined Dornier Do 217 K-3 medium bomber, Kesselring felt immense pride as he embraced the 330 aircraft air armada that was about to pound the British naval base and anchorage of Scapa Flow. Ironically, this major bombing mission, along with a couple of smaller ones being done simultaneously against Rosyth and Newcastle, had been made possible by the Kriegsmarine in two ways: first, the submarine blockade around the British Isles, which had starved the British forces of fuel and had forced the Royal Navy to confine its bigger units to port in order to save what precious fuel was left; second, the nearly 23,000 tons of high-quality aviation gasoline captured in the South Atlantic and recently brought to Lorient, Brest and Cherbourg, gasoline that had helped refill the strategic reserves of fuel of Kesselring's aviation units, which encompassed all the German aircraft on the Western Front, from Norway down to Southern France.

As the armada approached from the Northeast the small town of Kirkwall, to the North-northeast of Scapa Flow's main anchorage, thus flying through a gap in the British heavy anti-aircraft batteries defending Scapa Flow, Kesselring gave an order on the radio.

"Shark Four, from Shark Leader: break off from the formation now and go down to deal with the British airfield and anti-aircraft guns on both sides of the anchorage." On that radio command, a total of 41 Messerschmitt Me 410 HORNISS heavy fighter-bombers broke off and split in turn into three separate squadrons that dove towards the ground and Mainland Island, where a British naval air station and eight heavy anti-aircraft gun batteries were located. The Me 410 had been in service for only a few months now and this was going to be its first use in a major operation. Designed as a long range day heavy fighter-bomber with heavy cannon and machine gun armament, the Me 410 had been selected by Kesselring as the perfect type of aircraft to strafe the British air station and gun batteries. If some British fighter aircraft managed to climb up to try intercept the German armada, then 31 Focke-Wulf Fw 190 G long range fighters providing close escort to the German bombers would then deal with them.

As the Me 410s started spreading destruction on the ground, Kesselring anxiously scanned with his binoculars the main and secondary anchorage areas, plus the quays of the naval base situated on Hoy Island, to identify and select the main targets for his planes. Battleships and aircraft carriers would of course rate high as important targets, but Kesselring was experienced enough to know that, if anything, cruisers and escort carriers were actually the main strength of the British naval forces that patrolled daily the seas around the World, along with a multitude of destroyers, frigates and corvettes. He was thus prepared to assign a sizeable number of his bombers to deal with those cruisers and escort carriers. A big grin soon appeared on Kesselring's face as he finished counting the British ships anchored or moored in Scapa Flow: from a distance he already could identify one old fleet carrier, H.M.S. FURIOUS, five escort carriers, four battleships, seven heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and over two dozen destroyers, frigates and minesweepers, plus a dozen submarines. Thinking for a few seconds, Kesselring then started giving a series of short orders, assigning targets to the various units of his air armada as the first puffs of black smoke from exploding British anti-aircraft shells started bursting in the sky around his aircraft. On his part, the bombardier/missile controller sitting in the nose of Kesselring's Do 217 K-3 concentrated his attention on the British battleship H.M.S. NELSON, anchored in the middle of the bay, some two kilometers ahead of the bomber. With the powerful battleship centered in the crosshairs of his special sight, the bombardier then pushed a button on his control stick, releasing one of the two FRITZ-X guided bombs carried by his bomber. A 1570 kilo weapon put into service nearly a year ago but that had not been used widely until now, the FRITZ-X was a radio-controlled weapon designed to attack and sink heavy naval units. As such, it had a very powerful warhead containing 320 kilos of high explosives, but it had a major drawback: during the guidance phase, its parent aircraft had to fly in a straight line at low speed, thus making it quite vulnerable to enemy fire. As the guided bomb started falling from high altitude towards the H.M.S. NELSON, the German bombardier hoped that the British gunners would take some time to react to the German air attack, thus giving him time for his bomb to hit the battleship. What did help him was the fact that the anti-aircraft defenses of the NELSON, a ship built in the 1920s, were not very heavy, consisting only in a total of six medium anti-aircraft guns, two octuple 2-pounder mounts and eight machine guns. Still, some anti-aircraft shells exploding around in the sky shook somewhat the bomber as the bombardier concentrated into keeping aligned the flare in the tail of the bomb with the

British battleship. The German nearly shouted with joy when a huge explosion amidships rocked the NELSON, under the main forward superstructures and near the waterline.

"HIT ON THE TARGET! PILOT, TURN AROUND FOR A SECOND BOMB RELEASE, PLEASE!"

"Well, if you ask this so politely, Hans..." replied Kesselring, also happy for the bomb hit, before doing a half-turn to the right in order to return to the tail of the lineup of the four Do 217 K-3 assigned to attack the NELSON. As he did so, he looked around at how his other aircraft were doing and nodded his head in satisfaction: surprise seemed to have been near total. While the British had been ready to repel small raids and lone reconnaissance flights, the appearance of such a huge air armada, coming from the Northwest rather than from the East, had clearly taken them off balance. Another battleship, the H.M.S. QUEEN ELIZABETH, had already been hit by a FRITZ-X, while all the British cruisers in sight had to each contend with a minimum of six German dive bombers. A huge blast wave and following fireball in the middle of the anchorage then marked the end of the old battlecruiser H.M.S. REVENGE as it blew up, hit in its forward main magazine by a guided bomb.

In one of the Junkers Ju 88 A-4 medium dive bombers assigned to attack the British destroyers moored at the naval base on Hoy Island, the pilot grinned ferociously as he was diving on a group of three destroyers moored side by side along a jetty.

"How could anybody miss such an easy target? One of these destroyers will soon be toast!"

"You do miss the dart board at the mess when you have more than three mugs of beer in your belly, Hans." Replied his copilot, being malicious. Hans ignored him for the moment, concentrating on his bombing aim and finally pushing his release button, letting go his two 1,000 kilo armor-piercing bombs. To Hans partial disappointment, one of his two bombs barely missed the outer destroyer of the trio and exploded in the water beside its hull, while the other bomb did hit dead center that destroyer. That direct hit devastated the engine room of the destroyer, while the near-miss still buckled a number of hull plates, creating heavy water leaks inside the boiler rooms. Mentally pestering his poor aim, the pilot of the Ju 88 A-4 pulled hard on his control yoke to come out of his dive and leave the way open to the next Ju 88 A-4 behind him. His copilot couldn't resist pricking him a little then.

"How many beers did you have before taking off, Hans?"

"Fuck off, Karl!"

About three minutes later, a huge deflagration followed by an unending chain reaction of explosions shook the whole British naval base area, as the main ammunition dump for large caliber naval shells and torpedoes was hit by a number of bombs from an air group of Heinkel He 111 H medium bombers, flying level at medium altitude and carpet-bombing the naval base's installations. Explosions, fires and thick black smoke now covered the whole British base, while many ships in the anchorage were either sinking or already sunk. However, Kesselring did not let off the pressure from his attack, reassigning bombers which still carried bombs or guided weapons to the targets still intact or afloat. With much of the British air defenses now neutralized, the operators of FRITZ-X guided bombs and of Heinschel Hs 293 rocket-propelled gliding bombs started fully making their mark on the battle, sinking one after the other the British cruisers and escort carriers still afloat. The bombers and heavy fighters which didn't have bombs anymore but had rounds left for their forward fixed cannons and machine guns were sent by Kesselring to strafe either ground installations or the destroyers and smaller ships still afloat. Only when his bombers and heavy fighter-bombers were completely out of ammunition did Kesselring give the order to return to base. During that time, the R.A.F., as hampered by lack of fuel as the Royal Navy, had been able to send up only nine Hawker HURRICANE fighters to engage the German air armada. Those nine brave fighter pilots were however quickly overwhelmed and shot down by the 31 Fw 190 G long range fighters escorting the bombers, before they could even fire once on the bombers. Only the British anti-aircraft heavy guns did cause some damage, shooting down three German bombers and damaging seven more aircraft, all in all a casualty rate that Kesselring was most ready to pay in view of the massive losses caused to the British fleet. By the time the commander of the Home Fleet could tally the damage, he found out that he still had left intact and ready for sea a grand total of one light cruiser, four frigates and corvettes, two minesweepers and six submarines. The British admiral learned later on that he had also lost to air attack in Rosyth and Newcastle the battleship H.M.S. RODNEY, three cruisers, five destroyers and frigates and two minesweepers. The British Home Fleet had in essence mostly ceased to exist on that day.

10:03 (London Time)

Tuesday, November 9, 1943

Prime Minister's residence, 10 Downing Street

Whitehall District, London

"Where is the Prime Minister?" nearly growled Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee while storming inside Churchill's official residence. Churchill's butler did his best to block his way, but could only protest verbally.

"The Prime Minister is still sleeping, sir, and asked not to be disturbed."

"Still sleeping, at past ten in the morning? There are urgent matters to be attended to, damn it!"

Attlee, a small, thin and nearly bald man with a short moustache, ignored the butler and ran up the stairs leading to the upper floor. There, he pushed open the door of Churchill's bedroom, finding him alone in bed and snoring loudly. Approaching the bed, Attlee shook his head at the sight of the two empty bottles of scotch on the night stand. The next thing he shook was the Prime Minister himself.

"Wake up, Winston! I SAID, WAKE THE BLOODY UP, WINSTON! WE HAVE URGENT MATTERS TO DEAL WITH!"

Churchill, still in a half drunken stupor, finally opened his eyes and snarled at Attlee.

"Uh? What? What is it? I asked not to be disturbed."

"The cabinet and the nation needs you, that's what, Winston. We have urgent decisions to take."

Reluctantly, Churchill sat up in bed and swung his legs out, then held his head in his hands.

"God, I feel awful!"

"With all the liquid courage you have been downing lately to escape the hard decisions needed to be taken, no wonder!" Replied Attlee in a severe tone. "What we need from you is less drinking, less bombastic statements, more realism and more empathy towards our people."

Churchill snapped his head up to stare angrily into Attlee's eyes, causing in turn a wave of pain through his brain and making him cringe before he could reply to his deputy.

"What do you mean, more empathy towards our people? I always cared for our people?"

"Is that so? Then why do you ignore its suffering and the growing death and destruction from German air attacks and sea blockade, instead simply repeating that we will fight to the death and will never surrender? Right now, our sailors are sitting ducks aboard ships immobilized by lack of fuel, while our bomber aircraft are being systematically destroyed on the ground, thanks again to lack of fuel, and while our war industries are being bombed out of existence one by one. Rationing has now come to the point where the basic health of our civilian population is at risk, while we are running out of ammunition for our anti-aircraft guns, thanks to that damn German submarine blockade. We have to do something else than say empty slogans."

"Like what?"

"Like possibly looking at discussing an armistice with the Germans." fired back Attlee. "I know that you hate that idea and so do I, but it has now come to the point where we cannot ignore that option anymore."

"Then, if it's to discuss our surrender, do it without me." said the stubborn Churchill, swinging back his legs on the bed. Attlee, now getting truly angry, forced him back to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

"NOW LISTEN UP, WINSTON! WE NEED YOU, NOW! IF YOU ARE NOT READY TO COME AND DO YOUR JOB, THEN WE WILL VOTE YOU OUT OF OFFICE AND DESIGNATE SOMEONE ELSE IN YOUR PLACE."

That threat finally convinced Churchill to get out of bed and to go to his closet, to start dressing up while grumbling to himself. Before leaving him, Attlee stopped for a moment in the frame of the bedroom's door.

"For your info, we have been discussing already for a couple of hours, so don't be surprised if we will have a list of options ready for you when you will show up at the cabinet conference room."

The politician then walked out, leaving Churchill alone in his bedroom. A quick look in a mirror then decided the Prime Minister that he better shave and wash his face before dressing up, if he wanted not to look like some kind of old scarecrow.

It was past eleven o'clock in the morning when Churchill showed up at his government's offices, located next to his residence in the Home Office Building. It took another twelve minutes to reassemble the ministers and military leaders who had dispersed after waiting hours for him. Once everybody needed was present, Churchill looked slowly around the table, noting the mix of frustration, discouragement and

resignation on the faces looking back at him. To his annoyance, he saw very little combativeness or resolve in those same faces. Still half drunk and not feeling in a mood to compromise, he sat down in his chair and threw a severe look at his ministers and military chiefs.

“So, what kind of options have you been discussing together without me, gentlemen?”

That earned him annoyed stares from around the table, with Clement Attlee looking the most pissed.

“Mister Prime Minister, we had to discuss viable options for the country, since you had deemed not fit to attend yourself. I will now save time for all of us and will list for you the options left to us. The first option is to continue resisting, despite our severe lack of fuel and dwindling food supplies. However, all of us agreed that this option will only result in the gradual destruction of Great Britain as a viable military power and in progressively more acute starvation for the whole of our population. At the present rate, all of our major war industries will have been destroyed by air bombardment, while most of our ships and aircraft will have been destroyed in their bases, and this within two to three months, unless we somehow manage to break the German submarine blockade of our coasts. Unfortunately, our lack of fuel makes that a completely unrealistic expectation. The only way to break the blockade would be to get massive American support in warships and planes. Unfortunately, our ambassador in Washington reports that such American support is not forthcoming. President Roosevelt is presently focused on trying to avoid a complete defeat in the Pacific at the hands of the Japanese. So, the option of continuing resistance is not a viable one in the long or even medium term. What we are left with as realistic options is to either open armistice talks with Germany and try to get as favorable terms as possible that would ensure the survival of Great Britain as a country, or to surrender.”

That last word made Churchill jump out of his chair, furious.

“SURRENDER? NEVER! YOU REALLY WANT TO SEE GERMAN TROOPS PARADING DOWN WHITEHALL? I WOULD DIE RATHER THAN SEE THAT!”

To his surprise, Attlee didn't push back at his reaction and looked back at him somberly.

“On that point, me and most others present here concur with your reaction, Mister Prime Minister. We only need to look at France to see what a German occupation of Great Britain would bring us. Such a prospect is indeed too humiliating and painful for our country to contemplate. That leaves us with the option of an

armistice or negotiated peace with Germany. Fortunately, we do have a few things going for us that would tend to make the Germans fairly reasonable in such negotiations.”

“Oh!?! Such as?”

“Such as the fact that the Germans are presently engaged in tough, ferocious battles with Soviet forces on their Eastern Front and are far from assured of winning in the long run. The Germans would love nothing more than to be able to conclude a peace with us that would then allow them to redirect most of their forces to the Eastern Front. Yes, this could be called a betrayal by us of our Soviet allies and would infuriate Stalin, but let’s not forget that Stalin was the first to conclude a peace treaty with Germany in 1939, in order to be able to grab half of Poland for himself afterwards. If we would conclude a peace arrangement with Hitler, then Stalin will be welcome to sign his own peace treaty with Germany.”

Churchill, now thoughtful, sat back in his chair.

“Hum, that makes a lot of sense. To be frank, I wouldn’t mind seeing Stalin getting his due. But what about the United States? If we sign a peace treaty or armistice with the Germans, then it will find itself alone against both Germany and Japan. Japan might also object to a treaty that would not also protect its gains in the Pacific and would leave it alone against the United States.”

At that point, the minister of foreign affairs, Anthony Eden, jumped in on the conversation.

“Japan would effectively object to being left alone against the Americans, so would probably push for including the Americans in any peace treaty, unless Germany promises to keep fighting the Americans. However, that last point would mean that we would consciously decide to abandon the Americans in order to sign a separate peace. Personally, I would find such an outcome repugnant.”

Most heads around the table, including those of Attlee and Churchill, nodded in agreement at that last sentence. Eden then went on.

“In my opinion, the best realistic outcome would be a peace treaty agreed to by us, Germany, Japan and the United States. If the Soviet Union would accept to join such a treaty, then the better. The one delicate point for us would then decide on conditions that would be acceptable to us and would preserve Great Britain as a free, viable country. If we could preserve at least part of our empire at the same time, it would be the icing on the cake.”

Churchill didn't find objections to that then, very conscious of what the British people had suffered to date and now realizing at last how desperate the situation was after four and a half long years of war. He thus nodded his head and spoke in a much more conciliatory tone.

"Very well, gentlemen. Let's thus discuss about the peace terms that we would wish to achieve during talks with Germany and with possibly Japan as well. I agree with Sir Anthony that we should keep in mind the impact of any term on the United States. Sir Anthony will be in charge of keeping President Roosevelt apprised of any development if and when we enter in negotiations with Germany and, possibly, Japan. As for me, I will call President Roosevelt myself tonight."

16:35 (Washington D.C. Time) / 21 :35 (London Time)

Oval Office, White House

Washington D.C., U.S.A.

"I understand, my friend. Keep me apprised of any new developments on this subject. I will consult my cabinet at once, then will get back to you. Have a good evening, Mister Prime Minister."

On those last words, Franklin Delano Roosevelt slowly put down the receiver, then stared a long moment in silence at his telephone, his mind furiously processing the words from Churchill. He couldn't help slam his fist on his work desk then, in order to spend some of his anger and frustration.

CHAPTER 10 – A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW

14:45 (Madrid Time)

Thursday, November 25, 1943

Main entrance of the Palace Hotel

Downtown Madrid, Spain

The two armed Spanish Guardia Civil policemen stationed at the main entrance of the Palace Hotel, in Madrid, presented arms with their rifles as yet another group of foreign diplomats and V.I.P. guests walked in after stepping out of a convoy of three cars flying American flags. Once the newcomers were inside, the two policemen returned their rifles to shoulder position. One of them then spoke in a near whisper from the corner of his mouth to his comrade.

