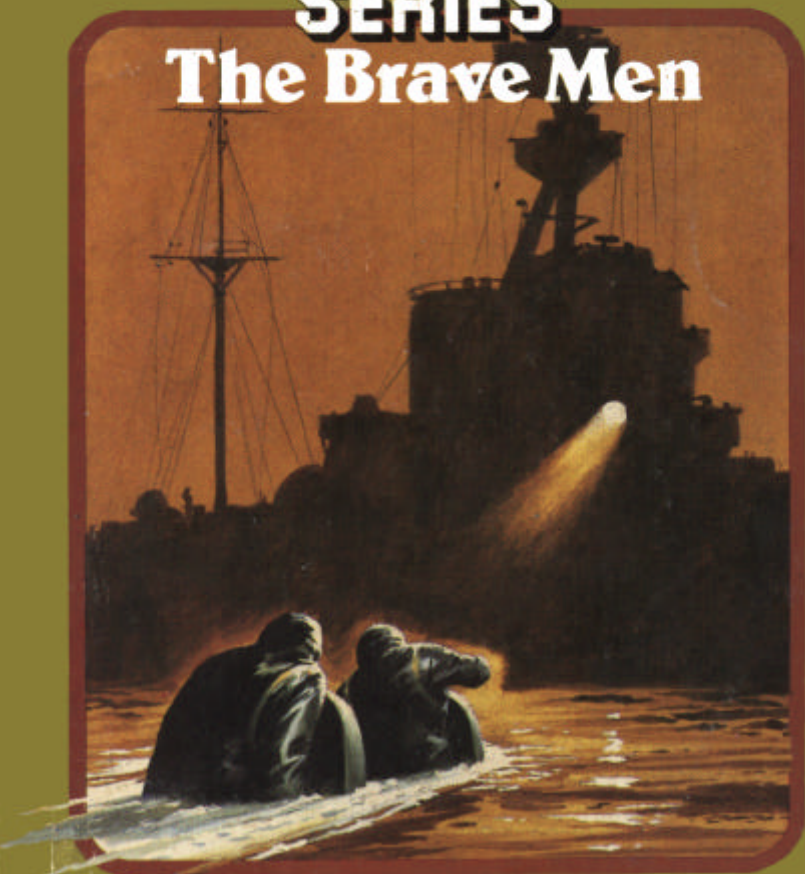


119

J.E. MACDONNELL

COLLECTOR'S SERIES

The Brave Men



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INTRODUCTION

I suppose most of us who came through the war believed ourselves to be, well, normally brave; at least we didn't hightail it from our guns and tubes and boilers, and we did win. Lord knows there was more than one time when I thought, *Thank God I've come through that lot*. I don't mean physically whole and alive, I mean still at my gun and not cowering in some corner. But we - if I may speak for the great majority of us who won no gongs - were just normally, in control of ourselves; buttressed by the comradeship and the presence of known friends close about us, each man unwittingly helping the other to keep that upper lip from gibbering...

This book - in the main though not exclusively - deals with the really, proven brave men, those who had little but cold courage to sustain them in what they did, practically alone amongst alert enemies in a hostile anchorage. Yet even in the actions concerning a ship and by implication her crew - in some cases several hundred men - it was still the decision and the responsibility of one man bravely to say *Advance* or *Retreat*. God knows a captain is a lonely man. Thus, at least, to my mind, the captain of a destroyer - or cruiser can be as deliberately courageous as the frogman, going about his murky work beneath a battleship.

In some cases my information came from men who were actually engaged in the actions described. Details of other cases were culled from action reports and battle summaries in the files of the R.A.N. Historical Records Section; from commanding-officers' reports kindly sent to me by the Chief of Naval Information at the Admiralty in London; and from German and Italian naval histories. To all of these sources I am gratefully indebted.

THE BRAVE MEN

J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

THE BRAVE MEN

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CHAPTER ONE

Like space-travel and motor-racing, even war can produce its fringe benefits; things like radar and jet aircraft and plastic surgery - and skin-diving. How many of you, wet-suitedly taking your weekend pleasures around reefs or wrecks, realise that your sub-surface mobility had its genesis way back in the 1930's, when an Italian inventor named Belloni produced his first "overall"?

It was very much a case of necessity being the mother of invention. Italian troops had marched into Abyssinia. "I am backed by a million bayonets!" Mussolini had trumpeted from that balcony in Rome, puffing himself into the bellicose bullfrog of caustic Churchillian phrase. Fine, on paper. But the martial gleam from those million bayonets quite failed to delude the sight of the Italian Navy's High Command. Their eyes saw instead the British Fleets, then the most powerful and experienced afloat, and what a blockade could do to squeeze the life-blood from Italy's narrow body.

The time was late 1935. Of necessity a new arm had - to be developed, comprising small, cheaply produced weapons of a kind wholly unknown to the enemy, and yet of such destructive capacity that not even his battleships would be immune. Thus the British superiority in tonnage and numbers could be reduced drastically, perhaps even to parity. And so a small group of Italian naval engineers, working with inspired application and devotion, produced something they called a "human torpedo," or more commonly and colloquially, a "pig." No other Navy had anything like it, nor suspected that such a weapon had been invented.

But first, before the pig could be used, men had to ride it - totally submerged.

Enter Belloni and his overall. This was a water-tight rubber garment (though nowhere near as body-flattering as the present wet suit), and provided with an underwater breathing apparatus which was fed, by high-pressure oxygen bottles. A flexible corrugated tube, looking much the same as that of a gas mask, carried the oxygen at: reduced pressure to the mouth-piece in the, diver's face-piece, which also resembled a gas mask.

The diver exhaled through the same tube, but his breath was taken

into a cylinder of soda lime crystals, which absorbed the carbon-dioxide. This was a principle something similar to the method used for freshening the atmosphere in a long-submerged submarine.

Judged by modern gear the Belloni overall looked ugly and awkward, but it worked, and was the prototype for all future frogmen suits. Yet everything is relative - compared to the diver in his lead-booted, lead-waisted deep-sea diving suit, a man in Belloni's overall had the mobility of a dragon fly.

And now for the pig. Perhaps a young engineer named Elios Toschi might be better fitted to describe it than I - being one of the inventors.

"The new weapon," Toschi wrote, "is in size and shape very, similar to a torpedo but is in reality a miniature submarine with entirely novel features, electrical propulsion and a steering wheel similar to that of an aeroplane.

"The innovation of greatest interest is the point that the crew, instead of remaining enclosed and more or less helpless in the interior, keep outside the structure. The two men, true flyers of the sea-depths, bestride their little underwater 'airplane', barely protected from the frontal onrush of the waters by a curved screen of plastic glass.

"At night, under cover of the most complete darkness and steering by luminous control instruments, they will be able to aim and attack their objective while remaining quite invisible to the enemy. The operators, unhampered by the steel structure, are free to move and act at will, to reach the bottom of the sea and travel along it in any way and direction, and are able to cut nets and remove obstacles with special compressed-air tools and, therefore, reach any target.

"Equipped with long-range underwater breathing gear, the operators will be able, without any connection whatsoever with the surface, to breathe and navigate under water at any depths up to thirty metres and carry a powerful charge into an enemy harbour. Being utterly invisible and beyond the reach of the most delicately sensitive acoustic detector, they will be able to operate in the interior of the harbour till they find the keel of a large unit, fasten the charge to it and thus ensure an explosion which will sink the vessel."

The specifications of such a weapon and its possible uses were formidable; to some officers at the Naval Ministry, incredibly so.

Guns, they declaimed, were the only weapons for sinking major warships, or mines or submarine-delivered torpedoes: what could a couple of unprotected men, blinded by dark water on a dark night and riding a tinpot electrical toy, possibly hope to achieve against the massive protection devices of a fleet at anchor?

Unhappily for us Admiral Cavagnari, Chief of the Italian Naval Staff, was of a progressive more than conservative turn of mind. He gave the project his blessing, and two pigs were ordered to be constructed at once. After only a few months but much improvisation - one of the propulsion motors was salvaged from a lift due for demolition - both prototypes were ready for their trials. Toschi again:

“The first tests were satisfactory. They were carried out in the chilly waters of La Spezia Bay in January and gave us unexpected results and extremely novel sensations when our submerged bodies stiffened convulsively as we were carried along by the machines we had ourselves created. We felt a thrill of delight in the dark depths of the sea our tiny human torpedo was penetrating so obediently.”

This ominous test was carried out three years before Hitler marched on Poland and placed the British Fleet on a war footing. It impressed other people besides Toschi. This order came from the Naval Staff:

“The Command of the First Light Flotilla (of human torpedoes and explosive motor-boats, called E-boats) is entrusted with the duties of training a nucleus of personnel for employment with given special weapons, and of carrying out experiments and tests concerned with the perfecting of the said weapons.”

CHAPTER TWO

The close of 1941 was a bad time for the British Mediterranean Fleet. Until then - with Matapan in March of that year shouting a fearful warning to the Italian Navy - the British had enjoyed undisputed authority over the tideless sea. Then came November and December, bringing with them disasters which the First Lord of the Admiralty, a man not given to hyperbole, described as “the crisis in our fortunes.”

Admiral Somerville, of the famous Force H, sailed from Gibraltar on November 10. With him was the Fleet aircraft-carrier Ark Royal; the object of the exercise was to approach Malta, launch thirty-seven Hurricanes and seven Blenheim bombers for the island’s defence, then return.

The operation was completed successfully and the naval force headed back for Gibraltar, still in formation, still whole and unhurt.

Men in the Navy go to afternoon tea at four p.m. On that day, November 13, no tea was served aboard Ark Royal. At 3.40 p.m. Lieutenant Gugenberger of the submarine U-81 had her 750-foot length in the graticule of his periscope lens. The great unsuspecting bow moved to meet the vertical line of his sight and Gugenberger said, “Fire.”

One minute later the long steel missile, fired with precise accuracy on an intercepting course, reached its destination. The warhead struck Ark Royal fair amidships and blasted a huge hole in her belly. Even her 22,000-ton bulk quivered, and the peaceful sky rang with the iron clangour of the blow.

Somerville had seven destroyers with him. They sniffed around like hungry otters in a pool of fish. Ark Royal was not interested, like a stricken patient unconcerned with hospital routine. She had big compartments and the sea filled them eagerly, taking only a few minutes to list her heavily. Then she suffered a temporary loss of all power and light. The great ship lay leaning in the water, quite unable to succour herself, while down her length and around her prowled those destroyers not despatched after U-81. Somerville signalled for ocean-going tugs.

By nine that night a pair of the powerful beasts had her in tow,

and to some extent her list had been eased by admitting sea water to compartments on the opposite side. Then at midnight her toiling stokers raised steam in one boiler, and it seemed she would make it.

Their hopes were stillborn. Two hours later a fierce fire broke out in the port boiler-room, and the impatient sea was worrying at her again. By 4.30 in the morning she was listed over at an angle of thirty five degrees from the vertical, an attitude she had never taken in even the heaviest seas. It was hopeless. The order to abandon ship was given. She sank at 6.13 a.m. - again that accursed number - when no more than twenty-five miles from Gibraltar and the chance of life.

Yet in another way the fates were kind - of a complement of 1,600, only one man was lost. So many times attacked and so often "sunk," Ark Royal had at last succumbed; a splendid ship killed by a single torpedo. Her sinking was a grave loss for Admiral Cunningham, Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet - now, with Illustrious and Formidable both repairing battle damage in the United States, he had no carriers at all.

Yet a greater loss was to come, and this one Cunningham witnessed. Less than a fortnight after the Ark Royal disaster he was at sea with his Battle Fleet, in support of cruisers which had sought, and found and sunk, an Italian fuel convoy. This time it was U-331, and in her sight she had battleship Barham.

The torpedoes streaked out, and when a few minutes after being hit Barham's magazines blew, there were dead Captain G.C. Cooke and 861 officers and men.

Opposed to five Italian battleships, Cunningham now had two. And then there were none.

Ark Royal, then Barham. Splendid, from the viewpoint of the Italian Navy High Command. Yet something just as significant in its implications had happened only a short time earlier. Carried to their destination in big cylinders on the deck of the submarine Scire, three pigs had breached the defences of Gibraltar harbour and sunk three British ships, one a large naval tanker, and totalling more than 30,000 tons. It was the first success of the human torpedoes, with all crews reaching safety in Spain.

Then came news of the carrier and the battleship, and Commander

Ernesto Forza, leader of the Tenth Light Flotilla of human torpedoes, cast an eager mental eye at the remaining two British capital ships in Alexandria. If they could be successfully attacked, leaving nothing comparable to challenge the forty-five 15-inch guns of the Battle Fleet in Taranto, then it was excitingly probable that British naval forces might be forced to withdraw from the Mediterranean - something which had not happened since a similar evacuation in 1796. Such an event would have a tremendous effect on the course of the war.

Commander Forza decided to send his pigs into Alexandria.

It was an extremely courageous decision, for after the Gibraltar attacks and the sinking of heavy cruiser York in Suda Bay by explosive boats, the last two British battleships could be expected to have surrounding them every protective device which an experienced and alarmed enemy could contrive. Against these minefields and nets, sonic loops and guard boats, not to mention the Fleet's deluge of defensive fire, Forza proposed sending in six men riding on three tiny submarines.

Objective: the destruction of 60,000 tons of armour-plated, 15-inch gunned might.

At La Spezia, a port on Italy's north-west coast not far from Genoa, Forza mustered his men and called for volunteers, for an operation "the return from which is extremely problematical."

It is hardly surprising that of such a select group every man volunteered. Now Forza and Commander Valerio Borghese, captain of the delivery submarine Scire, had the task, both awkward and difficult, of choosing six men, three officers and three ratings.

These were a brave sextet, and their names should be recorded in full: Lieutenant Luigi Durand de la Penne with his Petty Officer diver Emilio Vianchi; Engineer Captain Antonio Marcegaglia and P.O. diver Spartaco Schergat; Gunner Captain Vincenzo Martellotta and P.O. diver Mario Marina.

Selected, though still ignorant of the mission, they began training.

They were already highly trained, or thought they were. Night after night - the darker and rainier and rougher the better - they rode their chariots up and down and around, and encountered and overcome every obstacle which the devilish ingenuity of the

taskmasters ashore could devise. And every day, after their professional exercises, they trained physically as if for a heavyweight bout.

Meanwhile, Forza and Borghese had the additional and vital chore of dissecting Intelligence reports regarding the disposition, the standard of alertness, the protective measures and the general situation of the enemy Fleet in Alexandria.

I remember (coincidentally, it was in Alexandria) an Intelligence Officer coming aboard our cruiser and lecturing us on the general subject of security. There are no Mata Hari's to worry about, he told us in effect; the fellow to watch was that quiet, insignificant (always insignificant) little bloke drinking in the bar. He would never offer you drinks or joviality, nothing obvious like that. He would ignore you, ostensibly, while he drank quietly and absorbed himself in his paper - while in actuality he listened intently and with trained acuteness to the jabber of relaxed sailors around him.

You would never, of course, said the Intelligence officer, openly declaim in a public bar that such-and-such a battleship or carrier was sailing at a certain time for a certain destination accompanied by so many destroyers. But you very well might hold an apparently harmless conversation like this:

"Where's old Blubberguts? He's supposed to meet us here at five."

"Give him time. It'll take half an hour to get up-harbour."

"Yeah, I s'pose so. How does he like it down there?"

"Bored stiff, he reckons, up and down all the bloody time, nothing but up and down. Gives him the tom-tits. Gunna put in for a draft to a cruiser, he reckons."

"I bet. Here, it's your shout."

And after a decent interval the quiet little man looks at his watch, frowns, folds his paper, drains his drink and goes out - having learned by skilled interpretation that the patrol boats cruising up and down past the entrance to the boom change-over at 4.30, at least in the afternoon, and that by then their crews are bored and thus relatively inattentive, and that four or four-fifteen might be a good time for a submarine to try and make its entrance, especially if the gate were open then to let a ship out.

Maybe just a snippet of information, but enough of them could make up a detailed and valuable Intelligence report. Like this actual report which Forza and Borghese received from Axis agents in Alexandria:

“Fixed and mobile defences ascertained: (a) Minefield 20 miles north-west of harbour; (b) line of ‘lobster-pots’ (smaller mines but lethal if exploded against a submarine’s side) arranged at a depth of 30 fathoms in a circle with a radius of about six miles; (c) line of detector cables closer in (electrical loops which reacted to a metallic object passing over them); (d) groups of lobster-pots in known positions; (e) net barriers relatively easy to force; (f) advanced observation line beyond minefield.”

How could they hope to get by all these obstacles? First, by experience and the intuitive sense of the trained operator; second, by hoping that Scire’s deliberately streamlined length would allow her to slide harmlessly past any mine-mooring wire she might be unlucky enough to contact; third, by luck.

Like all good plans, that of Forza and Borghese was essentially simple. Pretending to sail on an ordinary patrol (her pigs, carried in a lighter, would be hoisted on board and stowed in their cylinders after leaving harbour), the submarine would arrive off the entrance to Alexandria, distant a few thousand yards, on the night of December 18. The lunar phase would be favourable, with the nights dark.

To help Borghese with his identification of his destination, aircraft would bomb Alexandria that night. Even if he did not arrive in time to see the bomb flashes and searchlights, the attack should leave fires burning. It was essential that Borghese’s navigation be absolutely precise if the pigs were to perform their navigation feat with any hope of success, and running blind he would need all the help he could get.

Once in position, Scire would release her three missiles, and then immediately return to base. Once in their position, the charioteers were to attach their three big warheads to the hulls of the battleships and set the fuses. Here came a clever refinement. Also carried in the pigs were a number of floating incendiary bombs. Released, and set to explode an hour after the warheads went up, the fiercely burning incendiaries should set alight the oil which could be expected to

flow from the ripped-open targets. Thus Alexandria harbour could be turned into an inferno which certainly would affect otherwise undamaged ships, and maybe burn down shore installations and warehouses. If this happened, then the Royal Navy's chief base in the Mediterranean could be put completely out of action.

It was a simple, very clever plan. Thank God it failed to work.

At last everything was ready. The training, the Intelligence interpretations, the navigational details, all were complete. At 2300 on the night of December 3, 1941, an hour before midnight, Scire cast off on her long journey. "Operation EA 3" had commenced.

CHAPTER THREE

The Italians the fine marine as well as automotive engineers; they built some of the fastest warships in the world, with cruisers capable of greater knottage than our destroyers, and many destroyers attaining the extraordinary speed of 39 knots. That is to say, almost two thousand tons of metal doing better than 45 miles per hour.

