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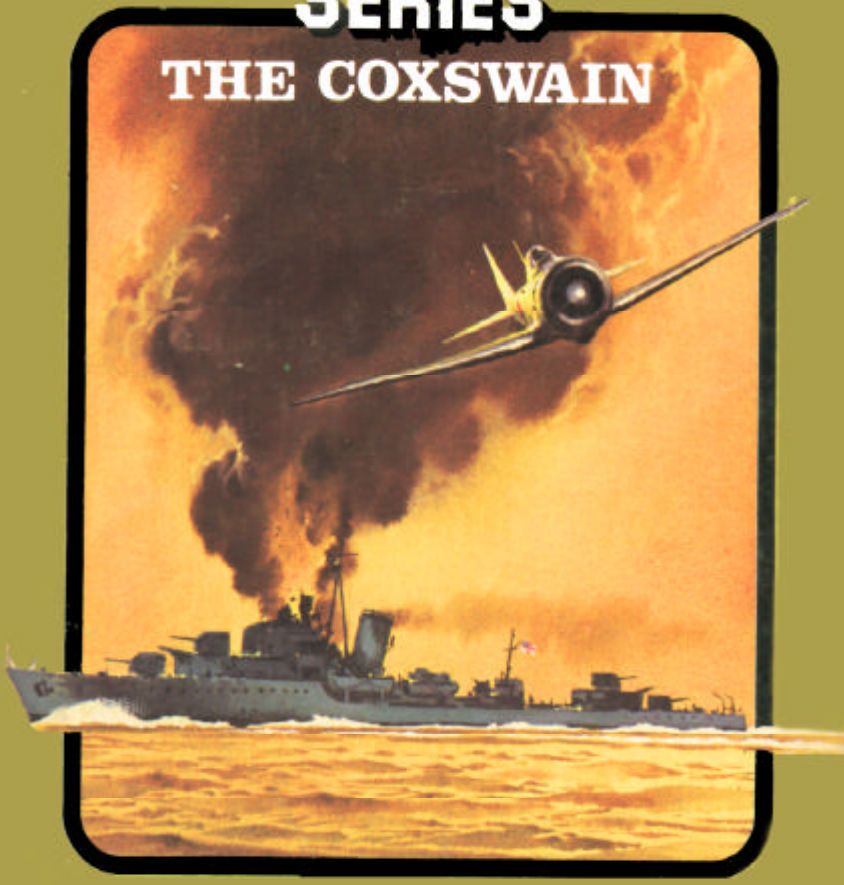
COLLECTOR'S SERIES

THE COXSWAIN



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J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

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CHAPTER ONE

H.M.A.S. WIND RODE, FLEET destroyer, was at sea, at peace.

That last-named state, for a destroyer in a worldwide war, was, admittedly, unusual. But Woodlark Island, a small and dangerous speck in the wide blue of the Coral Sea, had been passed last night, at high speed.

Now on this hot and cloud-piled morning Jomard Passage lay ahead of her; its lighthouse doused in these unfriendly times but its reef-bound exit known accurately to Commander Peter Bentley. Once through she could turn to starb'd and run straight for Port Moresby. There she would refuel.

Allied naval forces in the Pacific were stretched worryingly thin, and *Wind Rode* had been patrolling on her own. This state was not unusual. She was a destroyer, and what she couldn't handle with her torpedoes she could run away from. Anything seaborne, that is...

From outboard she made a graceful picture. She was clean grey overall, and her gleaming paintwork made a colourful and matching union with the clouded blue of the sea. The sea was almost flat-it is never completely smooth-so that the white flashes of her bow waves and wake made a solitary and vivid contrast against the vast reach of blue.

The ship was steaming at 20 knots, and her long low hull, the armoured gun-mountings, the compact bridge and the squat funnel imbued her with an impression of efficient and powerful purpose.

The impression was accurate. Commander Bentley had had close on a year in which to train his ship's company. It may be an aphorism to state that any weapon is only as good as the men who handle it. *Wind Rode* was a beautiful weapon of offence-fast, powerful, heavily-gunned; designed by the experience behind centuries of tradition and sea-fighting. Bentley and his first-lieutenant had seen to it that her capabilities had not been wasted.

Bentley was thinking, as he stood on the bridge, in terms related to this. It had not been easy... One book might succeed in outlining the schemes and plans, the manoeuvres and drills, the sternness, the cajoling, the psychological devices used by her captain over the past year to weld his heterogeneous team of 200 officers and men into

the single-minded unit they now were.

But it had been done, Bentley mused, the coxswain's book opened in his hand. It would not be anywhere near the truth to report that the captain thought of the state of his crew only occasionally: their well-being and efficiency and state of mind were in his mind constantly, sometimes deliberately as now, at other times subconsciously.

Today was Thursday, the day of Captain's requestmen and defaulters. Bentley could have waited another day or so, until they were safely berthed in Moresby; the fact that he was holding his court this Thursday morning at sea was simply a part of his unceasing endeavour to maintain his ship in its present state of undoubted competence. A typhoon or an enemy attack might disrupt the routine he had laid down, but nothing else.

These thoughts threaded subconsciously through his mind as he glanced down the morning's list while the coxswain waited beside him. There is a saying that a ship is known by her boats-she is also known by her quarterly punishment returns. For the past six months *Wind Rode's* returns had been almost negligible. This morning's court would not add to them.

There was three requests. Able-seaman McConnell wanted compassionate leave, Able-seaman Ellis desired to increase his allotment to his wife, and Leading-seaman Billson required official and automatic seal on his entitlement to his third good-conduct badge.

And one defaulter. In any ship, and especially in this one, for a man's offence to go before the officer of the watch, and then be passed on to the first-lieutenant, and then be considered serious enough to require the captain's decision, was bad. Obviously he had committed one of the cardinal sins.

Able-seaman Nesbitt had done this. He had been caught asleep on watch, at sea, in wartime.

Randall, the first-lieutenant, had had no option but to put him in the captain's report. And had then immediately called on Bentley in his sea-cabin. Bentley had not even been angry-surprise, approaching astonishment, had been his reaction, which speaks very decisively indeed for the opinion of Nesbitt held by his officers.

Nesbitt was an educated, devoted and highly-sensitive seaman: a man marked for promotion, the last man expected to let himself

and the ship down. But the officer of the watch himself had caught him.

It had been after a vicious dusk air-attack, three days earlier. For an hour *Wind Rode* had battled desperately against the howling demons which fell out of the sky upon her, twisting, firing with all her gunnery armament until the friendly opacity of the night had brought her surcease from the agony.

At a few minutes to nine o'clock that night the asdic-officer, Lieutenant Peacock, strolling back and forth across the bridge, had sighted a dark figure sprawled forward in the lookout's position, its arms on the disregarded binoculars.

The crucial post of lookout... a few feet from the bridge itself... Nesbitt's keenness and dependability... and careless sleep. None of these equations fitted. But now Bentley had the report of Surgeon-lieutenant Landis, delivered two hours after he had asked for it.

No blame at all, Landis had decided with professional firmness. A sensitive nature, driven by natural devotion and the fierce strain of years of war close to the point of exhaustion. The offence was serious, the cause was medical. Nesbitt's mental and physical strength was too finely-tempered for the savage hammering of war in a destroyer. His very strength-his loyalty and keenness and dependability - was his weakness. He had driven himself too hard, he lacked the comparatively insensitive phlegm of his messmates.

He should be transferred, Landis had advised, either to a shore base for a spell or to a bigger ship, one not almost constantly at sea and in action like this one. Or else he would crack wide open, perhaps at a dangerous time.

There had been a time when Bentley would have queried his surgeon's present unequivocal opinion.* But now he accepted Landis's judgment as definitely as his own. (* See The Surgeon)

He closed the big report-book and handed it over with a murmured "Thanks, cox'n," and his eyes, squinted against the sea's glare, stared thoughtfully out over the bow. Being a defaulter, Nesbitt would be seen last, with no messmates to hear. Bentley would explain to him the surgeon's diagnosis, and that he was to be transferred south from Moresby. There were other things the captain would say, for with his remissness common knowledge throughout the ship Nesbitt would

be going through hell, but those things Bentley did not have to rehearse in his mind now. He had been in command of men a long, violent time, and what he would say would be spontaneous, sincere; a few words of encouragement and understanding which could have even more therapeutical value than medical attention in Sydney.