“Present arms, shoulder arms, present arms, shoulder arms: at the rate we have to salute all those big shot dignitaries, my arms will fall off before sunset.”

“Yeah!” replied the other policeman. “And some of them looked like real sourly pricks! The German foreign minister in particular seemed to be a first class asshole, looked at us as if we were simple pieces of shit.”

His comrade nodded his head once at that: foreign delegations had been arriving all day at the Palace Hotel, in order to participate in a much publicized peace conference in which Germany and Great Britain would be the main players. Now, the whole of Europe was holding its breath, hoping both for an end to the fighting and fearing a future where Germany would be left the undisputed master of Europe.

Inside the hotel lobby, a Spanish man dressed in a good quality suit and with two younger men and three women at his back stepped forward to greet the American delegation in good English, addressing Harry Hopkins directly.

“Welcome to Madrid and to the Palace Hotel, Señor Hopkins. My name is Raphael Hernandez and I was sent by the Spanish Foreign Ministry to greet your delegation and help it in any way possible during the peace talks. To that effect, I brought with me a team of five talented translators who will be able to guide you around

Madrid and who will also be able to translate for you in a number of languages which will be used during the conference.”

President Roosevelt’s main political advisor briefly bowed his head to Hernandez as a matter of courtesy.

“Thank you, Mister Hernandez. Your translators and guides will certainly prove useful to us. I however have to tell you that we came with the sole intent of observing these talks and not participate directly in them. I would appreciate if you would convey that point to your foreign minister and to the other delegations.”

That left a surprised Hernandez speechless for a short moment.

“The United States are not going to participate directly in the peace talks? But, your country is one of the main combatants in the present war.”

“True, but my President has decided to continue the fight until our ultimate victory over Japan and Germany. I know that this will affect seriously the outcome of these talks, but President Roosevelt wishes for the resolve of the United States to be made clear to all.”

“I see! I will certainly pass this information to my minister, Señor Hopkins. In the meantime, let me and my staff help you get installed in the Palace Hotel. The talks will officially open tomorrow morning, at nine. How many separate rooms will you need for your delegation?”

“I will need one suite for myself and my secretary, plus four separate but adjacent rooms for the rest of my staff.”

Hernandez nodded his head to that and turned around to speak with one of the hotel receptionists, who gave him keys for a suite and four rooms. Hernandez then gave the keys to the Americans while smiling to them.

“I believe that you will find the Palace Hotel most comfortable, ladies and gentlemen: each of its 800 rooms has a private bathroom and a telephone and the hotel also features a number of top quality restaurants and clubs. If you will now follow me, please.”

Forty minutes later, as Hopkins and his female secretary, an employee of the State Department in her late forties, were finished unpacking, someone knocked at the door of their suite. Hopkins looked at once at the FBI agent provided to him as a personal bodyguard.

“Jim, could you check out who that is, please?”

"Right away, sir!" replied the agent, who took out his service revolver but kept it in his back while going to the door and unlocking it. Opening the door by a few inches, he saw that it was Raphael Hernandez, alone, thus let him in. The Spaniard entered and bowed to Hopkins.

"Excuse me for disturbing you, Señor Hopkins. I came to bring you an information pamphlet about the peace conference. I had it corrected quickly by adding the mention 'Observer Status' beside the info about your delegation. Every national delegation will receive a similar pamphlet, printed in their language. Be advised that any country that has an embassy in Madrid will be allowed to attend the talks as observers. Many neutral countries already expressed an interest in following the talks, so there will be quite a few people present in the conference room. Here is your copy of the corrected information pamphlet."

"Thank you, Mister Hernandez. You are a very efficient and helpful host indeed."

"Thank you, Señor Hopkins. Have a good day!"

"The same to you, Mister Hernandez."

The Spaniard then left, with the FBI agent locking back the door behind him. Hopkins read quickly through the thin pamphlet brought by Hernandez before looking at his secretary.

"Miss Granger, please ask the other members of our delegation to come to my suite right away."

"Yes, Mister Hopkins!"

Once all the members of his delegation were assembled in the lounge of his suite, with the door firmly locked, Hopkins started speaking in a low voice, in order to avoid being overheard through walls or the ceiling.

"Well, here we are, ladies and gentlemen. The announcement that we came only as observers is bound to raise many questions among the other participants of this peace conference. I will not stress enough the need for all of you not to elaborate with other delegates on the reasons why we didn't want to participate fully in the talks. So, keep your mouths shut and do not trust anyone, even if the person asking is a supposed friendly or neutral. If asked, simply say that the United States is resolved to defend itself and to regain the territories it lost in the Pacific. Unfortunately, in view of the desperate supply situation they are in presently and of the very heavy losses in ships and aircraft they suffered in the last few weeks, I fully expect that the British will be forced to accede

to the German demands during these talks, thus will leave us mostly alone in fighting the Germans and the Japanese. The one big unknown factor is what will happen then to the other member countries of the Commonwealth and of the British Empire, like Canada, Australia and South Africa, which still have the military potential to continue the fight by themselves. As for us here in Madrid, our main goal will be to gauge which way things are going and, most importantly, if the defeat of Great Britain will motivate some countries that are presently officially neutral to turn coat and join Germany and Japan, or at least give the Axis economical support by giving it access to their natural resources. While you are to keep mostly mum, keep as well your ears wide open for any such signs or rumors of changes of allegiance. Well, that's all I have to say at the present time. You may go back to your rooms and freshen up before supper. I will see you all again tomorrow morning."

15:52 (Madrid Time)

Suite 501 of the Palace Hotel

"WHAT DO THEY MEAN, OBSERVER STATUS ONLY? THE UNITED STATES IS ONE OF THE MAJOR BELLIGERANTS IN THIS WAR. AND THEY WOULD REFUSE TO EVEN PARTICIPATE IN THESE TALKS?"

Walther Schellenberg, Chief of the SD Ausland¹⁸ and also officially the next person in charge of the German delegation after Ulrich von Ribbentrop, let the German Foreign Minister rant like a frustrated kid for a moment. In truth, despite his titles and positions, Ribbentrop's stature among the Nazi leadership had been in decline for quite a while already and he was looked at mostly with contempt these days in Berlin. Even the Führer was increasingly growing tired of his incompetence and sycophancy. Hitler and the other Nazi top leaders were putting too many hopes in these talks to let an idiot like Ribbentrop in charge of the show in Madrid. As a result, Schellenberg was the true leader of the German delegation, with Ribbentrop forced to abide by his directives. Walther finally cut off Ribbentrop's rants with a dismissive gesture.

"We actually shouldn't be surprised to see the Americans refuse to participate fully in the peace talks, Herr Minister. Their industries and war potential are still mostly intact and they still have the capacity to eventually have enough forces and equipment to

¹⁸ SD Ausland : SS Corps Security Department, Division for foreign countries.

be able to roll back the Japanese in the Pacific. Then, they will probably turn against us and try to retake Europe from us.”

“Nonsense! We just wrestled control of the Atlantic away from them, while the Japanese Navy has nearly full control of the Pacific.”

“And the Japanese are presently badly overextended, while their war industries have only a small fraction of the capacity of the American war industries. In one year, the Americans can produce more ships, aircraft, tanks and guns than what we have in our whole inventory at present. More importantly, they have access to nearly unlimited resources, like minerals, oil and foodstuff, while we have to ration everything in Germany.”

“And what about our submarines? Our new boats have been decimating their navy and merchant shipping nearly at will.”

“True, for now. However, they will eventually produce more ships and aircraft and will develop better anti-submarine weapons, enough so that we may lose the qualitative advantage we presently enjoy in terms of submarine warfare. What we are badly missing right now is more long range weapons to strike at the United States territory. We notably don’t have a bomber with the range to strike the United States from Europe. Also, let’s not forget that we are presently engaged in a hard fight with the Soviets and that things have not been going very well for us on the Eastern Front lately. So, let’s forget the blind propaganda stuff and let’s be more realistic, shall we?”

By the tone use by Schellenberg in pronouncing his last sentence, Ribbentrop understood that it was more an order than a suggestion. Hiding his fury and frustration, he thus simply nodded his head and turned around, walking inside his bedroom and slamming its door behind him.

17:19 (Madrid Time)

Friday, December 3, 1943

Dance Hall of the Palace Hotel

Madrid, Spain

Sir Anthony Eden, Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom, felt sick to his stomach as he grudgingly signed the armistice treaty declaration that was the final product of the peace conference. Great Britain was in essence being emasculated militarily, forced to either destroy or ship to Canada all of its remaining warships and

armed aircraft, in exchange for opening the submarine blockade to cargo ships carrying foodstuff, medicine and a very limited amount of refined fuel. However, the ships that wanted to get to the British Isles would be forced first to submit to German inspection at a few fixed passage points. Great Britain would not be occupied by German troops and the German air bombardments, which had already been suspended temporarily during the talks, would stop for good. Any violation of the importation limits would however result in a resumption of German air bombardments and the closing of the passage points. Even worse, Great Britain was now losing permanently its possessions in Asia and the Pacific which had already been taken by the Japanese. Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Burma were thus now officially Japanese territories. As for India, Great Britain was allowed to keep it, but was going to be demilitarized, in order not to present a threat to Japan. Another humiliating and painful point was the loss of Egypt, Sudan, Palestine and Iraq, given away to either Italy or Turkey in exchange for avoiding further air bombardments of Great Britain. Gibraltar was also to be demilitarized, with all the heavy guns, planes and ships defending it to be either removed or destroyed on the spot. The Axis Powers thus were gaining full control of the Mediterranean and of the strategically vital Suez Canal and would now have full access to the oil of the Middle East. On their part, Australia, Canada, South Africa and other member countries of the British Empire not occupied by the Axis Powers had used their status as sovereign countries to refuse to sign the armistice, vowing to continue the fight in this war, something that was one of the few bright spots Eden could see today. The fact that the United States was going to continue the fight as well was another bright spot for him, but it had especially enraged the Japanese, who had hoped to be able to end the fighting in the Pacific, so that they could reorganize their conquests and regroup and rebuild their overextended forces.

An ecstatic von Ribbentrop was next to sign the armistice declaration, with the dozens of photographers present snapping pictures after pictures of him and of the other officials that would sign the declaration. However, Anthony Eden gave him a cold look when Ribbentrop tried to shake his hand. That moment as well was taken in picture, illustrating how bitter this pill was to swallow for the British. On his part, Harry Hopkins felt depressed as he and his delegation left the Dance Hall, where the talks had been held: this was a truly dark day for freedom and democracy around the World.

13:52 (Berlin Time)

Monday, December 6, 1943

Führer's conference room, Chancellery Building

Berlin, Germany

Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz, participating in a top level meeting of the German High Command presided by the Führer himself, was growing increasingly aggravated and frustrated as that wind bag of Hermann Göring bragged about how his great Luftwaffe was going to be able to singlehandedly push back the Soviets once he will have time to transfer most of his combat squadrons from the victorious Western Front to the Eastern Front. He could see from the corner of his eyes that Albert Speer, the Minister of Armaments, Joseph Goebbels, the powerful Minister of Propaganda and the even more powerful head of the SS Corps, Heinrich Himmler, were getting as aggravated as him. Dönitz finally slapped one hand on top of the conference table, cutting off the fat leader of the Luftwaffe.

"Enough with your promises, Göring! Bragging and making promises are the only things you are good at! If not for your litany of blunders, mismanagement of the Air Ministry and your broken promises, we could have won the war three years ago!"

"What are you talking about?" shot back Göring after a moment of stunned surprise at that attack against him. "My planes crushed both the Poles and the French and..."

"And then let nearly half a million Allied soldiers escape from Dunkirk, when you promised that your Luftwaffe would be able by itself to finish off the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force. Then, only months later, you promised the Führer that your planes would sweep the British from the sky and allow our army to invade England. You failed! You then promised to have the British submit to us by bombing London. The British didn't break, while the R.A.F. got the best of your Luftwaffe. You then promised that the British wouldn't be able to bomb our cities and factories and you were proved wrong, again! When our Sixth Army got surrounded at Stalingrad, you promised that your transport planes would be enough to supply our troops by air. They failed again, miserably! As for that air raid that sank most of the British Home Fleet last October and about which you just spent a good two minutes washing your mouth with, it was both planned and led by Generalfeldmarschall Kesselring, who piloted the lead bomber. At that time, you were in Prussia, hunting deer at your forest lodge. I know that because I

checked with your staff then. During all that time, my submariners were fighting and dying at sea while strangling the maritime supply lines of the British. The British were starved into submission by my submarines, not by your planes. The American Navy was also cut to size by my submarines, something that greatly helped our Japanese allies to gain predominance in the Pacific. Our ground troops and tankers are now pushing back the Soviets thanks to the tungsten that one of my submarines brought from Chile, along with thousands of tons of refined fuel and of bauxite. And now you want more resources allotted to your Luftwaffe so that you can, and I quote 'crush the Soviets from the air' unquote? Enough with your empty promises and mismanagement! We have been waiting for years for your Air Ministry to produce a heavy bomber capable of hitting the American East Coast. Well, we are still waiting, while my submarines have been alone in hitting the Americans along both coasts, and this without Luftwaffe support. Our new aircraft programs are not advancing because your Air Ministry is rife with graft, traffic of influence, incompetence and lack of vision."

Dönitz, still fired up, then looked at Adolph Hitler, who had been watching all this with increasing annoyance directed at Göring.

"Mein Führer, I say that Herr Reichmarschall Göring should be replaced as the leader of the Luftwaffe and head of the Air Ministry, for gross incompetence, mismanagement and graft."

Before Göring could even open his mouth to protest, Albert Speer got up from his chair and looked straight at Hitler.

"I concur with everything that Grossadmiral Dönitz said, Mein Führer. In truth, I consider Herr Göring to be a dead weight for our war effort. I can't count anymore the times when he arbitrarily allotted juicy but also useless development contracts to a number of his friends and supporters in the aircraft industry. We could have had a good long range bomber in service months ago, yet the RLM¹⁹ is still prevaricating about which design to favor and push to completion and series production. We need somebody with true vision and competent leadership at the head of our aircraft production and of our air combat units."

"I also concur with those views, Mein Führer." added Joseph Goebbels, closely followed by Heinrich Himmler. Feldmarshalls Kluge, Manstein and Rundstedt, representing the ground forces, also came down in support of Dönitz' views. Hitler

¹⁹ RLM: German acronym for 'Reich Air Ministry'.

finally spoke after Rundstedt while looking severely at Göring. Both men had a close friendship dating back to the 1920s and had fought together to form and expand the Nazi Party, but the list of bad decisions and of broken promises made by Göring in the last few years was a long one that could neither be denied nor ignored. On the other hand, thanks to Dönitz' masterful handling of his submarine arm, Germany had just defeated one of its three most dangerous foes, no thanks to Göring.

"Hermann, I believe that you should go home and let me decide how and where our war resources will be allotted. As of tonight, Herr Kesselring will be in charge of both the Luftwaffe and the RLM. You may leave now."

With the wind utterly taken out of him, a red-faced Göring could only salute Hitler before turning around and walk out of the conference room. Once he was gone, Hitler looked at Albert Speer.

"Speer, I will need you to stay at the end of this meeting. The same goes for Grossadmiral Dönitz."

CHAPTER 11 – THE WAR GOES ON

09:04 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, December 15, 1943

U-Boote Command headquarters, Keroman

Lorient, Atlantic coast of France

“Please sit, gentlemen!” said Grossadmiral Dönitz in a jovial tone after returning the salutes from his five submarine commanders who had just presented themselves at his request. Ulrich von Wittgenstein, along with Klaus Bargsten, Carl Emmermann, Horst Degen and Ulrich Heyse, took place in the easy chairs and sofa placed in front of Dönitz’ desk, making themselves comfortable as their commander started speaking.

“Well, gentlemen, we are now in a brand new war, if I could say so. The Madrid Accords, by mostly eliminating Great Britain from this war and by transferring control of most of its Middle East territories and assets to our allies, has given our country fresh hopes of winning this war. For your information, the fact that we don’t have anymore to fear air or sea attacks from Great Britain against continental Europe has allowed the High Command to free substantial forces from the Western Front, in order to reinforce our Eastern Front and push back the Soviets. A total of 38 divisions, including eleven panzer divisions, are now preparing to move east or have already started to move. Accompanying these ground units to Russia will be two thirds of the Luftwaffe combat and transport air units stationed presently in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. With such an influx of new blood, our forces on the Eastern Front will have a much easier time to then deal with the Soviets and throw them back into full retreat.”

At that point, Dönitz smiled to Ulrich von Wittgenstein.

“I am happy to say that the tungsten metal you brought back from Chile has played a crucial role in stopping cold the Soviet Fall offensive, my dear von Wittgenstein. With our 50mm anti-tank guns and the 50mm guns of our medium Mark III tanks now able to pierce the armor of the Soviet T-34 and KV-1 tanks, our soldiers were able to decimate and push back the latest Soviet armored assaults, causing them huge casualties.”

"I am most happy to hear that as well, Herr Grossadmiral." replied Ulrich, being sincere. Dönitz acknowledged him with a nod, then continued.