Already basically excellent Scire's machinery had been tirelessly checked and rechecked, so that she proceeded happily towards the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the toe of Italy. Commander Borghese expected no propulsion trouble, and had none, but on raising the Sicilian coast potential disaster reared its ugly head.

There was a signal station on Cape Pelorias. Sighting the submarine at night, it sent a message by light beginning with the words, in plain Italian, "Submarine. Scire."

Commander Borghese was aghast. In the words of his own report it was "a piece of madness!" Any enemy submarines or ships sighting that clear signal would know that the only submarine in the Italian Navy capable of carrying assault craft was at sea, obviously on a mission. Just as obviously, her destination would be either Malta or Alexandria, and the crucial element of surprise would be destroyed. Just as worrying to Borghese was the knowledge that the carefully kept secrecy of their mission was about as secret as a battleship's broadside.

But there were no enemy ships to spot that foolish signal - at least, not just there. Then, off the lighthouse of Messina, a motorboat closed the submarine. But this craft was expected, bringing information from the Naval High Command as to the whereabouts of Scire's friends at sea. This, of course, was essential; the mission was dangerous enough without her passing close to ships which might depth-charge first and collect evidence later.

But the motorboat brought even more vital information. Only a few hours earlier a British submarine had been sighted attacking an Italian convoy near Cape dell Armi. That cape was on Borghese's course.

He reacted naturally and quickly, swinging Scire to port so as to clear the danger area by a safe margin, for on no account must he

attack, and he had to avoid being attacked at all costs.

They were passing the port of Taormina, some thirty miles south of Messina, when with a kick of alarm in his guts Borghese sighted another submarine on the surface. Again his reaction was swift. He swung Scire bows-on to the other boat, which was instantly identified as enemy. There was something else Borghese knew - he, too, had been sighted.

What to do? There were his special mission and special orders about avoiding attack, added to the fact that with Scire carrying so much extra weight, she had been stripped of guns. Borghese decided to do nothing.

Then happened something which if presented fictionally would not be believed. Scire maintained her course for the eastern Mediterranean - and the enemy submarine got under way and kept station on her! Side by side they went, little more than a mile between them, each clearly visible to the other, for almost an hour. Like the best of friends, as Borghese reported. Then without warning the Britisher swung away and headed back towards Taormina; no doubt hoping for convoy pickings up there, never realising that she could have "got," for her own side, two battleships.

"Strange things," Borghese wrote, "happen at sea in time of war."

Without further shocks they reached the submarine base at Leros, one of the Aegean Islands. Here Scire's cylinders were covered with tarpaulins - occupied Leros held many Greeks who would have loved a sight of them - and the charioteers rested for the trail ahead. On the 13th Borghese brought them together and they went once again over the operational plan, at the same time studying the latest aerial reconnaissance photographs of Alexandria harbour. These showed both battleships moored to their usual buoys, head and stern. It was time to go.

Scire left Leros on December 14. Four days later, running submerged by day, surfacing at night only to recharge batteries and take in fresh air, running deep, sliding up and over the undulations of the sea bottom, she slipped through the waiting roots of the minefield, and "at 1840 hours (6.40 p.m.) we found ourselves at the prearranged point, 1.3 miles by 356 degrees from the lighthouse at the west mole of the commerical harbour of Alexandria, at a depth

of 15 metres.”

They were also in a position of exceptional danger - a mile from the Royal Navy's biggest Mediterranean base. Borghese brought her up just enough to crack the upper hatch and clamber on to the bridge. He found the conditions ideal - the night moonless and dark, the sea smooth and the sky clear. This should enable the pig crews to sight their looming targets easily, while their own craft should be almost impossible to detect - if no malfunction of equipment occurred.

Dressed in rubber suits and fitted with breathing gear, the six brave men awaited Borghese's order. He checked his position again, then gave it. For so long and so often they had trained for this. The cylinder doors were opened, the pigs slid clear. A few minutes later Scire's hydrophones told the tense control-room crew that all three craft were steadily on their way. And on their own.

Now, above all, the mother submarine must not be discovered; her presence so close would alert the whole harbour and thus prepare a hellish reception for what had to get into it. Borghese gave further orders. Scire turned with care and slid away back through the minefield. After 39 hours of running submerged she surfaced, and set course for Leros. La Spezia, her original port of departure, was gained safely. She and her crew had performed their part of the operation faultlessly.

Now, back to the main part.

All three pigs had reached the anti-submarine boom strung across the entrance to the harbour. From de la Penne's report:

“We saw some people at the end of the pier and heard them talking; one of them was walking about with a lighted oil-lamp. We also saw a large motor-boat cruising in silence off the pier and dropping depth charges. These charges were rather a nuisance to us.”

Nuisance ... I recall a mob of us swimming off our destroyer's side one afternoon when a patrol boat started its confounded dropping. We were a long way off, and the charges were only 25-pounds, yet the explosion of each one felt as though a broom stick had been shoved up a certain orifice. De la Penne and his colleagues were much closer to the entrance than we had been, and the boat would have been dropping bigger charges, and they must have

severely buffeted the Italians.

Yet, undeterred by the “nuisance,” the six heads, with little more than their eyes above water, searched with single-minded concentration for a gap in the boom. But fruitlessly, for the British knew something about building that sort of net - made of extremely tough steel-wire mesh and capable of balking a full-sized submarine’s rush.

Then, with disappointment beginning to enlarge into desperation, a flotilla of three British destroyers suddenly hove in sight from seaward. They shaped-up for the entrance and slowed down, waiting for the boom-gate to be dragged open. Guiding lights were switched on - and also, at once and without orders, were three electric motors.

So small, the pigs got very close to the last destroyer, and slipped through the gate behind her. This was the most important harbour in the Mediterranean, and the Italians were inside it!

During their swift and gutsy manoeuvre they had lost sight of each other, but that did not matter. They were in, and the targets lay waiting. These had been specifically designated as follows: de la Penne was given battleship *Valiant*, Marcegaglia the flagship *Queen Elizabeth*, while Martellotta’s destination was an aircraft carrier suspected of having entered harbour. If she had not, he was to rip open a loaded oil-tanker so that its cargo would add to the fuel for the incendiary bombs.

At this point, to avoid the confusion of chopping back and forth, it is intended to stay with one pig at a time and follow its adventures through to the end.

First, de la Penne and his diver Bianchi. A battleship weighing more than 30,000 tons is a massive vehicle, even without its rearing control tops and distinctive superstructure, and starkly visible from water level even on a dark night, so that de la Penne had no trouble in identifying his great, quiet target, *Valiant*. But though most of her thousand-odd men were asleep, *Valiant* still had a strong, silent protector. This was a wire-mesh net laid around her to catch torpedoes. De la Penne found it. With cool and iron-plated courage he got over the net on the surface. Naturally *Valiant* had lookouts posted, and if he had been discovered he would have been subjected to a deluge of fire from her close-range armament. This included

Bofors, pom-poms, oerlikons and machine-guns. But one rifle would have sufficed. He was not discovered.

Now, past the net, he was less than a hundred yards from the great ship. At nineteen minutes past two (he noted the time!) there was a slight shiver of his pig as it bumped against Valiant's hull. He was there, but too high.

De la Penne carried out the necessary flooding procedure to get beneath the huge roof of steel.

At this crucial moment something went wrong; the pig sank too fast, in fact from under him. At once he dived to follow. He found the pig all right, but not his diver. Of Bianchi there was no sign. But this was a two-man job, or was designed to be. Forcing calmness on his nerves - how long before the grenades of charges started dropping? - de la Penne swam back to the surface and searched urgently for his crew-mate. Still, no sign.

Everything seemed quiet aboard Valiant - now. He decided to forget about Bianchi and return to his job. This turned out to be a herculean task.

The pig was not under the hull, not even near enough to cause crippling damage. That could easily be remedied. De la Penne bestrode his chariot and pressed the starter. Nothing happened. Again and again he tried, but the engine would not start. A quick check told him why; a piece of steel wire, possibly from the torpedo net, had its python's grip round the propeller.

The pig was more than twenty feet long, and heavy. Its warhead alone weighed 300 kilogrammes. Its whole body was resting on the harbour mud. What could one man, already tired and cold from hours of submersion, do to shift it? A lesser man would have given up, justifiably contending that he had done his best. But de la Penne was no ordinary man.

He grabbed hold of his obstinate pig and with all the strength of his superbly trained body he heaved. There was about ten yards to go. He had a compass, but presently this was obscured by the mud churned up by his panting effort. Still he heaved, his breath gasping through the mask. Only an iron will allied to muscle could have shifted that log of a thing. But inch by painful inch it was shifting.

And time was passing. This factor constantly rubbed at his nerves.

Somewhere up there Bianchi must be floating. Alive or dead didn't matter. A foc's'le sentry, a lookout, had only to sight the spreadeagled figure and the balloon would be up and down would come the charges; not only here, but all round the other two targets. The mission, so close to success, would be blown to failure.

De la Penne could not see through goggles plastered with sticky mud. He was near the end of his endurance when he heard a sound. He paused, gasping for breath, while experience tried to identify what came to his ears. In a moment he had it - that was an alternating pump, and it was coming from inside the battleship's hull, and it seemed to be coming from almost above his head!

The noise of that dispassionately operating pump galvanised him. From some reserve of strength he started the tortuous heaving again; and then, after forty minutes of effort, his head bumped against Valiant's belly.

It was no use resting, for he could hardly breathe. It took the last vestige of his physical and mental endurance to regulate the time fuses, which he set to explode at six o'clock local time. the incendiary bombs he decided against - floating, they might be seen, and thus negative all his effort.

Slowly, painfully, de la Penne paddled to the surface.

His head broke clear. Off came the mask and pure gloriously fresh, the air was gulped in. It revived him swiftly. He started to swim away from the monstrous egg he had laid. There came a shout, then a searchlight, and a snarling ripple of machine-gun fire. Brave, but no idiot, de la Penne turned and swam back to the buoy to which Valiant's rearing bow was moored. Hauling himself up, he found that the buoy was already occupied, by Bianchi. During a fainting spell brought on by stress and the pig's abrupt descent, Bianchi had ballooned to the surface. Coming to his senses, he had enough sense not to compromise his colleague's efforts down below, and so had hidden himself crouched on the buoy.

Their stories were exchanged with quick terseness, and here came the motorboat to pick them off. The boat crew seemed more curious than alarmed, but Valiant's commanding-officer viewed the capture of these two frogmen somewhat differently. They were taken before him immediately.

“Where have you placed your charges?” asked Captain Morgan.

Already well briefed for this eventuality, both prisoners simply stated their names and ranks, offering their identity cards as proof, but refused to answer any other questions. Had the interrogators been their allies, Germans or Japs, their treatment would surely have been less lenient and civilised. As it was, on again refusing to reveal anything of their activities, Captain Morgan ordered them placed under guard in a forward compartment, well down in the ship. Actually this compartment was almost above where the big warhead lay ticking its life away, and its choice by Captain Morgan was as much clever as fortuitous; the prisoners having been discovered forward, he assumed that their charges, if any, were more likely to be there than aft. He also assumed, or at least hoped, that the prisoners’ proximity to the explosive would loosen their tongues. What happened is best left to de la Penne himself.

“Our escort were rather white about the gills and behaved very nicely to us; they gave me rum to drink and offered me cigarettes; they also tried to make us talk. Bianchi sat down and went to sleep. I perceived from the ribbons on the sailors’ caps that we were aboard the battleship Valiant. This is odd. During the war, cap tallies of ratings in the British and Commonwealth Navies carried no names of ships, for obvious reasons, but simply the letters H.M.S. H.M.A.S. and so on. But the point is unimportant).

“When there were about ten minutes left before the explosion, I asked if I could speak to the commanding-officer. I was taken aft, into his presence. I told him in a few minutes his ship would blow up, that there was nothing he could do about it and that, if he wished, he could still get his crew into a place of safety.

“He again asked me where I had placed the charge and as I did not reply had me escorted back to the hold. As we went along I heard the loud-speakers giving orders to abandon ship, as the vessel had been attacked by Italians, and saw people running aft. When I was again in the hold I said to Bianchi, as I came down the ladder, that things had turned out badly and that it was all up with us, but that we could be content, since we had succeeded, in spite of everything, in bringing the operation to a successful conclusion.

“Bianchi, however, did not answer me. I looked for him and could

not find him. I supposed that the British believing that I had confessed, had removed him. A few minutes passed - they were infernal ones for me: would the explosion take place? - and then it came.

“The vessel reared, with extreme violence. All the lights went out and the hold became filled with smoke. I was surrounded by shackles which had been hanging from the ceiling and had now fallen. I was unhurt, except for a pain in a knee, which had been grazed by one of the shackles in its fall. The vessel was listing to port. I opened one of the portholes very near sea level, hoping to be able to get through it and escape. This proved to be impossible, as the porthole was too small, and I gave up the idea: but I left the port open, hoping that through it more water would enter.

“I waited for a few moments. The hold was now illuminated by light which entered through the port. I concluded that it would be rash to stay there any longer, noticing that the vessel was now lying on the bottom and continuing slowly to list to port. I climbed up the ladder and, finding the hatchway open, began to walk aft; there was no one about. But there were still many of the crew at the stern. They got up as I passed them; I went on till I reached the Captain.

“At that moment he was engaged in giving orders for salvaging his ship. (Surely the restrained statements of the war). I asked him what he had done with my diver. He did not reply and the officer of the watch told me to be silent. The ship had now listed through four or five degrees and come to a standstill. I saw from a clock that it was quarter past six. I went further aft, where a number of officers were standing and began to watch the battleship Queen Elizabeth, which lay about 500 metres astern of us.

“The crew of that battleship were standing in her bows. A few seconds passed and then the Queen Elizabeth, too, blew up. She rose a few inches out of the water and fragments of iron and other objects flew out of her funnel, mixed with oil which even reached the deck of the Valiant, splashing everyone of us standing on her stern.

“An officer came up and asked me to tell him on my word of honour if there were any other charges under the ship. I made no reply and was then taken back to the hold. After about quarter of an hour I was escorted up to the officers’ mess, where at last I could sit

down, and where I found Bianchi. Shortly afterwards I was put aboard a motorboat, which took me to (a jail near) Ras el Tin.

“I noticed that the anchor, which had been hanging at the bows, was now underwater. During transit an officer asked me whether we had got in through the gaps in the mole. At Ras el Tin we were locked in two cells and kept there until towards evening. I asked whether I could be given a little sunlight, as I was again very cold. A soldier came, felt my pulse and told me that I was perfectly all right.

“Towards evening we were put into a small lorry and transported therein to a prisoner of war camp in Alexandria. I found some Italians in the camp who had heard the explosions that morning. We lay down on the ground, without having had any food, and though we were soaked through, we slept till the following morning. I was taken to the infirmary for treatment of my knee injury and some Italian orderlies gave me an excellent dish of macaroni. The next morning I was removed to Cairo.”

De la Penne sank into the obscurity of so many thousands of his POW compatriots, until in 1944, after Italy's surrender, he was returned home. There, with Bianchi, he received the Gold Medal for gallantry in war. It was pinned on his chest by a man whose face he knew - Valiant's Captain Morgan, by then promoted to Admiral and head of the Allied Naval Mission in Italy.

I must confess to being puzzled by de la Penne's description of his treatment - no food and delayed medical attention. Admiral Morgan's presentation of that gallantry medal to his former enemy is more in accord with my knowledge of British seamen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Now to Marceglia and his diver Schergat, two men on a tiny craft whose object was the destruction of the armour-clad massivity of battleship Queen Elizabeth.

Their's was a text-book operation: in through the opened boom-gate, feeling strong shock waves from the patrol boat's charges, taking evasive action to avoid a couple of destroyers under way, until, as Marceglia reported, "In no time at all I found myself face to face with the whole massive bulk of my target."

He got past the anti-torpedo net (without mentioning how), and submerged his pig under the hull directly in line with the great funnel - a most tender spot for any ship, regardless of size.

Big ships are fitted with bilge keels. These are long steel fins several feet wide rivetted along the hull on each side, and their object is to help reduce, by pressure against the water, the ship's rolling. They also happen to be peculiarly suited for the clamping of objects thereon.

With his diver Marceglia secured a steel wire from bilge keel to bilge keel, so that it looped under the hull from side to side. Smack in the centre of this wire, that is to say directly under the ship's main keel, he secured his warhead. It hung down about five feet from the hull. Satisfied, he set the fuse. The time was 4.15 a.m.

"I tried to analyse my sensations at that moment," Marceglia writes. "I found that I did not feel particularly thrilled, but only rather tired and just starting to get cold. We got astride our craft again; my diver made me urgent signs to surface, as he was just about all in.

"I pumped in air to surface. The craft only detached itself from the bottom with difficulty, then at last it started to rise, at first slowly, later more rapidly. So as not to burst out of the water too suddenly, I had to exhaust; the air bubbles attracted the attention of the watch aft. He switched on a searchlight and we surfaced right into its rays. We ducked down on the craft to make the target as small as possible and prevent our goggles from reflecting the light. Shortly afterwards the searchlight was switched off. (Another puzzling aspect: a lookout could see bubbles rising in the dark, but not a human torpedo and its crew caught in his searchlight. Perhaps, in his natural state of tension

and tiredness, Marceglia only thought he was held by the light's full glare, where as he might have been in the diffusion at its edge. Or maybe at that time the lookout, too, was tired, and thought he was seeing things. But there is no doubt at all about what was ticking quietly beneath Queen Elizabeth's belly.) "We started on our return, which took us past the bows of the ship. A man was walking up and down the foc's's'le deck, I could see his cigarette glowing. Everything was quiet aboard." Inexcusable slackness? Not on the facts. On the enemy's own admission, Queen Elizabeth had lookouts posted fore and aft, even though she was moored in a heavily protected harbour, and presumably safely screened from submarines. So she was, against conventional craft. But at that time very little was known about the Italian pigs, and certainly no lookout aboard the battleship would have seen one.

"We got out of the obstructed zone and, at last, took off our masks. It was very cold; I couldn't prevent my teeth chattering. We set off for the spot on which we were to land."

Well clear of the shore, Marceglia started the fuse of his pig's self-destructing charge and sank her, then they swam ashore. Once on land - an area specially selected because of its relative freedom from guards - they cut up their rubber suits and breathing apparatus into unrecognisable pieces and buried them under rocks. It was 4.30 a.m., which meant they had been in the water for eight hours.

Now, for themselves personally, came the crucial part. It had been arranged that a submarine would be lying off the Nile delta at certain times for the next couple of nights, waiting to pick them up. But this required them to take a train to the port of Rosetta, and they would have to board it in Alexandria.