There was another man on whom the ship's present stats largely depended, and he was standing beside and a little behind Bentley now. Chief Petty-officer Herbert Smales, the coxswain; standing on the bridge, waiting, respectful, his slight frame reaching not much higher than his captain's broad shoulder, his leathery face composed, his alert blue eyes flicking regularly to Bentley's face, waiting for the word.

He had not the slightest conception of what his lord was thinking, nor was he interested. His sole concern at this moment was time-whether he would muster requestmen and defaulters at the normal time of eleven o'clock, or whether-as he guessed-the captain would wait till the ship was safely through Jomard Passage.

Chief Petty-officer Smales was, officially, the chief of police, the keeper of discipline, the senior rating on the lower-deck. He was also the man who took the wheel when the ship entered or left harbour, or came within dangerous approach of land, as she shortly was to do. And that was another reason why now he waited for the captain to give him the time-for those few minutes of tricky steering and navigation through the Passage, Smales would hold *Wind Rode's* safety literally in his small and practised hands.

But the coxswain was much more than these things. Officially he was junior in ranking to a midshipman, who enjoyed officer status; he was required by regulation to salute the greenest acting-sub-lieutenant, and to address him as "Sir". Yet Smales, a most experienced representative of his select branch, was Bentley's confidant; in *Wind Rode* he was closer to the captain, knew more of his trials and worries over the ship's working-up, than many a senior lieutenant.

The asdic, radar, torpedo and gunnery officers were important to the handling of the *ship*. But between Commander Bentley and the 200 men of his command, the main and incorruptible link, the mouthpiece of their requests and troubles, the knowledge-packed

well of information and advice, was the small and weather-wisened figure of Smales.

In a big ship like a cruiser or battleship or carrier his opposite-number would be the Master-at-Arms, the only noncommissioned officer in the Navy entitled to wear, at Sunday Divisions, a sword: in the Army, he would correspond to a regimental sergeant-major, or perhaps a provost-marshall. His authority might not be greater than an R.S.M., and yet there was a subtle difference; here, aboard ship, he was indefinably closer to his captain than the Army man to his colonel.

A coxswain in a destroyer could make or mar a crew, his slackness or indifference could negative the most assiduous efforts of the bridge officers. But then it was a most precious position, and *a* candidate was most carefully and shrewdly judged before he was promoted to it; so that although there may have been unreliable or inefficient coxswains in the British and Australian Navies, this chronicler has never heard of them.

Now *Wind Rode's* coxswain judged that his master had been allowed sufficient time for introspective thought. He did not reason quite like that-rather, he was worried about sufficient time in which to get his four cases out of their working rig into clean khaki shorts and shirts to meet their judge. He coughed.

The small and respectful sound was as expressive as the imminent narrowing of a lover's eyes, or the clang of a bus-conductor's bell. Bentley's head swung, to see the brown face looking back at him expectantly.

"Oh, 'Swain," he said, half apologetically, "I'd forgotten you were still there."

"Yes, sir," Smales answered truthfully. "Ah... I was wonderin' about the time for requestmen, sir..."

"I was thinking, 'Swain," Bentley said, ignoring the suggestion with a nod of his head at the book under the coxswain's arm, "we seem to have the punishment returns licked. Looks like we have a pretty taut bunch down there."

"So long as they're kept that way," Smales answered definitely. "They ain't all angels, not by a long shot." He shook his head slightly. "There's a rogue or two amongst em."

But I've got a bigger and better one, the captain thought with satisfaction. He said, smiling:

"So long as they know that you know more wrinkles than they do..."

Smales did not look too sure about this dubious compliment. But he said, dutifully:

"Yes, sir."

"Now," said Bentley, his tone crisp, "we'll be through Jomard in half-an-hour. I'll see defaulters directly we're clear."

Smales's tone was also crisp.

"Aye, aye, sir," he said, saluted smartly, and left the bridge.

A small smile on his lips, Bentley turned and walked slowly towards the binnacle. The officer of the watch, the radar-officer, saw him coming and made to step down from the raised wooden grating. Bentley made a slight negative gesture with his forefinger and the officer stayed where he was. Bentley halted beside the grating. His head and eyes turned up to the sullen sky.

The clouds were dark grey, almost black, and heavy. But he was not much concerned with the weather threat. He said, his voice low and casual:

"That stuff could be troublesome."

The radar-officer knew what he meant, and he was relieved that the captain had noticed it. Thick clouds like that could cause temperature inversion, and that could greatly decrease the efficiency of their radar. He had been mildly worried about it since he had come on watch two hours before. But every hour of steaming brought them closer to Moresby, and once through the Passage they would be on the last leg of the base course.

"Yes, sir," he answered, also looking skyward, and keeping his voice down-there was no point in spreading unnecessary alarm. "We have no contacts on the 291..."

No, Bentley thought, but that means a hell of a lot of nothing with that muck up there. On the other hand, there mightn't be a Jap aircraft within a hundred miles...

The voice of the signal yeoman cut across his musing:

"Jomard light bearing Green oh-five."

"Very good," the radar-officer acknowledged, and both officers

lifted their glasses. No other comment was made - the light had appeared almost dead ahead, where it should have, but plumb-on landfalls were the norm in a warship.

While Bentley stared through the twin powerful lenses the officer of the watch ordered the bosun's mate:

"Tell the navigating-officer we've raised Jomard Light."

The young seaman scuttled down the ladder.

Bentley was looking at the light, lifting up from its low island at the southern limit of the passage like a white saltcellar, but he was thinking of the significance of the radar-officer's order, and its immediate result.

The lieutenant's thought of the navigator had been instant, and his order had followed at once: the bosun's mate had doubled away on his errand. Nothing out of the ordinary in that, perhaps-but he had been on bridges where the captain would have had to send for the navigator, and where the messenger would have walked to the ladder. Little things...

A good ship, Bentley mused, a taut ship. Like all deep-water sailors, he was inclined to be superstitious but there was no doubt whatever about this-she *was* a good ship, and nothing could alter that proven fact.

At 20 knots the light was growing more identifiable every minute. He could pick out the circle of protecting glass. The navigating-officer stepped on to the bridge and at once checked the ship's position. Obviously she was steaming on a safe course, but with thousands of tons of moving metal you didn't rely on what your eye told you-you got it down mathematically on the chart. Many times, especially in these waters, the only obvious thing about a "safe" course had been the shearing grind as her hull ran up on the hidden reef.

But Bentley, with his trained team working about him, was not worried about navigation. The Passage was not wide, but with the island on one edge and the visible reef on the other it presented in this quiet sea no problem to a well found ship. Once she was committed to a safe course through she had simply to hold that course.

That was what was exercising his mind at the moment - the committal of the ship to an un-deviating course, with disaster waiting

on either side if she swerved from it. That would be the time for a waiting aircraft to drop upon her...

A clipped and competent voice came up the voice-pipe:

"Bridge? Cox'n on the wheel, sir."

"Very good."

Nice, Bentley thought briefly. No actual order had been passed to Smales, but either he had been waiting for the light to come into sight or else the bosun's mate had used his own initiative. The team was working smoothly with him...

He turned to the radar-officer, and the order he gave was one which could come only from him:

"Get the close-range weapons closed-up."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

That would give him the multiple pom-pom, the oerlikons and the machine-guns ready for instant use. There was not sufficient danger, nor indication of it, to warrant closing-up the big guns' crews.

"Five minutes to the turn, sir." the navigator reported quietly.

Bentley nodded. The radar-officer stepped from the grating and the captain took his place, behind the binnacle and close to the open mouth of the wheelhouse voice-pipe. By that simple gesture he had tacitly taken control of the ship.

"Close-range weapons closed-up."

"Very good."

It was the deep voice of Bob Randall, the first-lieutenant, who answered the report. He would have come to the bridge anyway with the ship in confined waters, but he was the gunnery-officer as well, and the call to the guns had ensured his presence on deck.