"About Chile, the defeat of Great Britain has brought us as well a number of other advantages that we are at the moment keeping discrete about. Know that, during the Madrid talks, representatives from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay secretly spoke with our delegation to offer us their support in the form of discreet port refueling rights for our submarines and the exportation of their various natural resources and minerals to Germany. It seems that those countries, and especially Chile and Argentina, have grown quite weary of the bullying ways of the Americans in running roughshod over their economies. They have had enough of that and will now accept our cargo ships and will load them, as long as they come under disguise. They would have been more open about this if not for the fact that Brazil, an important ally of the United States, is looming large as a threat on their borders. Their offer of support is thus presenting us with many new opportunities, one of which is the possibility for our submarines to refuel in either Argentinean or Chilean ports and to station there resupply ships carrying spare torpedoes and fresh food. With such refueling and resupplying points, especially in Chilean ports, we will now be able to attack enemy shipping and ports along the American West Coast. This is where you are coming into play, gentlemen."

Dönitz then distributed large envelopes to his five submarine commanders before continuing.

"Those envelopes contain your respective mission orders and intelligence materiel concerning your future target areas for your next war patrol, gentlemen. Kapitän von Wittgenstein's boat will go roam the area off the ports of Vancouver and Seattle and will interdict enemy shipping activity along the Juan de Fuca Strait. Kapitän Bargsten's boat will go interdict the shipping activity around San Francisco, which has been reopened to ships three months ago after herculean efforts by the Americans to clear the debris of the Golden Gate Bridge which were blocking the entrance to the harbor. Kapitän Degen's boat will go roam around Los Angeles and the port of Long beach and will disrupt as much as possible the maritime traffic and the coastal activities in those areas. Kapitän Heyse's boat will do the same around the San Diego area. Finally, Kapitän Emmermanm's boat will post itself outside the Pacific-side locks of the Panama Canal, which has just reopened last month after extensive rebuilding work. A tanker ship and a cargo ship loaded with extra torpedoes, shells, spare parts and

foodstuff will precede you to the Chilean port of Valparaiso, where they will take discrete stations outside the harbor and will serve as your resupply stations. We may also send further north one of those resupply ships, to take a discreet position near an uninhabited island off the coasts of Central America. The goal of all this is for your five submarines to stay on station as long as possible and to paralyze for a long period the enemy maritime traffic along the American West Coast. If we can achieve that, we will choke up the American supply lines to Hawaii and to the South Pacific and will also prevent newly built American warships from going to reinforce the American Pacific Fleet. This should prevent the Americans from eventually regaining the upper hand over the Japanese and will also force the Americans to devote more resources to protect their West Coast, at the detriment of their East Coast and the Caribbean Basin, where more of our submarines will keep the pressure up in the two latter areas.”

That was when Ulrich Heyse raised one hand to ask a question.

“Herr Grossadmiral, you spoke about the threat from Brazil to our new secret allies in South America. What will Germany do to prevent the Brazilians from attacking either Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay or Uruguay?”

“A pertinent question indeed, my good Heyse. What we will do is to station four Type XXI submarines along the Brazilian coast, off its main ports, and harass Brazilian Navy ships and commercial traffic, in order to disrupt the Brazilian economy, cut to size its navy and weaken it to the point where Brazil will no longer be strong enough to attack its neighbors. Our four submarines will also benefit like you from having resupply ships, posted in Argentinean harbors. Apart from weakening Brazil, this will also cut off a major source of food supplies and minerals to the United States. Now, all of your boats have been extensively refitted during the past few weeks, while you were enjoying well earned shore leave time. They also were upgraded with our latest improvements in electronic systems and weapons. In particular, your 12.7 centimeter twin deck guns will now have reserves of shells equipped with German-produced copies of the American proximity fuse, which our good von Wittgenstein was so kind to bring examples to us. As well, your main deck guns have been replaced with a new model of gun with a much increased angle of elevation, to both allow longer ranges against sea and ground targets and to improve its anti-aircraft capabilities. Basically, your new main deck gun mount is a navalized and waterproofed variant of our heavy Flakzwilling 40 anti-aircraft mount. Its elevation range is minus ten to plus eighty degrees and its vertical effective ceiling is 14,800 meters, while its maximum horizontal range is 24 kilometers. In combination with

our new proximity fuse, this gun will be deadly against enemy aircraft and, by using airbursts above the ground, will be able to cause much more damage to soft area targets than with the older impact shells. The shining examples given by both the U-800 and the U-900 on how useful a well used deck gun can be against coastal installations pushed me into ordering the series manufacture of this new gun, which will eventually equip all of our Type XXI boats.”

The five submarine commanders exchanged smiles on hearing that, with Ulrich von Wittgenstein then looking back at Dönitz.

“Herr Grossadmiral, another thing that proved very useful is the use of elite commando teams aboard my submarine and on the U-800. I would thus like very much to have again Hauptmann Margraff and his men aboard the U-900 for my next war patrol.”

A malicious smile appeared on Dönitz' face on hearing that.

“My dear von Wittgenstein, be assured that I am now well sold on the benefit of having coastal raiders and ship boarders on my submarines. Major Margraff, who was recently promoted thanks to his exploits, has used the last few weeks to train more Brandenburg Regiment soldiers in the subtleties of serving on submarines and operating from them, along with how to seize control of enemy ships. I have now a full company of the Brandenburg Regiment qualified for service on submarines, with all its men fluent in the English language and with some of them also fluent in Spanish. Major Margraff and twelve of his men will be traveling aboard your U-900 during your incoming mission, while your four comrades along the West Coast and the ones along the East Coast of America will also have commando teams aboard. As for their use, it will be up to your imagination and their daring to decide what they will do.”

“Thank you, Herr Grossadmiral.” replied Ulrich, truly happy. His next war patrol already promised to be a challenging but also an exciting one.

CHAPTER 12 – AMERICA CRUISE

05:08 (Seattle Time)

Thursday, February 17, 1944

Control room of the U-900

Off Cape Flattery, northwest point of Washington State

Entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait, Pacific Ocean

“Yes, it is Cape Flattery! We are finally arriving in our assigned patrol zone after nearly two months at sea, men.”

The crewmembers manning the control room of the U-900 nearly sighed at those words from their captain: two months at sea was a long time, even in a submarine as comfortable as the U-900. However, they also knew that their mission was only beginning and that they wouldn't see Germany again for at least another four months...if they returned at all. Ulrich von Wittgenstein then went to the chart table located aft of the periscopes and marked down his new location before calling to his side his second in command, Bruno Barber.

“Here we are, Bruno. We will now go up the Juan de Fuca Strait while staying in the deep channel. Stay at schnorchel depth for the moment and recharge our batteries to the maximum during the next two hours, until sunrise. Then we will go down to a depth of 150 meters and will continue on batteries at ten knots. Stay silent and keep a defensive only posture for the moment. I am going to go rest in my cabin.”

“Understood, Herr Kapitän.”

Leaving the control room and going aft, Ulrich went through the sonar section and the circulation space beyond it, to finally enter his suite, situated on the same deck as the control room. Even though his 'suite' covered only a total floor space of nineteen square meters split into three compartments, it still was unimaginably spacious compared to the accommodations of the captains of the older TYPE IX and TYPE VII boats, or of those of any other class of submarine around the World. Pushing open the door of his suite, Ulrich crossed quickly his small work office and entered his bedroom, where he quickly undressed before walking into the small adjacent bathroom, stepping into the shower stall and pulling closed its curtain before turning the faucets of the shower head. The

spray of warm water helped him relax after the long hours spent in the control room, checking his navigation and being on the lookout for any possible accidental encounter with an American warship or patrol aircraft. While the radar, sonar and radio passive detectors had signaled to him numerous surface ships around him, he had not become nervous on that account: the Juan de Fuca Strait was one of the most frequented waterways in the World, linking the Canadian ports of Victoria and Vancouver, plus the American ports along the Puget Sound, to the Pacific Ocean. It was thus a strategically important venue in this war, which was the main reason why Ulrich and the U-900 were here. Toweling himself dry, Ulrich then thankfully went to his bed and laid down on it with a grunt of satisfaction. It took him only seconds to find sleep, being truly tired.

Eight hours later, after shaving and after eating breakfast at the officers' wardroom, he was back in the control room, wearing like his men a relaxed, informal dress of turtleneck sweater and trousers. There, he found Leutnant zur See Heinz Blischke, the third watch officer, his most junior and least experienced officer. However, that was very relative, as most of the crew of the U-900 was very experienced by common standards. Blischke, while young, already had two war patrols under his belt and was, in Ulrich's opinion, an intelligent and decisive officer with a very good potential to become one day a submarine commander.

"So, Blischke, anything special to report?"

"No, Herr Kapitän, except for the fact that the traffic along the Juan de Fuca Strait is quite dense, on both sides. If we wanted to sink ships, we would have plenty of choice."

"And tell me why we are not sinking ships yet?" asked Ulrich, testing him. The young officer answered without hesitation.

"To exploit surprise to the maximum and get at the most difficult targets first, still undetected, Herr Kapitän. Once those targets are hit, then we can do methodical strikes according to our list of priority targets."

"Excellent, Blischke! You will one day be Captain of this boat."

"Danke, Herr Kapitän. You are too kind."

"But I meant it. Show me our present position."

Going together to the chart table, Blischke then pointed a dot on the chart representing the strait and the sounds leading to Vancouver and Seattle.

"We are here, some fifteen nautical miles short of the entrance to the Admiralty Inlet, which itself connects to Puget Sound. We should arrive at Point Wilson in a bit less than two hours, Herr Kapitän."

"Good! Have a second helmsman go up to man the surface helm station inside our forward underwater observation dome and go up with him. We will slow down and rise to a depth of fifty meters, where we will wait for a big, noisy ship heading towards the Puget Sound. Once we will have found one, we will stick to its keel and follow closely underneath it. Then, I challenge any hydrophone operator to be able to pick us up over the screw and machinery noise of that surface ship."

"Is the area of Point Wilson well defended, Herr Kapitän?"

"By the standards of 1910, yes. By today's standards, not so much. However, our intelligence says that the Americans have added an underwater hydrophones listening station in Fort Worden, one of the three old coastal forts defending the entrance to the Admiralty Inlet. We have no information about possible underwater minefields or torpedo launch tubes there, but we will err on the side of caution. Call the second helmsman now."

"Right away, Herr Kapitän!" replied Blischke before walking to an intercom box. As he was doing his call, Ulrich went aft to the sonar section and looked over the shoulder of the duty sonar operator, examining his passive sonar display.

"Schneider, I need a big, noisy ship heading for the Puget Sound, so that we could stick under it while going down to Seattle."

"Well, I believe that I already have a good candidate for you, Herr Kapitän. We have nearby what sounds like a damaged warship heading east, probably going to the Bremerton Navy Yard for repairs: I evaluate it as a probable light cruiser and its machinery is sounding like a bag of broken bones. I can also hear the continuous noise of multiple pumps fighting some major leaks."

"A lame duck! Perfect! Connect with the helmsman and direct him towards that cruiser, so we can stick to its belly."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!"

Leaving the sonar section, Ulrich went to an intercom box near the attack periscope and grabbed its microphone, activating it.

"Attention all hands, this is your captain! We are approaching an enemy coastal defense point. Avoid all unnecessary noises and keep your voices down until further notice. That's all!"

Ulrich then followed his own directives and went to his cabin to put on over his boots felt slippers specially designed to minimize the noise of a person walking inside a submarine. With that done, he returned to the control room to see how his sonar man and helmsman were doing.

His men proved to be indeed true professionals and veterans of their trades and the U-900 was able to follow a mere thirty meters under the wounded American cruiser as the latter turned South, leaving the Juan de Fuca Strait to enter the Admiralty Inlet and continuing towards the Puget Sound and Seattle. Ulrich let himself relax a bit once they were well past the first group of American forts: the fox was now in the hen house, undetected. What helped him a lot now was the unusual depth of the waterway, with an average depth of over 140 meters and maximum depths that attained over 260 meters. By exploiting the deep-diving capabilities of his submarines and using its underwater observation domes and infrared scopes and projectors to visually navigate, Ulrich was going to be able to go deep to avoid both detection and enemy attacks. With the most danger now behind him, he ordered his submarine deeper and slower, letting the wounded cruiser plod ahead. He however kept the surface helm station manned, as he would soon need to get to shallower waters and check for the presence of anti-submarine nets, sea mines and other obstructions. His intelligence information package given to him in Lorient was fairly detailed, although a bit dated, and he had worked up from that package a list of targets arranged in order of priority and difficulty. The first targets were the ones needing maximum stealth, before he started the real 'light and sound show'. The very first one on that list was the entrance of the Sinclair Inlet, which gave access to the Navy Yard Puget Sound, in Bremerton, just west of Seattle on the opposite side of the Puget Sound. Ulrich was planning to discretely lay a few sea mines there and thus block the access to the yard.

17:51 (Seattle Time)

Control room of U-900, at periscope depth in Rich Passage

Southern tip of Bainbridge Island, Puget Sound

"ALL STOP! ANTI-SUBMARINE NET AHEAD!"

The warning by intercom from the surface helmsman station, at the top of the sail, made Ulrich climb quickly from the control room to the forward underwater dome. There, he

effectively saw through the thick acrylic of the viewing dome the interlocked steel hoops of an anti-submarine net blocking the entrance to the Sinclair Inlet, which led to the Navy Yard in Bremerton. Looking at the depth sounder indicator, he grimaced at seeing that the bottom at the inlet entrance was too deep for his sea mines to be effective, them having to be sown at no lower a depth than 35 meters. His first intended objective was thus proving to be out of reach for him. He could of course wait for the net to be opened eventually to let pass a ship, but there was no way for him to know when that would happen, or how long he would have once inside the inlet until the net was opened again to let him get out of it. Mentally scratching off that target, Ulrich went back down to the control room, where he raised the search periscope in order to look at his surroundings above the surface. While he didn't see any ship near him, he saw at once the nearby coast of Bainbridge Island, which formed the northwest side of the Rich Passage. Knowing through his intelligence package that the southwest tip of Bainbridge Island was the location of an old American coastal fort named Fort Ward, he concentrated his attention in that direction, using the last minutes of daylight before sunset. While he saw a few wooden buildings and some stone embankments on the island, he couldn't see any coastal gun. However, something else prompted him into calling out loud his electronic warfare and intelligence officer, Leutnant zur See Werner Schultz, out of his transmissions and EW section.

"LEUTNANT SCHULTZ TO THE CONTROL ROOM AT THE DOUBLE!"

Schultz promptly came to near the search periscope and came to attention.

"Yes, Herr Kapitän?"

"Look through the periscope, which is now pointed at what is supposed to be Fort Ward. I cannot see any guns there, but I see numerous radio antennas and masts, some being of rather unusual design. Tell me what you think of them."

The young officer, who had a diploma in physics and in electronic engineering, grabbed the handles of the periscope and glued his eyes against the binocular lens eyepieces. Ulrich saw him tense up after a few seconds of observation, but Schultz kept observing for nearly a minute before looking back at Ulrich, his expression sober.

"Herr Kapitän, those antennas are part of a long range radio listening station, the kind that listens to enemy communications."

"Are you sure?" Asked Ulrich, his interest fired up at once. Schultz nodded his head once at that.

"Very sure, Herr Kapitän: I could distinguish a number of rhombic antenna masts typical of such listening stations, plus a long range reception tower. This could be a very significant enemy installation for us."

Ulrich thought that over for only a few seconds before grabbing the nearest intercom microphone and speaking into it.

"MAJOR MARGRAFF TO THE CONTROL ROOM! MAJOR MARGRAFF TO COME AT ONCE TO THE CONTROL ROOM!"

Putting down the microphone, Ulrich then smiled to Schultz.

"I think that this Fort Ward could be worth a discrete visit by our good Major Margraff and his men."

Less than twenty seconds later, Hugo Margraff ran inside the control room and presented himself to Ulrich.

"You wanted to see me, Herr Kapitän?"

"I certainly did, my dear Hugo. Look through the periscope and examine the antenna park and buildings of Fort Ward. We may have something there worth a ground reconnaissance by your men."

Margraff looked through the periscope's lens for a good minute, embracing as much as possible what was visible of the installations of Fort Ward before looking at Ulrich.

"I concur, Herr Kapitän. Do we have a map of that place?"

"I have a general map of the Puget Sound and of the Seattle area, but not a detailed map of that Fort Ward. Come with Leutnant Schultz to the chart table, so that I could show you."

The three men moved quickly to the nearby chart table and took positions around it, bending over it as Ulrich pointed a spot on the map laid side-by-side with the maritime chart of the Puget Sound.

"We are presently just off the southwest tip of Bainbridge Island, near the location of Fort Ward. The waters around the island are quite deep, with a steep gradient right at the coastline. There is however this small underwater plateau at the southern tip of the island, where I can rest my U-900 on the bottom and still be able to use my periscope and schnorchel. What I am thinking of doing is to go rest there, then have you and your men go out of our airlock in frogmen's suits, to swim to the shore and infiltrate Fort Ward, in order to look around it. If it turns out to be indeed a radio listening station, then it may constitute a valuable target worthy of some silent but deadly action on our part. You would thus need to use silenced weapons for that reconnaissance.

Will you want to bring all of your men with you for such a job, or do you prefer to keep your team small?"

"If I may have to switch to direct action, then I will definitely want all my men to be available, Herr Kapitän: in this case, numbers may help to prevent the enemy from raising the alarm about our presence."

"Very well! Sunset is due in a few minutes only. By the time that I have put down our submarine on that small plateau, night will have fallen, something that will help you infiltrate Fort Ward. It is however imperative that our presence here near Seattle should stay unknown to the enemy for as long as possible: we have a number of other targets that I would like to hit tonight while still benefiting from the element of surprise. Don't hesitate to be ruthless and do not allow anyone to raise the alarm during your reconnaissance. Other than that, you will have full liberty to act as you deem fit, Major. Of course, if you can capture documents of interest for our good Leutnant Schultz, don't hesitate to do so."