At first everything went smoothly. They made Alexandria city without trouble, posing as French sailors amongst the polyglot lot which inhabited the town at the time. Still free, they even heard the big bang of what they'd brought with them. But from then on their satisfaction began to dim. Just about flawless in regard to military matters, the Italian Intelligence had fallen down on one vital point; an aspect which any British or Australian matloe, visiting a bar or Sister Street, could have put them right on. The Gyppos would take only local currency, piastres: the frogmen had been issued with

English money.

By the time they managed to get their sterling changed, of necessity having to keep away from the normally frequented areas, night had fallen. Now, of course, patrols were everywhere, yet they did manage to make Rosetta., Here, in a fly-blown hostelry, they also managed to avoid searching police, and when darkness fell again they made for the seashore. About, like young turtles, to enter the friendly sea, they were caught by Egyptian police. Shortly afterwards they were in the hands of the British Naval authorities.

Thus the mission of Marceglia and Schergat came within an ace of being perfectly accomplished. But the main part of it had proved terribly successful, and they were later awarded their country's high award of the Gold Medal for gallantry.

Martellotta, the pilot of the third pig, starts his report with: "Aboard the submarine Scire at 16.30 (4.30 p.m.) on December 18, I received from Lieutenant-Commander Borghese the following operational orders: 'Attack to be made on a large loaded tanker and six incendiaries to be distributed in its immediate neighbourhood.'

"The presence which had been notified of 12 loaded tankers in harbour in Alexandria, with a total tonnage of 120.000, was sufficient indication of the importance of the order received: the fire which might be started would be capable of reaching such proportions as to bring about the entire destruction of the harbour itself, with all the units present and all the shore installations.

"Nevertheless, I felt obliged to reply: 'Sir, I shall obey your orders; but I should like you to know that my diver and I would rather have attacked a warship.'

"The captain smiled at this remark of mine and, to please me, since he was aware that there was a possibility of an aircraft-carrier having returned to the harbour, he modified the original operational orders to read: 'Search to be made for the aircraft-carrier at its two normal anchorages and attack to be made on it if found; otherwise, all other targets consisting of active war units to be ignored and a large loaded tanker to be attacked with distribution of the six incendiaries in its immediate neighbourhood.'"

After reaching the vicinity of the boom and the patrolling motorboat, Martellotta goes on: "I felt shocks from depth charges

and violent pressure against my legs, as though they were being crushed against the craft by some heavy object. I put on my mask and, so as to avoid injury from the frequent shocks being inflicted at vulnerable parts of my body, I ducked in such a way as to lie low in the water, but with heart, lungs and head above the surface.

“I told Marino, my diver, to put on his mask also and to take up a similar position, but facing aft, since I was unable myself to keep an eye open in that direction, engaged as I was in looking ahead and having only the limited area of visibility which the mask allowed. We arrived in these positions at the entrance of the harbour. We did not find obstructions, as we had expected, at the pier-heads: the channel was clear. (It had been made clear for those destroyers to enter.)

“We went ahead very slowly. Suddenly Marino thumped me on the shoulder and said: ‘Hard-a-starboard.’ I instantly swerved in the direction indicated, putting on speed, but the craft struck the buoys of the fixed interior barrier, being driven against them by the waves from the bow of a ship which had caught me up as it entered the harbour.

“It was a destroyer, showing no lights and going at about 10 knots; I distinctly heard chains clashing at her bows and saw members of the crew on deck getting ready to moor. It was then thirty minutes after midnight on December 19th. I got going again and, taking advantage of the waves made by a second destroyer as it entered the harbour, I slipped in with it, still surfaced and passing within about 20 metres of the guardship.”

Safely in amongst the cattle, the wolf started looking for its choicest target. Fortunately, no carrier was in the fold that night. But it held a plenitude of big targets, one of which Martellotta judged to be a battleship. He was ready to attack when he realised that the object of his attention and desire was a cruiser. This 10,000-tonner with its 8-inch guns would have been choice enough, but there were his orders, so perforce Martellotta obeyed them and went hunting for a tanker.

He was just about to slide clear of the cruiser when from her quarter-deck the light of a torch lanced at him. He stopped the pig; along with his diver, he froze. Time and his heart seemed to stop. As

abruptly as it had flashed on, the torch went out. Still they waited. Nothing happened; no yells of alarm, no smashing flail of bullets which could not possibly have missed. All about them, quiet and peaceful, the great harbour slept.

But the strain was enormous. It started a hard ache in Martellotta's head. He gagged on the mask mouthpiece; took it out and vomited. When he replaced it the same thing threatened. There was only one answer; to proceed on the surface. This was not in the plan; it negated the pig's most vital advantage, while at the same time it hideously increased the danger.

And still Martellotta went on; and there, suddenly, were the tankers.

He carried out his attack on the surface, keeping the pig close in under the fat-bellied ship's stern while Marino rigged the loop-wire and secured to it the warhead. A few minutes before four o'clock Marino started the fuse - just as a smaller tanker scraped alongside the big one.

"When Marino rose to the surface and saw her, he said: 'Let's hope she stays here another two hours and then she'll have her hash settled too.' Next, we started off again, for distribution of the incendiaries: we moored them, after setting their fuses, about 100 metres from the tanker and 20 metres apart."

This was a fearsome situation for the Fleet and its base. Yet in all my research through British and Italian histories, I can find no reference to the effect of these incendiaries. It has to be assumed that either they failed to explode, or if they did, then efficient and prompt fire-fighting procedures made their contribution, one that was so potentially disastrous, quite abortive.

As with their two compatriots, Martellotta and Marino got safely clear, destroyed their gear and the pig so as to leave the British no clue as to the method of their attack, and then:

"I set off with Marino to get clear of the harbour zone and enter the city: we were stopped at a control point and arrested by some Egyptian customs officials and police, who summoned a second lieutenant and six privates of the British Marines.

"We were taken to an office occupied by two lieutenants of the Egyptian police, who started cross examining us; while I was

answering the questions put to me in as evasive and vague a manner as I could, a British naval commander arrived and requested the senior of the two Egyptian officers to hand us over to the British. The Egyptian refused to do so in the absence of any authority from his Government, pointing out that, as he had found us to be Italians from the documents we carried and Egypt was not at war with Italy, he would have to get special instructions.

“The British commander, after obtaining the necessary authorisation from his Admiral, made a personal application to the Egyptian Government for the instructions required and succeeded in getting us handed over.

“My waterproof watch was on the table with the other articles taken possession of and I never took my eyes off it. Shortly after 5.54a.m. a violent explosion was heard, which shook the whole building. A few minutes later, as we were getting into a car to follow the British officer, a second explosion was heard, further away, and after the car started a third. At the Ras el Tin naval headquarters we were briefly interrogated, courteously enough, and then despatched to the concentration camp for prisoners of war at Cairo.”

And, in 1944, to receive the third pair of Gold Medals.

It was an extraordinary brave, brilliant and frightenly effective operation. Just how much so is revealed by one who should have known.

“A further sinister stroke was to come,” Churchill wrote in his memoirs, detailing a speech he made before a secret session of the House of Commons early the following year. “On the early morning of December 19th half a dozen Italians in unusual diving suits were captured floundering about in the harbour of Alexandria. Extreme precautions have been taken for some time past against the varieties of human torpedo or one-man submarine entering our harbours. Not only are nets and other obstructions used but underwater charges are exploded at frequent irregular intervals in the fairway.

“None the less these men had penetrated the harbour. Four hours later explosions occurred in the bottoms of the Valiant and the Queen Elizabeth, produced by limpet bombs fixed with extraordinary courage and ingenuity, the effect of which was to blow large holes in the bottoms of both ships and to flood several compartments, thus

putting them both out of action for many months.

“One ship will soon be ready again, the other is still in the floating dock at Alexandria, a constant target for enemy air attack. Thus we no longer had any battle squadron in the Mediterranean. Barham had gone and now Valiant and Queen Elizabeth were completely out of action. both these ships floated on an even keel. They looked all right from the air. The enemy were for some time unaware of the success of their attack, and it is only now that I feel it possible to make this disclosure to the House even in the strictness of a Secret Session. The Italian Fleet still contains four or five battleships, several times repaired, of the new Littorio or the modernised class...”

And we had none. Six men had reduced the status of British naval forces in the Mediterranean from a Battle Fleet to a collection of submarines, destroyers, many of them ancient, and a few cruisers.

It was a tremendous chance for the Italian General Staff. Happily, that august body held little of the imagination, enterprise, and plain common guts of the men in the Tenth Light Flotilla. Thus the chance to smash at our forces in North Africa and Malta was let slip, and thus time was gained, during which both naval and air replenishments were sent to Admiral Cunningham in the Mediterranean.

But that is strategy. The tactics of those six brave men will go down in history as a text-book method of dragging down heavy capital ships with comparative coracles.

CHAPTER FIVE

On this bridge in this area - Atlantic destroyer, out of Halifax bound Liverpool - wet-weather gear was as common a sight, and for that matter almost as necessary, as the compass.

At this particular moment, for some reason, it was not raining; but all the other weather aspects were present, in their normally large measure. There was an oilskin hung over the mouth of a little-used voice pipe clamped against one side of the bridge. The oilskin suddenly swung wide away, as if under the effect of some mysterious levitation process, and came back clinging to the side. It was not the only thing clinging on that reeling bridge - mainly gloved hands.

Two of them, gripped around the binnacle, belonged to a man with that sort of quiet, hard, yet pleasant face which you find so often amongst British officers with senior responsibility. It was a face you respected for the qualities of experienced toughness marked so plainly upon it, while at the same time there was something there which engendered trust. Men of the Gestapo were experienced and tough - and brutal. This face on this bridge was different, you knew it belonged to a good man, and decent. It belonged, in fact, to Peter William Gretton, who could write Commander before his name, and D.S.O. and two Bars, O.B.E. and D.S.C. after it. Yet he was only twenty-nine years of age. He was also lord of the 326-foot length, 36,000 horsepower and 36 knots which sailed under the name of H.M. destroyer Duncan; and also in command of the 14th Escort Group, which had on its slop chit thirty-eight heavy-bellied merchantmen. Kokoda, Burma, Tobruk? Admittedly nasty. But there could hardly be a dirtier or harsher war than the one Duncan was fighting. Its significance was tremendous, for if it were lost those men in Tobruk and Burma would go short of petrol and food and ammunition, not to mention men in a hundred other places. Its bitterness was total, for the sea could be as savage as the human enemy. And in its fighting no quarter was given or taken: there were no survivors from an exploded fuel tanker, nor prisoners from a U-boat sent down to be crushed flat by the pressure at a thousand fathoms. This was the Battle of the Atlantic, and brave men fought it, on both sides.

Always and naturally apprehensive (and hardly alone in that), always tired but somehow managing to remain alert, Gretton at the start of this particular convoy was lightened by a feeling of anticipation. The reason for this was inherent in a message he had passed to the convoy's Commodore. This jocular signal (Lora knows there were few enough of that nature sent), intimated that, as Gretton was getting married shortly after the convoy's scheduled time of arrival, he would appreciate it if the convoy would maintain, or even exceed, its ordered speed. In return, the Commodore offered his full co-operation; forbearing to mention, due to his ignorance of the fact, that four groups of U-boats were being concentrated to attack the convoy.

Gretton was chaffingly known among his lowerdeck fraternity as the "Ace of the Atlantic." He did not know this; nor did he know that as he swayed behind his binnacle on a bucking bridge the size of a shore-side kitchen, he was, positioning his ship to screen the most savage Atlantic convoy of his young and violent life.

Beside him, waiting to take over his customary (4 p.m. to 8) dog-watches as officer of the watch, the first lieutenant stared miserably ahead over the white-streaming foc's's'le.

Like Nelson, and also a very experienced captain under whom I served, the first lieutenant was seasick - always was when they left harbour in any sort of a loup after a period ashore, and would be for the next few hours. Then, as had happened on so many convoys before, the squeamishness in his stomach would settle, the tightness round his forehead and the cold sweating would ease away, and he would be able to bring all his experience as a U-boat hunter to bear on seconding his captain in the job of protecting-the fat, wallowing convoy and of beating the life out of any submarine that tried to get in amongst it.

Because of this proneness to seasickness, and because sailors are as heartless in their soubriquets as they are apt in their choosing of them, Number One was known to his lowerdeck fraternity as the "Sea Rover." But in his case the nickname was an affectionate one; the-Rover was a first-class seaman. He could hardly have been otherwise to hold down his job of deputy to the commander of an Escort Group.

The sub-lieutenant, officer of the dying afternoon watch, was consciously busy getting the ship into correct station before turning her over to the Rover; though leader of the Group, Duncan was not necessarily always in the van. So the sub. had to bring her up to, and regulate her speed so that she would remain in a position on a line of bearing 45 degrees from his own bridge to the next destroyer ahead on the starboard bow.

The sub. well knew there would have been no indecision with his orders if he had been alone - Gretton had trained him, too - but the captain's presence there right beside him as he carefully checked his bearing from the other destroyer rattled him. He knew it was time to reduce speed so that she would not overshoot her station, but before he could make up his mind to speak...

"All right, Sub., you can come down to nine-oh revolutions. We're in position, aren't we?" That's the sort of judgement years of destroyer time gives a man.

Incalculably priceless, and to Gretton draggingly slow, the convoy ploughed on at about ten knots. Night fell, dark and rough. Duncan bucked and screwed and thrashed through the murk, the white splatter of her passing the only relief in the blackness which encompassed her densely on all sides. To starboard, just visible, a long line of dim shapes bulked against the horizon. To port, distant about ten miles, another convoy drew level on its way west to Newfoundland.

The wind was blowing across from it. Suddenly a sullen boom reached the muffled ears on Duncan's whistling bridge. Far away over the tumbling sea a tongue of flame licked up, then died.

"They're starting early..." Gretton began; the staccato crackle of the bridge radio-telephone speaker clearing its throat interrupted him. A voice came through - the commodore of that other convoy talking to his escorts.

"There has just been a big flash astern of me." A second or two, while Duncan's officers swayed waiting, then:

"That flash was the frigate Itchen." Thus began a new phase in the pitiless Battle of the Atlantic - send escorts down first, then slaughter the merchantmen at will. Gretton broke the taut silence.

"They won't have a chance in this sea - they'll freeze almost as soon as they hit it." No one answered him - the statement was too

obvious to need comment; in water at this temperature a man usually lasted about three minutes before his heart, literally, was frozen to a stop. They were thinking of these ninety-odd men whom the torpedo had left alive, flung without warning into a pitch-black winter sea a few miles south of Iceland. They were thinking, too, of the possibility of a periscope with the picture of their own silhouette swimming in its watery, cross-wired lens.

Gretton voiced the general thought. "Warn the asdic team, Number One - an extra sharp lookout."

All that menacing night the mass of ships stole eastward, alert, apprehensive, darkened for their lives.

At frigid dawn Duncan closed-up for action; men fully dressed tumbling reluctantly from their hammocks and groping their way into upperdeck air that cut like a knife; coughing as its chilliness touched their lungs.

They had slept fully dressed in accordance with Captain's Standing Orders; closed-up, they carried out the rest of them.

"All guns are to be trained, laid, and all moved parts moving through their full limits to prevent freezing.

"The morning watch (four till eight), stand-fast depth-charge crews, is to be employed before breakfast in chipping the ice from the upper-deck and main armament.

"No man is to remove his clothing for bathing or turning-in. If hammocks are slung, men are to sleep fully dressed."

This last order was meant to be taken literally, boots and all; Itchens fate supplied the reason for it.

On the bridge, muffled to his cold-stung eyes, Gretton peered at the gradually forming shapes of the convoy. He saw that they had lost the rigid alignment they'd held at yesterday's dusk; that meant an hour of shepherding, signalling and bellowing, cursing and being cursed at in return.

The thought made him check, by eye, his own station. He spoke to the Rover, now officer of the morning watch:

"Bit astern, Number One?"

The Rover had also noticed - with the aid of his bearing-ring.

"Just a bit, sir. I'm bringing her up now." He had bent to the wheelhouse voice pipe when a sudden shove sent him stumbling to

the edge of the grating. A bull voice shook the pipe.

“Full-ahead together! Port twenty!”

Then, an ominous accompaniment to the urgent grinding and bell-ringing of the engineroom telegraphs in the wheelhouse below, a swift succession of strident “whoos” reached them from the destroyer on their quarter astern. The Rover regained his balance in time to see the last plume of white (Gretton had caught the first) stream from her siren and shred to streaks in the whistling wind, and a whipping flag climbing its halliards towards the upper yardarm in long jerking swoops.

U-boat!

The Rover also saw, from the rear ship of the port wing, a tanker, a vast pillar of flame thrust vehemently at the leaden sky.

Duncan’s crew swayed, slowly and in unison, to meet their ship’s heel as she listed to starboard on the turn, while the sea creamed inboard of her low waist and gave an individual how-wave to each guard-rail stanchion.

The other destroyer was speaking to Duncan in stuttering blinks of yellow light. Gretton didn’t have to wait for the signal yeoman’s shouted: “Contact bearing 270!” He read the message himself, and spoke with harsh clarity into the voice pipe that ran aft to the quarterdeck:

“Standby depth charges!”

Now his face was simply hard, with a singular lack of pleasantness. A destroyer on a revengeful hunt for her main enemy is a cruel hound, and Duncan’s hunt-master was as savage as his hound.

He crouched over his vital bearing-sight and drove her along the line of bearing flashed by the other ship, the asdic’s sonic beams spearing ahead in an embracing fan of sensitivity. They searched out, urgently, right, left; and finally laid their fingers on a sub-surface cigar of steel and rebounded joyously to the operator’s ears. Duncan had eased her initial headlong speed so as to give asdic all the help she could. Gretton heard the echoing “peep” on the loudspeaker and slammed his hand on the bearing-ring.

Now both ships had contact, and hurried on converging courses at their best operational speed to get above the quarry, fleeing in the

dark tranquility 60 feet below the smoking waves. Then the charges were over, splashing, dropping down.

The other boat, junior to Gretton, hauled clear and maintained contact. Boat to boat (submarines and destroyers are so-called by their crews), a submarine has most of the advantages. But here was the classic situation - two destroyers on the job, one remaining clear in contact and signalling ranges and bearings, while her consort did the hammering.

Contrary to Hollywood conception, a submarine capable of withstanding the pressured tons of mid-ocean is not blown to slivers by one depth charge, nor indeed by a full pattern of even ten charges, unless they burst very close. But to a hunter as experienced as Gretton, his asdic set reports were an all-seeing eye; he knew by the German's manoeuvring, his uncertain changes of course and speeds, that he had hit him hard; and he knew he would have to belt him harder.