But Bentley was not concerned with the obvious movements of his deputy. His eyes were on the light and the passage, and he kept clear of the compass while Pilot took his bearings. Yet while the one part of his brain was busy with seamanship requirements, another was judging:

This is the time... we're too close to swing hard a starb'd or port; either we go on through, or else we stop and back out into clear water. From now on in we're sitting ducks.

"On the bearing, sir," Pilot said. And:

"Starb'd fifteen," Bentley ordered.

She was built to swing fast, and her bow felt the effect of the angled rudder-face almost at once. Bentley was not watching her slim nose slide round - his eyes were on the lubber's line of the compass, watching it approach the course he would have to steer on his way through. This was the crucial straightening-up and not the whole Japanese Air Force could have diverted his attention now.

"Midships."

"Midships, sir... wheel's amidships."

It was the two of them now, the captain and the coxswain. One judging, the other implementing. The R.S.M was never as close as this...

"Steady!"

"Steady, sir! Course 225."

"Steer 225."

"Steer 225, sir."

It was done. To a civilian observer the manoeuvre would have appeared ridiculously simple, a minor exercise in course-alteration. Yet Bentley, ten feet above the ship's wheel, had by his judgment stopped the swing of two thousand tons of advancing steel dead on the course required. Aided by the quick and practised hands of the coxswain, the practical extension of the captain's brain and experience.

The light was sweeping past on their port hand now, and they could see that its apparent pristine whiteness was marred by the grey droppings of a myriad of sea-birds. The island behind the light rose to a rounded peak, its rock sides scrubbed over with low bushes and an occasional palm.

To the right the coral reef ran its jagged teeth up to the edge of the chasm through which the ship was safely sailing; the green swell broke lazily over this obstruction, and fell back, exposing the cruel brown niggerheads, snags which could rip her thin sides open as easily and efficiently as a can-opener,

"Lovely sight." said Randall beside Bentley, and the growl in his voice belied the words.

Bentley nodded, shortly. His head was raised to the leaden skies, and now he had no qualms about letting the whole bridge team know the source of his worry. A destroyer's main defence against attacking

aircraft is her length and her manoeuvrability. Viewed from that angle, *Wind Rode* might now as well have been held immobile in dry-dock.

Bentley's instinct was to give her her head, to release her waiting strength and increase to 35 knots. His experience warned him that he had to keep her in hand, that a set could move him to port or starb'd, that he could not afford to gamble with the increased line of advance a turn at high speed would ensure.

They were almost through. An enemy would have to strike shortly, or lose a priceless advantage. Above his head the air-search radar aerial circled smoothly, its radius of search blocked only by the bulk of the island, which was now dropping astern on the port quarter. Down to Bentley's ears came the sound of its operation, a soft electronic whirring.

Slowly his taut nerves let go. His head lowered from the sky and he automatically searched the empty sea ahead.

"Clear, sir," Pilot reported.

Thank God for that, Bentley felt. He said, casually:

"Put her on-course, Pilot," and then leaned to the voice-pipe:

"Cox'n? I'll see requestmen and defaulters as soon as you're ready."

"Yes, sir. They're mustered now, sir."

"Very well, I'm coming now."

Bentley unslung his black binoculars and stepped down from the grating. Pilot moved over behind the compass.

At sea, the captain held his court in the tiny flag-deck behind the bridge. This position had several advantages-it was clear of curious eyes, and it was handy to the bridge.

As he stepped towards the ladder Bentley idly noted that with the ship's swinging on to her more northwesterly course, with the quartermaster now on the wheel, the island and its light were almost dead astern, though still quite close.

He knew it was deserted-the light was unwatched and his tension-relieved mind mused briefly on the fact that men like Bully Hayes and the old copra-traders would have taken their bearings on that peak to beat up to and through the Passage. That island had seen many ships come and go - and had received more than one luckless hull on its hard coral edge. Now another ship had made its landfall

and was receding into the blue distance. The island and the reef, uncaring, timeless, waited for the next.

Bentley stepped on to the flag-deck and he saw the pom-pom's crew falling-out; the starb'd oerlikon was already deserted, the danger past. Then he saw the coxswain and the supplicants lined-up, waiting, but his eyes went to Nesbitt, standing a few paces clear of the requestmen.

Bentley had possibly a little more than five seconds before he reached the baize-covered table behind which he would deliver judgment, yet in that time the expression of utter dejection on the seaman's face seared into his consciousness. Nesbitt's normally alert face was drawn and grey, tortured, pitiful in its evidence of what he had been through in the past days, and Bentley knew with the utmost clarity of conviction that it would be a long time, if ever, before the seaman was of any use for anything.

As Landis had judged, his keenness and eagerness had been his weakness; the reaction was complete and irrevocable.

The cowswain's waiting head jerked back and faced his line-up. His voice, curt and impersonal, snapped out:

"Requestmen and defaulters..." The warning. Then: "Requestmen and defaulters, atten..."

''Requestmen and defaulters." "Requestmen and defaulters." "Request..."

When the shells land and explode. When the grinning radiator and the pounding wheels of the car loom above the fallen pedestrian. When the heart can no longer pump, and the brain-cells are starved for oxygen, and consciousness slides down into blackness, there remain in the dying brain words or thoughts, or perhaps a remembered face or scene, which linger on the photographic cells of memory before death closes the shutter.

Bentley was not dead, but the coxswain's words and their broken ending remained ringing in his consciousness for a second or two after it had happened.

He was not sure which had come first, the powered snarl of the aircraft or the softer, shearing noise of the bomb. It did not matter-both sounds were blasted to insignificance by the intimate eruption of the bomb.

The next thing he knew was that he was sprawled on the deck, a body beneath him and a stinking rain of salt water pouring upon him. The noise of the water was like the hissing of torrential rain, a foreground accompaniment to the shrill background of the alarm bells.

Then he was scrabbling to his feet, one hand shoving uncaringly at the other prone body.

His eyes stung with the deluge of salt. Upright, he dug at them with his handkerchief, and with his clearing vision he saw two definite things amongst the shambles on the flag-deck. The bomb had exploded close to the ship's side, abreast where they had been standing. The splinters had laced upwards. The coxswain, on whom he had fallen, was lying on his stomach, unmoving; Able-seaman Nesbitt was beside him but Bentley could no longer see the tortured expression of his face. Nesbitt now had no face.

These things Bentley saw, but they were extraneous, unimportant impressions. Insistent in his brain was the need to get back to the bridge. He flung the handkerchief aside and stumbled forward on the drenched deck. He did not even halt to think if he were himself wounded-subconsciously his unhindered movements told him he was not. But his brain was racing-that Jap was a fool! He'd missed his chance. Or was he? He had let them through the Passage, but he'd cleverly come in behind the island. Nicely blanketed from their radar.

These thoughts were a flash of appreciation, formed and discarded before he reached the bridge. Blinking from the salt, he saw Randall at the wheelhouse voice-pipe, snapping orders with his mouth close to the pipe and his head twisted so that he could look up at the sky.

He felt Bentley jump on to the grating and he jerked upright and said at once:

"Fighter-bomber, bearing Green two-oh angle of sight seven-oh. Climbing for another run!"

The rapped directions were just as quick as a pointing hand, and more specific. Bentley picked up the aircraft at once, a bat-winged shape dwindling ahead and above them. It was climbing steeply, and as he stared the wings canted- in a moment he would be round, facing them for the next run in.

The ship was heeling on the turn, and as Bentley tensed one leg

and relaxed the other to meet the cant the movement crystallised an urgent memory prodding at his consciousness.

His eyes trained on to the bosun's mate.

"Get the Buffer on the wheel! First-aid party on the flag-deck!"

The seaman dived for the ladder and Randall asked:

"Cox'n?"

"Yes. Wounded at least."

All about him he heard voices and running feet as the gun-crews closed-up. Directly below him B-gun's pump began to whine. His eyes on the wheeling aircraft, he spoke to the wheelhouse:

"Who's on the wheel?"

"Leading-seaman Bennet, sir."

"Cox'n's been wounded, Bennet The Buffer will be up to take over."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Bentley thought of adding some exhortation to the quartermaster to be on his toes. But this was no time for needless speech. He watched the aircraft, now circling at ten thousand feet, and he spoke to Randall:

"That pilot's a fool."