"I will bring waterproof bags with me, Herr Kapitän." assured Hugo Margraff. "With your permission, I will now go get my men ready for this mission."

"By all means, Major."

Hugo quickly walked out of the control room and went aft, then down by one level, ending on the submarine's upper deck. A few more steps aft brought him to the compartment reserved for the living accommodations of embarked passengers, which contained a total of ten bunks, with individual effects lockers and one communal table. Before entering that compartment, Hugo knocked on the doors of two petty officers' cabins next to it, in which three of his men lived.

"EVERYBODY TO THE TEAM'S COMPARTMENT: MISSION BRIEFING!"

He then entered the living compartment and shouted out.

"MISSION BRIEFING! ASSEMBLE AROUND THE TABLE!"

Within a minute, he had all thirteen men of his embarked commando team around him, including his second-in-command, Feldwebel Franz Stein, a veteran of five submarine patrols. Smiling at his men, Hugo made an announcement in a jovial tone.

"Well, men, the tourist cruise is over! It is now time to get back to the good old looting, burning and killing routine. We are going to exit underwater in frogmen's gear in order to go on an armed reconnaissance of a ground military installation that appears to be a sort of radio listening station. We are to stay discreet, but we will not hesitate to kill

any witness we meet, in order to prevent them from raising the alarm. We may also get to sabotage some radio equipment and steal classified documents during that mission. We will bring silenced weapons, handheld radios and waterproof bags with us. I want all of you ready to exit the submarine in forty minutes. Let's move, men!"

19:07 (Seattle Time)

Forward airlock of U-900

Just before pushing the button that would make the airlock flood, Hugo pressed the intercom button linking it to the other airlock, in the aft part of the sail, and spoke briefly.

"Feldwebel Stein, you may now flood your airlock and go out with your men. I am flooding out my airlock now."

"Understood, Herr Major!" replied the senior NCO via the intercom. Closing the protective panel of the intercom set, Hugo then flooded his airlock. With six men at his back, he opened the heavy, spring-loaded outer access hatch of the airlock and swam out, trailing behind him at the end of a short rope a waterproof bag containing his weapons, ammunition and special equipment. Breathing through his rebreather apparatus, which did not let out telltale bubbles, he closed back the airlock's hatch and led his commandos towards the nearby underwater cliff marking the southern shoreline of Bainbridge Island, swimming vigorously with his rubber fins. Climbing up the cliff with his hands, he soon let his head emerge slowly from the water and quickly looked around him, seeing only the grass and bushes of the shoreline. He hurried out of the water and crawled to the nearest set of bushes, where his men joined with him. Franz Stein and his own team also joined up with him there, allowing Hugo to give a few orders in a near whisper.

"Okay, time to get our weapons and gear out of our bags. We will leave our breathing apparatus, masks and fins here but will keep on our diving suits, in order to save time in case we have to dive back in a hurry. Remember: be ruthless and don't let time to anyone to raise the alarm. Use as much as possible your knives and silenced pistols first but have your silenced StG44 assault rifles ready as well, just in case."

A couple of minutes were enough to get their weapons and gear out of their waterproof bags and to camouflage quickly their diving equipment before they started walking in single file towards the Northwest, Hugo in the lead.

The fourteen Brandenburg Regiment men had only to walk for about 200 meters through a dense forest before arriving at the edge of a large clearing containing three sets of four giant radio masts linked by overhead wires. Further to the West, Hugo could see the lights of a number of buildings situated inside the fort's perimeter. Looking with his binoculars for the presence of armed sentries, he saw only a total of two soldiers guarding the main entrances of two separate wooden buildings, but didn't see any sign of roving patrols. Signaling Stein to approach him, he then whispered to him while pointing one of the guarded buildings.

"You and your men go to that guarded building at our ten o'clock and eliminate quietly the sentry at the entrance before entering and seeing what is inside. You will kill anyone that you meet. Once you will have explored that building, go to the next ones to its left, one after the other. I will do the same with the buildings to the right of the one I will approach first. Questions?"

"No, Herr Major."

"Then, let's split!"

The two groups of seven men then separated, their diving suits making them dark silhouettes that were nearly impossible to see until a half-moon would rise in nearly six hours.

Still leading his group, Hugo cautiously approached his target building from one side of it, at an angle that would add some more difficulty for the sentry to see him. After twenty minutes of walking at a crouch or crawling, he finally came to touching distance of one side of the two-storey wooden building, on which four illuminated windows were. Taking out a small, folding periscope and extending it, he raised its upper lens to just past the sill of the nearest window to him and looked through the lower lens. He frowned on seeing that the room inside which he was now looking was occupied by a mix of men and women, all wearing American Navy uniforms and manning numerous radio sets: despite his years of experience at killing enemy soldiers, he still felt reluctance at having to kill women. However, the present circumstances would not let him any other choice but to be indiscriminate about his killing tonight. There was also the fact that these Americans wore navy uniforms. This was supposed to be an army fort. Thinking about it, he concluded that this fact only reinforced the suspicions about this place being a

secret radio monitoring station. Looking to his left at his nearest man, he whispered to him.

"The personnel here includes women. They will have to be killed as well, without hesitation. Pass the word."

As Heinrich Bayerling himself turned around to pass his directive, Hugo activated the microphone switch of his headset, connected to the portable VHF radio hooked to his belt.

"Raider One to Raider Two: be advised that this fort is being manned by navy personnel, including women. My orders about killing anyone without hesitation stand."

"Copy that, Raider One!" Answered nearly at once Franz Stein. Moving in succession to the three other windows on this side of the building, Hugo used his periscope to have a look inside, each time finding the rooms occupied and active. Up to now, both the number of active radio operators on shift and the quantity of radio and electronic equipment he could see indicated a major radio installation inside Fort Ward. Walking slowly to the corner of the building near where the sentry stood, Hugo used again his periscope to see where he exactly stood. The American soldier was actually standing a few paces in front of the main entrance and was armed with a GARAND semi-automatic rifle. The American suddenly searched into a pocket of his overcoat and extracted from it a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Seeing a good opportunity presenting itself to him, Hugo took out his combat knife and quietly advanced on the American as the latter turned his back to him, trying to shield his lighter from the cold wind while lighting his cigarette. Hugo was on him before the soldier could light his cigarette and, covering his mouth with one hand while digging his knee in the small of the American's back, planted deep in one jugular his knife before pulling it hard towards the opposite jugular, sectioning both jugulars and wind pipe in one quick motion. The unfortunate man jerked for a couple of seconds, his gurgles mostly smothered by Hugo's hand while blood shot out of his cut arteries. He then became completely inert, at which point Hugo laid him down on the grass. A brief look at the soldier's uniform then told him that his victim had been a U.S. Marine, something that tended to confirm the status of this fort as being presently a U.S. Navy installation. Dragging the dead man along the side of the building from where he had come, Hugo then handed the steel helmet and rifle of the Marine to his youngest soldier, Schutze Max Landau.

"Take these, along his overcoat, and play sentry in his place. Kill with your silenced pistol anyone approaching you."

“Yes, Herr Major!”

Next, Hugo returned to the main entrance and took in his right hand his silenced Walther P 38 pistol, indicating to his men behind him to do the same. Once they were all ready, Hugo opened the door and walked in at a normal pace, as if he belonged here. The room he entered proved to be some kind of reception room cum administrative office, with three women in navy uniforms busy typing documents. All three twisted their heads to look at him as he walked in, quickly followed by his men. The women’s looks of curiosity instantly changed to that of horror and fear at the sight of their frogmen’s suits and silenced pistols, but none of them had the time to scream before being shot in the head with single bullets, with the noise of the firings about the same volume as that of Champagne bottles’ corks popping out. Hugo couldn’t help contemplate with bitterness for a short moment the young woman he had just killed. He however quickly shook himself back to mission mode and made signs to half of his men to follow him through the door giving in to the rest of the building, with his three other men climbing the stairs leading to the upper floor. Finding himself inside a corridor that ran the length of the building and which was lined up with a total of eight doors, Hugo went to the two nearest doors, situated opposite of each other, and read the plates fixed to them. One said ‘Radio Monitoring Room # One’, the other ‘Crypto Room # One’. Using hand signals only, he pointed the radio monitoring room to Hans Arnim and Johannes Schwälbe, then signaled Max Hohenbascher to follow him inside the crypto room. Acting in concert, the two pairs of German commandos opened their respective doors and quickly entered medium-sized rooms, each containing an impressive amount of electronic equipment and work stations. While the radio monitoring room was occupied by four women and three men, the crypto room contained five women and one man, the latter a navy officer. Shooting as quickly as accuracy allowed, Hugo and his three men coldly shot all the Americans in the head, helped in this by the fact that many of the Americans were wearing headsets and were concentrating on listening or writing, thus delaying their reflexes. However, despite the silencers fitted to their pistols, this still made quite some noise, enough to attract one male NCO out of one of the adjacent rooms. Hugo however shot him dead before he could make more than three steps in the hallway. Quickly changing his now empty magazine for a full one, Hugo hurried to the room from which the American had come out, where he could hear female voices expressing concerns and wondering what was going on. To his deep annoyance, his entrance into that room triggered a chorus of high-pitch panicked screams before he could even start shooting.

Now realizing that discretion had just gone out the window, he emptied again his pistol, killing the three men and four woman, all unarmed, that had been working at a row of radio listening work stations. Holstering back his pistol, he then grabbed his StG44 assault rifle and gave a nod to Hohenbascher.

“Forget the discrete part from now on and use your rifle: those screams could have awakened even the dead.”

“Yes, Herr Major!”

When the duo returned into the hallway, it was confronted by three American navy men armed with pistols and running towards them. However, not knowing what was really going on, the Americans were too slow to react and were cut down in a hail of automatic fire that, even with the silencers fitted to the StG44s, resonated loudly along the hallway. Hugo then decided to forego any attempt at being ‘discreet’ and shouted an order in German to his men via his portable radio.

“Use your grenades to clear each room! No more pussyfooting!”

Outside the main entrance of the radio monitoring building, young Max Landau became quite uncomfortable as the noise from gunfire and grenades exploding inside became loud enough to be heard clearly from the outside: this was liable to attract an armed reaction from the Americans, in which case he could hardly explain why, as the supposed sentry of the building, he had not rushed inside to investigate. Landau was still wondering how to handle that question when he saw seven armed men come towards him at a run. Six of the soldiers were running in double parallel files behind what looked like an officer holding a pistol. Holding firmly his GARAND rifle and taking two steps forward in order to be in a darker area away from the main door, he shouted in his best English as the newcomers were less than ten paces away from him.

“HALT! WHO GOES THERE?”

The seven Americans slowed down to a quick walk on hearing him, with the officer answering Landau in an angry tone.

“It’s me, Captain Rickert, you nitwit! Why are you still here, doing nothing while all this firing is going on?”

“The shooting is coming from the next building, sir, and I didn’t want to abandon my post.”

The American captain seemed to gobble up his excuse then: by attenuating the loudness of the shots inside, the silencers used by the commandos made it difficult to

judge correctly the distance and direction of the shots. Deciding that he had to prevent those Americans from taking his comrades in the back, the young Max then profited from the moment of hesitation by the American officer and leveled his rifle, shooting as fast as he could from near point blank range. The officer was the first to be shot, getting a .30 caliber bullet in the chest and collapsing nearly at once. The six other American Marines, caught by surprise, took a fraction of a second to start reacting, something which allowed Max to shoot as well two more soldiers before they started pointing their weapons at him. With adrenaline pumping furiously through his veins, Max kept firing, downing two more Americans before the remaining two Marines opened fire. The first bullet went through his guts, while the second bullet grazed his left hip. Ignoring the pain, Max continued firing, downing the last American as the now empty ammo clip of his GARAND was automatically ejected with a characteristic metallic noise. Throwing away the empty rifle, Max started to grab his StG44 assault rifle slung in his back but suddenly felt empty headed and started wobbling on his feet. Opening his stolen American overcoat and putting one hand on his belly, he felt liquid against his hand but could not tell in the darkness how much blood there was. Seeing that one of the Americans was still moving and trying to grab again his fallen rifle, Max, now in a daze, pointed his StG44 with difficulty and shot a burst that hit the Marine, killing him. That was the last thing he could do before collapsing on the grass, passing out from loss of blood.

Hugo Margraff found Max a couple of minutes later, inert on the grass in front of the main entrance, as he and his men ran out after killing all the American personnel on duty and starting fires inside with incendiary grenades. Crouching beside his youngest trooper, Hugo felt sadness when he found no pulse. Grabbing first the assault rifle lying nearby, he pointed his dead soldier to his men.

“Grab him and carry him back to our beaching point: I will cover you.”

Four of his men took hold of Max’ arms and legs and lifted his limp body up from the grass before starting to run away towards the woods to the Southeast, with one man at the point, his rifle pointed. Hugo then followed them while watching their back. He had already alerted by radio Fritz Stein and his team to withdraw, so the commandos were not leaving anyone or anything behind, save dozens of empty brass cartridge casings. Hugo threw a bitter look at the now burning two buildings they had raided: this was the first raid on American soil where he had lost a soldier. What had soured things on this

mission was the unpredictably high number of Americans on duty at such a late hour, something that had prolonged the shooting for much longer than anticipated. At least, he now knew what Fort Ward was used for and by whom and he had taken the time at the last moment to grab two important classified documents inside one of the crypto rooms before priming and throwing away a white phosphorous grenade. Thankfully, it seemed that young Max, in his last act, had taken out the Americans' quick reaction force, as other Americans in the fort were apparently taking some time to organize a bigger response. That allowed Hugo and his team to reach unimpeded their beaching point, where they put on their masks, fins and rebreather systems. Two men dragged Max' body behind them into the water, while a third man took hold of his waterproof equipment bag. By the time that a strong party of Marines and armed sailors started scouring the grounds of Fort Ward, searching for the saboteurs who had put fire to the two most important buildings in the fort, the German commandos were already swimming down to the waiting U-900. As soon as Hugo and his men were inside the airlocks of the submarine, Ulrich von Wittgenstein lifted his boat from the silt plateau he had been resting on and retracted his schnorchel before sailing towards the Southeast at periscope depth.

Hugo was still in his diving suit when he went to the control room to report to Ulrich on his mission. His grim expression put at once Ulrich in a guarded mood.

"Did you suffer casualties during your raid, Major?"

"Yes, I did, Herr Kapitän: Schutze Max Landau was killed. Fort Ward is actually a U.S. Navy radio monitoring station that specializes in long range listening and deciphering of Japanese communications. We found over eighty American Navy personnel, both men and women, at work at this late hour, something that completely threw my action plan out of balance. We were however able to eliminate the Americans on evening duty shift and put fire to their radio monitoring and crypto-analysis buildings before withdrawing. I was also able to grab these two documents, Herr Kapitän."

Ulrich looked down at the two documents, one thick binder and a small hardcover book, reading aloud the titles on the covers.

"Decryption keys for Japanese Navy code, plus a U.S. Navy Codebook..."

Ulrich then looked back at Hugo, his expression sober.

"You have my most sincere condolences for your dead trooper, Major. You however filled your mission well, as these two very important documents prove. Now, are you still ready for your next mission of the night?"

To that, Hugo answered firmly at once.

"Yes, Herr Kapitän! I will need only twenty minutes to switch the equipment in our waterproof bags and to refill our breathing apparatus. I will still be going out with a total of only five men this time, as previously planned."

"Excellent! We should be able to let you out close to the predetermined shore location in about one hour. Once you will be on your way on foot, I will move north towards my next objective. Be in position and expect my radio call by nine tomorrow morning."

"We will be ready, Herr Kapitän." promised Hugo, standing at attention.

21:34 (Seattle Time)

Shoreline of Burien District

South from Downtown Seattle

Running into the woods lining the shoreline of the Burien District, south of Downtown Seattle and its port, Hugo and his four men stopped among the trees at a point where they still could see the waters of the Puget Sound's East Passage. A number of boats were searching along the shores of Bainbridge Island with the help of projectors, still looking for the infiltrators that had attacked Fort Ward. However, none of those boats were searching to the South of it: von Wittgenstein's ruse of sailing southeast after the raid seemed to have worked. Putting their waterproof packs and weapons down, they quickly took off their diving gear and suits, then took both American Army uniforms and German field uniforms out of their packs. Putting on first their German uniforms, they then put American Army trousers and winter greatcoats over them, completing their disguises with American boots and steel helmets. Next out of their packs were a collection of American weapons and web gear, plus two backpack radios. There was still plenty of other equipment in their packs, but it stayed inside them for the moment, while their diving gear and suits got quickly camouflaged behind a bush. Hugo, now looking like a U.S. Army first lieutenant and armed with both a M2 .30 caliber selective-fire carbine and a Colt M1911 .45 caliber pistol, looked at the four men assembled around him, who were armed with GARAND rifles. Heinrich Bayerling,

Michel Drücker, Karl Haussmann and Hellmuth Golding were among his most experienced and efficient soldiers and he knew that he could fully count on them for this mission.

“Alright, let’s get moving towards our objective. We will do our best not to attract attention, as stealth will be primordial in this mission. Put on your packs and follow me.”