He continued to do so, pattern after pattern, until the sea astern was a frothing maelstrom, convulsed every few minutes by bursting eruptions of white water, the mounds becoming smaller as the charges searched deeper.

Gretton had not moved from the gyro compass, not even to glance astern, where, fascinated by the ship's discharged fury, the others watched the ocean heaving. So he did not see the brown stain that seeped up and laid a calm, oily hand on a wide stretch of water. But he smelt the wholly peculiar, pungent tang of diesel oil.

On that convoy Duncan carried a secret weapon for U-boats - a terrible machine which had not yet been used. Now was the time. The submarine might be only slightly damaged, or maybe that oil had been discharged deliberately. They had to make sure.

Gretton now spoke quietly, affectedly nonchalant, trying to hide his acute awareness of the things he was about to do.

"All right, Number One. Let him have it." Once again at high speed - this, she needed! - Duncan rushed down on the oil stain - not straight for it, but towards the invisible source from which the current was slanting it surfacewards.

An order passed. From one of her torpedo tubes the huge charge splashed over the side.

Seconds passed. Duncan thrust on, shaking with speed. On the

bridge they waited. They had been told what their new weapon should do. But would it?

Then the sea astern, for a distance of 100 yards, heaved up; it fell back, seemed to gather itself, then leapt skyward in a crashing, shaking roar. The ship's stern was punched bodily from the water, then slammed down again, a smacking jolt which shuddered through her as though she had rammed a pier.

Now Gretton was looking back there, with his glasses up.

"My God," he breathed.

They all saw it, and were struck dumb with awe. The sea was littered with hundreds of pieces of woodwork, very small, about the size of half -a-crown. The U-boat had been shattered to pieces.

But the violence of that blast had also shaken some of Duncan's vital and sensitive anti-submarine gear out of action. This was a quite unacceptable state of affairs, and Gretton acted promptly to rectify it. With the convoy's position known to the enemy, W/T silence was broken and a signal flashed to base for spare parts. These were to be flown out and dropped by parachute from a Sunderland flying-boat.

Duncan hauled out of line, well to the northward and outside, as she thought, the U-boat path, and waited for her plane.

The Sunderland arrived all right, but with a Morse light flashing urgently from her side. "Submarine surfaced bearing 240 degrees, 10 miles."

This was roughly south-west.

Gretton ordered the signal acknowledged and grinned:

"Good hunting country, Number One - sound action. Starb'd twenty! Two-seven-oh revolutions!"

This was definitely thirty knots.

The whine of the engineroom blowers rose to a roar, and she rolled as she turned, lifted her bow high and shocked it down on a mountain of apparent liquidity which jolted her as though it were iron-ore. A lather of spray from the hose of her bow-wave curved up over the flare, lifted gracefully on the wind towards the bridge and drove swift and sharp as needles into the skin of their faces.

It would be goodnight for a submarine crew to forsake their hull for this pitiless sea. Swiftly through the gathering dusk of the sub-Arctic night Duncan pitched, her asdic set feeling out. When close

enough she eased her rush for better operating efficiency, but still her movement was rough. Gretton was swaying behind his bearing-sight, his weather-reddened nose thrust forward at the horizon like the bloodhound he was - every nerve taut, everything subjugated to the intensity of his need to find, and track, and destroy. The convoy lay to the south, and it was not hard to guess the U-boat's destination.

It was almost dark when the asdic speaker peeped its message. The same method of attack - the fairly fast rush down to escape self-inflicted damage and to give the target a minimum of time to manoeuvre; shower of charges from throwers and rails both sides; and then the tracking and positioning for the next run-in.

It wasn't needed this time. There was still light enough to see the black, glistening shape, that dreaded and hated shape, shoulder its length up from beneath. No sooner was the bridge clear than a stream of men clambered out, ran to their rails and plunged with the desperation of some private knowledge into the icy sea. "Like rats," said the Rover, now with his sea-sickness long forgotten.

Duncan was about fifty yards off, shuddering with speed and the belt of waves, when the U-boat cocked her saw-edged nose in the air, high so that the watchers saw clearly the streaming sockets of her starboard tubes, and slid quickly back whence she had come. "Hard-a-port!" rasped Gretton.

Round she careered, missing the struggling swimmers by an oar's length, straight on over the creaming patch which marked the U-boat's grave. Breaths held, they waited, braced for the shock of collision, the Rover gripping with both hands the brass chart-table cover, Gretton choking the compass.

The drowning Germans were yards astern before, shock-free, Gretton realised the U-boat had beaten them under by a whisker. His breath eased out on a phew of relief.

"Bring her round, Pilot," Gretton ordered from where he now leaned over the starboard windbreak, looking down. "We might get a couple of prisoners."

He would be lucky if he got them, from this sea. Slowly Duncan passed through the bunch of bodies. Nearly all were dead, stiff and floating on their backs. The red lights on their life-jackets were burning, shining macabrely into their frozen faces and staring,

sightless eyes. "Horrible," muttered the Rover.

Gretton heard him, coming back to the compass.

"Yes," he answered quietly, "that's what Itchen's boys must have thought."

With the chief bosun's mate reporting two live prisoners hauled on board, Duncan hurried on into the night, while her asdic team completed fitting what the Sunderland had dropped. Presently she was back to full operating efficiency.

One of the German prisoners was a petty-officer, the other a leading-stoker. The latter, Duncan's black-gangers found, happened to be a good hand at making duff, which is the generic term for pudding or dessert. Two days after he was picked up, when he was feeling a bit cockier than he had been, he placed a nicely browned apple tart on the stokers' mess-table, then stood back arrogantly with his arms crossed. On the crust of the tart, made with left-over pastry, lay a large swastika.

But the stokers laughed at him, and offered, in addition, some unsubtle remarks on the parentage of one Adolf. Instead of the anger and abuse he had patriotically braced himself to bear, the submarine man heard grunts of appreciation as the British sailors wolfed his swastika.

Next day an Australian-manned Liberator swept out of a cloud bank, circled the convoy, then headed northwards on offensive patrol. A few minutes later Gretton was handed a W/T signal to the effect that she was attacking a surfaced U-boat with depth bombs.

"Would like assistance." Duncan hauled off to help.

Her bridge got the story from the five Australians she picked up from their rubber dinghy.

The plane had swooped in to attack, but had been met by a hail of bullets and cannon-shells. These weapons were not secret, but, on Atlantic U-boats, most surprisingly unexpected. And effective.

The big bomber, so low, made a target the German gunners on their stable platform couldn't miss, and she was badly mauled. But her bombs were way, and the submarine was lifted almost out of the water. The pilot had time to see her turn turtle before his own craft skidded into the sea.

Some weeks later it was officially announced that U-boats in the

Atlantic were now equipped with improved anti-aircraft armament. Two Australians airmen paid the price for this knowledge.

The convoy moved on along its lengthy course, and was granted only a brief respite before the old routine started again.

This time Duncan bloodied her quarry early; the oil gushed up in a swirling, spreading patch, with a clearly defined trail leading from it, as telltale as the bubbles from a diver's helmet.

With the rest of the escort screen temporarily disengaged and on the alert, Duncan followed him leisurely, sitting right on top of him. Gretton cupped his duffle-coated chin on his hand and stared down over the edge of the bridge.

"Look at the fool," he said disgustedly. "They must be sending 'em out raw these days. Why the devil doesn't he sneak back and lie under the big patch?" Then, turning to the Rover: "We'll have the stoker depth-charge crew up, Number One. Give 'em some practice."

"Aye aye, sir."

The stokers got their practice.

Next day Gretton revised his comment on the rawness of U-boat commanders, with sound reason - one of them was smack in the middle of the convoy!

Gretton's reaction was natural and immediate. Everything he had ever learned was used in the twisting and probing which sent Duncan careering through the line of merchantmen. Given even seconds of destroyer-free time the Germans couldn't miss.

In the middle of his gyrations Gretton noticed his signal yeoman frantically jabbing his outstretched fingers down over the side of the bridge, he was mouthing speechlessly. Gretton jumped to the side, craned over, and stared down.

Directly below (and my informant, who was in Duncan at the time, swears to the truth of this), not a dozen feet from the ship's side, and travelling with it, was a U-boat periscope! It was trained with dreadful intentness on a big tanker abeam. Underneath, Gretton saw his conning-tower clearly, beautiful fluting lines of movement flowing symmetrically from each leading edge.

In perhaps seven seconds the charges were over, pattern after blasting pattern.

When the thunder had ceased the tanker winked a startled yellow

eye at Duncan. Gretton took the pencilled message from the yeoman, started to curse, then laughed. The tanker captain was complaining that a photograph of his wife and children had been brokenly blown from his cabin bulkhead by the blast!

There were other attacks from those four savage packs, but the one with the most dramatic result occurred just before the convoy reached safe waters.

A sister-ship to Duncan sighted a hump-backed object momentarily surfaced on the horizon. She increased to thirty knots and swung towards. Her engines had just reached the ordered revolutions when without warning, and probably through bad handling, another U-boat broke surface dead ahead! The captain had time to bellow "Hang on!" before the thrust of 36,000 horsepower hit the submarine full amidships.

That fierce meeting pushed the U-boat bodily sideways in a smother of white foam, cut her almost in two, and sheared the destroyer through and over the stricken remnants, on into clear water. The destroyer dropped a charge or two, but they weren't needed.

When she docked in Londonderry her nose looked like a shark's, with the underneath waterline part under-slung backwards in a crumpled mess of steel plates and girders.

So the convoy ended, and Gretton's married life began. That month of May, 1943, saw forty-one U-boats sunk, a terrible toll. In Churchill's words, "The Battle of the Atlantic never again reached the same pitch of intensity, nor hung so delicately in the balance."

Those hard Atlantic years developed a peculiarly tough 'creed of British seamen - men who will not have forgotten to teach their successors how to deal with any other sub-sea rats which might consider gnawing at Britain's lifeline. For, modified weapons regardless, it will still be destroyers against submarines, and the basic principles. - find, attack, destroy - still remain.

CHAPTER SIX

For even the most seasoned seaman, it is a medically shocking thing to be sunk. You live in a ship, eating and drinking, sleeping and playing and working there, while your main object of existence is to see that she remains afloat. Then, suddenly and violently, you are in the water, and your ship is under it. This is the most alien thing that can happen to a sailor. It saddens and in some cases frightens, but above all it numbs him.

My best friend in the Service, a man with whom I later served in the prototype for Bentley's *Wind Rode*, told me about the following sinking.

H.M.A. destroyer *Waterhen*, predictably called the "Chook," was of much the same vintage, build and experience as the rest of those fighting "Vs" and "Ws", those "rust and wire" contemptibles of Goebbel's sneer: Stuart, *Vampire*, Voyager and Vendetta.

Being a flotilla-leader, Stuart differed from the others in her 4.7-inchers, as opposed to their 4-inch. *Waterhen* differed from them all in that she was the only one commanded by a Royal Navy officer - Lieutenant-Commander J.H. Swain.

She first met the Luftwaffe at Sollum, a port east of Bardia and Tobruk, when a convoy of Stukas, cunningly biding their time, bombed to a useless mess all the stores she had just finished landing.

From then on she was caught up in the direful pattern of those vicious Mediterranean days - ferrying to Tobruk, anti-submarine patrolling, screening the Battle Fleet on its sweeps of the inland sea, at sea six days out of seven; taking punishment in the form of rocking near misses, nerves strained almost to snapping point, minds wondering dully when all the uselessness of it would end; dishing it back in the shape of falling dive-bombers, depth-charged submarines and broadsides flung at shore fortifications.

Through all this mould of harsh adventure, periods of intense nervous excitement and fear mixed with the exultation of victory, was threaded the ugly fibre of those runs to Tobruk, when, with helpless wounded crammed aboard, the enemy's bombing developed with the certainty of the sunrise which presaged its commencement.

It was on one of these runs to the Rats that the *Chook* met her

fate.

The time was about 7.40 of a calm evening on June 30th, 1941. The sun had set, but in the still-blue bowl above them there remained more than enough light to curse.

Waterhen slipped easily through on her way to Tobruk, this time carrying, in addition to the unusual supplies and ammunition, the Provost Traffic Control Branch of the Sixth Australian Division. She was in company with a British destroyer, disposed to port, cruising at 25 knots.

The *Chook* was closed up in the fourth degree readiness, with anti-aircraft and anti-submarine lookouts posted; the ship's company having fallen-out from checking through everything at dusk action stations. Men were beginning to feel relaxed, for with full darkness their worries would be lessened by about 90 per cent. At this speed and unhindered by any convoy, submarines presented not much of a threat, but while the light lingered aircraft, their main enemy, could get at them.

Yet it seemed this night as though the Diggers would have to wait for their own element to provide their baptism of fire. Until, at 7.45, the action bells shrilled their summons. The men of the little ship closed-up and waited, fearful and brave. My friend, one of the control team in the director, counted thirty Stukas before he gave up the pointless exercise.

The flock of vultures came over quite high, then dived to draw the defenders' fire. But these men were too seasoned to leave themselves with empty guns when the attack really developed. They just watched and waited, and prayed for the light to fail.

The Stuka leader was also conscious of time. Every minute lost meant a lessening of the target's clarity. They saw his gull-winged shape tilt on to one wing and come plummeting down. The rest followed, their engine notes a rising scream of menace.

Designedly, the howl of a Stuka dive-bomber could strike fear into the most experienced mind, no matter how many times you had heard it. Familiarity bred fright. So it was here, but no man ran.

The ship did, deliberately. Twisting and weaving at full speed the *Chook* strove to escape the deluge. On either side of her the sea was being continuously convulsed into gouting columns of white,

shaded a dirty and ominous black at their bases. The uproar, too, was continuous; scream of planes combining with thunder of bombs to form a hellish cacophony which would have had lesser men cowering in fear.

But these brave men in their private, confined war blocked off their fear and with steady fingers of tracer clawed at the attackers. One Stuka, its bomb still clasped to its belly, blew up in mid-air in a brilliant and satisfying flash of light. Another, the pilot dead or wounded, kept on its near-vertical course and smacked whitely into the sea.

Then a Stuka let go his load from astern. The bombs hurtled low over the quarterdeck, twin streaks, and exploded at the base of the foremost funnel. The ship shook like a suddenly tightening towing wire. When the smoke had fled down-wind there was no motor-boat left at the davits, and an upper-deck food store was a splintered mess.

More bombs flashed towards her. Swain snapped an order. She heeled suddenly to port, over further, until her lee gunnel was almost level with the rushing seas. Down they came, a stick of four, and all landed ahead of the bow. Except the last.

This 250-pounder, as heavy as an 8-inch cruiser's shell, struck near the side which was lifted from the sea. The blast shook her aged plates open to the sea - in a most vital place. Water poured into the engineroom, and she slowed down while a black scum of fuel-oil flowed from her wound.

The bombers drew off, either with their loads expended or else to a more important target, but the gutsy little *Chook* had had all she could take. There had been many near-misses, all shaking and damaging. She leaned over further, tired unto death, seemingly ready to go.

Relatively unhurt, the British destroyer nosed up to take in survivors. It was then the first Lieutenant uttered his famous last words. Someone had suggested souveniring the ensign before she went.

"Pipe down, you bastard!" shouted the Jimmy. "We aren't sunk yet!"

Incredibly, every man was taken aboard the Britisher, which then drew back to watch her go. Numbed, near exhaustion from the

concentrated ferocity of their fight, they looked across the darkening sea. Their ship made a sad picture, rolling sluggishly on the oily sea, guns pointing at all angles in the direction of their last target, boats smashed to splinters, jagged holes in her funnels and upper-works; finished.

And she refused to go.

At full dark she was still afloat, and it was decided to attempt a tow. This offered sound possibilities, for if she could hold up, then they had almost the whole of the night to drag her towards Alexandria and safety.

With a group of volunteers, my friend amongst them, the first lieutenant pulled across in a whaler and crawled up the sloping side on to her foc'sle. Suddenly he stopped and whispered: "Quiet! There's somebody aboard!"

With drawn weapons - taken in case an E-boat happened along - they crouched there, their throats tickling with the combined stink of cordite and fuel-oil, their eyes striving to pierce the blackness. Whoever it was could have come from an E-boat which had sneaked up on the blind side, or even a submarine.

Yet no sound came - nothing save the occasional clink of empty cartridge cases and the flap, flap of a torn canvass screen. Then, abaft the capstan, jolting their taut minds with its suddenness, a torch flashed on, and off. The first lieutenant shouted.

"Who's that? Answer or I fire!"

No answer. Quickly he loosed four shots in the direction of the flash. The result was another flash.

"Rush!"

Guns at the ready the towing party scrambled over the tilted deck, and found the interloper - a torch, flicking on and off as the ship's roll took it over the switch-button. Number One uttered predictable words, and then uttered orders.

Warily conscious of the instability of their platform, the boarding party set to work swiftly, and soon the tow was passed. The whaler returned, was hoisted, and the British captain ordered his ship slow-ahead.

All the hands stared aft, to see the *Chook* once again move through the water. But only for a few yards. The tow-wire tautened suddenly

and alarmingly, warning them to slip it.

The strain of movement was too much for her. Weakened bulkheads had given in against the sea's impatient pressure. Her slim bow lifted in the air, far above any angle it had reached in the roughest sea, then quietly and gracefully, without fuss, she slipped under. Her men silently watched her go, many of them with dimmed eyes. A warship is more, much more, than just a home.

For the survivors there followed three weeks in a camp in Alexandria. One rainy afternoon a merchantman pulled alongside Princes Pier in Melbourne and a line of sailors filed ashore. There were no bands or plaudits to welcome them - only the thankful arms of wives and sweethearts.

Waterhen had stayed behind, but she had sent her men back. She was the first ship of the Royal Australian Navy sunk by enemy action.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Find, attack, *destroy*. Not always. The *Bismarck*, sure, and *Graf Spee* and such commerce-threatening monsters. But sometimes it can be of incalculable value if an enemy warship can be captured alive, and especially so if it belongs to a new class of ship. If you learn what advanced equipment and weapons an enemy ship - a submarine, say - carries, then that knowledge helps enormously in the matter of improving your own counter-measures against similar vessels of her type and class. This, of course, could be of crucial importance.

But due to the over-riding need for intense, swift and destructive retaliation against a submarine attacking your convoy, very few of them were captured. U-110 was. This is the story of her attacks on a British convoy, of the attacks on her by the escorts, and of the consequent descent into her deserted (he hoped!) and dangerously wallowing innards by a brave sub-lieutenant aged twenty.

U-110 was commissioned at Bremen on November 21st, 1940. She was a brand-new type, of the class which the Germans called "*Atlantic boat*," and which were to prove extremely efficient fighters.