The big lieutenant nodded, definitely. He understood Bentley's judgment. The pilot had caught them napping, with gun-crews fallen-out. He had barely missed with his first bomb; he should have climbed and come in again at once. Even if he had missed with his second bomb he could have raked the scrambling men on the upper-deck with cannon-fire.

Now, circling high up there, he was merely threatening them. His threat was empty. They had been given precious minutes, and in that time the decks had emptied, the men were posted behind their guns, waiting, ready.

"He might be waiting for some cobbers," Randall suggested.

Bentley shook his head.

"I doubt it. If he had any he would have brought them down in a bunch. I'd say he's patrolling from Woodlark and decided to have a shot on his own. Now he's left it too late."

Randall pursed his lips, his face alert, thoughtful. Only just too late, he was thinking-a few feet in to the right and that bomb would have landed nicely... But he said nothing.

“Bridge? Buffer on the wheel.”

That was Chief Petty-officer Hooky Walker, the giant chief bosun’s mate, next to Smales in seniority, a polished steel hook in place of a hand, and an old shipmate of the captain.

“Very good,” Bentley acknowledged.

As with Bennet, there was no need for amplification. He would know by now Smales was wounded, and certainly he would need no exhortation to remain alert.

A phone buzzed and Lasenby’s voice came through from the director:

“Main armament closed-up.”

Now... Bentley thought grimly. He reached forward and juggled the microphone from its brackets.

“This is the captain speaking. We’ve been attacked by a single Japanese fighter-bomber. He’s now at ten thousand feet ahead of us, circling. Very nice of him... Now listen to this, gun-crews. That pilot seems either a fool, or very green. You know why I say he ‘seems’ to be. We must assume he knows his business. Therefore you will not open fire until ordered. He could come down in a power-dive, draw your fire, haul off, and then come in for the real thing and catch you with your guns empty. If he does that we’ll be ready for him. When ordered, main armament will open in long barrage, shifting to short barrage if he gets through. Close-range weapons will open in the normal hosing fire. The ship will be swinging quite fast, so watch your aim-off.”

He paused, the microphone cuddled in his big hand, his eyes on the distant black speck. Throughout the length of the listening ship there was no sound, nothing but the soft hissing of the water down her sides and the muted beat of the engines.

“We’ll get this fellow,” Bentley said, “that’s all.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE BRIDGE WAS QUIET.

There were four officers and several ratings posted there, and it was a measure of their training and experience that of them all only two men were watching the enemy aircraft.

The torpedo-officer was talking through a sound-powered phone to his tubes aft in the waist. They would not be used, but the ship was closed-up at action, and that meant every section of her had to be on the ball.

Pilot had no eyes for the plane. He was stepping quickly from compass bearing-ring to the chart-table, making sure she was on the map accurately while the Passage light was still in sight. He was doing more than this-each time he made a mark on the chart his eyes roved far ahead over the white parchment, ensuring that in her coming gyrations *Wind Rode* had no subsurface snags to contend with in addition to the one now waiting above her.

Towards New Guinea? There was plenty of space there to manoeuvre in, even at the 30 knots to which Randall had raised her speed. A spiky patch which meant "shoal" lay on their port quarter, and although the captain knew of that trap he must himself keep it in his memory; *Wind Rode* would be twisting in all directions once it started.

Nutty Ferris, the signal-yeoman, was not watching the aircraft. There were no ships to signal to, but he had the keenest eyes in the ship and they were not being wasted on a target everybody knew about. His long telescope up, Ferris was scanning the sea ahead and on both sides. That aircraft could be in contact with a submarine; and in any case *Wind Rode* was not sailing on a close preserve. Ferris had seen it happen before-all hands concentrated on the one airborne target, while another came up eagerly and unnoticed from seaward.

The director phone-number, in normal times Bentley's messenger, a smart able-seaman named Frost, had his back to the enemy. He was standing against the fore wind-break, the phone to Lasenby to his ear, and his eyes never left his captain's face. He was the vocal link between bridge and gunnery control, and his orders, especially against an aircraft, had to be passed fast. There was no idle gawking

on this bridge... Bentley and Randall had their glasses on the target. Randall, big and hard, efficient and unimaginative, was simply watching for the tilt of a wing or the foreshortening of the fuselage- the warning.

Bentley was also watching for that, but his mind was exercised by many other things. That pilot was either as gutsy as hell or else an inexperienced greenhorn to take on a Fleet destroyer single-handed. Whatever he was, if he attacked again he had to be shot into the sea.

Bentley felt no exultation at the prospect of battle. As the captain, he could not afford such fictional extravagances of feeling. *Wind Rode* was heavily-gunned, but she was also thin-skinned, and a bomb in her boiler-rooms could rupture her wide open.

Bentley's mind was a tightly-meshing complex of considerations and prophecy and forthcoming decisions. Like Pilot, he had the chart in his mind's eye, and he was consciously aware of that shoal patch astern. He was also thinking of relative bearings of ship and aircraft, of what direction he could steer her to avoid the bomb, of what effect such an alteration would have on the line of fire of his big guns, of the minimum degree of rudder he could put on so as to swing her without hopelessly throwing-off his pom-poms and oerlikons.

Fuel. At this shaking speed she was gulping it up, but his daily fuel-report had shown him he had more than enough to make Moresby. Much more in reserve, in fact, than his enemy up there.

What the hell was he waiting for? Screwing up his nerve, probably. He didn't blame him. If the aircraft came in again, unless he was lucky and dead accurate with his bomb against his slim twisting target, he was finished. Kaput.

Those thoughts were idle, barren of product. Bentley crushed them. Fuel. Engines. He leaned to the voice-pipe.

"Tell the engine-room we will be manoeuvring at high speed shortly."

"Aye, aye, sir."

All right, damn you! Come in and get it over with! Bentley crushed that spurt of irritation too. Maybe that's what the Jap was up to; making them wait, tensed as they were, increasing their nervousness; not the nerviness of fear - they were too battle-wise for that - but of coiled-spring tension.

Perhaps he was an ace after all. He let them through the Passage because he could not know their radar was partly inoperative through temperature inversion; let them through and then had come spearing in unseen behind the island. Maybe he was a very clever fellow indeed, a psychologist...

"Aircraft's started its run," Randall reported flatly.

Bentley responded instantly.

"All guns follow director! Barrage long, long, long!"

Frost passed the word through.

The aircraft tilted on its streamlined nose towards them and the six 4.7-inch guns elevated their grinning muzzles to greet it.

Because they would be firing at a set fuse-length the guns were already loaded. And they did not have to wait, like the pom-pom and oerlikons, for the enemy to finally commit himself. The plummeting aircraft was in range of *Wind Rode's* main claws, and now she bared her teeth.

The blast of the two forrard mountings opening fire crashed back over the bridge in a face-smacking slap of sound. The spurting clouds of brown cordite smoke whipped quickly astern and Bentley heard the next rounds slamming metallically up into the breeches.

Now all eyes on the bridge were on the sky-there are limits even to the strictest training. Magically, six black handfuls of smoke appeared, a momentary flick of flame in the centre of each, squarely in front of the aircraft's nose.

Right for line, right for elevation, Bentley automatically judged. But short for range. If he came on he should fly smack into the next broadside.

And in the next second, when the pilot took no avoiding action, when he made no effort to swing away from what was already on its way up to meet him, Bentley knew quite certainly that the Jap was not an ace, nor clever, nor a psychologist. He was simply a brave man, not well-trained, who had sighted an enemy below him and had then screwed up his courage to attack.

Wind Rode's shells were sighted and flung by well-trained men indeed; men whose drill and experience were aided by the mathematical certainty of radar.

The six long yellow shells were fused to burst at long barrage

range, three thousand feet. Their bursting and the position of the diving plane coincided nicely.

That aircraft was travelling fast, something close to 400 knots, but a T.N.T. packed shell spreads its steel splinters and disruptive effect much faster than that. No sooner had the fuses fired and the T.N.T. exploded than the six shell-casings broken into thousands of pieces of jagged, white-hot steel, lashed the aircraft with hurricane force.