Looking very much like a U.S. Army foot patrol, the five men plodded eastward through the forest, reaching Ambaum Boulevard after about 400 meters of walking. Vehicle traffic was light at this hour, while there were only a few dispersed houses visible along the road. The five men crossed the boulevard at a run while no vehicles were in sight, then entered the woods again and continued east. After another two kilometers of cautious walking, the team arrived at the Pacific Way highway, which bordered the Duwamish River, which itself flowed down to the port area of Seattle. Staying inside the tree line, Hugo took long minutes to examine with his binoculars one of his objectives on this mission: the Boeing Plant # 2, which produced B-17 heavy bombers for the U.S. Army Air Corps. Situated on the opposite side of the Duwamish River, the plant itself was huge, with over 160,000 square meters of covered factory floor. Even larger was the open field next to it, in which rows and rows of brand new B-17 four-engine bombers were lined up, waiting to be shipped. Hugo smiled while examining the plant and the open field with his binoculars.

“Wow! Talk about a juicy target! Huge, immobile and with over fifty shiny new heavy bombers parked side by side in tight rows. We will take our time to carefully plot it on our maps and calculate the distances before continuing towards our main target. Haussmann, take out your rangefinder.”

“Yes, Herr Major!” replied the soldier before taking his pack off and pulling out of it a portable artillery optical rangefinder with light tripod. He then set up his instrument and pointed it at the distant aircraft manufacturing plant, then let Hugo look through it. Using a detailed map of Seattle, a compass and the rangefinder, Hugo spent a good fifty minutes to carefully plot the various parts of the manufacturing hall, along with the exact perimeter of the parking field full of new bombers. Once he was satisfied with his work, Hugo had the rangefinder packed again, with his team then heading towards a nearby bridge crossing the Duwamish River. This time they walked openly in single file, following the side of the highway before crossing the bridge, Hugo leading. Their

disguises worked well, the few drivers passing by them not making any case about them and not even slowing down at their sight.

The commando team walked another kilometer or so through a residential neighborhood before arriving at the edge of a wide open field. Seeing an apparently abandoned sort of garage or storage building nearby situated on the edge of the open field, Hugo decided to seek shelter and hide there. Breaking the lock on a flimsy side door of what turned out to be an abandoned garage, Hugo had his men install themselves inside and went to a window facing the field. Running north to south and occupying much of that open field was the Renton Airfield, with its sole main paved runway. Bordering its eastern limit was the Cedar River, which flowed into Lake Washington. On the other side of the river, Hugo was able to observe a huge factory, nearly as big as the Boeing Plant # 2. Next to it, facing the airfield, was a wide tarmac full of newly-built B-29 heavy bombers. Hugo immediately concentrated his attention on those bombers. While Germany knew about the existence of the B-29, it knew little about it and photos of it were rare, so Hugo took out a 35mm still camera equipped with a long zoom lens and a small tripod and, piling a few old crates under the window, solidly installing his camera and tripod on top of them. Using highly sensitive films and long exposure time, he took a number of pictures of the bombers, playing with the exposure time to make sure that at least some of his photos would be perfect. Once he was done with his camera, he replaced it with their optical rangefinder on top of the crates. However, before starting his observations and map plotting, he looked briefly at his men.

"I will stay up for another hour or two while plotting that manufacturing plant on my map. In the meantime, go to sleep. I will wake one of you up later to continue the watch."

"Understood, Herr Major!" replied in unison his four men, who then laid down as comfortably as they could before rapidly falling asleep, quite tired by their previous evening activities.

05:13 (Seattle Time)

Friday, February 18, 1944

Abandoned garage on the western edge of Renton Airfield

King County, Washington State

Hellmuth Golding jumped down the last two meters of the tall pole he had just climbed up and down and smiled in the darkness to Hugo while handing him a spool of thin metallic wire.

"Here you go, sir! With such a long wire antenna suspended from that height, we should have excellent communications with the U-900."

"I certainly hope so: if not, our mission will have been mostly wasted. Once this wire antenna is plugged to one of our backpack radios, we will be in business. You may go catch some extra zee time now, but make sure that you eat breakfast first."

"Yes, sir!"

Hugo, the spool in one hand, then walked to the window of the garage facing the airfield and passed it to Michel Drücker, who was waiting on the other side of the window and who then quickly connected the wire to the antenna of their backpack HF radio.

At precisely six in the morning, Hugo powered their HF radio and did a very brief radio check with the U-900, speaking in English in order not to attract immediate attention from amateur radio operators and using coded words to minimize the amount of time spent on the air. After less than twelve seconds, he put down his headset and smiled to his four soldiers.

"Radio reception was perfect at both ends and the mission is still on as planned. We now only need to wait another three hours, then it will be show time."

That helped relieve some of the nervousness among his men, who well knew how near impossible it would be for them to return to the U-900 if they were ever discovered here, in Renton. On the other hand, they all understood how important their mission was at the strategic level and were more than ready to do their duty to the end. While none of them were what one would call Nazi fanatics, they were all proud Germans.

08:59 (Seattle Time)

Control room of the U-900

Navigating at three knots and a depth of sixty meters

Puget Sound Central Basin, facing Elliot Bay and Downtown Seattle

"REEL IN OUR TOWED FLOATING ANTENNA! GUN CREWS AND LOADERS TO BE READY TO MAN OUR DECK WEAPONS! SURFACE, SURFACE!"

Primed up as he had rarely been before, Ulrich then hurried forward to the ladder leading up to the forward underwater observation dome, climbing the steel steps as fast as he could and leaving Bruno Barber in charge of the control room. When he arrived inside the observation dome, he found Leutnant Werner Wendt and three men already there, manning the three-meter high angle rangefinder and the indirect fire control station.

“Leutnant Wendt, point and elevate our main gun mount towards our primary target’s coordinates as soon as it will rise from its deck well.”

“Yes, Herr Kapitän!” replied Wendt, who then quickly rechecked his indirect fire control map table, where the location of the Boeing’s Renton Plant was circled in red. The U-900 then burst through the surface, emerging like a monster of the deep in a halo of foam and bubbles, barely 150 meters from one of the ferries which linked the east and west shores of the Puget Sound. Ulrich could see numerous passengers lining the rail sidings of the ferry and looking at the U-900 with mouths opened ajar, obviously able to recognize the big swastika painted on the sail, alongside ‘U-900’. That made Ulrich smile, both proud and amused. As the old saying went: be famous or infamous, but be somebody! Today, he was definitely going to be infamous. As soon as the U-900 was fully on the surface and level, he keyed his intercom and spoke in it.

“RAISE ALL DECK MOUNTS! GUNNERS, TO YOUR WEAPONS!”

Next, he looked at Wendt and at the men manning the big optical rangefinder.

“You may now confirm our exact position with the help of our rangefinder, Leutnant.”

“Right away, Herr Kapitän!” said Wendt before looking at the rangefinder operators. “Give me the exact heading and distance to the Smith Tower²⁰ in Downtown Seattle.”

The rangefinder operators, already well briefed about their job for today, quickly lined up their big optical instrument on the old skyscraper, giving its azimuth and distance to Wendt, who promptly marked the location of the U-900 on his map, then calculated the azimuth and distance between it and the Boeing’s Renton plant. Next, he keyed his radio microphone as the gunners of the submarine came out at a run from both airlocks

²⁰ Smith Tower : Oldest skyscraper in Seattle. Built in 1914, it was 38 storey-high and was one of the highest buildings in the United States at the time.

in the sail and manned the twin 12.7 centimeter gun mount and the two twin 3.7 centimeter anti-aircraft mounts.

“Turtle, this is Orca. Am ready to open fire.”

Less than two seconds later, the voice of Hugo Margraff came into his headset.

“Turtle ready to direct your fire, Orca. Fire first ranging shot, over!”

Wendt, using the remote control system of the big twin deck gun, made it rotate and elevate to the values he had just calculated, then spoke with the gun master.

“Twin 12.7 centimeter gun, one ranging round, fire!”

On the forward weather deck of the U-900, the gun master of the twin heavy gun shouted a warning to his loaders, so that they wouldn't be hurt when the gun would recoil, then pressed the gun trigger.

“FIRING NOW!... RELOAD!”

The loud ‘BOOM’ and bright flash from the gun's muzzle blast as it spat out its 26 kilo shell at a velocity of 880 meters per second made most people aboard the nearby ferry crouch or cower in fear. Fired at high elevation in indirect fire mode, the shell went up to past 10,000 meters of altitude before going down towards the Boeing Renton plant. Its point of impact, just at the southeast corner section of the big assembly hall, was observed by Hugo Margraff, who immediately reported it by radio to Wendt and gave him the necessary corrections. The second shell, fired 45 seconds after the first one, hit dead center the assembly hall. Using that point as a reference, Hugo then ordered more adjustments and started directing his fire plan against the giant aircraft plant, allowing Wendt to go to full rate of fire.

On the forward deck of the U-900, the big twin 12.7 centimeter mount was now firing at near its maximum rate, each of its barrels spitting a shell every five seconds, for a combined firing rate of 24 rounds per minute, with minute adjustments in azimuth called by Hugo between each salvo. Feeding the twin guns were a long lineup of sailors passing the big shells and their long brass casings up from the main gun magazine all the way to the gun mount. One of the sailors in the ammunition chain grinned to Otto Hannig, the graying submarine's cook, as he got a fresh shell from him.

"Hey, Smutje²¹, I bet that you don't feed that kind of menu too often to your customers!"

"To you guys, never! To the guys on the other side, always!"

The sight of the German submarine firing its big guns at an infernal rate while calmly sailing in front of Seattle soon proved too much to many of the occupants of the ferry, some of which started making obscene gestures and shaking their fists at the Germans visible on the decks of the U-900. Others ran up to the bridge of the ferry boat, shouting angry questions at the captain of the ferry.

"FOR GOD'S SAKE, WHERE IS OUR NAVY?"

"WHERE ARE OUR AIRCRAFT? DON'T WE HAVE A MILITARY AIRFIELD NEARBY?"

"DON'T WE HAVE COASTAL GUNS TO DEFEND THE PORT?"

To which the poor ferry boat captain could only respond with a grimace.

"I ALREADY ALERTED THE COAST GUARD ABOUT THAT SUBMARINE. THERE IS NOTHING ELSE THAT I CAN DO APART FROM KEEPING YOU AWAY FROM THAT SUBMARINE."

"AND WHEN WILL THE COAST GUARD ARRIVE?"

"I DON'T KNOW! LOOK, IF YOU WANT TO MAKE YOURSELVES USEFUL, HOW ABOUT TAKING DETAILED PICTURES OF THAT SUBMARINE WHILE IT IS STILL ON THE SURFACE?"

That reply struck many of the ones who had come to the bridge. Those who had still cameras with them then dutifully started to film the U-900 in action. Ironically, those pictures would soon prove to be the best taken of a TYPE XXI submarine to ever reach U.S. Navy Intelligence.

In Renton, Hugo was as concentrated as he ever had been while directing the fire from the U-900 according to his fire plan. Each pair of shells was directed by him to hit forty meters to the left of the preceding one. Once the shells had hit one end of the assembly hall, Hugo had the intended points of impact elevated by forty meters, with firing progression switched to the right. With the 26 kilo high-explosive fragmentation shells hitting the plant at a rate of 24 to 25 per minute and with the impact zones

²¹ Smutje : Common nickname given to the cook aboard German submarines.

changing constantly and methodically, the Boeing plant and the heavy bombers being built inside were reduced within four minutes into a field of blackened and twisted pieces of metal and broken machine tools. What Hugo Margraff could not see was the horrendous effect of the intense bombardment on the thousands of workers employed by the plant, a majority of which were women. Hundreds were killed outright, while hundreds more were wounded, often horribly, while the rest fled the plant in utter panic. When Hugo judged the plant itself to be effectively destroyed, he had the gunfire switched to the nearby tarmac where newly built B-29s were lined up. With shells with proximity fuses now being used, the naval gunfire soon proved devastating to the bombers, many of which had their fuel tanks filled. Shells exploding a few meters above the ground sent hundreds of red-hot steel fragments all around, piercing the aluminum skin of the bombers and ripping up engine mounts, hydraulic lines and electrical wiring, plus piercing fuel tanks. With the tarmac transformed into a sea of fire with only ten shells, Hugo then had the U-900 switch target again, this time aiming at the Boeing Plant # 2, which produced B-17 heavy bombers. That plant basically got the same treatment as the Reston plant but, being within direct line of sight of the U-900 and being much closer to it, that allowed Leutnant Wendt to use directly his optical rangefinder to point his twin big guns. Within seconds, shells started slamming and exploding into the aircraft plant, making the workers inside run out like ants coming out of their hill. Ulrich von Wittgenstein, who was constantly looking around his submarine, watching for the arrival of a warship or a military aircraft, suddenly caught up on something on the shore just north of Elliott Bay. Going to one of the C38 Night Directors installed inside the underwater viewing dome, he pointed the powerful optical instrument in that direction. He couldn't help swearing softly to himself after a few seconds of observation.

"Mein Gott! I can't believe this! A prisoner of war camp, here."

Using a nearby intercom, he nearly shouted in it.

"FELDWEBEL STEIN TO THE FORWARD OBSERVATION DOME, AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE!"

He then resumed his observation of the camp, which could be identified by its barbed wire perimeter fence and its wooden guard towers. He could also see now something quite unsettling. Fritz Stein thankfully arrived inside the dome in near record time, with Ulrich then making him look through the C38 unit.

"Look at this and tell me if the crowd I am seeing inside that camp is not a bunch of German prisoners cheering up as we bombard Seattle, Feldwebel Stein."

Stein soon looked up at him, utterly stunned.

"You're right, Herr Kapitän! Those men must be Germans. What are we going to do about them?"

"We will discuss that later, Feldwebel. For the moment, observe that camp and notice as many details about it as you can. We will have to submerge soon, though."

Leaving Stein at the C38 director, Ulrich resumed his panoramic watch, helped in this by two of his sailors armed with swivel-mounted heavy binoculars. After four minutes of firing at the Boeing Plant # 2 and with already nearly ten minutes spent on the surface, Ulrich decided to not force his luck much longer, shouting an order to Wendt.

"Leutnant, switch fire to the Todd Shipyards, at the mouth of the Duwamish River, but fire only a total of ten shells at it, then have our gunners get back inside and lower our gun mounts."

"Understood, Herr Kapitän!"

"Captain to control room: be prepared to crash dive on my command. Accelerate to twelve knots and take Heading 006!"

"Aye, Herr Kapitän!" was the answer through the intercom. Two minutes later, Ulrich gave the order to dive and the U-900 disappeared within twenty seconds under the surface, still watched by the shocked passengers of the ferry boat. The first Coast Guard boat to show up on the scene six minutes later, an armed tugboat, was nearly greeted with boos. In Renton, Hugo Margraff and his men, their job done in Renton, quickly packed up their equipment and left the garage, still disguised as American soldiers, and started marching back west.

16:40 (Seattle Time)

Intensive care department, Harborview Medical Center

325 Ninth Avenue, First Hill District, Seattle

Seattle Mayor William F. Devin was near tears as he toured with Governor Arthur B. Langlie the Boeing employees being treated at the Harborview Medical Center. The hospital was presently overflowing with nearly 500 wounded Boeing employees, with a clear majority of them being young women and with many having suffered horrible wounds, including many lost limbs. All the hospitals and medical facilities in Seattle were now equally filled with casualties from the brazen morning bombardment by a German submarine, with more wounded still arriving as they were discovered by rescue

workers among the twisted ruins of the two Boeing plants. The mayor finally had to sit down on a chair near a nurses station, utterly broken by all the suffering and tragedy he had just seen.

“My God! What a horrible day! How could this have happened at all?”

Governor Langlie, who had been the mayor of Seattle from 1938 to 1941 and who was as devastated as Devin was, looked severely at his military aide, a Navy lieutenant commander.

“A pertinent question indeed! Would you have an answer to that, Commander Nielsen?”

The navy man shrank under Langlie’s and Devin’s hard stares, having little that he could tell them.

“The Navy is still looking into that, Mister Governor. The latest news are that our ships and planes are still looking for that German submarine, but they have found no traces of it yet. We presume that, after bombarding the Boeing plants, it fled the Puget Sound underwater and is now probably going down the Juan de Fuca Strait, heading for the open waters of the Pacific.”

His answer only seemed to make the Governor angrier.

“The Navy presumes? How about it proves to the people of this state that it can do its job properly? We now have over a thousand dead civilians, plus over 1,700 wounded, victims of a German submarine the Navy let come through all the way to here. Be assured that the President and Secretary of Navy Knox will learn of the sordid details of this outrage. In the meantime, I want Admiral Browning, who supposedly commands the local navy district, to give me a detailed report on this attack, tonight at the latest! Now, go find a telephone and pass my request to him, Commander.”

Next, Langlie looked at his chief political advisor, a very experienced and resourceful man who seemingly had contacts everywhere.

“Ed, would you know by chance something that Commander Nielsen didn’t know...or wouldn’t tell me?”

“Not much, Mister Governor. I already told you about the yesterday evening attack by frogmen on Fort Ward, in which over eighty Navy men and women died. It is now evident that those frogmen came from the submarine that bombarded the Boeing plants this morning. What is disturbing about that is that submarine was able to loiter all night in the local waters, and this without being detected at all, despite the sweeps

effected by the Navy. Something is definitely lacking in the Navy's anti-submarine capabilities."

"That is certainly a point that I will emphasize to the President when I will call him after this visit. Anything else?"

"Uh, sort of, Mister Governor. A number of passengers who were in the morning ferry boat that came close to the German submarine were able to snap many good quality pictures of that submarine, which reportedly is of a new type on which the Navy knows little about. Some of those passengers gave copies of their photos to the Navy Intelligence, while others offered their photos to a number of local newspapers. However, the censoring section of the Navy is now trying to block the publication of any newspaper article describing or referring to the morning's submarine attack, including showing pictures of that submarine in newspapers."