Displacing 1,050 tons on the surface, while there she could move at 18.2 knots - faster than our corvettes and not much slower than our frigates. On diesel-electric motors she had a range of 12,400 miles and could dive to 330 feet. She carried six torpedo tubes, nineteen torpedoes, a 4.2-inch quick-firing gun (very handy against any unconvoyed merchantmen), one 37 millimetre and two 20 millimetre shell-firing cannon (very handy against aircraft).

Her commanding-officer was Kapitänleutnant (Senior Lieutenant) Fritz-Julius Lemp. The main personal characteristic of Lemp was an unaltering dedication to the welfare of his crew, among whom he was extremely popular. Even before taking command of U-110 he had achieved a notable state of notoriety in the German Navy, possibly the reason why he was given this brand-new boat; for it was Lemp who, in U-30, on the very first day of the war, sank the liner *Anthenia* with the tragic loss of many of her passengers and crew; this is at a time when even Hitler had not declared unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant ships.

More legally, and with undoubted efficiency, Lemp had planted one of U-30's torpedoes in the side of battleship Barham, though luckily with smaller effect than that of the second torpedo Barham was to take in the Mediterranean.

With six sunken merchantmen on his tally, and the Knight's Insignia of the Iron Cross on his chest, Lemp took his worked-up U-110 to sea in March, 1941, for her first war cruise. Time passed, along with several more merchantmen which fell victim to Lemp's torpedoes. Then, out on patrol to the south-west of Iceland, he brought U-110 to the surface during the afternoon of May 8. Almost immediately, at about four o'clock, he sighted smoke ahead. This betraying skim of black came from convoy OB (Outward Bound, Liverpool to Newfoundland) 318. Lemp's sighting signal to U-boat headquarters brought the order: "Attack if possible."

Lemp thought an attack was eminently possible, and thus he came to make contact with, though never to see, a man named Baker-Cressell.

Joe Baker-Cresswell was born in London shortly after the death of Queen Victoria; in fact, while those of his family not otherwise engaged were watching her funeral procession from their home. Joining the Navy and later specialising in navigation, he navigated a comprehensive variety of ships from submarines to battleships. Naturally this experience did nothing to hinder him when, in 1941, he finally came to his best love - captaincy of a destroyer and commander of an Escort Group ranging the Atlantic.

The Force was designated the 3rd Escort Group; his ship was named *Bulldog*. One remembers *Bulldog* with nostalgic clarity; she was our "chummy ship" in Alexandria; that is to mean, she normally berthed alongside our cruiser, got from us most things she had to have, sent her men on board for picture shows and other little amenities of big-ship life like that.

She was a neatly shaped 35-knotter of two funnels, three 4.7's and on 3-inch A.A., while her class were the first destroyers to be fitted with torpedo tubes in mounts of four.

Baker-Cresswell owned a nuggety, no-nonsense sort of face, habitually narrowed eyes (were there any other type in that cruel Atlantic?), a largish, straight nose and a mouth ready to smile. And

he was keen.

The Group learned this from the day he took it over. Whenever possible, which meant just about all the time, he experimented with new screening formations for convoys, exercised his escorts in multiple attacks on submarines, and in the grass-roots field he constantly drilled his men, from asdic operators and signalmen to gun, torpedo and, most devoutly of all, depth-charge crews.

When Lemp sighted the evidence of his targets, Baker-Cresswell had nine escorts in his Group; these comprised destroyers, corvettes and anti-submarine trawlers. In his charge he had thirty-eight merchantmen.

All was in order. *Bulldog* steamed in the van with nine columns of ships behind her. Most importantly, with the coast of Greenland almost in sight, it was highly improbable that, so far west, a U-boat should attack. So much so, in fact, that at four p.m., about four hours from now, Baker-Cresswell intended to disperse the convoy and return with his Group to their base in Iceland.

The noon 'sun-sights had just been taken. Baker-Cresswell was dictating a signal for the convoy Commodore, comparing *Bulldog's* position with his, when the peace of the day was abruptly shattered.

At two minutes before noon Lemp had fired his first torpedoes. They were aimed at the nearest ship, the *Esmond*, and they got her; two familiar geysers of white rising loftily from her starboard side.

All hands on *Bulldog's* bridge stared with shocked incredulity. So far west? Then Lemp changed their disbelief to harsh certainty. He placed his next missiles fair amidships in the leading ship of Column 7 and broke her back; so effectively that with both parts of the ship sticking up from the water, her two masts were crossed.

Esmond went first. Lieutenant-Commander Dodds, *Bulldog's* engineer, was on deck and saw it; saw the bow dip and the stern rise, higher, until the cargo on her decks broke its lashings and tumbled down that terrible slope into the sea, "like a child pouring toys out of a box." Then thousands of tons of ship were gone and only bubbles, huge and bursting gently, were left in evidence.

Baker-Cresswell wasn't interested. The torpedoes must have come from the north-westward, up to starboard. His reaction was swift, and his snapped orders sliced *Bulldog* round to the right, at

the same time increasing her speed. Following him round came *Broadway*, an old four-stacked ex-American destroyer.

They moved fast, but they were beaten to it. Up there guarding the starboard wing of the convoy steamed a corvette named *Aubrietia*. *Aubrietia*? She was lucky. Amongst the names of her sister-ships were such warlike trumpeting cognomens as *Potentilla*, *Spiraea*, *Myosotis* and *Starwort*. Churchill named their type "corvette," but it's a safe bet he had nothing to do with naming the ships. But then they were Flower-class. There was even a *H.M.S. Jonquil*.

What's in a name? In *Aubrietia* there was an experienced young lieutenant-commander named Smith, a 4-inch gun, a pom-pom, several oerlikons and many depth charges. And an asdic set whose type was the best in the world.

It got on to a target. Not a submarine, but the torpedoes it had fired at *Esmond*, and while they were on their way to that unfortunate ship. Their noise made a harsh and unmistakable screech on the asdic speaker. Smith also made noises, and these had *Aubrietia* swinging hard to starboard and men running to the throwers and rails on her quarterdeck.

Just after *Esmond* blew, Smith's asdic operator gained contact with the submarine, which of course was U-110. Almost at once contact was lost, but Smith fired a quick pattern by eye. There were ten charges in that pattern, set to explode at 100 and 225 feet, the idea being to hammer the U-boat between two anvils of force.

Smith had no illusions about this first attack - it was like firing a shot in a dark room - but then his asdic regained contact, and held it, and Smith came in on the submarine's port quarter to let fly with another full pattern, similarly staggered in depth.

Seeing that *Bulldog* and *Broadway* were both in contact, Smith transferred his attention from the U-boat - believing his second attack also to be unsuccessful - and headed for *Esmond's* survivors in the water.

The merchantman's entire crew of officers and men had just been hauled aboard *Aubrietia* when her lookouts reported a startling sight on her quarter.

All these events happened very quickly, so let's return for a moment to Baker-Cresswell and *Bulldog*. He had his contact and

was preparing to attack when his lookouts reported something odd. It was an area of disturbed water, like you see sometimes flowing over a shallowly submerged reef; patches of smoothness edged by swirling currents and ripples of white.

But this 'reef' was moving. Just as the last of *Esmond's* survivors climbed up the scrambling net, U-110 broke surface. For many of those experienced hunters it was the first time they had seen one of their hated enemies.

And this one was very close to the convoy, and though damaged, there was nothing to make Baker-Cresswell believe that she could not still fire her torpedoes. Across the water came most hearty cheers from *Esmond's* people, but Baker-Cresswell had other things on his mind, which right then, at sight of that ugly black shape, was feeling peculiarly savage.

Obedying the dictates of both his professional instinct and his feelings, he opened his mouth to shout "Standby to ram!" The words never came out. Instead, men came scrambling out of the U-boat's conning tower. To Baker-Cresswell, their object was the 4.2-inch gun just forward of the bridge. They meant to have a go, and against the big target *Bulldog* made, and her thin sides, they might very well make a good go of it. So he did shout, but to his coxswain and his gun crews.

Bulldog started to swing away from her ramming course. The 3-inch dual-purpose gun had already swung; it bellowed, and its first shot made a vivid red splash against the conning tower. Then everything *Bulldog* carried opened up, even unto a light machine-gun kept handy on the bridge for low-flying aircraft.

Meanwhile *Aubrietia's* men were cursing, for the two bigger destroyers were masking the target she'd surfaced, and her own 4-inch had to remain silent.

No sooner had *Bulldog* bared her teeth than Baker-Cresswell realised that the U-boat's men were heading not for their gun but for the sea., In pairs, in groups, they leapt into the water. At once the thought flashed through his mind - *capture*.

"Full-astern both engines!" he roared. Even though on the turn away she would have to be quick, for the U-boat loomed close ahead. But Chief Dodds had hurried below to his engineroom, and she

stopped in time - less than a hundred yards from the enemy. Baker-Cresswell saw her number, U-110, painted in tall white letters on the side of the bridge, and then he issued another order.

“Away armed boat’s crew.”

And to *Aubrietia* he made a signal telling her to pick up the German survivors as well. If ever justice was poetic, this was the time. Captain McCafferty of *Esmond* and his men watched with grinning satisfaction as thirty-four Germans, oil-smeared and soaked as they themselves were, climbed up the corvette’s scrambling nets. Their satisfaction increased when one of the Germans spat in a petty-officer’s face, and was promptly flung back into the sea; there to remain until he had apologised. *Esmond’s* crew felt a little less frozen.

Aubrietia got underway again and headed for *Bulldog*, but without Lemp. U-110’s captain was last seen by his men swimming in the water. He went down, but not with his ship.

CHAPTER EIGHT

This fact, the continued presence of the U-boat, was causing Baker-Cresswell some misgivings. She looked stable enough, rolling normally in the Atlantic waves, but surely scuttling charges would have been laid? But had there been time to set them? If so, he could be sending nine of his men to their deaths. On the other hand, this was obviously a new type of U-boat, and her examination by experts could prove of tremendous importance - even gear sent back in the whaler.

The captain had an unpleasant decision to make. A young and eager voice, speaking suddenly beside him, helped him make it.

“Boarding party mustered abreast the boat, sir.”

Baker-Cresswell looked at the freshly handsome face of Sub-lieutenant David Balme, alight with the sense of novelty, and he tried not to smile at sight of the big .45 Webley revolver strapped round the youngster’s waist; knowing that though *Bulldog’s* men could hit a ship eight miles away, a man standing eight yards away from that rarely used pistol would be pretty safe. Then the captain’s mind returned to the urgent business in hand and he spoke crisply:

“Get on board the U-boat as quickly as you can. I think she is completely abandoned, but there may still be one or two men left on board. Get hold of the documents first, and then everything else useful that you can take away. Never mind if you lose the whaler. I’ll send over another boat.”

He forebore to mention scuttling charges. Balme would be aware of that danger, and there was small point in enlarging on it.

“Aye aye, sir!” Balme said, and hurried down to the whaler.

Apart from the five oarsmen, he took with him a telegraphist and a stoker, both of them taut hands who knew what to look for.

The sea was fairly calm - here. Anywhere but in the Atlantic it would have been logged as rough. But the whaler was a seaboat, especially designed for lowering in the middle of an ocean, and Balme, like all his breed, had been well trained in the handling of small boats. He brought her alongside bows-on to the gib waves, waited his chance, and when the boat lifted he jumped and for the first time found himself on the deck of a German submarine.

The casing was wet with spray, and slippery. Handling himself aft towards the bridge Balme drew his pistol, feeling self-conscious with the hefty thing in his hand. As he wrote to Captain Roskill, that most able historian of the Royal Navy:

“Had anyone appeared I do not suppose I would have hit him, but the revolver gave me a sense of security for *I did* expect someone to come out of the conning tower.”

He climbed up the footholds in the side of the bridge, found that both the upper and lower hatches were still open, and looked straight down into the control room. No sound of human movement came up to him, but it seemed incredible that there wouldn't be someone left to start the scuttling charges. There was only one way to find out. The young officer put a ton's weight of resolve on his muscles and put his foot over the hatch coaming. This is how he felt.

“To climb down through the conning tower of a submarine when one has hardly ever been aboard one before is difficult enough with both hands free, and to do so with a loaded revolver in one hand seemed likely to prove suicidal. So I put the revolver back into its' holster. This to me was the worst moment of the whole affair, since while I was climbing down I was presenting a perfect target to anyone below.”

But this young officer *did* climb down - not only towards a possible and unavoidable shattering bullet, but towards the distinct possibility of being dragged down to death in a swiftly sinking coffin blown open by carefully placed scuttling charges. And in this act he was quite alone. The bravery displayed here corresponds to that of those coolly gusty men who were lowered into the crater caused by an unexploded land-mine or bomb; it is the real courage.

Sweating, wary, Balme jumped from the last rung of the ladder and stared about him; and found the control room quite empty, as was the whole boat.

“All the lights were still burning, and everything was lying around just as if one had arrived at someone's house for breakfast, before they had time to make the beds. Coats were flung around, and bunks half made. There was complete silence in the U-boat except for the continual thud-thud of our own ship's depth charges.” (The convoy was under threat of attack by another U-boat).

“This was almost unpleasant sound, especially when the detonations came closer - for it made one expect the U-boat to be blown up at any moment. However, we wasted no time and started immediately looking at the gear and documents lying around. The telegraphist in the boarding party immediately went to the wireless-office, noted all the settings on the U-boats’s wireless sets, and dismantled a lot of equipment.

“Meanwhile I had a look at some of the charts, and at once noticed the heavy dark lines indicating all the searched channels (free of mines) leading into the German U -boat bases. (This was a vastly valuable discovery). Two or three of the seamen now helped me pass all the charts up through the conning tower and into the whaler, and they were soon followed by all the books.

“One had no time to distinguish between those of greater or less importance, so we passed out the whole lot. Various pieces of moveable equipment which were obviously of technical interest were also sent up, and we also found about half a dozen sextants of superb quality - far superior to those supplied to us by the Admiralty. Of course I know nothing about the use that was later made of what we seized, but from my own personal point of view the greatest find was about ten pairs of Super Zeiss binoculars. One of them, I am afraid, was not handed in; and I still use it nearly every weekend when I am out sailing. They are the finest I have ever used, and the same standard applied to everything else we found in the U-boat.

“For instance, those were the days when England was short of everything, and we all lacked clothing which was really suitable for work on the Atlantic convoy route; but in the U-boat we found quantities of splendid leather clothing - similar to what we later, and enviously saw American sailors wearing.

“While inside the U-boat we lost all sense of time, but I believe the whaler made several trips backwards and forwards loaded down with documents and equipment. In due course our engineer officer came over to see if he could get machinery started, but he had no success.” No success with the engines, but an extraordinary and comprehensive harvest was garnered from U-110 - Baker-Cresswell even co-opted *Broadway’s* large American-style motorboat to help in this precious transfer. By now it was four p.m. and Balme’s party

had been in the U-boat for three hours - tense hours for Baker-Cresswell, loitering about such an unhealthy spot. Not only his engineer but his torpedo-gunner had been sent across, and everything of any possible value was now aboard *Bulldog*. The thought occurred to Baker-Cresswell that the submarine herself might also be taken home. Across to U-110 went the message.

“Batten down and prepare to be taken in tow.” This delicate and difficult operation - only a couple of men could work at a time on the submarine’s narrow, wave-washed bows - was finally completed, and escorted by *Broadway*, *Bulldog* began her long haul to Iceland.

After many adventures - one of them included contacting another U-boat, slipping the tow, chasing the enemy off and repassing the tow! Baker-Cresswell got his load up to a respectable seven knots and many safe miles from the point of her capture. It was only then that he broke wireless silence to the Admiralty with the momentous news that he had captured a German submarine and had all her logs, charts, books and moveable equipment on board.

The signal caused a sensation. It was immediately taken to the Director of Naval Intelligence and the First Sea Lord, who ordered the most stringent restrictions on the signal’s distribution, confining it to a handful of specially chosen officers. Right now *Bulldog* carried a veritable bomb of knowledge. But if the Germans found out what she had done, then not only new boats but all of U-110’s type would be changed to render the British knowledge practically worthless. But if they could be kept from finding out...

They were.

And U-110 kept what secrets she may have still had inside her. *Bulldog* was getting close to Reykjavik in Iceland when the weather worsened. By dawn it was blowing almost a full gale, with the tow yawing so wildly that it was impossible to steer a steady course. Then, as if in a last challenging and defiant gesture, the U-boat suddenly cocked her nose high in the air until her body was almost vertical. Back she slipped, and now the sea astern reached empty, while the long tow-wire started to tauten with ominous warning. So for the second, and last time, *Bulldog*’s men knocked open the towing slip and her British wire followed the German hull to the freezing bottom.

But only an empty shell was lost. What the Admiralty's submarine experts drooled over was of such significance that when engineer-officer Dodds was up before King George VI to be presented with his D.S.C., the King told him, according to the official historian, that the operation in which he had gained it was perhaps the most important single event in the whole war at sea.

In addition to his pair of Super Zeiss binoculars, young Balme also garnered a D.S.C. from U-110, and Baker-Cresswell his promotion to captain.

CHAPTER NINE

After the fact of her demise became known, the Sydney Bulletin carried a story headed: "Exit *Vampire*-Fighting."

The contemptible old rust-bucket of Herr Goebbels' scorn could have made her exit in no other way - a habit of years is hard to break.

This is a story of one brave ship's company, and of an unbelievably brave - or extraordinarily lucky - coxswain of her motorboat. Maybe this chap still shivers when he thinks of what might have happened to him, if it had been anybody but Old-Close-the-Range... But I'm firing the broadside before it's loaded.

Since the 1,900-ton steel-hardened gnat christened *Vampire* (*Aubrietia*??) first tasted salt water in 1917, when her razor-stemmed bow and the lean flanks behind it slid with a streamlined splash into its native element, she had steamed scores of thousands of miles, in all kinds of weather, in all sorts of places, worked by all natures of men.

Acquired by Australia from the Mother Navy in 1932, she continued for another seven years steaming solidly, across to New Zealand in the summer, up to Singapore and points east in winter. By the time she docked in Malta, six months after Hitler beat the drum, she had clocked another 26,000 miles.

All that grim year she fought through the Mediterranean, valiant company of that immortal Scrap-Iron Flotilla; in at the Battle of Calabria; in and out of Tobruk countless times ferrying men, their food and munitions; establishing an advanced base at Swda Bay; and before she left for a brief spell in quiet home waters, in and out of the savagery of the Greek and Crete evacuations - and anyone who was in that lot knew what war was all about.