The watchers on the bridge saw it fly into the black bursts, momentarily lost it behind the smoke-screen, and then saw it plummet out clear. But it was no longer an aircraft, an integrated machine of beautiful and powerful purpose.

Part of the fuselage, heavy with the engine, came on down at high speed; the rest of it followed more leisurely, drifting down from the clouds like a handful of flung leaves, twisting, sliding, zig-zagging.

"Cease firing," Bentley ordered.

His voice and his face were normal, no betrayers of the feelings inside him. But still he felt no exultation at his quick victory. His mind was exercised only by relief that once again he had taken his ship and men into action and once again they had come out still sailing.

"Pilot's baled out," Randall reported.

Bentley saw the desperate attempt. It was quite clear without glasses. The dark body, then the streaming white of the parachute; and the silk touching as it fell the flame-wreathed engine and itself changing in an instant into a fiery cape.

Wind Rode's gunners, watched the macabre end. The flames of engine and parachute were an ochreous yellow against the backdrop of grey clouds. Only Bentley's mind was exercised by other considerations than fascination and satisfaction. His captain's brain, always watchful, always judging, was thinking that that engine would strike very close.

But there was not enough time to swing the ship. And no need. The heavy metal plunged into the sea a hundred yards astern. The pilot, lighter, followed it in three seconds later. Their entry left two small circles of froth on the face of the water.

"Port twenty," Bentley ordered, "stand-by seaboat's crew."

It was an automatic gesture. Neither Bentley nor anyone else expected that the seaboat would be needed.

Swiftly the destroyer came round, until she was steaming at reduced speed along the line of bearing Pilot had taken on the froth. She slid slowly up to the point of entry, and the quiet surface of the sea was empty.

Burned down to the harness, the parachute had been dragged under by the pilot's heavily-clad body. The gases of his decomposing body would bring him to the surface eventually, but *Wind Rode* had neither the time nor the inclination to wait for that.

"Half ahead both engines," Bentley ordered, "two double-oh revolutions, steer 310 degrees."

Three minutes later the ship was making 20 knots, back on her interrupted course for base. She had won her battle - at, Bentley was to find out shortly in his cabin, worrying cost.

Surgeon-lieutenant Landis came in first. This was a vastly different surgeon from the one who had joined the ship some months before. Then Landis had been professionally competent, but complexedly unsure of himself in his completely novel surroundings. But war is a forceful teacher, especially in a destroyer, and the officer who answered Bentley's "Come," had confidence and surety stamped on his thin brown face.

"Sit down, Doc," Bentley invited, "cigarette?"

"No thanks, sir," Landis shook his head, "I must be getting back."

Bentley lit a cigarette himself, his first since the action, and over the flame of the match his eyes invited Landis to get on with it.

"Three killed, four wounded, sir." the surgeon responded. "Badly?"

Bentley's voice was practical, interested. He had seen many more casualties than this, and in this matter he had to be like the surgeon himself in an operating-theatre-he had a corporate body to look after, and he could not afford the luxury of compassion for the wounds of some of its parts. Not yet.

"They're out of action, but-no, not badly wounded. They'll have to be transferred, of course. The worst one..." Landis paused, and

this brief hesitation was an indication of how familiar he had become with the working of the ship. “The worst one is the cox’n.”

Bentley had been waiting for this. It flashed through his mind that he would sooner have lost one of his junior officers. But his face and voice were composed.

“Go on.”

“Shell splinters. Extensive laceration to the chest and abdomen.” “He’s all right?”

After that diagnosis the captain’s question seemed paradoxical. But Landis knew what he meant.

“He’ll live, yes. He must have been standing side-on to the burst. Penetration was mainly in the abdomen. It reached to the peritoneum, but I’ve sutured that all right. Loss of blood and shock, of course. It would be a good idea to get him ashore as soon as possible. All of them for that matter.”

Without a word Bentley leaned back and unhooked the flexible speaking tube from its holder. Randall answered.

“Increase to thirty knots,” Bentley ordered, “then come down here.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” his friend replied formally. Bentley replaced the tube and turned around. “Nesbitt?” he asked. “Killed instantly. Rather a mess.”

“Yes - I saw it. All right, Doc. We’ll be in tomorrow. I’ll let you know the E.T.A. later.”

Landis went out, long and thin in khaki. Bentley tapped slowly at his cigarette, watching the ash drop. Remembering Nesbitt’s tortured face, and that death would have been instantaneous, Bentley was inclined to believe that the seaman might have wanted it that way. Then he castigated himself mentally. How the devil do I know what he wanted? Frowning, he put the thought of the seaman from his mind - it was not too difficult, for now he had a real problem.

Smales. His coxswain. Irreplaceable, at least by another man on board. Hooky Walker would take on acting duties till they got in, but the chief bosun’s mate had more than enough to occupy him in his own department; he was in charge of the whole upper-deck, the seamanship of the ship.

The gunner’s mate was similarly placed. Six big guns, a dozen

smaller weapons, the transmitting-station and the director to drill; apart from his concern with the magazines. The torpedo gunner's mate-*ditto*.

It was an insoluble problem. At peace, or in dock, he could have overcome it. But *Wind Rode* was a Fleet destroyer at war, fighting in an area where every ship was vitally needed to stem the forceful tide pressing southward. She had been, and would be, at sea and in action almost every day. All his chiefs would be fully occupied.

He could have spared one of his six seamen petty-officers, perhaps. But even if the man chosen could do the job, he was junior to the chief; and the coxswain was senior to them all.

Stirred by his preoccupation with his dilemma, a memory came to Bentley. A recent judgment. A good ship, a taut ship, he had prided himself, not more than an hour ago. Now a Jap bomb had altered all that.

She was still as taut as ever, of course. But how long would that last, without a coxswain? Smales himself had said you had to watch them, they weren't all angels. How much of her present competence was due to his and Randall's training programme? How much to the coxswain's steadfast and unremitting discipline?

Randall knocked and came in.

"All well, Peter," he said, and dropped his cap on the table, "we'll be up to 30 knots shortly."

Bentley knew that, even if he had not ordered the increase. The cabin was quivering, he could feel the deck vibrating under his feet, and from the pantry outside came the musical jingle of pieces of crockery dancing.

Randall eased his big frame into a chair and Bentley pushed the box of cigarettes across the table.

"Who were they?"

Randall understood the question at once. The captain wanted, not names, but gunnery positions. The regret, the compassion, the letter-writing to next of kin, would come later. They were still at sea, they had been attacked a matter of minutes before.

"Two loading-numbers of the pom-pom," he answered, "and the trainer. A cook who'd just stepped out of the galley and a stoker on his way aft with a fanny of water. Nesbitt. of course - and the cox'n."

Yes, Bentley thought grimly, the cox'n. The important one left till last. You know it as well as I do.

"You were bloody lucky yourself, old feller," Randall said seriously. "It burst abreast the galley, a fraction aft of you."

Bentley nodded. He knew there would be no delayed shock-reaction to that intimate and venomous blast; his mind had been fully engaged immediately after it, and now he could look back on the bomb explosion calmly.

But he had no wish for retrospective thought. His problem was in the future.

"I've got to get a cox'n," he said bluntly, and picked up another cigarette. "What ships are in Moresby?"

"A couple of Yank cruisers..."

Bentley squinted at him, disgustedly.

"And one of our destroyers," Randall added. His voice was not hopeful.

"That's right," Bentley mused, "the old *Pelican*. Who's got her?" He answered his own question. " 'Dutchy' Holland."

Randall's head was a little on one side, his tough burned face a puzzled query.

"What the hell are you getting at?" he asked slowly. "I've got to get a cox'n," Bentley said again, "and six men." Randall pressed back in his chair. His laugh was a short grunt. "Hornblower, yet! The press-gang is out of fashion, or didn't you know?"

Bentley ignored the sarcasm. His upper teeth roughed thoughtfully over his bottom lip.

"What's she in Moresby for?" he wondered, almost to himself, "how long's she been up here?"

"Longer than us-and that's a lot longer than I want to think about," Randall growled. "Maybe she's on her way south for leave and refit."

"Exactly," Bentley said softly.