"WHAT?" nearly shouted Langlie, furious. "On top of being incapable of protecting this city and state from a German submarine attack, the Navy would sweep under the carpet any news of that attack? Multiple local radio stations have already talked and even discussed that attack on the air with listeners. How stupid can these Navy officials be?"

"A lot, sir!" replied the advisor in a sarcastic tone.

"That's it! I am going back to my office to place a few phone calls. Go tell Commander Nielsen to move his ass if he doesn't want to have to walk back to his office."

Langlie then turned to look at Mayor Devin.

"If you will excuse me, I have to go knock on a few heads. Pass my personal sympathies to the poor victims of this German attack."

"I will, Governor. Don't hold your punches."

"Oh, I won't, I promise you."

With the Governor then walking away with his advisor, the mayor continued his tour of the wards, doing his best to comfort the wounded from the bombardment, many of which were in critical shape. As Devin was coming out of an elevator on the third floor of the hospital, he saw near a nurses station Senator Homer T. Bone, who represented the State of Washington in the U.S. Senate, talking with Rear admiral Adams, the head of the local Coast Guard district. Both were sitting on chairs and, while Bone was questioning Adams in a low voice, the admiral looked like a broken man. As Devin

approached the duo, he saw that Adams had been crying. Toning down his anger about the Navy's shortcomings, Devin spoke to Bone, who also looked quite shaken.

"Senator! Admiral! I gather that you also came to visit the victims from this morning's German bombardment?"

Bone, a balding man in his early fifties, looked up at Devin and gave him a sad look.

"I was indeed visiting those poor men and women, Mayor Devin. I found Admiral Adams here: he just visited one of his nieces, who was critically wounded in the attack."

"Oh! Please accept my sincere condolences, Admiral. What is her medical prognosis, if I may ask?"

"You may, Mayor Devin." answered Adams in a weak voice. The doctors are giving her a fifty-fifty chance of surviving but, if she survives, she will still be left with major permanent disabilities. If only my boats could have found and sunk that damn German submarine last night, before it could fire its deck gun."

Devin gave a somber look at the Coast Guard man: Adams was visibly in deep emotional distress. Questioning him now felt wrong to Devin, but too many important things were involved in this.

"Admiral, could you tell me basically how a German submarine could pass by the forts defending the entrance to the Admiralty Inlet, then could evade your anti-submarine searches all night?"

Devin expected Adams not to answer him but, probably because he was in near-shock, the old officer answered him in a weak voice.

"Because it is a TYPE XXI submarine. Both our sonar sensors and our anti-submarine weapons are nearly useless against such advanced submarines. They can even outrun most of my ships while underwater and can stay hidden at very deep depths for days before having to come up to recharge their batteries."

"What about its deck gun it used this morning? Every visual witness agreed that it had tremendous firepower. And how could it be so accurate in its shooting? The Boeing Reston plant is nearly fifteen miles away from where the submarine was."

Adams thought for a moment, apparently debating mentally about something before opening his briefcase at his side and extracting a large envelope, from which he took out a set of large black and white photo prints that he handed to Devin and Bone. The two politicians examined the prints, which showed the U-900 on the surface and firing its twin main guns, as Adams spoke.

"I am going to resign after this, as I can't deny my responsibility in this disaster, so I might as well be open about the facts here. My ordnance experts told me that this submarine, which is by the way the U-900, one of our most feared enemies at sea to date, was armed with a new type of deck gun mount that we haven't see up to now. It mounts what appears to be a variant of a German heavy anti-aircraft gun with twin five inch barrels. That kind of gun has a maximum range of about sixteen miles and is a very accurate and powerful weapon. However, to attain the kind of accuracy demonstrated against the Boeing's Reston plant, my experts all agreed that the Germans had to have a forward observer near the plant, directing the fire by radio."

Both Devin's and Bone's eyes widened on understanding the implications of this, with Bone speaking next.

"You are saying that German infiltrators are roaming the Seattle area?"

"They did, but they are probably back aboard the U-900 by now."

Devin and Bone exchanged concerned looks before the former asked another question to Adams.

"Admiral, you earlier said that this U-900 was especially feared. Why?"

"Why? Because it was the submarine that landed a commando team near Boston last year, a team that then traveled all the way to the Canadian border to go break a number of German prisoners out of a Canadian prisoner of war camp. It also sank dozens of our warships as well as merchant ships and its captain holds the title of 'Ace of aces' among German submarine captains."

Bone couldn't help make a disdainful gesture on hearing Adams' last sentence.

"Yeah! A man who shells thousands of young women from miles away : some ace he makes!"

Adams threw a strange look at Bone then and said something that shocked Devin.

"Senator, I hate to have to say this but, what the Germans did this morning was perfectly within the laws of war and cannot be called a war crime."

"What? How can you say that, Admiral?" asked Bone, scandalized.

"How? Simple : we and the British did much worse in the past and we still considered our acts as legitimate acts of war. My niece may presently be lying broken in this hospital, but she was working at a factory producing heavy bombers. Those bombers are meant to drop bombs on the enemy and, in the first years of this war, we and the British dropped a lot of bombs on Germany, targeting factories, plants, refineries and the like. The British even deliberately targeted city residential areas in an attempt to

break the morale of the German population. In contrast, the captain of the U-900 targeted this morning with exquisite precision and accuracy two aircraft plants producing exclusively heavy bombers, with not a single shell falling on a residential area. In only ten minutes of shelling, he succeeded in destroying both plants, cutting our national production output of heavy bombers by nearly a third. As for the frogmen's attack against Fort Ward last night, it was a completely legitimate one against a military installation. We may not like it but that is what war is about: death and destruction."

Devin was next to talk after a couple of seconds needed to swallow Adams' words.

"And...what do you expect that this 'submarine ace' will do next, Admiral? Could he really be gone by now?"

"If he wished so, yes! However Captain von Wittgenstein has the reputation of being a crafty, inventive and unpredictable man. So, I wouldn't count him gone yet, Mister Devin."

04:01 (Seattle Time)

U.S. Army transit barracks, Fort Lawton

On waterfront of the Puget Sound's Central Basin

Magnolia District, Seattle

Corporal George Murray was sleeping in his bunk when a nerve-twitching whistling noise, followed by an ear-splitting explosion, awoke him with a startle. His reflexive move to sit up in bed resulted in his head banging against the wooden board supporting the mattress of the top tier bunk of his double bunk bed. Swearing loudly while holding his head with both hands, he swung his legs out of his bed and sat up on the edge for a moment, waiting for the worst of the pain to pass. Barely a few seconds later, a powerful pair of explosions again shook the 400 two-storey wooden barracks of the pre-embarkation transit camp, presently occupied by over 18,000 men from Murray's infantry division.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" Shouted a young, very green private, near panic. A sergeant quickly answered him in a harsh tone.

"WE ARE BEING SHELLED, YOU DIMWIT! EVERYBODY OUT OF YOUR BEDS, NOW! GET DOWN TO THE GROUND FLOOR AND EVACUATE THE BARRACK! DISPERSE INTO THE NEARBY WOODS!"

The soldiers bunking on the top floor then ran to the wooden staircase leading down to the ground floor, quickly clogging it with a panicked human mass. One of the next 12.7 centimeter shells from the U-900 then struck their barrack, piercing easily the wooden peaked roof and creating mass butchery when it flew down through the human mass before exploding at the foot of the staircase, blowing up over half of the barrack building and killing all but a very few of its 75 occupants.

Falling at a rate of two shells every five seconds and hitting with unnerving accuracy, the gunfire from the U-900 systematically destroyed rows after rows of wooden barracks, killing hundreds of American soldiers and sending thousands more fleeing in disorder through the cold outside rain, many wearing nothing more than their underwear. With their officers occupying separate quarters some distances from the enlisted men's barracks, only a sprinkling of senior NCOs were present to try bringing order to the stampeding crowd, but with little success. Most of these NCOs in fact joined the fleeing soldiers, realizing that staying within the barracks lines could well result in their deaths.

The officers of that division were however not spared the bombardment, a series of shells falling within the officers' lines of the camp after three minutes of gun fire, just as the first officers were running out of their quarters. That shellfire then started switching at interval between the enlisted barracks and the officers' quarters area, with one shell in particular killing the commandant of Fort Lawton, Colonel Harry Branson, blowing his official residence to splinters.

The noise and flashes from that new bombardment in turn spread panic around the whole of Seattle, with families rushing to the basement of their homes or apartment buildings, seeking shelter there. Happening in the dark of the night, the shelling from the U-900 went on for longer than its bombardment of the Boeing plants the morning of the preceding day, as the chances of an American ship or plane intercepting the submarine and firing at it were much less than during daylight. One solitary armed tugboat belonging to the Coast Guard did bravely try to intervene but was quickly turned into Swiss cheese and sank under the murderous fire of the two twin 37mm automatic cannons of the U-900. The only reason that the shelling came eventually to a stop was that the U-900 was starting to run low on its stocks of 12.7 centimeter shells. Ulrich von

Wittgenstein wanted to keep at least some medium shells in case he would need in the near future to save on his torpedoes by finishing enemy cargo ships with gunfire. However, all those shells expended in the course of two days had certainly proved most useful.

The shelling had stopped for some ten minutes when the surviving American soldiers started emerging from the woods where they had taken refuge, many of them in a state of shock and all of them shivering under the cold rain. What they found on returning to their barracks was a scene of utter carnage and destruction. The wooden barracks, meant to be temporary war structures, had provided next to no protection from the shells to their occupants, the wood splinters thrown around by the explosions actually having contributed to the casualty count. Mixed in with the male survivors were a hundred or so women from the Women's Army Corps School whose barracks had not been spared by the shelling. A brigadier general who was part of the infantry division staging through Fort Lawton finally managed to restore some order into that mass chaos, getting the thousands of wounded to the hospitals that still had beds available in Seattle and organizing the intact men and women into rescue parties, in order to comb the ruins of the barracks and find any possible survivors there.

Daylight was finally coming for the shell-shocked, wet and freezing survivors when the brigadier general noticed that one of the buildings at the German prisoner of war camp, situated away from the transit camp, was burning. Intrigued by that, as he had not seen shells hitting that camp, he sent a squad of military policemen in three jeeps to go check the situation there. On arrival at the main gate of the POW camp, the MPs at first saw no one guarding it or standing in the guard towers surrounding the camp's perimeter barbed wire fence. The MP sergeant in charge of the squad became immediately suspicious.

"Chamber rounds into your weapons, guys: I don't like the smell of this. Jump out and spread out!"

The nine MPs under him obeyed quickly, loading their M2 carbines and keeping them at the ready while advancing cautiously in extended line. One of the MPs who went to check the small guard hut on one side of the main gate of the camp suddenly shouted towards his sergeant.

"SARGE, I FOUND ONE OF OUR MEN IN THE HUT, KILLED BY A BULLET."

"DAMN! HERBERT, CONNELLY, RICKERTS, GO CHECK THE GUARD TOWERS AROUND THE PERIMETER FENCE, THE REST WILL COME WITH ME AND CHECK THE GARRISON'S BARRACKS."

Now fully alert and expecting the worst, the MPs split up, with most of them following their squad leader. Acting as if he was clearing out a house in enemy territory, the MP sergeant kicked open the door of one of the two wooden barracks used by the guards of the camp and jumped inside, his carbine at the ready. One quick look around him in the semi-obscure barrack and its double row of double bunk beds made him lower slowly his weapon while swearing softly to himself.

"Holy Mother of Christ!"

Most of the beds were still occupied, but four of them were empty, their previous occupants having fallen out of them and now sprawling on the floor, inert. Going to the nearest man lying in bed, the sergeant was able to see that the unlucky soldier had been shot in the head, probably while he was still sleeping. His MPs soon confirmed the worst for him.

"They are all dead, Sarge. All of them were shot."

Now nearly sick to his stomach, the MP sergeant then noticed something that alarmed him further.

"I don't see the weapon of the dead man near me, nor do I see his ammunition bandoleer. Can you see the weapons of the other guards, guys?"

After a short wait, he got a number of negative answers that made him swear again.

"SHIT! This means that we have about forty weapons unaccounted for, along with their spare ammunition. If the German prisoners inside the camp now have those weapons..."

He didn't have to finish his sentence, as his men understood at once the implications of that. The soldiers who had gone to check the other guards barrack soon reported to him that they had found the same picture there. Then, the three MPs sent to check the guard towers came back with more bad news.

"All the guards in the towers were shot dead, Sergeant. Their weapons are missing. Also, we found a large cut that has been made in the perimeter fence, on the side facing the Puget Sound."

The sergeant then couldn't contain anymore his fury and slammed a fist against the wooden frame of a double bunk bed.

"GOD DAMMIT! IT MUST BE THESE GERMAN SABOTEURS FROM THE SUBMARINE AGAIN! THEY PROBABLY CAME TO FREE THE PRISONERS UNDER THE COVER OF THEIR BOMBARDMENT. HERBERT, CONNELLY, RETURN TO THAT CUT IN THE FENCE AND WATCH IT WHILE WE GO SEE HOW MANY PRISONERS ARE MISSING."

"Uh, how are we going to check on that, Sarge?" asked his youngest MP, an inexperienced but very bright teenager. "The administrative building, where the prisoners lists were kept, has been burned down to cinders."

"Hell, you're right, Jenkins! Still, I want to go check inside the camp before reporting all this to our bosses. I will go inside the perimeter with two men. The rest will guard the main gate and the fence."

The MP sergeant and two other, very nervous MPs, soon walked through the main gate and headed to the nearest long wooden barrack. The barrack was strangely quiet when they got to the front door. Cautiously opening the door and slowly walking inside, his carbine leveled, the MP sergeant was disconcerted to find that all the prisoners were apparently present, either lying on their beds or sitting on the edge of their mattresses. However, the way the close to 180 Germans present looked at him with a mix of hostility and defiance shook him up badly. Tense as a bar and his right index finger on the trigger of his M2 carbine, the MP sergeant looked at the nearest prisoner, a blond young man with blue eyes.

"What happened here earlier this morning?"

The young German replied in German, his tone showing arrogance.

"Nicht sprechen Engländer²²!"

Containing his anger, the MP sergeant asked another prisoner.

"You, tell me what happened in the camp last night."

"Nicht sprechen Engländer!"

Two more prisoners answered the same way, the last one doing it with an arrogant smirk that furiously tempted the MP NCO to smack his carbine's butt against his jaw. Realizing that he wasn't going to get any answers here, he withdrew from the barrack with his two men and returned to the main gate, where he stepped out of the camp and went to his

²² Nicht sprechen Engländer : 'I don't speak English' in German.

jeep to send a radio message. He was however already expecting his commanding officer to swear violently on hearing his report about the prisoners' camp.

14:14 (Seattle Time)

Monday, February 21, 1944

Pier 91, Port of Seattle

There were a lot of somber faces around Rear admiral Adams as he and the visiting big brass from Washington D.C. looked at the wreck of the troopship that had sunk a mere 300 meters from the pier on which they stood. Pier 91 was reserved for troopships loading or unloading fresh or relieved units from the Pacific Theatre and was usually very busy. Now, it was next to empty, thanks to the U-900. Normally, the Navy District Commander for the region, Rear Admiral Browning, would have escorted these Washington V.I.P.s around Seattle, but Browning, already close to mandatory retirement age, had suffered a heart attack on understanding the extent of the damage caused around Seattle and the implications for his navy career. Browning was now in a hospital, but Adams could bet that Admiral King was not finished with the district commander. In truth, Admiral King, General Marshall and General Arnold were about equally incensed by the damage and casualties suffered around Seattle, but King was much more ready to express his fury openly than Marshall or Arnold were.

"And we haven't heard anything more about this damn U-900 since that troopship blew up on a mine yesterday?" asked General Henry 'Hap' Arnold, Commander of the Army Air Corps. Adams shook his head bitterly in response.

"Nothing, General! It is as if that U-900 is a ghost. As much as I hate saying this, the captain of the U-900 just served us a masterful lesson on how to use a submarine."

"I unfortunately have to agree with you, Admiral Adams." said Ernest J. King, the Chief of Naval Operations and head of the U.S. Navy. "In fact, this is not the first time that Captain von Wittgenstein serves us such a lesson. If we ever capture him alive, I may have to praise his tactical prowess before breaking his jaw. The strategic damage he did to us in just three days is unbelievable, and that mostly through old-fashioned gunnery. By the way, do we know if any German prisoners escaped with the help of the U-900 from their camp in Fort Lawton?"

George Marshall answered him on that, having been given some information by his staff in Washington.

“My aides were able to compare the lists of German prisoners of war kept at the Pentagon with the muster of prisoners taken on Saturday. A total of 59 Germans are missing, most of them being submariners and the rest being combat pilots. However, these missing prisoners hurt a lot less than the casualties suffered in Fort Lawton: 3,870 dead and wounded! A number of the intact survivors also suffered severe nervous shock, something I can hardly blame them for. That whole division will in fact need to be reformed, reorganized and refitted before it could be sent overseas.”

Marshall then looked critically at King.

“So, what is the Navy going to do to prevent further such mayhem by German submarines along our coasts, Admiral? I already have many reports of numerous and painful attacks on our coastlines by German submarines posted off Panama, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco.”

That question seemed to frustrate to no end the irascible King. He however managed to answer Marshall in a measured tone of voice.