In the Mediterranean she was under the orders of Admiral (Old-Close-the-Range) Cunningham, whom you have met and of whom First Lord of the Admiralty A.V. Alexander said when the battlewise sea-fighter was raised to the peerage and promoted Admiral of the Fleet: "The greatest sea captain since Nelson."

A certain able-seaman in the Royal Australian Navy is wholeheartedly in agreement with that lofty assessment.

Shortly before the Battle of Matapan, in which Cunningham was

to surprise and annihilate an Italian heavy cruiser squadron and send their newest battleship running for home, *Vampire's* motorboat was alongside the landing stage in Alexandria.

Her driver, a stoker, was fiddling with the engine, for like her mother the boat seldom did more than one trip without a breakdown.

The coxswain and his bowman were patiently waiting and smoking - in the boat; an inexcusable breach of regulations - when a slightish man dressed quietly in a grey civilian suit and wearing a friendly smile stepped on to the pier. Politely he asked the coxswain to take him out to the *Queen Elizabeth*. Coxswain cocked an eye at the battleship, noted her position and replied:

“Okay, Cobber. I’ve gotta pass the big bastard. Soon as this bloody abortion of an engine’s fixed we’ll shove off. Hop in.”

The quiet man hopped in and presently they cast off and chugged down-harbour, with the young bowman in earnest conversation with the passenger on the demerits of life in the Service, in hard-worked destroyers in particular. Approaching the battleship’s port gangway, that one reserved for junior officers and libertymen, the coxswain cupped his hands and shouted aft above the clatter of the aged engine.

“Hey, there! You’ll have to jump as we come alongside - this old bumboat won’t go astern!” The one addressed acknowledged with a wave of his hand, and as *Vampire's* tattered craft surged alongside the glittering ladder he leaped to the platform and ran nimbly up its steps. As he reached the quarterdeck there was a frantic rush of marines, quartermasters, sideboys, midshipmen and the officer of the day from the Admiral’s gangway on the other side where they’d been drawn up to receive him. but *Vampire's* coxswain missed all that flap. Not long afterwards the destroyer received a signal thanking her for assistance to the Commander-in-Chief.

“Commander-in-Chief!” gulped the motorboat coxswain. “Christ. I thought he was their canteen manager!”

The signal was characteristic of its sender’s quiet humour - when he was quiet! When he was roused, as he often was by reports of the lacing his ships were taking by ridiculously superior enemy forces, he led his heavies to sea and fought for a respite for his small craft with almost tigerish ferocity.

Even danger can become monotonous; and *Vampire's* life (and

the constant threat to it) in the Mediterranean was much the same as *Waterhen's*, which we have already covered. This story therefore concerns itself more with her life and death nearer home, against a different enemy.

Commander William Moran, fresh from the big-ship comfort of cruiser *Canberra* (in which I served under him), took over from *Vampire's* Mediterranean driver, Lieutenant-Commander J.A. Walsh, in September, 1941. Hailing from that old deep-water port Kalgoorlie, changing mine dust for cadet's uniform in 1917, Moran was a short, dumpy, quick-stepping officer who had served in battleship *Valiant* and was commander at the Royal Australian Naval College when Hitler marched. Though he lacked the personal magnetism of captains like Hec. Waller of *Stuart* of Matapan and John Collins of cruiser *Sydney* (that is no disparagement; theirs was a fine and rare quality), Moran was a first-class seaman, and a consistent disciplinarian.

He was well-rigged to drive *Vampire*, being a specialist in the torpedoes which, each packing in its warhead the blast of a cruiser's broadside, she carried in her triple tubes amidships. And, as it turned out, he was not lacking in the guts department; in fact, a specialist there, too.

Like all destroyers, *Vampire* was all works - 27,000 horsepower spinning her turbines in a whining blast that gave her 34 knots, the lot packed in a shell just strong enough to hold it, and to withstand the hammer blows of snorting at speed into any sort of sea. Anything heavier than a rifle bullet could pierce her skin - therefore she was built low in the water, to make a difficult target for enemy guns and given her speed, to whip round on her tail and dodge their shells.

The daily newspapers christened her breed "maids of all work"; they worked all right, days and nights for months on end, but there was little of the maid about them. *Vampire*, with her four 4-inch, shooting a 31-lb shell at 2,600 feet per second, smaller ack-ack guns, six 21-inch torpedo tubes and depth charges aft, was a termagant. In protection she was as a mother with chicks; in offence she could be pitiless.

Moran joined her after she had undergone a much needed refit in Sydney. With an almost new crew he sailed her to Singapore. In her company, due to the wisdom of the drafting office, *Vampire* retained

a backbone of staid permanent-Service hands - staid meaning taut, or if you like, experienced. Hers were veterans of the Med.

The rest were Reserves. One had been a grocer's assistant, another a railway porter; there was a bus conductor and a car sprayer, a public schoolboy, a kangaroo shooter from Queensland, a shoemaker and a lad from Hobart who a few months before had been putting patterns on silk for ladies' dresses. But her captain had a set of good petty-officers, the real strength of his command. He had some good officers; he had a few who were green. But his navigating and torpedo-control officer, Ian Cartwright - a most important young man, as subsequent events in Endau Bay were to prove - was a lieutenant who'd had almost a year and a half in *Vampire*, and this included her Mediterranean stint.

A large fair man always ready to smile (well, mostly), Cartwright later became first-lieutenant of that N-class Fleet destroyer which changed her name to *Wind Rode*, and in which I served with him as captain of the iron-deck. This has no relevance, except insofar as now and again you could get him to talk...

But Moran is the lead character. Tallying his forces as a poker player would consider the laws of chance in a deck of cards kept Moran in his new command awake at night, and governed his drill orders for the all-too-short trip up north.

This was what command really meant. Not the flamboyant, Hollywood-esque dash of a 30-knot greyhound, but the insistent consideration of a hundred changing elements. At thirty-eight years of age it was a burden that formed his mouth into a thin line. It was a thing you could never tell anybody; it was something a man knew only after long years of experience. And the hundred or so men under him, whose lives rested on a single order from his lips, knew, and trusted. Such, as Conrad saw it, is the prestige, the privilege and the burden of command.

Vampire still had a few precious days of peace left her to work-up in this Pacific area. All that her old hands had learned from the Luftwaffe and the U-boats was ground daily into the butchers and bakers and silk-pattern makers who formed the major part of her crew.

It was a hard, vital time. Daily, and through the night as well, gun

crews drilled, damage-repair parties shored up bulkheads and quenched imaginary fires, ammunition-supply gangs whizzed the metal food up to the guns, masts of friendly ships were cut and spliced together in range-finder lenses, and almost without cease, Moran drilled the brains of the ship's fighting organisation - his bridge and gunnery-control teams. And the pay-off? She got out again from Endau Bay.

Apart from the constant drill she did convoy duties. Once she carried the G.O.C. Malaya (Lieut.-General Percival), with his staff, to Sarawak in Borneo. En route, lookouts sighted a small group of lights low down on the horizon. Japan was not yet in, but *Vampire* altered towards and racked on speed; and the lights disappeared. Though she searched diligently, gaining more practice, no sign of a surface craft was found. It was presumed that the lights belonged to a dived Japanese submarine, sniffing around its future hunting ground.

Things were pretty tense when she was assigned to escort battle-cruiser *Repulse* to Darwin. Half-way, a signal ordered both ships back to Singapore, "with all despatch."

On approaching harbour another signal told them to "open fire without hesitation on any suspicious aircraft sighted." In this ominous atmosphere 1941 drew towards its close.

When, without warning, Singapore was first raided, the navigator was asleep in his cabin. He was wakened by the steward clamping down the steel deadlights over the cabin scuttles, or portholes. He asked him what the devil he thought he was doing.

"Air raid, sir," answered the steward briefly, in the non-committal tones of a man who knew well the shelters of Malta.

To Pilot's rude and disbelieving reply he held up his hand.

"Listen."

Just then a flying Nip, aiming at the water-front oil tanks, plonked his load in the harbour. The slamming thud against *Vampire's* old plates brought Cartwright out of his bunk in one leap. The morning light broke through a sky smudged with the smoke of burning oil.

Japan was in. *Vampire* was ready.

CHAPTER TEN

Her first big job was a sweep northwards in company with *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to smash a reported enemy landing. They liked this; the company. In the Med. there had been *Queen Elizabeth* and her heavy sisters, but they were of their own War I vintage, whereas this great 44,000-ton *Prince of Wales* was barely out of nappies, so to speak, and *Vampire* could just about sit on her quarterdeck. *Repulse* was old, but had been modified extensively, and in any case was a lovely brute of a ship, longer even than the battleships, with huge 15-inch guns. From *Vampire's* low deck both capital ships looked indestructibly powerful.

On December 8th, while Pearl Harbour was still smoking, the force steamed to sea down the island-cluttered channel. As *Repulse* passed the little Australian Morse lights were flashing from three different points on her rearing bridge at once. One of those eyes was blinking at *Vampire*:

“Take station ahead.”

She had just got into position in the van when coming up-channel loomed the bulk of armed merchant cruiser *Kanimbla*. She flashed a peremptory signal to the destroyer, brief and to the point:

“Get out of my way!”

Vampire slunk to one side while Her Majesty steamed past. A few minutes later the signal yeoman, his mouth twisted under his telescope, spoke to Moran:

“*Prince of Wales* to *Kanimbla*, sir. ‘Keep clear to starb’d. Can’t you see I am under way?’ “ There was a full Admiral behind that peremptory message. They grinned at each other on *Vampire's* bridge.

Late next day the clouds lifted, and revealed miles astern a lone aircraft, shadowing backwards and forwards across their wake. They stared at that unreachable vulture with silent hate. A carrier would have swiftly done something about it, but they had no carrier, nor any planes from ashore.

All that night *Vampire's* men got quietly ready for the dawn and what they knew it would bring; checking lifebelts, lashing hammocks tightly - one of these could keep a man afloat for hours - checking fire hoses and the slipping gear of boats and carley rafts: the guns

needed no checking. Some men wrote letters to wives and mothers. You never knew. If you bought it, the ship might not, and then there was a chance that your last words would reach home.

They wore an odd assortment of clothes, from old grey flannels and khaki trousers to clean overalls, but all of them covering, some way or the other, arms and legs from the green-hot flashes from shells and bombs. Their faces were protected by the white, non-inflammable cloth of anti-flash helmets, which made them look like cowed monks. Their only real resemblance to monks was that many of them indulged in silent prayer: by now all hands knew about Pearl Harbour, and the number and efficiency of the Japanese planes. There were no misconceptions here about imitative little yellow men.

At 8am on the 10th, radar contact was made with a large formation of approaching aircraft. The British Fleet promptly turned east, to position itself as far as possible in its own element, and as far away from the bombers'. At 10.25 the bosun's mate aboard *Vampire* piped that familiar and gut-clenching tune:

"Hands will go to action station in five minutes' time."

The planes came over high, in tight formations of nine. As mentioned before, a Stuka's howl is frightening, but there can be nothing quite so ominous, at least to men waiting in a thin-skinned destroyer, as the remote, muted, approaching thunder shafted down from the sky by heavy aircraft.

Yet throughout the resultant mayhem *Vampire* was not directly attacked, except for a few strafing efforts of rear-gunners, and so she had a dress-circle view of the whole tragedy.

At its height, with planes snarling in, bombs exploding, the British heavies erupting in almost solid sheets of repelling flame, the whole back-clothed by rolling black smoke and white curtains of flung spray, *Vampire's* navigator, watching *Repulse* carefully so as to maintain correct station through all her gyrations, suddenly spoke:

"*Repulse* turning, sir."

Moran had his glasses up, and he answered grimly:

"No, by God, she isn't. She's going!" The great ship heeled, as though under full rudder. Leaned, till the bright red of the anti-fouling paint on her bilges showed clear against the sea. Over, farther, a frightful unnatural lean; then she was right over, and gone. A huge

patch of boiling oil-black water was all that remained where a minute before 32,000 tons of battle-cruiser had fought and floated.

When *Prince of Wales* had followed her, slamming her great bilge keels against the rescuing destroyer *Express* as she rolled, *Vampire* was ordered to pick up survivors.

She collected 225, black and slimy with oil, choking and vomiting as the stuff burned their insides. Among them was Captain Tennant, of *Repulse*. He staggered up to the tiny bridge and hung, coughing uncontrollably, over the windbreak, watching the rescue. Then followed something the Australian seamen would never forget. From below in the scummy water, from whalers and rafts and floating spars. Tennant's men sighted him. One sailor in the water, hanging on the whaler's lifelines, raised his voice in a shout:

"Three cheers for Captain Tennant!" From oil-blinded faces, from mouths caked with salt, the cheers floated hoarsely up. Tennant waved and turned away, blinking.

Vampire made Singapore at two o'clock in the morning of the next day. Moran and Cartwright had been on the bridge since ten the morning before, with a few minutes break for supper.

In port ambulances were waiting. The wounded went first, then the rest, with Tennant supervising their quartering ashore. And then, almost out on his feet, he came back aboard to personally thank *Vampire's* company for their assistance. Small wonder his men cheered him from the sea.

In the next six weeks *Vampire* had little time to remember the Royal Navy's worst tragedy for centuries. Her convoy run was from Singapore to Batavia and Sunda Strait, shepherding back more troops and supplies to try and stopper the Japanese tide welling, it seemed irresistibly, down through the Malayan neck.

Then a fresh enemy landing was reported at Endau Bay, on the east coast. *Vampire* and *Thanet* (a small 900-ton destroyer with only two 4-inch and a brace of tubes, but with 31 knots in her boilers) forgot their convoying and leaped up-coast to have a lash.

It looked like a destroyer's picnic - a dogfight inside a small harbour crammed with troopships, but neither ship knew then what else they were about to tackle.

The jungly promontory protecting Endau Bay from the south was

raised about six in the evening. Both ships at once altered course out to sea, to wait till the moon went down.

When the yellow disc at last slid below the world's rim the two little ships, impatiently keeping station in the friendless dark, settled their low tails -in the water and got down to business.

Not a chink of light revealed their black silhouettes, not even a cigarette glowed. Deadlights were tightly clipped over scuttles, all mess-deck lighting except that necessary for ammunition-supply parties was doused; they went in with black canvas screens over all upper-deck doors and hatches that weren't shut, galley fires out, instrument lights on bridges and guns a dim merging blue, stoker petty-officers in their 'tween-deck hades watching so that not a spark from those roaring, boiler-wreathing jets of superheated flame reached the night air.

Totally darkened, they slid through the harbour mouth. Moran had no need to check his darken-ship routine, for the petty-officers responsible for it remembered that night off Tobruk when a carelessly-laced screen on an Italian supply ship flapped open, and brought a rupturing blast from sister-ship *Waterhen's* ready guns.

Now they were inside the harbour. Almost at once *Vampire*, leading, sighted two Japanese destroyers under way fine on the starboard bow; and, further in, others.

Now was the time to get out, to slink away unseen from those unexpected and superior enemy forces, to leave a harbour which they'd thought contained only troopships. Any one of those big Jap destroyers could have taken on both the aged intruders. The risks were too savage, they should clear out.

Moran gave no orders, vocally. His silence, which had *Vampire* maintaining her inward course, was just as effective as a shout. And so this handful of brave men went on in. Few of them believed they would ever get out again.

Now that first pair of Jap destroyers were so close that Cartwright, torpedo-control officer as well as navigator, almost whispered his orders as he trained his sight on the leading ship's bridge.

He had to be quick, and he was. Two torpedoes leapt out and speared for the target. They watched the twin tracks reach out, swift and straight, and touch the destroyer's side. And nothing happened.

The range was so close that neither fish had had time to regain its correct depth-setting after its initial deep lunge.

Incredibly, the Britishers were still undetected. Eyes straining, *Vampire's* bridge made out a third destroyer 2,000 yards ahead, dwarfed between the shapeless bulk of half a dozen troop transports.

Cartwright emptied another tube. This time the Japanese saw the red tongue across the water. The Australian replied with a broadside, echo to the brilliant gush of red flame which marked the violent expenditure of a quarter-ton of T.N.T. against the enemy destroyer's bilges. This time the range had been long enough...

At once a searchlight opened its shaft of light and, with the glare of a disturbed enemy upon them, all hell broke loose in the harbour. The sea spouted. The two Japanese boats which had been missed by the first torpedoes opened up with full broadsides, joined by guns from ashore.

A rabbit caught in a car's headlights enjoys obscurity compared to the hard brilliance which outlined *Vampire* and *Thanet*, whipping and spitting like Kilkenny cats round that silvered, spouting harbour, urged to full thrust in a cluttered waterway whose greatest depth was five fathoms. All hands believed it was just a matter of when.

Cartwright, busy on his charts under the weather-dodger, pulled his length out and queried the signal yeoman behind him:

"Why the hell aren't our guns firing?" The navigator was normally sane enough, and the surprise in the yeoman's answer was natural.

"Firing, sir? We've been in rapid broadsides for the last five minutes! Listen."

And as he listened, consciously, the din beat against his eardrums with an almost physical violence. But until then his whole mind had been totally absorbed in navigation, and he hadn't heard a shot!

They all heard the next one.

Gallant little *Thanet* - in this mad arena of noise, flashes, smoke, cordite stink and ships, brief vehicles of reflected light in the blackness, dashing in and out of the searchlight beams fastened steadily on *Vampire*, but still in her correct station astern - little *Thanet* caught a shell in one of her boilers.

The enormous, disciplined force of steam under superheated pressure was unleashed abruptly in a giant blast that lifted the ship's

midship deck, huge leaves of steel twisting in the searchlight's glare, and burst her sides and bilges open to the sea siding with the enemy her own strength had ruptured her, as effectively as if she had stopped the whole of a battleship's broadside.

Most of her crew left alive had time to abandon her before, still making way and vomiting plumes of white into the night, she staggered under.

Still flat, out, and still the miraculously alive target for a score of concentrated guns, *Vampire* burned a smoke-float on her foc's's'le. The wind of her speed chased the thick whitish vapour far astern, writhing silver along the searchlight's finger like cotton-wool winding a swab stick. Then Moran had a simple and brilliant idea. He leaned over the fore windbreak and shouted to the toiling shadows round A-gun.

"Heave that smoke-float over the side!" It was, undoubtedly, this quick thinking which saved her life. Believing that another enemy ship had got in, and was on fire, both Jap destroyers shifted target to the smoke, now also light-held, and opened a heavy fire. Unaware of this, and also sighting the smoke, a third Japanese boat nosed in to investigate. The first pair's belief in another enemy ship was naturally strengthened when their binoculars sighted a vague ship-shape through the smoke. Exultantly they increased an already forceful close-range bombardment; to such good effect that one of his Imperial Majesty's own destroyers just managed to beach herself before, stern first, she sank.