Randall thumped forward in his chair.

"Damn it all, Peter!" he expostulated, "you can't do that! You won't have a hope. If they're heading south for leave that makes it worse. Dutchy's a tough nut. He may have an old ship but that boy's been around. He'll laugh at you!"

"That's what I mean," said Bentley slowly.

"Eh?"

"His ship's old. She's had it as far as Fleet work is concerned. We, on the other hand, are new. And very much on the required list."

"But those men have been up here a hell of a long time.

"So? I mind the time we didn't see Sydney for a year or so. There is," he reminded his friend with a quick grin, "a war on."

His friend's sceptical face did not mirror the smile.

"There'll be a bloody war on when you come up against old Dutchy," Randall decided darkly.

"We'll see," Bentley smiled, "we shall see."

A ship, certainly not a destroyer, should not always be judged by her appearance, Bentley thought as his own gleaming craft slid carefully up-harbour towards her anchorage. He put his glasses again on the destroyer they were passing.

H.M.A.S. Pelican had once been the pride of the Australian destroyer squadron. But it was doubtful if any of the men now aboard her could remember back that far. She was of earlier vintage than even the old and valiant Scrap-iron Flotilla, and her age showed in the rust streaks down her salt-faded sides.

It must be a hopeless and frustrating task to keep her clean, Bentley decided-if a chipping-hammer after rust dug too deeply it would chop right through her ancient skin.

But *Wind Rode's* captain was too experienced to be impressed solely by the old ship's outward signs of decay. His glasses traversed slowly along her length and he noted that all the boats were hoisted square, the falls neatly stowed; none of the guardrails sagged, the ropes on the deck were cheesed-down neatly, her four-inch guns were trained dead fore and aft, all at the correct harbour elevation of ten degrees. Little things...

She might be old, a worn-out has-been, but she was run by a seaman.

And the seaman looked what he was, Bentley thought as he stepped on board *Pelican's* quarterdeck an hour later and held out his hand.

A calm, oaken face looked back at him, its skin the dark colour of a dried leaf, and something of the same juicelessness, and riven with the maze of wrinkles ploughed into it by thirty years of wind

and sun and salt. A hard dry hand gripped his and a growl of a voice said: "Morning, sir."

Holland had been a lieutenant-commander when Bentley had his single sub-lieutenants ring, and he still was. But he offered the title to the senior, younger officer without hesitation. He was the sort of man, Bentley felt, who would call a waiter "sir" if it pleased him, and be damned to an admiral's wife he didn't like.

"Good morning," Bentley returned, and only just caught himself from adding "sir." Holland had been at sea while his visitor was still wearing triangular trousers, but there was something else about him which commanded respect. Not his intellectual or educational capabilities-he would never rise above his present rank-but a sort of gruff, weathered, practical competence. His whole stocky figure and beaten face exuded *experience*.

They walked forrard towards the sea-cabin and Bentley was thinking that Randall could be right; here was a hard nut indeed to split. On the other hand, Holland's very qualities of experience and hard-won understanding might swing things *Wind Rode's* way. And it was the ship which was really at stake...

In the cabin, tiny compared to Bentley's, Holland grunted, "Sun's over the yardarm. Gin?"

"Thanks."

The steward brought the gin and tonic, a cool hint of blue in the long glasses, and Holland said "Skoll." Bentley murmured conventionally in answer and they drank.

The older officer's mind was alive with questions - he had heard of Bentley and his exploits, but he barely knew him, and this was not a friendly social visit - but politeness kept rein on his wondering. He said:

"I hear you had a bit of a stoush near Jomard?"

"Yes," Bentley nodded. Holland had given him his opening. He decided to use it at once-frankness might pay off with this veteran. "That's what I've come to see you about."

"Oh...?"

Holland was not yet sure of his visitor's intention, but an unpleasant doubt began to stir in his mind. The relation of a ship in action, and casualties, to a visit to a ship about to leave the danger

area was more than a bit obvious. Maybe this bright young fellow wanted to shanghai one of his stokers, or cooks.

He lifted his glass slowly and over its rim his deep, narrowed eyes watched Bentley warily. *Wind Rode's* captain interpreted the expression accurately - in Holland's position he would have been just as watchful. But his voice when he went on was casual, as though what he were about to ask were in the normal order of natural things, instead of being outrageous.

"I've lost seven men, three killed, four wounded." Holland's eyes were fixed on him steadily, unwinking. "I can manage without the cook, but I need a stoker, at least two men for the pom-pom. And a cox'n."

"You lost your cox'n," Holland said, carefully, "that's bad luck."

"It's calamitous," Bentley nodded definitely. He went on at once. "That's why I'm asking you to give me yours."

Holland lowered his glass. He leaned forward to place it gently on the table. In that position, his wide shoulders bent over, he looked up at Bentley.

"You're not serious!"

His voice was half-mocking, half-doubtful, as if he had heard a joke in bad taste. It was, as well, hard.

"You don't imagine I like asking for these men?" Bentley said, beginning his battle.

"You don't imagine you'll get them?" Holland returned, his lips twisted.

Bentley started to talk. He kept his voice calm, reasonable. He had to avoid the slightest indication that he was trading on his seniority; that would have been fatal, for Holland was just as much lord aboard this old craft as Bentley was in his domain.

For almost ten minutes he reasoned with Holland, and the only hope he got from the uncompromising weathered face listening to him was the fact that it *was* listening.

He said:

"I appreciate your position-naturally you don't want to lose your cox'n - but surely you can see the hole I'm in?" "So you appreciate my position,"

Holland said drily, "I wonder... D'you realise these men have

been up here more than a year? That for weeks now they've known the time's approaching when they'll get back to their families? And you want me to order half-a-dozen of them to stay? Perhaps for a further six months, even a year?"

"There are a few soldiers on the Kokoda Trail and Milne Bay and similar pleasure resorts who've been up here a hell of a long time," Bentley reminded him. "So have my men, for that matter."

"Are you completely ruddy insensible?" Holland asked him. "Your men are reconciled to their commission here; mine have been keyed-up for days at the thought of home. What sort of captain would deliberately smash those hopes? Would you swing that sort of thing on to any of your crew?"

"It's my crew, and ship, I'm thinking of," Bentley told him gravely. "Listen, Dutchy. You've forgotten more than I know - I realise that. But I've worked bloody hard to train that ship. You're going home, I'm stuck up here. And I don't have to tell you what work's ahead of us. Likewise you know damn well enough that a cox'n's absolutely essential to me. What I've built up over the past year could fall to pieces in three months without a cox'n. I don't want that to happen- I've got a good bunch over there."

"I've got a good bunch here," Holland smiled cynically, "except..."

He stopped, and Bentley saw a queer expression shade across his face. That look was hard to define - it seemed a mixture of sudden realisation, decision, and a sort of sardonic pleasure. "Your father is Captain Bentley?" Holland asked suddenly.

"That's right."

"M'mm. I served with him - way back. First-class officer."

While Bentley wondered what the devil all this had to do with his problem, Holland got up and slowly walked across to the porthole. He stood there a few seconds, his thick legs astride and his hands on his hips, staring out over the sun-glinting harbour to the glaring galvanised - iron roofs of the town sprawling up the hill.

Then he turned abruptly and came back to the table. His craggy face was bisected by a wide and friendly grin.

"All right," he said, and sat down, "you can have your men."

For a moment Bentley was too astonished to thank his benefactor.

His mind automatically searched for the trap, the reason for this abrupt reversal. His father? Surely an acquaintance of so long ago could not have swung Holland's adamancy to such sweet reasonableness.

He got up, looking down at Holland's quizzical grin. It must have been the appeal to his experience and understanding, he decided, his own face frowning a little in puzzlement. He appreciates what we've been through in working-up *Wind Rode*.

"Well?" Holland queried, "aren't you satisfied?"

"Of course, of course," Bentley said hastily. He picked up his cap. "Thank you very much - I'm much obliged."

"That's all right." Holland's voice was negligent, but he was still grinning. "The other half?" He nodded to the empty glass.

"No thanks. I'd better be off - a lot to do, you know... And no doubt you'll be wanting to organise those men over to me."