“In the past couple of years, we had quite a few successes against German submarines of the older types, by locating them via HF direction finding radio triangulation. The command style of Admiral Dönitz, who liked to tightly control his submarines, actually helped us in that aspect. Unfortunately, Dönitz changed his command methods and the volume of radio traffic between his submarines and his headquarters in France dropped off dramatically. We however still could triangulate German submarines when they sent radio messages, even though we stopped being able to decipher German codes two years ago and still can't. Unfortunately, the Germans located along our coasts now use a new method of transmission that makes radio direction finding and triangulation impossible. My radio specialists call it 'burst transmission'. Now, German submariners apparently pre-record their messages, then sent them out at a highly accelerated rate on the air. A typical message that would take minutes to send before is now sent in less than a second, way too short a time for us to be able to triangulate the signal. The couple of times when our radio operators could hear those messages, which are also encrypted by the way, it sounded like a short screeching noise. As for other methods to detect those new German submarines, we are working on better sonar sets, but that work will still take many months, maybe years,

before we have new sonars. To sum it up, the new German submarines unfortunately have us by our balls right now.”

Both Marshall and Arnold appeared both horrified and scandalized by King’s words, but they also understood that King was only being brutally honest with them, something they still preferred to white lies and empty promises.

“So, you are saying that we can do little to stop the depredations by those German submarines deployed along both of our coasts?” asked Marshall, getting a nod from King.

“Basically, yes. Our patrol planes still could get lucky and spot a submarine on the surface, if the captain of that submarine is not careful enough but, presently, we seem to be dealing with a team of highly experienced and professional submarine aces, like that von Wittgenstein, and those submarines aces are killing us literally, the way they killed the British.”

Marshall and Arnold exchanged worried looks then, with Arnold letting out his discouragement in a few words.

“Damn! We just lost over a quarter of our production capacity for heavy bombers and rebuilding these plants will take nearly a year, possibly more. The worst is however the loss of trained aircraft construction workers: forming new workers properly takes time, lots of time.”

“One thing is sure, though.” Added Marshall. “These plants will have to be rebuilt in new locations away from any waterways communicating with the sea, in order to make a repeat of these bombardments impossible.”

The three top commanders nodded their heads in unison at those words before getting back in their jeeps to go visit some of the victims of the U-900 in the overcrowded hospitals of the city.

At nearly the same moment, much further south along the West Coast, Korvettenkapitän Horst Degen smirked while observing with binoculars through the forward transparent dome of his U-916, as his boat was diving to periscope depth and accelerating towards deeper water in order to escape possible air attacks. His gunners had just fired over 180 12.7 centimeter shells at the Chevron refinery in El Segundo, near Long Beach and Los Angeles. The Chevron refinery, the biggest on the American West Coast, covered over four square kilometers, with over 150 large fuel storage tanks, and was situated a mere 400 meters from the California shoreline. It had thus been

literally a target that was simply impossible to miss. Now, the huge refinery complex was little more than a sea of raging fires, with columns of thick black smoke rising high in the air.

“Well, if that doesn’t piss off the Americans, nothing will!”

Prowling at periscope depth off San Francisco, Korvettenkapitän Klaus Bargsten and his U-915 were looking at a much tougher nut to crack. The first major problem was the wide, shallow underwater plateau running along this local section of the coast, which left little depth to play with and made his submarine easily visible from the air. The second problem was that the sole entrance to the San Francisco Bay was through the Golden Gate Strait, which was heavily guarded by guns and radar stations. Those defenses had in fact been further reinforced two years ago, after a daring Otto Kretschmer and his U-800 had managed to enter the strait and fired repeated torpedo salvos at the pillars of the famous Golden Gate Bridge, succeeding in collapsing the whole giant structure in the water and blocking completely the entrance to San Francisco Bay for months. It had taken herculean efforts to cut away piece by piece the collapsed bridge and reopen the strait to ship traffic, but the decision then had been taken to not rebuild a bridge across the strait and use only ferry boats instead. With the reinforced and reviewed defenses of the strait making any attempt at entering San Francisco Bay nearly suicidal, Bargsten had kept to staying away from the Golden Gate Strait and to simply torpedoing the ships coming in and out of San Francisco. While he had been quite successful at that, he still wished to be able to use his new main deck gun mount, something von Wittgenstein had apparently been able to do with great success, according to the message received earlier from the U-900. After carefully studying the maps and charts of the San Francisco area, Bargsten had finally been able to mount a plan to use his big twin gun. He and his crew would however have to be both quick and accurate in both their firing and their boat handling.

“Helm, have us rise above the surface just enough to allow our optical rangefinders to have a direct view of the coast. Keep our speed at two knots. Gunners and loaders, be ready to man the main gun mount and sustain a top firing rate for a few minutes once we fully surface.”

Bargsten then gave his position at the periscope to his second watch officer and went forward to climb up to the forward underwater observation dome, where a helmsman and rangefinder operators already were. The top of the transparent canopy covering the

observation dome and open top bridge was bursting through the surface when Bargsten emerged from the internal access hatch of the dome.

"Rangefinder, give me a precise azimuth and distance for the lighthouse at the entrance of the Golden Gate Strait as soon as you can."

Bargsten quickly sat at the indirect fire control map table of the dome and plotted his precise position as soon as the rangefinder operator gave him the data he needed. Calculating the azimuth and range to his intended target inside San Francisco Bay was the matter of seconds for him, as he worked frantically against the clock and hoping that the American coastal gunners would not be top notch and quick to react today. This was literally going to be a hit and run job.

"SURFACE, SURFACE!... GUNNERS, MAN THE MAIN GUN MOUNT! BE READY TO FIRE ON MY COMMAND! SET SHELL FUSES TO SHORT DELAY DETONATION ON IMPACT!"

With the twin 12.7 centimeter gun mount on remote-control mode, Bargsten made it slew in the direction and elevation he had just calculated to hit his target, then sent another order by intercom to the gun master.

"FIRE FOR EFFECT, MAXIMUM RATE, FIRE!"

As the first two big shells burst out of the twin guns, Bargsten looked nervously at the coastal batteries located on each side of the Golden Gate Strait. Thankfully, they didn't seem to have reacted to his presence yet. However, that would not stay like that for long. The trick for him was to cause the most damage possible in the least amount of time and then dive before the American gunners could fire their first shells.

14:31 (San Francisco Time)

Treasure Island, in the middle of San Francisco Bay

Treasure Island, in the middle of San Francisco Bay and in direct view of the Golden Gate Strait, was an artificial island built in 1936-37 by dumping thousands of tons of rocks, landfill and top soil over a shallow reef that had been until then nothing but a navigation hazard. The 200 hectares island thus formed had then been used to lodge the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. However, with the coming of the war, the Navy Department had simply confiscated the island from the city of San Francisco in 1942 and had turned it into a major naval installation and center named Naval Station Treasure Island. On top of quays and piers for warships, the island was the location for

numerous barracks, repair shops, storage depots, ramps and hangars for seaplanes, a navy personnel processing center, a hospital and, most importantly, the headquarters of the 12th Naval District. There were over 12,000 navy men and women present on the island, many being men waiting to be deployed to the Pacific Theatre, when the rain of shells fired at near maximum elevation by the U-915 started to fall. Most of the shells did impact on the island right from the start, as it was a well-charted feature on all existing maps of the time, and started immediately to cause damages, casualties and panic, most of the personnel on the island never having seen combat before. As the U-915 slowly drifted at two knots from South to North, its fire also slowly swept the island, hitting first the seaplane hangars and the naval district headquarters building, then the rows of multi-storey military barracks. With his gun loaders working like demons, Bargsten was able to fire a total of 68 shells in only a bit more than two minutes. That was when he decided that he had pushed his luck far enough and gave the order to clear the decks and dive. The top of his sail was already under water when the American coastal batteries belatedly fired their first shells, missing the submarine by a long shot. The planes that then took off from the nearby Alameda Naval Air Station tried in vain to find the pesky German submarine but failed to locate it despite patrolling until they had to land due to low fuel levels. Bargsten, having 'parked' his submarine on the bottom well away from the coast at a depth of 260 meters and then keeping a silent routine, let the storm pass before going back near the surface and sailing along a giant loop, returning to near the Golden Gate Strait's entrance. Once there, he repeated his previous attack, but this time against Naval Air Station Alameda, nearly at the maximum range of his big guns. He fired a total of 42 shells on that pass by San Francisco before diving again out of sight, leaving hundreds of American coastal artillerymen swearing profusely at the U-915.

18:15 (San Francisco Time)

Friday, March 3, 1944

German disguised cargo ship S.S. BREMERHAVEN

Anchored inside Wafer Bay, Cocos Island

550 kilometers off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica

"You fired a total of 292 12.7 centimeter shells?" Exclaimed the captain of the S.S. BREMERHAVEN, presently disguised as the Portuguese cargo ship S.S. SANTO

CRISTOBAL. Ulrich von Wittgenstein smiled at the surprise shown by his merchant navy comrade.

"Yes, and none of them were wasted, I can assure you. In fact, I intend to fill my boat to the roof with all the 12.7 centimeter shells I will be able to load aboard. Those big twin guns are simply marvelous."

"Hell, if the other four U-boote captains on this mission expend as much shells as you did, then I might run out of shells within a month or two."

"Well, if they do, fill their requests as best you can. Those shells are presently returning their weight in gold in terms of strategic damage done to the Americans. A few months of this and the Americans will be on their knees."

"And what about those 59 men you freed from a POW camp in Seattle? What do you want me to do with them?"

Ulrich thought over his response to that for a moment before answering.

"On second thoughts, I will keep on my submarine 24 of them who are qualified submariners or warship crewmen, so that I can use them to man tanker or cargo ships captured by me and whose cargo I deem valuable enough to grab and bring back to Germany or use during this operation. The rest will stay with your ship until a prize ship starts its way back to Europe."

Ulrich then contemplated the nearby shore of the bay, with its high cliffs covered with thick tropical vegetation and its beaches. There was even a photo-worthy cliff-side waterfall nearby, plus a number of old huts from a long-abandoned settlement. The island, belonging to Costa Rica, was actually uninhabited and had been so for decades, which was one of the reasons it had been chosen as one of the clandestine resupply points for the submarines of Operation VISE GRIP.

"This place looks really nice. I think that I will let my crew profit from the beach and waterfall for a couple of days, while your men resupply my boat."

"You are most welcome to it." replied the captain of the S.S. BREMERHAVEN. "My own men have been going to the shore quite often while waiting for subs to show up. For your men, it will be a nice change from being stuck inside a steel coffin."

Ulrich smiled at the mild joke from his merchant navy colleague.

"Well, that coffin of mine certainly dealt a lot of death and destruction lately and I am far from finished, my friend."

CHAPTER 13 – A PRESIDENT GONE

17:07 (Washington D.C. Time)

Saturday, May 6, 1944

Cabinet conference room, the White House

Washington, D.C., United States of America

Harry Truman was in a near state of shock as his top military leaders finished briefing him on the war situation. This early morning, he had been only a little-used and ill-informed Vice-President of the United States who was not regularly briefed on military matters. All that had changed when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had suddenly died, struck down by a massive stroke which, according to his doctor, had been brought on by heavy and unrelenting amounts of stress caused by the ever worsening war situation. Now, Harry Truman was officially the new President of the United States, having been sworn in just before noon. Truman had thought then that the pressure on him couldn't get worse, with all the responsibilities of the presidency now on his shoulders. However, since he had not been regularly briefed on many matters, the litany of bad news that his military top commanders had just delivered to him had come like a hammer strike to his head. And he was supposed to lead the nation through such a disastrous situation?

"Gentlemen, I...I never thought that things were so bad. How did we sink so low?"

"How, Mister President?" answered Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy. "Because of the continued assault on both our East and West Coasts by German submarines, which are strangling our maritime traffic on top of causing widespread destruction along our coasts with their shelling. Our navy did its best, but those new German submarines are simply too advanced and performing for our anti-submarine sensors and weapons. We also suspect but can't prove that a few South American countries, notably Argentina and Chile are secretly supporting Germany by providing safe ports to these submarines, where they can refuel and rearm."

"Then, why didn't we send warships to these countries to make them toe the line?" asked Truman. Knox hesitated and lowered his head before answering.

"We tried, Mister President. All the warships we sent down south were sunk while on their way by the same German submarines that are blocking our ports. We also tried to entice our allies down there, like Brazil, to intervene and pressure militarily both Argentina and Chile, but they refused to act, probably because they are sensing that we are losing this war."

"And are we really losing this war, Secretary Knox?"

"I believe so, Mister President." was the nearly whispered reply, shocking Truman. In contrast, the military leaders around the table didn't protest on hearing that opinion, mostly keeping somber faces. Picking up again the sheets of printed statistics about the war given to him at the start of the meeting, Truman reread some of the numbers with growing bitterness: over 48,000 dead and wounded, most of them civilians working in war industries, victims of three months of German submarine shelling against coastal installations; most war-related manufacturing, transport or repair facilities situated within fourteen miles from the coast heavily damaged or completely destroyed by shelling; all the main ports either damaged or blocked by shelling or sea mines; maritime traffic cut by more than half; merchant ships and warships being sunk faster than they could be replaced and a growing difficulty in recruiting and training enough replacements to compensate for all these human losses. What was not said in the fact sheets Truman was reading but something he was well aware of was the growing wave of population exodus from the coastal areas, with citizens afraid of being shelled moving further into the interior of the country, thus creating even bigger shortages of manpower for the industries that were still intact along the coasts. Suddenly feeling very old, Truman looked up from the document and eyed the men around the table.

"What is your counsel, gentlemen? How could we redress this situation?"

"We can't, at least with conventional means, Mister President." answered Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War. "We do have however a last hope: Project Manhattan."

"Project Manhattan? What is that? I never heard of it before."

"That's because it is our most secret national project by far and because the knowledge about it has been restricted to a very limited number of persons. I believe that President Roosevelt chose not to put you in the know about it, Mister President. As for what it is, the simple answer would be that it is a scientifically advanced project which is trying to develop a new kind of weapon, a bomb powerful enough to destroy a whole city by itself. This, by the way, is classified Top Secret, Mister President."

"And...that super bomb, when could it be ready for use?" asked Truman, feeling some hope coming back to him. However, Stimson then quickly doused cold water on his hopes by his answer.

"If all goes well, in about a year, maybe. Please understand that the technology involved in that project is revolutionary and still not well understood, Mister President. We are devoting enormous financial, scientific and industrial resources to make it advance as fast as possible, but we can't possibly accelerate it further."

"So, you would be asking the American people to go through one more year of what it has been enduring already for three months, in order to complete a bomb that may or may not work by then. Is that it, Secretary Stimson?"

"Basically yes, Mister President. The only alternative to that would be to capitulate or negotiate a peace with Germany."

"Right now, I am not sure that the American people would vote to continue the fight for another year, at the rate our country is getting clobbered. Many would consider a negotiated peace with Germany as the lesser of two evils, in view of the growing destruction and casualty counts inside our country. I will have to think in depth about that. If you have any suggestions about how to either win or stop this war, write a plan about it and submit it to me as soon as possible. Right now, my head feels ready to explode. I propose that we adjourn now and sleep on it."

Not getting any objections to that, Truman then declared the meeting adjourned. With the other participants walking out of the conference room, a pensive Truman went to one of the large windows of the room to look outside, his mind boiling. He was now President, yes, but of a country on the verge of defeat.

04:06 (New York Time)

Sunday, May 7, 1944

U.S. Army mobile radar station, on coastline of Atlantic City

New Jersey, U.S.A.

Corporal Robert Hickman was fighting not to fall asleep in the semi-obscurity of his radar van as he scanned visually his radar scope. His mobile radar unit had been stationed on the coast near Atlantic City for a good three months now and little had happened in that period of time, except for one suspected submarine contact that had quickly disappeared and for a few false alerts caused by unscheduled friendly flights

overhead. In case things got serious, he had a radio link with the army air controller in Dover Airfield but, apart from the raucous raised across the country by the death of President Roosevelt, his shift had been a quiet one up to now.

His junior partner on his shift, Private First Class John Milner, had just prepared some hot coffee for both of them and Robert was gratefully sipping on his cup when a cluster of dots suddenly appeared on the edge of his radar screen, coming from the East. Focusing his attention at once on the dots, he put down his cup of coffee and started plotting the unknown newcomers.

"Hey, John, I have a group of dots that just appeared on my radar, coming from the East."

"Oh? We were not told about flights coming from that direction. Let me just recheck our flight manifest."

After a minute spent sifting through the announced flights manifest for the day, Milner shook his head.

"Sorry, no flights are due from the East today. How many blips are there and how fast are they going and in what direction, Bob?"

By now, Hickman had time to do a preliminary plot line on his scope and what he was seeing now was downright alarming.

"Uh, you better contact Dover Airfield, now! I have a total of eleven blips, coming from Heading 083 and heading straight for Washington at a speed of approximately 300 miles per hour."

"Holy shit! You don't think that those could be German planes, do you?"

"I don't know but I am not ready to waste time on suppositions. Call Dover, NOW!"

Milner sat back down in front of his radio set and put on his headset, then called the air control section at Dover Airfield. He had to repeat three times his call before getting an answer.

"Dover Air Control here!"

"Dover, this is the Atlantic City coastal radar station. We have eleven fast blips coming from the East and heading towards Washington at a speed of 300 miles per hour. They are now 110 miles from the coast and are coming from Heading 083, over."

"Uh, Atlantic City radar station, you do realize that there is nothing to the East of your position for over 3,000 miles, except the Atlantic Ocean, over. You better check your radar set, out!"