Moran took immediate advantage of this disharmony in the enemy ranks, here was only one obstacle to their escape. He rested his belly against the windbreak and bellowed above the uproar:

"A and B-guns, local control. Take the searchlight!"

No need to designate which light. Layers and trainers squinched their eyes to slits against the magnified glare through their telescopes and let go almost together. The great eye exploded in a burst of orange light; darkness rushed in over *Vampire*.

Moran was ready with his orders and the engine-room more than eager to get them. At top speed, as fast as ever she'd gone in her life, she crashed out into the open sea, slewed round like a terrier-chased cat, and dug her tail down for home.

And now her men, profoundly grateful for the miracle of still being alive, prayed for another - that her engines would hold up. They did, all the way. But then she was British-built.

Even so, she beat *Thanet's* men home by only a few days; miracle number three.

After Jap search parties had collared *Thanet's* motorboat load, other survivors on rafts, floats and their own bellies, reasoning that where the Japs had looked once they wouldn't bother looking again, pulled themselves aboard the empty motorboat.

Paddling with bits of wood ripped from her bottom-boards, they got clear of the smoke-wreathed harbour and headed south for Singapore. Sailors are a versatile breed, especially destroyermen, and with sails constructed of lifejacket covers, laboriously stitched together with the sailmaker's needle and twine in the boat's bag, her crew made a jungle-covered island down-coast. Here they landed, commandeered a Malayan junk, set sail; and made Singapore four days later.

Except for the unlucky few taken prisoner, and those killed in the blast, the party had ended happily. But they would never forget it. We meet *Vampire* next in Trincomalee, then the Royal Navy's base in Ceylon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After her nippy night action she ran a convoy to Batavia, then gave two Dutch merchantmen the doubtful comfort of her presence on the lonely and dangerous run across to Colombo. Ducking south round the island to the huge, boom-defended spread of Trincomalee harbour on the north-east coast, she was given to carrier *Hermes* as her crash destroyer, her job to hang on the big ship's flank ready to dash up and pull out of the sea any pilot unfortunate enough to land in it.

The writer knows Trincomalee well (based there in one of the screening destroyers for the British Eastern Battle Fleet), and remembers the hours he and his shipmates spent quietly paddling in its warm blue waters alongside the ship - ten minutes at first, twenty the next day, then three-quarters of an hour, gradually increasing the period till we could stay afloat with minimum effort for two or three hours: every afternoon twenty or thirty of us, paddling like ungainly ducks, quacking as well, with the rest of the ship's company in the cool of the upper-deck watching, and finding nothing incongruous in this watery tea-party - every now and then one of them would join it.

We had a very good reason for conditioning ourselves to staying afloat; the same one which, on that hot sunny afternoon of April 8th, 1942, when the signal came, had half of *Vampire*'s company over the side, gazing up as they paddled in meditation of *Hermes*' rearing side, against which their own pint-sized home snuggled.

Suddenly the signal yeoman bustled across the flag-deck, clattered down the foc's'le ladder and hurried aft, a message form in his hand. Many pairs of eyes in the water watched him halt at the quarter-deck, scan the officers-ashore board, then dive down into the wardroom. The swimmers were already heading for the scrambling net hung over the side when the bosun's mate stepped to the guard-rails, blew a shrill blast on his call, and yelled: "Swimming party clear the water!"

By the time Commander Moran, with Cartwright in attendance, walked forward to the chart-house, all watches were fallen-in the ship's waist near her tubes, being detailed to secure for sea.

In the chart-house Moran dropped his signal on the polished table, fingered it aside, and laid out a chart. Cartwright read the signal as he handed the captain a pair of dividers.

“Force enemy carriers sighted 350 miles east of Ceylon. Anticipate attack. Ships in harbour are to proceed at midnight and remain 40 miles off-shore.”

At five minutes to midnight *Vampire* slipped her last berthing wire, shot a smother of white from her throbbing tail and swung her nose seaward. Behind her as she passed through the boom gate the bulk of *Hermes* loomed against the starlit sky. All night both ships cruised in the ordered position, waiting for the dawn.

At 8am they were radioed that Trincomalee had been raided by about fifty Jap aircraft. At 10.25 the port bridge lookout sighted black dots low down on the line of horizon.

“Hands will go to action stations in five minutes time.”

It took the 48 dive-bombers about fifteen minutes to close the range. They clawed up into the bright smiling blue, straightened out, kicked over on one wing and came plummeting out of the sun, engine-notes a rising snarl of sound.

Hermes was the target.

One second the carrier's acreage of flight-deck stretched bare and quiet, an ordered reach of tarmac, bulkheads and supporting girders. The next it was converted violently into a cratered mess of smoke and flame and bent-up sticks, like a rumpled crow's nest.

A stick of armour-piercing bombs had penetrated and, their fuses started, ruptured her ordered neatness into steel slivers. Mess tables, paint, contents of kit lockers, books, clothing, fired by the enormous heat generated in each burst, made half a dozen pouring chimneys of her flight-deck.

Again and again the bombers struck, each a winged bat preceding a snarling whine, zooming high again into the blue and laying its egg at the base of a bursting geyser of flung smoke and spray.

In twenty minutes *Hermes*' captain ordered abandon ship: almost as old as *Vampire*, she could not take such a fearful battering. She went down under a pall of white smoke, her high mast, with its ensign, sticking a second above the shroud. She took five Jap planes with her.

Now alone, *Vampire* increased to full speed and prepared to fight for her life. This was harshly clear daylight: there were no tricks Moran could use here. While the little ship shuddered up to high speed her gunners waited for the reforming planes, oerlikon layers strapped behind their long, black, shell-firing barrels, pom-pom muzzles moving slightly as they nosed at the approaching shapes.

The first bomber let go at 1,500 feet. Two bombs struck off the stern; the third over the bridge, cleared the whaler at its davits and exploded alongside in a blast of water that washed the port oerlikon crew clean out of their mounting and along the upper-deck, the phone number being brought up hard by the lead on his head. Quickly they scrambled back, shocked and fearful but still game.

Most sailors know the stoker who, a bit out of normal station, opened the breach of a 4-inch gun aboard his ship in Melbourne to show his popsy “where the bullet went,” and found he couldn’t shut it. He overcame his difficulty with an airy, “She’s right. All breeches are left open till sunset.”

In the next few seconds *Vampire*’s pom-pom crew wiped out the stain.

Destroyers may be maids of all work, but certainly (and especially in old destroyers with relatively small crews) their men are jacks of all trades. For instance, a motorboat is coxswained by an able-seaman, whereas a cruiser’s boat is in charge of an experienced leading-seaman and a midshipman. For further instance, *Vampire*’s pom-pom crew were all stokers.

In charge was the chief stoker, a veteran of Greece and Crete, a man who had seen dive-bombers before. And now he was waiting with controlled patience for a good target. He got it.

There came suddenly the screaming banshee wail of a diving plane. It pulled out twenty feet above the sea, a colourless streak. A crash of cannon shells and bullets slashed a powdery path through the sea hundreds of yards ahead. The fighter whipped over in a tight bank and came driving in again, brown balls of smoke breaking from its nose and wings.

Still the stokers waited.

Then the Jap hauled his nose-up, exposing the plane’s dirty underbelly. The chief shouted. The pom-pom coughed and the lines

of tracer leaped out, the plane's smooth streamline erupted in dozens of vicious little explosions, with the flying pieces plain to see. He hit the water in a slewing rush, sprayed a great wall of whiteness fanwise before his nose, and dug under.

That was not only good shooting, but excellent control. And that, of course, in the face of such a menace, indicated a hefty degree of guts.

The next bomb hit. It sheered easily through the shell-like thinness of her hull to A-boiler-room and exploded among the maze of high-pressure steam pipes. Superheated steam is a marvellously efficient servant, but a frightful master; its touch can peel human skin like a cooked beetroot, and one breath of it can sear lungs to uselessness.

From the hole in her deck, from shattered hatches, gouts of steam hissed at the sky, till her after-part was hidden in a blanket of white.

That bomb finished her. Almost stopped, the sea creaming in over the starboard waist, rudder jammed hard-a-starboard, she staggered on through a convulsed sea. Moran ordered abandon ship.

A bomb landing in the vegetable locker rained potatoes on the bridge and blew in the wheelhouse door. The coxswain stumbled to the break of the foc's'le and, joined there by Cartwright, prepared to jump. As they did so, a stick of three blew the ship almost in halves abaft the funnel.

Both of them surfaced in a scum of black fuel-oil pouring from her opened belly and struck out desperately to get clear of the suction. Just as well. They had made better than fifty yards when a plane caught X-magazine.

There was much in there to help that bomb. *Vampire's* whole afterpart rose slowly and bodily in the air, and then shattered to pieces, but one small compartment was left momentarily intact, and its airlock kept the rudder and screws clear of the water, under the torn red, white and blue of her ensign. Then the bulkhead collapsed, the air escaped in a valedictory sigh, and what was left of her shuddered, reeled, then dropped quickly under the fouled sea.

Clinging to rafts and spars, her men watched her go, shocked and numbed like *Waterhen's*. The first lieutenant kept himself up with a football in his arms. On one raft they hauled a ghastly figure out of the stinging sea - a stoker from A-boiler-room. The ship's

doctor swam from raft to raft, doing what he could. Others, conditioned by those calm hours in the waters of Trincomalee harbour, kept their oil-blinded mates up on arms and shoulders. The servitude of the sea is austere, but it pays dividends.

About four that afternoon a hospital ship hove in sight and lowered boats. She was the *Vita*, whose crew *Waterhen* had helped one day off Tobruk when she had been damaged by Stukas. Exhausted faces lit up as she approached. The bosun's mate pulled his pipe from his overalls pocket and yelled with cheery hoarseness: "Swimming party clear the water!"

At ten o'clock the next night *Vita* pulled into Colombo with her survivors. Commander Moran and nine stokers stayed behind in *Vampire*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Those of you faithful followers of my naval novels may have gained there from the impression that the Navy can do no wrong. Not so. Mistakes were made, though it gives me no particular pleasure to record this one, for it was to cause the loss of one of our proudest ships, and the lives of some six hundred men. On the other hand, I have no hesitation in opining that in this case “the brave men” were enemy. This, of course, is not to denigrate the efforts of our own sailors; it is simply a matter of degree. The Germans did not have to fight; they could have surrendered honourably to a vessel of such superior capacity. But fight they did, and against all theoretical tenets, they won. It is a sad, but at the same time a tingling story of self-control, discipline and plain guts.

But first, something introductory about the main protagonist.

Even today, there is no naval name so firmly fixed in Australian minds as that of cruiser *Sydney*. Both ships of the name fought and convincingly won the first cruiser duels of their wars: the first *Sydney* against *Emden* off Cocos Islands in November, 1914, and her successor against the Italian *Barolomeo Colleoni* west of Crete in July, 1940.

Modern *Sydney* was a fast, strongly-gunned ship of 7,000 tons. Her main armament was formed by eight 6-inch guns mounted in four power-operated twin turrets: four guns forward and four aft, so that she could fight with equal weight both ahead and astern, and if necessary at the same time, as a secondary controlling director was fitted aft.

These long-barrelled guns fired an armour-piercing shell weighing one hundred pounds at high velocity - in fact, at three thousand feet per second. They left with a muzzle energy of six thousand foot-tons, and arrived with not much less. This is a smashing force, as will be shown by what happened to *Bartolomeo Colleoni* when her body met it.

In addition to her main armament (which was intended for use against ships her own size, and bigger), she carried eight 4-inch in twin mountings amidships (two more than the main armament of a Fleet destroyer).

Ostensibly anti-aircraft, these could be used just as effectively against surface ships, and of course submarines; that is to say, in gunnery terminology, they were dual-purpose weapons, and semi-automatic, with the run-out after firing opening the breeches ready for the next rounds. Their ammunition was "fixed" - the shell fitted to its brass cordite cartridge in much the same way as a bullet is. This made for a rapid rate of fire.

They could fire very fast indeed, for they were the Mark 16 type, a splendid gun. Aboard cruiser *Hobart*, sister to *Sydney*, towards the end of the war in the Pacific, I was officer of quarters of the four-inch gundeck, with the whole eight generally on my slop-chit, but my own particular gun being P1 - the forward mounting on the port side.

Hobart was heading north for Borneo, and busily working-up after being refitted from her torpedo damage suffered in the Coral Sea. Time and Borneo were getting close, so down came the gunnery officer to test, in flat-out drill, the efficiency of his secondary armament. My mounting (he said modestly) won the competition, at a loading rate of twenty-two rounds per minute. Atom-age gunners might smile, but our guns were loaded by hand... It seems safe to assume that under her first wartime captain, a man named Collins who knew something of gunnery, *Sydney's* cannon achieved a corresponding degree of competence.

But their testing-time was not yet. Originally *H.M.S. Phaeton*, her keel was laid in England in 1933, but while still on the slips she was bought by the Australian Government and renamed. Early in 1936 the brand-new *Sydney* arrived in Alexandria, there to join the 8-inch cruiser *Australia*, of whose company I was then one of the less significant members - ordinary-seaman, second-class, than which rating there was no lower.

At that time Collins was *Sydney's* commander - that is to say, her three-ringed second-in-command. Mussolini was bravely attacking the natives of Abyssinia, and just in case he got bigger ideas we were kept in the Med. to augment the British Fleet instead of sailing for home. This found small favour with us, yet it was to give me, and I am sure hundreds of others, an experience which still lives brightly in my memory. For in April, 1936, both Australian ships were allowed

to visit Gallipoli.

We arrived the day after the 25th - our Anzac Day being a time of rejoicing for the Turks, the victors. After an address of welcome by the Turkish Premier on board *Australia*, men of both ships donned boots, gaiters and water bottles and trekked across the peninsular to Anzac Cove. A ceremony of remembrance was held at Lone Pine cemetery by *Australia's* chaplain, and after that tingling service we walked around.

Standing above the beach where many of their fathers had landed long years before, we visitors saw that it was still studded with rusting hulls and scattered with rust-eaten bully-beef and condensed-milk tins. To right and left below, old paths stooped over the hills in forky zig-zags, and at unexpected corners crumbling earthworks of some post bore mute witness to the violence those hills had known. It was a sad and proud experience.

Both ships left before dusk, with the senior officer timing his run to breast Cape Helles and its lofty monument right on sunset. The decks were packed with men as the sun touched the rim of hills to starboard. Standing on one of the bridge platforms, rigid and clear for all hands to see, the bugler raised his trumpet. He was a good bugler, bless his memory, and slow and haunting the notes of the Last Post sang across the polished sea, across to *them*. When the last note quivered to silence you could see men look at each other, and too quickly look away again.

A moment later course was altered, and Gallipoli merged into the night astern. Passing the Italian air base on Leros Island (from where submarine *Scire* was to carry her frogmen and their pigs to Alexandria), Mussolini's aircraft flew out to take photographs. In those days Governments, or at least cruiser captains, were less chary of offending aggressors, and both ships closed-up their 4-inch anti-aircraft armaments to track the targets. Seeing this, the Italians swerved from the swinging barrels and high-tailed it for home.

A few months later, in August, *Sydney* also found herself home, still in company with her big country-mate.

By the end of May, 1940, she was back in the Mediterranean, a bare two weeks before Italy came in against us. On her bridge, now captain instead of commander, was John Augustine Collins.

One of the most battlewise seamen the Royal Australian Navy produced, an easy-to-serve fellow with a schoolboy grin never far below the surface of his weather-marked face, Collins was born near salt water at Deloraine in Tasmania, son of a doctor, brother of author Dale. He learnt his practical navigation in an exacting school - the War I Grand Fleet - and his gunnery (in which he specialised and topped his class) at that alma mater of British naval turreteers, Whale Island. Two years after that effort he qualified in the Advanced Gunnery Course, which means that what he didn't know about gunnery was hardly worth bothering with.

As executive officer of *Sydney* during her first two years of life, with the upper-decks his main province, not to mention the ship's standard of seamanship, he got to know her vital parts backwards, and was a natural choice for her command when the time came to land practice ammunition and restock with yellow-nosed armour-piercing shells.

When her name, and his, rang through the world's navies with *Barolomeo Colleoni's* sinking in 1940, it was not so much the result of that one short action as of years of patiently acquired gunnery and seamanship skill, brilliantly applied to a few hours' fighting.

Collins led his men through *Sydney* in February, 1941, and enjoyed the victory march like a schoolboy on holiday; afterwards he enjoyed the speeches as much as a four-hour watch in an Arctic blow. The contrast provides the index to his character.

As to that, there is another indication, personally experienced. It was just after the war. By then having climbed laboriously from ordinary-seaman second-class to Gunner, I was officer of the day of a frigate berthed at Garden Island in *Sydney*. Alongside us lay another frigate, aboard which there was to be a ceremony of prize-giving for some good effort which I have forgotten. To get to her you had to cross us.

Up our gangway from ashore came a certain rear-admiral, under whom, as a cruiser captain, I had served when a senior petty-officer. he could not have forgotten me (good captains always remember their higher ratings, and many of them the lower ones), and all he said was, curt and sharp:

"Where's So-and-so's gangway?"

“Over here, sir.”

With relief I turned him over to So-and-so's officer of the day, and heard, in the same tone, “Take me to the ward-room,” and then I returned to our gangway. And there came Rear-Admiral Collins he came - well, not quite bounding - up the gangway, but certainly and widely smiling, and after returning my best gunnery-school salute he shook hands and started with: “Well, Guns, how are you today? All well?” “Yes, thank you, sir.”

“Good, good. Look, it's been a long time since I was aboard one of these floating fortresses. Lead across to the gangway, there's a good chap.”

I felt like carrying him across! And there was no slick insincerity about his manner. He was then the Navy's senior rear-admiral, and there was hardly the need for him to curry favour with a lowly one-striper. Collins was (and still is, judging from our meeting at our last reunion) simply a damned nice bloke. He ruled by the power of personality, not gold rings.

An important shore post in Singapore took him from his old bridge before *Sydney* fought her last engagement, but he was soon afloat again, commodore commanding British naval forces under the Allied South-West Pacific command - the first Australian to go higher than captain.

On October 21st, 1944 (Trafalgar Day), Collins was wearing his pendant in cruiser Australia, then bombarding off Leyte. A Kamikaze suicide bomber bore in, smashed itself into the foremast and slewed across the bridge, trailing a curtain of high-octane fuel. A bomb exploded the lot in a searing wrap of flame which killed the captain, navigator, four officers and twenty-six men. Commodore Collins was badly burnt. He convalesced in Fremantle, returned to command the Australian Squadron, and was Australia's naval representative at the surrender in Tokyo Bay.