Now Holland frowned, in wonder.

"You drive a tough bargain," he growled, "I suppose you'll want 'em in ten minutes! There is, of course, the trifling matter of the drafting office in Flinders..."

"I'm sure we won't have to worry them," Bentley put in quickly, "under the circumstances they'll play along. In any case if I have the men there's not much they can do. Is there?"

"Hmm," Holland grunted, "you're like your Old Man in more than looks."

"Well... ?" Bentley half smiled.

Holland shoved his squat bulk up and now he too was smiling with a genuine, more pleasant humour. Smart as new rope, he was thinking, can't wait to get back and get his new hands on the watchbill; probably have 'em drilling this afternoon, poor beggars. You were like that once, remember? M'mm... He said:

"Pity you're in such a hell of a hurry. It's nice drinking weather, and I'd like to hear first-hand some of the stories of your stoushes. You've got..." grinning, holding the door open, "quite a name, y'know."

It *was* nice drinking temperature, and Bentley was un-fictionally not at all averse to being prompted about some of his exploits-but he really wanted to get back to his ship, and his only reason for leaving

so hurriedly was a fear that Holland might change his mind.

So that he smiled a little self-consciously at his fellow-captain and stepped out into the passage.

Required by both junior rank and courtesy, Holland saw his visitor off at the gangway. Bentley thanked him again and ran down into the waiting boat. The pipes shrilled their respect and the boat shoved off.

It was still quite close to the ship's side when, sitting in the stern-sheets and looking back, he saw an officer, whom he judged rightly to be *Pelican's* first-lieutenant, come up to Holland on the quarterdeck. He saw Holland speak to him, and he saw the expression on the lieutenant's face - puzzlement turning quickly to frowning anger.

Then Holland said something else; he spoke earnestly and he took the lieutenant's elbow. Bentley was still close enough to see the younger officer's face turn towards him. It was turned back almost at once, but not before Bentley saw the expression on it. The sunburned face of the first-lieutenant of *Pelican* was split athwartships by a wide grin of sheer and appreciative gladness.

Then the boat swung on-course for *Wind Rode* further up-harbour and the quarterdeck of her sister destroyer dwindled rapidly astern.

Bentley was worried by that drastically altered expression for about five seconds. Then the facts came swamping in to drown his worry - he had gained one coxswain and half-a-dozen replacements; the first-lieutenant of the ship he'd got them from could grin his silly head off for all he cared. There was probably some explanation- Holland might have told him the exact time of their sailing for home; he might have pointed out that Bentley and his crew were due for another six months up here: either of which reminders would be enough to make any seaman grin with delight. He heard the boat coxswain order "Slow ahead," and he turned his head to look at his own ship. There she was - smart as paint, long and lean and new and strong; and now she was fully manned again. He saw the quartermaster and the bosun's mate drawn up smartly at the gangway to receive him, and the officer of the day waiting, stiffly at attention. They'd worked their guts out to get her that way, he thought, and now they could keep her that way.

His few seconds of worry evaporated. Commander Bentley jumped from the boat and ran nimbly up the ladder. The pipes pierced out.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS NOT ALTOGETHER an accident that an hour later Bentley was walking along the iron-deck when the new hands came up the gangway.

In harbour he liked to lunch in the wardroom, instead of alone in his cabin as he did at sea, and he would have been on his way aft anyway round about this time. But today from his porthole he had seen *Wind Rode's* motorboat returning from *Pelican*, the kitbags and hammocks piled in the sternsheets. He waited till he heard the boat coxswain's whistle order "Stop engine," then he put on his cap and stepped out on to the upper-deck.

When reservations are made, the side set apart for captains is always the starb'd side: he walks on the starb'd side of the quarterdeck, his gangway, when two are down, depends from the starb'd side, and now as he walked aft Bentley approached the quarterdeck from starb'd. *Pelican's* men were climbing up the port gangway, and so without his presence interfering with the routine, Bentley could look them over.

They looked ordinary enough, half a dozen of them, some short, some lanky, all dressed the same, and all characterised by another general distinction-every face was distinguished by as close approach to a scowl as their position before the officer of the day allowed them.

But Bentley had expected that: he had not thought to find men laughing for joy. Give them a day or two to find their way round this big new ship, to begin their messdeck friendships, to realise what a snug berth this was compared to the rusty bucket they had left, and they'd settle in all right.

Even as the thoughts ran through his head Bentley knew that that was only half the story; *Pelican's* men *would* settle in, but the main inducement would be the designed fatalism of sailors. These six had been given a pier-head jump, an abrupt transfer from one ship to another, and after the anger and acrimony had worn down a little they would not think of their new big ship, nor of their possible new friends, but of something like this - "What can you expect from a bloody outfit like this? I want me head read. I shouldn't have joined.

But you can't fight the mongrels. Ah well..."

And, having arrived at that philosophical point, they would be ready to be moulded into whatever brand of sailors their new captain favoured.

Bentley was almost past. There were several of *Wind Rode's* men hanging about the gangway - when you've been a year in a destroyer a new face possesses something of the charm of a new girlfriend, or a middy of cold beer in Sydney - and he had not sighted the coxswain, his main interest.

Then the huge bulk of Hooky Walker turned aside for a moment, and Bentley saw his man. Hooky, acting-coxswain, was allocating them their messes, and his relief was listening. Bentley saw a chief petty-officer of about 35, tall and thin in khaki, his face set. Then he was past the group and stepping over the coaming on to the wardroom ladder.

The six or seven officers in the mess rose when he entered and his hand waved them down again. Bentley was officially a guest in the wardroom, and he noticed that the table was laid for lunch. But he was not worried that he had kept them waiting - they were in harbour after a long stint at sea, and meal times were relaxed now. He knew, from personal experience, that these officers were more interested in their frosted glasses of beer and gin than in a meal in the humid heat. None of them drank at sea.

He settled down beside Randall and the big Lieutenant grinned:

"You did it, I see."

This was intimate talk, and his voice was low. Not that there was any need. The other officers were deliberately talking among themselves, and they would neither listen nor intrude until the captain made known his wish for general conversation.

Bentley took his beer from the steward. He could feel the sweat prickling his back under his shirt, and the lip of the glass was icily welcome against his lips.

"Yes. They don't look overjoyed about it."

"Thank the Lord for discipline." Randall answered cryptically. "They'll fit in." He snapped his cigarette lighter, looking sideways at Bentley with cigarette and flame a few inches apart. "You saw the cox'n?"

"M'mmm. Seemed all right. Though I wouldn't like the chances of a sailor putting in for leave out of watch at the moment."

"I suppose it was a hell of a thing to do to 'em," Randall mused.

"It would also be a hell of a thing to be without a cox'n," Bentley reminded him.

"Oh, I'm not complaining..."

"I'm so glad."

"All right, all right!" Randall looked at the table. "Do you want to feed now, sir?"

"If you like. Although I'm enjoying this..."

"Now that's something!" Randall grinned. "An official order to drink!"

His raised eyes found the face of the waiting steward. The steward got the message.

Bentley gave the coxswain an hour to settle in before he sent for him.

When the knock came at the door he was studying the fuel-report the engineer had just handed him. *Wind Rode's* big tanks had been filled to capacity: she was still taking on board fresh vegetables and meat, but within an hour or so she would be ready for weeks at sea. Bentley laid aside the report.

"Come," he invited, and swung in his chair to face the door.

The door opened, and the captain saw the same lean height of man he had first noticed at the gangway. The coxswain still had his cap on, but as he stepped into the cabin he took it off. Before he could stop himself. Bentley's eyes squinted in sudden surprise. The coxswain's face and arms were the usual weathered brown; his hair above the young face was grey.

Not white, or blonde, but an overall, dead, lustreless grey.

Bentley saw his visitor's own eyes narrow in recognition of the effect on the captain's face, and he cursed his revealing of it. He got up. Smiling, he held out his hand.

"Good afternoon, cox'n. My name is Bentley."

His hand was taken in a cool, hard grip.

"Afternoon, sir. Chief Petty-officer Rennie joining, sir."

The voice was respectful, and clipped, as expected - and that was all.

"Sit down. You use these?"