Milner was left stunned by the cavalier answer from the Dover air controller. When he told his comrade about that answer, Hickman had a hard time not to swear out loud in response. Calming down with difficulty, he grabbed the field telephone that linked his radar van to his company's command post, which controlled four anti-aircraft guns deployed along the coast, and turned its handle. A voice answered him after a few seconds.

"Company Command Post! Staff Sergeant O'Malley speaking."

"Sarge, this is Corporal Hickman, at the radar van. I just picked up eleven unidentified blips coming from the East on my radar. They are heading towards Washington at a speed of 300 miles per hour. We called the Dover Airfield air controller, as per our standing directives, but he didn't take us seriously and told us instead to check our radar set. What should I do?"

"He ignored a warning about eleven unidentified blips from the East heading towards Washington? Alright, I will wake up the captain, so that he could talk with the Dover air controller. Keep plotting those blips in the meantime and don't lose them."

"You can count on us, Sarge." replied Hickman before putting down the telephone's handset. Looking at his radar screen, he shook his head in discouragement.

"What we would need is an integrated network of fixed radar stations with direct landlines to a central air defense coordination center. This business of dispersed mobile radar vans is just not working. But who would listen to a simple corporal like me?"

At Dover Airfield, the same NCO who had answered Hickman also argued with Hickman's captain when he called by radio, but finally passed the call to his supervisor, a young lieutenant. A total of over five minutes was wasted before the decision was made by that lieutenant to alert the fighter unit based at Dover Airfield. However, the response he got then was that the unit was equipped with P-47 THUNDERBOLT day fighters and that the unit's pilots were not trained nor equipped for night interceptions. In return, the lieutenant woke up his superior, a captain, to ask him permission to alert the nearest airfield with night fighters. The problem was that they soon realized that there were no night fighter units posted along the Northeast coast of the United States at this time, all the P-61 BLACK WIDOW units having been reserved for the Pacific theatre.

The captain in Dover was still scratching his head about what to do when he heard the distant rumble of powerful engines passing overhead at high altitude to the south of the airfield.

04:37 (New York Time)

Lead German Messerschmitt Me 264 C heavy bomber Heading towards Washington, D.C.

Major Kurt Lippish, helped by the light from a full moon, compared the features he could see below him on the ground with the ones on his map and, being in agreement with his navigator/bombardier, keyed his radio microphone, calling the ten other bombers of his squadron.

“Condor One to Condor call signs! We are now less than seventy kilometers from Washington. Follow me into a gentle dive down to the altitude of 3,000 meters, from where we will drop our bombs, and accelerate to a speed of 600 kilometers per hour.”

Lippish then pushed forward a bit his control yoke, putting his heavy bomber in a gentle dive. His eleven Messerschmitt Me 264 C were actually all the production models that presently existed, the aircraft type having barely entered service after a frenetic last development phase directed and pushed by Generalfeldmarshal Kesselring in person, who had fired a number of RLM bureaucrats, managers and senior Luftwaffe officers for incompetence and for having wasted years while mishandling the ‘Amerika Bomber’ project. Now, the Me 264 C was making its first combat mission, filling the role it had been conceived to do: hit the American East Coast directly from Europe. The Me 264 C, while looking very much like the Me 264 V1 prototype that had first flown in December of 1942, however sported many significant differences with it. First, it had a longer fuselage and taller vertical rudders, to correct some original lack of longitudinal stability. Second, it had deeper wings with a much larger total surface, in order to lower the very high original wing loading ratio, which had made the Me 264 V1 a very slow climbing aircraft. Third, and most importantly, the four original radial engines, each rated at 1730 horsepower, had been replaced by six inverted V12 DB 603 G engines, which were each rated at 1900 horsepower. That extra engine power had done a world of a difference, with the new Me 264 C now being as nimble as any other heavy bomber around and also being very fast, being in fact as fast as the latest piston-engine fighter aircraft in

service. However, what really put it in a class of its own was its combat range: a whopping 15,500 kilometers while loaded with four tons of bombs on its way out, making it easily able to reach targets as far as Chicago from its base in Bordeaux, France. Taking a lesson from the famous British MOSQUITO light bomber, which had no defensive turrets and relied on its high speed to evade interception, Kesselring had ordered that the Me 264 C's armament be limited to one tail turret with two 20mm cannons and one 13mm heavy machine gun in the nose, to defend against frontal passes by enemy fighters. That had improved further the already good aerodynamics of the aircraft by cutting the drag typically caused by multiple turrets and gun positions, something that had in turn augmented further the range. Now, the Americans were about to meet with the latest Luftwaffe acquisition. That it would strike Washington only a day after the unexpected death of President Roosevelt could only magnify the psychological effect that the Führer was hoping from this raid.

Harry Truman was having an agitated sleep, the stress of his new position weighing on him, when a pair of Secret Service agents burst inside the bedroom occupied by Truman in the second floor of the Executive Residence building of the White House. One agent then shook Truman none too gently while speaking to him in a gradually rising volume of voice.

"Mister President! MISTER PRESIDENT! You have to quickly go down to the East Wing bunker with us: enemy bombers are about to overfly Washington."

"What? German bombers, here? But that's impossible!"

"I know that it is hard to believe, Mister President, but we can't take any chances. Please follow us quickly down to the bunker."

"At least, give me time to put my robe and slippers on and to retrieve my glasses."

"Alright, Mister President, but make it quick!"

"What about the rest of the staff in the building?" asked Truman while putting on his robe.

"We are already collecting them and bringing them to the bunker, Mister President."

A bit reassured by that, Truman put on his slippers and glasses, then followed the two agents down the stairs to the ground floor of the Executive Residence. From there, they nearly ran down the main hallway of the East Colonnade, which linked the Executive

Residence to the East Wing building. As they were about to go down the staircase leading to the underground bunker that had been built in 1942, along with the East Wing building, Truman started to hear a growing engine noise, like the buzz from angry bees, approach from the East. The senior agent also heard it and urged his charge to further hurry up.

"The enemy bombers are approaching fast, Mister President. Please hurry!"

Truman obeyed, himself quite nervous by now. They found another Secret Service agent waiting at the opened steel door of the underground bunker, built of thick reinforced concrete, in which Truman could hear the worried or fearful voices of other White House occupants. As Truman was entering the bunker, with the agent at the entrance about to close the heavy steel door behind him and his escorts, a sinister whizz started to be heard.

"Oh shit!" exclaimed the agent at the door, who hurried to close it and secure it. He had just done that when a first muffled explosion made the whole White House shake violently. A second, third and fourth explosion, each one closer, shook again the building, making plaster fall from the ceiling of the bunker. Then, at least two bombs made direct hits against the White House complex, making even the bunker shake violently and sending its occupants scrambling for the protection of tables and beds. To add to the chaos, a water pipe running along the ceiling burst, turning into a giant sprinkler and soaking everything and everyone in a radius of three meters. Truman counted a total of eight bombs which exploded near or on the White House. Other, more distant explosions were felt as well but were obviously targeting some other buildings in Washington. After about five minute, the head of the presidential protection detail decided that it was time for him to go inspect the damage upstairs. He however opposed a firm 'no' to Truman's wish to accompany him up and ordered him to stay under guard in the bunker for the time being. Frustrated but understanding the man's point of view, Truman went to sit on a sofa beside a very scared White House assistant cook who was crying from a near nervous breakdown and gently patted her shoulder.

"Come now, Miss Denning, the bombing is already finished and we are all safe here. We should be able to go back upstairs soon."

"But how could those damn Germans fly all the way to here to bombard us, Mister President? What tells us that they won't come back again to drop more bombs?"

"They won't! I will make sure of that, Miss Denning." lied Truman, who then wondered how he was going to keep that promise.

Some twenty minutes later, the head of the security detail came back into the shelter and walked to Truman, his expression grim. Truman got up from his sofa and led the Secret Service man to a corner where they would be able to speak in privacy.

"So, how is the White House?" asked Truman anxiously.

"It's bad, Mister President. A total of about eight large bombs either bracketed or hit directly the White House complex, blowing in all the windows in the process. One bomb hit the junction of the East Colonnade and of the Executive Residence and exploded, blowing up most of the Executive Residence and collapsing the North and South Porticos. What is left of the Executive Residence could collapse at any moment. That bomb also destroyed half of the East Colonnade section. A second bomb directly hit the West Colonnade section, going through the Press Briefing Room and burying deep into the ground before exploding. It basically obliterated all of the West Colonnade section and more than half of the West Wing. The rest of the West Wing has mostly collapsed or is now structurally compromised because of the blast and shock from that bomb. I am afraid that the White House is presently finished as your residence and work place, Mister President."

"The bastards!" raged Truman while trying to restrain his volume of voice. The senior Secret Service agent was not finished, however.

"There is more, Mister President. From the flames I could see in the distance, I would say that both the Capitol Hill and the Pentagon were hit, hard. Today is going to be marked as a true dark day for the nation, Mister President."

"And that was my first day as President. Great! Thank God that my wife and daughter had not moved in yet." said dejectedly Harry Truman, feeling discouragement fill him.

Two days later, on May 9, the German heavy bombers returned, this time to carpet-bomb the giant General Motors car plant in Detroit, which was now producing tanks, armored vehicles and trucks for the U.S. Army. That bombing raid, contrary to that made against Washington, was conducted during daylight in order to attain maximum accuracy. The eleven Me 264 Cs of Major Lippish dropped a total of 176 250-kilo bombs on the plant, causing severe damages to it and also killing over 1,600 plant workers, who basically had no real shelters they could find nearby when the alert was given. The German bombers then turned around eastward and accelerated to their

maximum speed, surprising and leaving behind the 34 American fighter aircraft that had scrambled from Army airfields around Detroit. The fact that none of the German bombers had been successfully intercepted during the raid triggered a storm of indignant protests, both from the public and from the Congress, asking for heads to roll, starting with General Arnold. Truman sided with the protesters and fired Arnold as head of the Army Air Corps the next day, then ordered his military chiefs to stop sending reinforcements and supplies to the Pacific and to concentrate the American war effort into fortifying the East and West Coasts and into improving the country's air defenses. While the public saluted that presidential directive, it also left Australia basically isolated and without support against a Japanese empire that extended all the way to Indonesia and Papua-New Guinea, next door to the Australian continent. The only thing that then saved Australia from a Japanese invasion was the fact that the Japanese Army and Navy were already badly overextended. Australia and Japan were thus both secretly content to sign a mutual armistice in mid June, with Japan left in control of nearly the whole of the Pacific, save for Hawaii, Australia and New Zealand, and with the Japanese now in possession of all the natural resources they had been eyeing at the start of the war. All that meant basically that the United States was by itself against Germany and Japan, except for next door Canada and with the Soviet Union fighting for its life against the Germans on another, distant front. Many countries of Central and South America that had allied itself with the U.S.A. in 1941 then started to get cold feet and either limited themselves to lukewarm support or squarely declared their neutrality in the war. Even Brazil, which was seeing its vital maritime commerce pounded by German submarines, started vacillating in its active support to the United States, especially after most of the American warships that had been helping to protect its Atlantic coast were withdrawn all the way to the Caribbean Basin on orders from Washington. From there, things only got progressively worst for the United States.

On the Eastern Front, as more Me 264 Cs were being produced and put into service, the Luftwaffe found itself finally able to hit at the Soviet weapons factories in the distant Ural Mountains, which had been until now mostly immune to German air attacks. With Soviet war production volumes abruptly dropping and with the Anglo-American maritime supply convoys shut off, the mighty Soviet Army's offensive, already stopped cold in early 1944 by the new German reinforcements from the Western Front, now turned into a slow, fighting withdrawal, then into a full blown retreat, with the Soviet

soldiers lacking ammunition, fuel, spare parts and rations. The oil-rich fields of the Caucasus, around the Black Sea, which had been in danger of falling back into Soviet hands, became secure German-held territory, allowing the Germans to repair and rebuild the oil wells that had been sabotaged by the Soviets before their withdrawal from the Caucasus.

By August of 1944, President Truman and his military chiefs had all but abandoned any hopes of winning the war, short of getting a functional atomic bomb. However, the progress reports from New Mexico on that subject were not very encouraging and promised the need for many more months of waiting. Faced with the prospect of enduring at least another year of mounting civilian casualties, strangled maritime trade via German submarine blockade and systematic air bombardments, President Truman and the American Congress finally decided to open armistice talks with both Germany and Japan in October of 1944. On learning that the U.S.S.R. would soon be left alone to fight, disgruntled Communist Party leaders led a coup that resulted into the death of Joseph Stalin and the prompt signing of a peace accord between Germany and the Soviet Union.

13:50 (Paris Time)

Saturday, November 11, 1944

Upper open bridge of the U-900

Navigating on the surface of the Atlantic

330 nautical miles southwest of Lorient, France

Coming out of the forward underwater observation dome of his boat and stepping on the covered open bridge, Ulrich von Wittgenstein took with delight a deep breath of the cold but fresh Atlantic air. He then did a visual tour of the horizon with his binoculars, out of long habit. The only thing he saw was a pair of small fishing boats in the distance, hard at work catching fish. That was a most fitting scene in his mind that coincided with the radio message he had received from the BdU headquarters in Lorient a few minutes ago. On the same day of the year than the armistice that had put an end to the fighting in World War One, the United States, Canada and the other countries of the old British Commonwealth still fighting had signed an armistice with Germany, Japan and Italy, putting in theory a stop to this war, with the losers recognizing on paper the

permanent loss of the various territories taken by the Axis during the war. In exchange, they got assurances that their remaining territories would not be attacked anymore and that maritime and air routes would be reopened and safe to use. For Germany in particular, it meant the recognition of its dominance over nearly the whole of Europe, the gain of vast new territories in the Ukraine, Belarus and the Caucasus and unimpeded maritime commerce with the countries of Latin America. For a moment, Ulrich fantasized that he, with other Germans, would one day be able to peacefully visit the United States or Great Britain as a simple tourist. That dream was however distinctly in the future, as emotions and feelings were still very much raw on both sides.

Hugo Margraff, who had participated with his commandos to the U-900's last war patrol of this conflict, joined Ulrich on the covered open bridge a few minutes later, looking quite content and also taking a deep breath.

"Aaah, the fresh smell of peace! Isn't it wonderful?"

"It certainly is, my friend. So, now that the fighting is over, what are you going to do now?"

"Well, I am not sure yet, as we still will need lots of soldiers to garrison and defend all our new territories. There is however one thing that I intend to do once ashore."

"Throw a party and get drunk?" said Ulrich with a smile, making Hugo shake his head.

"No, something even more pleasant: get married!"

That took Ulrich by surprise, but one name then quickly came to his mind about Hugo's project.

"Let me guess: you will ask for the hand of Oberhelferin Hanna Blumenthal?"

Hugo Margraff replied with a happy nod and a big grin.

"She's beautiful, intelligent, charming and brave. What more would you want in a woman?"

"She is indeed a fine girl, my friend. I hope for you that she says yes."

"Oh, I will deploy my best arguments when I will propose to her, you can count on that. And you, do you have a prospect in sight?"

Ulrich slowly shook his head in denial, as his smile faded somewhat.

“Not yet! Germany will still need good submarine commanders in order to guarantee that our old foes will keep the peace. So, for the moment, I will stay married to my boat, my friend.”

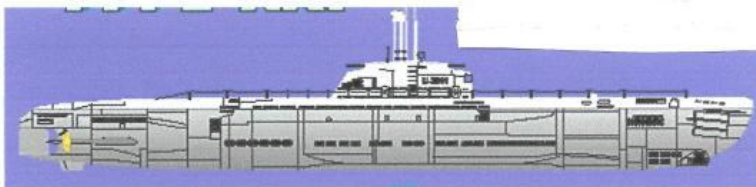
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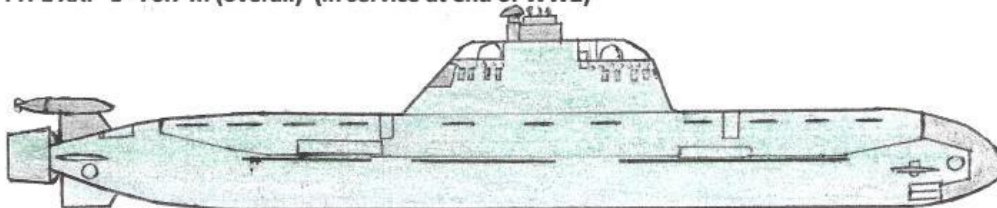
TYPE VIIC L= 67.1 m (overall) (in service in WW2)



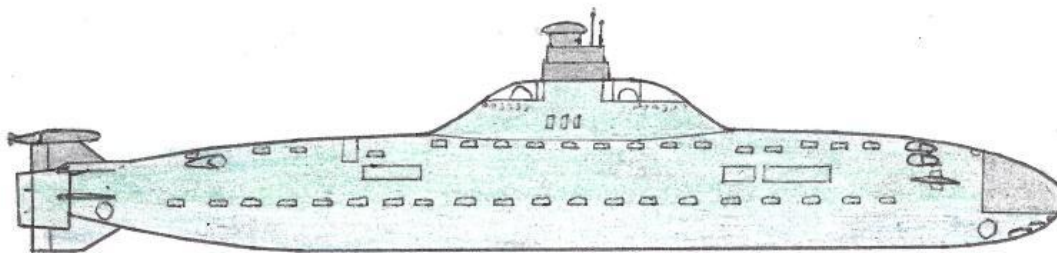
TYPE IXD L= 87.6 m (overall) (in service in WW2)



TYPE XXI L= 76.7 m (overall) (in service at end of WW2)



U-800 L= 107 m (overall) (fictitious design)



U-900 L= 112 m (overall) (fictitious design)

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