A very likeable, shortish, bouncy fellow, known universally (and unofficially) as “John,” Collins was Australia's first commodore, rear-admiral, First Naval Member and Chief of the Naval Staff - a post which, until he gained it, had always been held by a British officer.

But, we are way ahead of the action...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Even in war a warship's life mainly comprises monotonous searching, drills and exercises, with the intense nervous excitement of action rarely lasting more than a few hours. (Though men of the Scrap-Iron Flotilla might make a typical sailor's gesture to that claim!)

Even so, *Sydney* could hardly complain of boredom. British naval forces in the Mediterranean were numerically inferior by far to the enemy's, and with a British offensive mounting across Libya, the activities of our ships were commensurately increased.

Through the slower pattern of patrols and convoys - but quickening when enemy aircraft joined the game - was woven the nervy fibre of frequent contacts with the Germans and Italians; bombarding, destroyer-killing and full-scale Fleet engagements.

The first of these occurred when *Sydney*, with destroyer *Stuart* as her screen, flung a sizeable portion of her magazine contents at the cliff forts of Bardia. A week later, attached to the British 7th Cruiser Squadron, she made her first kill.

Six-inch ships have always been noted for gunnery, one reason why they were the standard cruiser in Commonwealth navies. I remember a throw-off practice shoot which *Sydney* carried out against my cruiser off Fremantle. The pointers which turret trainers followed were deliberately "put back," as you would the hands of a clock. This meant that while the controlling director was actually aimed at the target, in this case us, the guns were firing ten degrees to the left of it. Thus the control teams and gun crews gained almost the full effect of a real engagement: their target was an actual ship instead of a towed target, and except for line, they were firing to hit.

The big blue flags hoisted up and the exercise commenced. At a range of eight miles the salvos lobbed dead in our wake, smack on for range. We zig-zagged and altered speed, and *Sydney's* fire-control table allowed for this and her falling shells dogged our stern with well-nigh omniscient exactitude. It was splendid shooting; had the guns not been thrown-off, we would have been continually straddled.

On June 28th, 1940, the squadron and destroyers of the 10th Flotilla were coursing at speed to overtake an east-bound convoy near the Sicilian Channel. Three Italian destroyers were unlucky

enough to cross their path. *Sydney* picked *Espero*.

In a few minutes those deadly guns had smothered their target in a sustained storm of bursting explosions. Those left of *Espero*'s crew jumped into the sea before their riven craft settled beneath it. *Sydney*, regardless of enemy air and naval bases nearby, cruised up and rescued those still alive.

Then followed the abortive Battle of Calabria, when the Italian Battle Fleet retired under cover of smoke, though not before one destroyer was sunk and battleship *Cavour* damaged.

For the Royal Navy this was the first full-scale engagement since Jutland; for *Sydney* it was a pipe-opener for the first cruiser duel of the war.

The ship's bottom had been scraped clean a few days before she sailed from Alexandria in company with five British destroyers on a submarine hunt north of Crete. She was to need that barnacle-freed bottom, for Italy built the fastest cruisers in the world. All of them could raise 35 knots or better, while one type, the Regolo-class was powered by a tremendous 120,000 horsepower (to *Sydney*'s 76,000) and could reach a speed of 41 knots! Though, as Jane's mentions - "Armour: Practically nil."

Captain Collins dispatched four ships south within sight of Crete to broaden his sweep, while with destroyer *Havock* (paired with *Stuart* in the Battle of Matapan), he patrolled about 35 miles to the north.

The night of July 18th was clear and dark. *Sydney* slipped through a quiet sea at 18 knots, making a difficult target for submarines while at the same time conserving her fuel. She was carefully darkened, with the only sounds the fingering of wind through her rigging and the muted hum of turbines.

She rounded the north-east corner of Crete without incident. Full light came to find both ships at action stations; about them spun the empty horizons.

But at sea in war you never believe what you see, or at least put little faith in it, for you can see only fifteen or twenty miles, and up over that curve below the horizon can come marching nasty things.

Farther south the sun ate up the veil of the morning mist and revealed the four British destroyers and two Italian cruisers to each

other simultaneously. A terse coded signal flashed up to *Sydney*.

The destroyers at once turned northward, towards their big brother, and rang on speed. They needed all they had, for *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and *Giovanni delle Bande Nere* were among the fastest of Mussolini's fast squadrons.

Bracketed by the white towers of plunging salvoes, the destroyers performed their classic task of drawing the enemy on to bigger guns.

Sydney was working up to full speed. A spurting fan of spray in her teeth, big battle ensign whipping from the truck of the foremast, she raced to close the range before the Italians grew windy of the chase or a destroyer collected a salvo that could open her frail sides to the sea.

Then they heard it. From far ahead a dull pulse of sound rippled overhead and muttered away to silence. Again it came before the masthead lookout shouted his report: "Enemy in sight!"

The destroyers wheeled at once, and thankfully, to clear the line of fire of *Sydney's* waiting guns. She opened with triple deflection salvoes, and with the second hitting the nearest cruiser, went straight into rapid broadsides. Considering those combined speeds, and the range of 10 1/2 miles, that was superb gunnery.

The Italians swerved away and ran. They ran until *Sydney*, out-paced, sent a salvo that, overtaking easily and lobbing forward with fierce muzzle energy, knocked half of *Bartolomeo Colleoni's* bow off.

Anchors, cables and magazines dropped into the sea. The Italian was doing more than 30 knots when hit; pressure of water against her bared bulkheads pulled her up like a sandbar. "Shift target" was the message to *Sydney's* guns.

But due to prolonged rapid broadsides ammunitions was running low, *Bande Nere* was running very fast for the horizon, and *Sydney's* guns fell reluctantly silent. It would have been nice to bag both ships... She came back to watch destroyer *Hyperion* shatter the crippled Italian with a brace of torpedoes.

Theoretically and practically, the Italians should have won their fight. Superior in speed, numbers and fire-power, these technical considerations were outweighed by the human factors of discipline, skill and courage. And training. Above all, that. And the man

responsible for it was John Augustine Collins. In the enemy's case the main objective was to escape engagement; in Collins's, never were Nelson's words truer: "A captain can do no wrong who lays his ship alongside that of the enemy."

The British Fleet in Alexandria cleared lower-deck and cheered ship when, the paint on her gun barrels blistered and a hole in her funnel from *Bande Nere's* parting shot, the Australian steamed between the grey lines to her berth. It was a compliment her men never forgot.

That hole in her funnel... Once in Sydney I was asked to address members of a ship-lovers' society; the subject was *Sydney*. When it was done a man came up somewhat diffidently and, after mentioning that his son had been lost in *Sydney*, asked me if I might like to keep "this memento." I looked, and tried not to snatch it from his hand. It was a piece of blackened metal about three inches square with the edges twisted, and mounted on a plaque; and it was part of the metal blown out of *Sydney's* funnel. I wonder if this fragment, now gracing a shelf in my study, is the only part of *H.M.A.S. Sydney* still left "alive"?

After another Bardia bombardment with *Stuart* and *Waterhen*, and bombarding Scarpanto Island and Port Maltezana in Stampalia, *Sydney* joined the Battle Fleet in a raid on Otranto Straits. In January, 1941, Collins sailed her home for hard-earned leave.

Before she left the Mediterranean the cruiser had established a reputation for sustained accuracy of gunfire which, added to the plain guts of men in their destroyers on the Tobruk "spud-run," rated Australia's name very high in the Royal Navy.

Captain Joseph Burnett (he had joined the Naval College with Collins as one of the original entry) was appointed to *Sydney* in command shortly after she reached home. He, too, was a gunnery specialist, and both his sons were to join the Navy before the war ended.

There is no mystery now about *Sydney's* fate in her action with the German raider *Kormoran*. From a report (which I have studied) of interviews with German prisoners conducted by Rear-Admiral Crace, then commanding the Australian Squadron, and from knowledge of what shells and torpedoes would do to a ship of

Sydney's construction, facts of the action have been established, as near as they can ever be.

The only mystery lies in why her captain laid his ship so close to an unidentified merchantman.

Earlier the same year, and also in the Indian Ocean, New Zealand 6-incher *Leander*, raider-hunting with cruiser *Canberra* (I was in the latter ship), slid almost alongside a strange merchantman; only the Italian gunners' bad aiming laid a 4 inch broadside over her masts instead of into her belly. The "merchantman" was the Italian raider *Ramb I*. Surely one can assume that this near-miss was promulgated throughout the Fleet so that other ships could profit by the lesson?

Canberra certainly did. A few days later we came upon two German raider supply ships; opened fire at about 24,000 yards, closed to 18,000 yards (danger from torpedoes here), and altered out again, remaining clear of effective retaliation until the business was finished.

In view of these experiences, it is hard to understand why Captain Burnett, certainly a seasoned officer, approached a potential enemy at under two miles' range: point blank for guns able to open fire at five times that distance.

At 3 p.m. on November 19th, 1941, *Sydney* was positioned some 300 miles west of Carnarvon in Western Australia, steering south-east for Fremantle after escorting an Australian troopship to Sunda Straits.

From my time in sister-ship *Hobart*, we can assume that the following description of her routine is near enough to factual. She would be closed-up at cruising stations, a relatively relaxed state with one turret manned and a 4-inch gun crew standing by to deal with surfaced submarines. This would be a perfectly safe degree of readiness under the circumstances obtaining - visibility good, nothing in sight, nothing dangerous reported in the area.

Men were brooming down the upper-decks, and below on the mess-decks relieving gun crews were at tea; watches would change at four o'clock, when the Navy night begins and work ceases for the day; it had started at 6 a.m.

The bridge was a scene of quiet and watchful efficiency. Leaning one elbow on the binnacle, cap tilted to shade his eyes from the coppery glare of the sea, the officer of the watch continuously and

instinctively covered the sweep of horizon ahead, his eyes returning frequently to where the compass needle clicked back and across the course.

A signalman fiddled with a shutter spring on his 10-inch signalling lamp, telescope handy on a lookout seat beside him. Head and shoulders inside the chart table near the bridge ladder, the navigating officer was preparing his work-book for the four o'clock sun-sight.

B-turret below the bridge suddenly jerked off its bearing, gathered speed and swung smoothly through its training limits, then shrugged back into the fore-and-aft position, tested for the first dog-watchmen.

Still high, the quartering sun's rays fell steeply out of a cobalt sky, and the sea itself, inkily blue, drew all about them the unbroken wheel of the horizon.

Then, just on four o'clock, rang the urgent - eager but not alarmed - cry from the masthead lookout:

"Bridge! Bearing right ahead. Ship!"

The bridge buzzed, and presently up came the captain.

It was soon apparent that the ship far ahead was turning to run. Her masts opened, and shortly she was heading directly into the sun; though as the cruiser was well up-sun from her, the advantage of this manoeuvre was dubious. Or was the move deliberate, to indicate panic and thus lack of retaliatory effectiveness? Quite possibly, seeing that Captain Theodor Dettmers was a battle-wise and cunning as they come.

It is assumed that at this time there was no suspicion in bridge officer's minds that the running ship was enemy. Natural inclination and sound tactics would impel running from a warship, and when Sydney's W/T office intercepted a garbled radio distress signal in the name of a Dutch ship, *Straat Malakka*, claiming that she was being chased, they must have felt justified in classing her as a panicky non-combatant.

But aboard the "merchantman" there was no panic there *was* a plentitude of bravery and determination, for unhesitatingly she was preparing to fight - to take on a fully-commissioned and experienced 6-inch cruiser, a warship fitted with the most modern fire-control equipment then in existence; a vastly superior *fighting ship*.

Captain Dettmers issued his orders. A deliberately jumbled hoist

of flags in answer to the cruiser's peremptory challenge jerked *up Kormoran's* halliards, the Dutch ensign flew at her gaff - and along her decks hatches slid back above the smoothly rising snouts and breeches of five 5.9-inch guns. These brought her nowhere close to parity with *Sydney's* eight 6-inchers. In fact the cruiser, with her director, her transmitting station with its fire-control table, and her turrets with their hydraulic loading arrangements, not to mention her much greater speed and manoeuvrability, had a tremendous edge on her opponent - in a straight fight.

Dettmers meant to do his best to make the fight anything but straight.

Lifts brought his guns up, but stopped them just below deck level, invisible. Carefully behind the shelter of steel bulwarks the German sailors hurriedly stacked armour-piercing shells, and between their hidden torpedo tubes amidships the tube trainers, hands on their training handles, waited the order to swing outboard.

And to Dettmers' taut-minded satisfaction, the cruiser came closer.

From a range-finder hidden in the raider's bridge structure closing ranges were passed and set on the guns - 6,000, 5,000, then an incredible 4,000 yards.

Sydney's forward turret was alerted, but in accordance with policy on approaching a friendly merchantment it remained fore-and-aft; that is, bearing straight ahead instead of on *Kormoran*. Only the main gunnery-control tower above the bridge bore on the "Dutchman." According to *Kormoran's* survivors the range was well under 4,000 yards when, without warning, flaps along her side clanged down and five black barrels swung on to *Sydney's* bridge, the ship's brain.

They couldn't miss. The opening broadside tore into the bridge, killing or wounding most of its officers - and these were the executive ones. A moment later a torpedo leapt hissing out of its tube and splashed into the sea. Before *Sydney's* manned turret could swing the track of smooth water reached her. A wall of flames and water towered above her bow.

The explosion blew both A and B-turrets out of action, wrecking training machinery and jolting the heavy gun-houses off their bearing

racks.

Men rushed along her decks to their action stations under a close-range blast of rapid broadsides from every gun the raider carried. The transmitting station beneath *Sydney's* bridge, the controlling nerve-centre of all guns, was wrecked. Without waiting for orders, the after turrets shifted to local control and swung at full power on to the enemy's bearing, with men scrambling inside the gun-houses as they swung.

It takes seconds for a well-drilled crew to ram shell and cordite into a 6-inch gun and as X-turret's snouts laid on the raider they let go.

Kormoran's steel sides, heavier than her enemy's though they were, at that range offered paper protection against armour-piercing shells. Both projectiles punched through and, their fuses started, exploded in her engine-room. Six seconds later another salvo burst in a fierce heat that fired her fuel tanks instantly. The officer of X-turret earned his pay that day.

It was a macabre scene. Through the writhing pall of black smoke pouring from every hatch and crack above her burning tanks the raider's guns still cracked in brief stabs of red flame. Her gunners worked their weapons furiously to clinch the supreme advantage surprise had given them.

Sydney also was on fire, possibly from ready-use ammunition on her 4-inch gun deck. The plane on its catapult burned to a skeleton of ribs and rivets. Under somebody's orders - were they Burnett's? - she dragged her broken bow round and fired four torpedoes at the raider. All missed. *Kormoran* replied with a single tube that also missed.

Though her enemy was crippled, *Sydney* herself was cruelly hurt. That close-range battering had been vehemently forceful. Within half an hour it seemed that both ships were incapable of damaging each other further. Almost stopped, and burning fiercely, they drifted apart, *Sydney* to the south-east, towards Australia.

German survivors allege the cruiser tried to ram. It is believed, however, that this approach was an involuntary manoeuvre produced by a break-down in steering.

It would be almost impossible to steer her. This probably accounts

for *Sydney's* discontinuing the fight, as she could not be turned to keep her remaining turrets in action. The torpedo was a shrewd blow. Hamstrung by the drag of her bow, trailing, hundreds of fathoms of cable which, still secured to her foc's'le cable-holders, could have dropped from the shattered bottoms of cable-lockers, the crippled cruiser drifted into the night; victim of the same sort of damage she had inflicted on *Barolomeo Colleoni*.

Kormoran's company abandoned ship, and from the lifeboats watched their enemy, still blazing, drift out of sight.

The raider blew up at midnight. It is practically certain that *Sydney* ended likewise. Carrying hundreds of tons of high explosives and inflammables - cordite, shells, torpedo war-heads, depth charges and fuel oil - fire reaching any of these magazines would initiate a chain of eruptions that could shatter her hull to pieces; as *Hood* had gone, and *Barham*.

Somewhere in the night *Sydney* and her men went down.

While natural inclination leans towards our own ship, which, while under the disadvantage of being obviously and at once a known enemy to her foe, still fought her remaining guns with the initiative and skill to be expected of such a ship, one must in fairness pay tribute to the quite exceptional fight put up by the raider.

An armed merchantman had never before sunk a major warship; and in accepting the challenge of a cruiser's eight 6-inch guns with all their associated equipment, Captain Dettmers accepted terrific odds. That he did so much is proof of that German skill in gunnery and seamanship which units of the Royal Navy that have met it are freely ready to acknowledge. And of course there was the other detail of common guts.

Kormoran, sometimes called *Steiermark*, sank nine Allied ships before meeting *Sydney*. German raiders had no official names, only numbers, which were periodically changed. *Kormoran's* was 41 when sunk. Her existence, though not location, was known; immunity being mainly due to attacks well spread over time and distance, and the fact that, apart from a garbled appeal from the Greek ship *Embricos*, sunk south of Ceylon in October, 1941, no victim succeeded in signalling for help.

Three hundred *Kormoran* survivors came ashore on the West

Australian coast, and twenty-four were picked up from boats by the *Aquitania*. These had become separated from the main body during the night following the action.

For nearly a month air and surface craft scoured the area in the most intensive search for *Sydney*'s survivors. All they found was an unoccupied, splinter-torn carley raft, and two empty boats.

Perhaps to the victor remains the last word. As late as September last year, writing from his home in Germany, Captain Dettmers said:

“The (Australian) crew fought in an honourable and seamanlike fashion, but in war you need luck, and luck was not with the *Sydney*.

THE END

The Brave Men

The destroyer sighted a hump-backed object momentarily surfaced on the horizon. She increased to thirty knots and swung towards.

Her engines had just reached the ordered revolutions when without warning, and probably through bad handling, another U-boat broke surface dead ahead! The captain had time to bellow "Hang on!" before the thrust of 36,000 horsepower hit the submarine full amidships.

That fierce meeting pushed the U-boat bodily sideways in a smother of white foam, cut her almost in two, and sheared the destroyer through and over the stricken remnants on into clear water.



James Edmond Macdonnell is one of the most prolific writers in Australia today. His books have been translated into many languages, selling in the millions throughout the world. And he is still writing...

He served in the Navy before, during and after the War, climbing up through the hawsepipe from ordinary seaman to officer in the gunnery branch. This experience of both lowerdeck and wardroom provided invaluable insight into his fictional characters.

He lives with his wife, two daughters and a son in the shorebound Sydney suburb of St. Ives, but his main interest, apart from sports cars, lies in swapping stories, of varying degrees of truthfulness, with old shipmates

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