"I do, sir. Not at the moment, thank you."

You smoke; your captain offers you one, in his cabin; you take one.

This man declined. It showed he was browned-off, Bentley decided, but that was natural. It showed also he was no yes-man, but he knew he had certain rights, and had no qualms about claiming them. It could be good - it might also be sticky.

Wind Rode didn't want a man who obeyed orders. A disciplined automaton could do that. She wanted, especially in her coxswain, a man who obeyed willingly and cheerfully and intelligently, an example to junior ratings. He said:

"All right, cox'n. I won't say I'm sorry I arranged your transfer. I tried hard to do it, and I'm glad I got you. Of course I regret having to upset your going south for leave. But you know what a destroyer is without a cox'n."

"Yes, sir, I know."

The tone was respectful, the words were in direct and truthful answer to his question. Yet Bentley knew quite certainly that Rennie was referring to his late ship. His words were in fact a rebuke.

Bentley picked out a cigarette and felt for his lighter. He knew he was marking time, and the recognition impressed him with the delicacy of this first meeting: he was not used to resorting to subterfuge when dealing with any man.

He could, of course, simply order Rennie to get below and carry out his duties. Sydney leave or no. He was in the Navy, he was at war. But it was not that attitude which had made *Wind Rode* the ship she was, taken her in out of the things she had done. He said:

"We have a good ship here, 'Swain." He drew on his cigarette, his burned cheeks pinching in, and he saw that neither the pronoun nor the familiar diminutive of the coxswain's title had any visual effect. Rennie sat stiffly in the chair, his hands holding his cap in his lap, his feet together almost at attention, and his eyes were laid squarely on Bentley's face.

Bentley felt a little jab of anger. He crushed it. This man, coxswain though he was, was thoroughly fed-up with the Navy, the war, and especially with the ship which dragged him from a snug and familiar

berth and the prospect of three weeks leave.

"I won't give you any guff about the team, this working-together business. You know all that," The blue eyes still held his, cool, waiting. "But you've stepped into a smooth organisation. I need your help to keep it that way, and that help I know I'll get."

"Yes, sir."

Clipped, noncommittal, dutiful.

Bentley tried again.

"You're married?"

"No, sir."

That was something. Now he had only his own personal antagonism to overcome; no wailing letters from an equally-disappointed wife to stoke the fires.

"You were with Lieutenant-commander Holland some time, I imagine?"

"A long time, sir, about eighteen months."

With destroyer casualties as they were, that was a long time.

"Where were you before that?"

"I was in *Bantam,* sir."

The voice was the same but the words sparked quick interest in Bentley.

"She was sunk in the Med.?"

It was a statement. *Bantam* had been a renowned destroyer, a fighter like her namesake. Old, and game.

"Yes, sir. Torpedoed."

"Let me see." Bentley's face was interested, kindly. "There were only about six survivors?"

"Five, sir."

A bit over thirty, and grey hair... Bentley had seen many survivors from torpedoed ships, had himself been one. But no outward physical effects like this! Rennie's experience must have been particularly horrible.

Bentley's voice when he spoke now was not deliberately, but naturally, kind.

"You'll find this ship is considerably different from your last two, 'Swain. I hope you'll be happy in it."

For a moment he thought he had him. Rennie lowered his eyes

and the tip of his tongue moved slowly along his upper lip. Then he looked up again. He was staring into a strong, walnut-hued face, the planes of it hard with health and confidence and experience, the eyes grey and clear and direct. He knew about this Bentley fellow, what he had done with the two ships he'd commanded.

Now he was looking at him, and he knew he was the captain who had dragooned him into many more months of savage fighting, after a year of it.

Damn you to hell! his brain shouted silently, damn you and your glory-hunting ship! He said, his voice flat:

"Yes, sir. Is that all, sir?"

For a long four seconds grey eyes locked on blue. Then Bentley stabbed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

"That's all, cox'n. The Buffer will put you right on anything you want to know until you find your legs. If there's anything else-don't hesitate to come to the first-lieutenant or myself."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Bentley nodded and Rennie got up. He went out and shut the door quietly. For a minute Bentley stared at the door, his elbow on the table and his fingers gently rubbing his chin. Then he pressed a buzzer and sent for the first-lieutenant.

When Randall came in Bentley asked brusquely:

"How are the stores coming?"

"I'll be through in an hour," Randall answered. He recognised Bentley's tone, but he had also known him a long time. He went on:

"I passed the cox'n on the way up. He wasn't leaping with joy. Not so good?"

"He will be," Bentley promised grimly. "I appreciate the position, but we can't coddle the fellow."

Aha, Randall thought, so you're waking up at last, old feller. Kid gloves are all right-up to a point. He said:

"I quite agree. He's a cox'n, not a seasick ordinary-seaman. I'll handle him."

Bentley looked sharply at his friend's satisfied face. Then he lowered his eyes to the table and thoughtfully pulled at his nose. He'd needed that little reminder.

"No," he said, "don't ride him. Not yet."

"Look, Peter." Randall leaned his big hands on the table. His face was serious. "I didn't like the idea of grabbing those blokes any more than you did. I also appreciate the necessity for it. Okay - they're on board now. There's been lots of things we didn't like having to do, but we didn't cry in our beards over 'em. Same with this crowd. Sure, they're feeling low. But if we pander to that all we're doing is making 'em feel more sorry for themselves." He pushed himself up from the table. "If there's one thing I know, it's sailors. I say at the least sign of slackness, we slam down—hard!"

Bentley lit a cigarette and let the smoke waft up past his nose in a blue haze. Randall knew sailors, all right, and they knew him-knew him, with all their native shrewdness, as a hard-working, tough, completely fair and completely unimaginative first-lieutenant.

They liked him, respected him, and for him they'd work their guts out. That was all right. But a sullen man could be driven to dangerous lengths if he thought he was being unfairly treated. Sailors understood and respected discipline - just so long as they believed it was fair. These new men believed, with justification, that they had been most unfairly treated. A tough officer riding them would serve merely to blind them to reason: he could make them a nucleus of discontent and disobedience, a focal point for all the imagined wrongs of their messmates.

"I'll handle this my way, Bob," he said, and smiled - Randall was more important to him than a dozen coxswains. "If it doesn't work, then bring on the big stick. Until then we'll take it easy."

"For how long?"

"A week should crystallise matters." Bentley tapped gently at the end of his cigarette. "Y'know, we might be all up a certain creek. These fellows might be working like beavers by tomorrow. Maybe..." his grin was self-mocking, quizzical, "maybe we're both a bit too wrapped up in this confounded ship. We could be developing into a perfect pair of old schoolmarms."

"That," sneered Randall, though he grinned back, "is a lot of cock, and you know it! However, you're the boss." He slapped his open hands against his wide chest. "That's enough of philosophising about jolly Jack Tars. Sailing time still the same?"

"Three-thirty, yes." His mouth twisted at the question in his

deputy's face. "We rejoin the Fleet off Guadal Canal."

"That one wasn't hard to guess. We go back through Jomard, the direct route?"

"No."

"Your preference - or higher up?"

"Both. We're ordered down round the Louisiades. The Admiral wants us to snip round and see what's cooking in those unfriendly parts. Seems to me we're always doing that - like a ruddy terrier after rats."

"That puts it fairly enough," Randall grinned. "You want the new cox'n to take her out through the reef, or Hooky?"

"Rennie, of course."

"Right - I'll warn him."

Randall was turning for the door when Bentley's voice stopped him.

"No, Bob," he said quietly, "don't do that at all. He's the cox'n. I want him to know that we assume he assumes his duties at once. Just let him close-up on the wheel with special sea-dutymen."

"If he doesn't? If he organises Hooky to take her out?"

"Then," Bentley smiled tautly, "we shall know a good deal about our new cox'n."

The new coxswain was unpacking his kitbag in the chief's mess on the starb'd side of the foc's'le when Hooky Walker stepped in over the coaming. The big fellow's oaken face creased in a grin.

"Hi there, cobs! You pack it, you unpacked it. That's how she goes in this outfit, eh?"

He threw his cap deftly on top of the hammock-bin and slid his huge body along the padded seat against the ship's side. The steel hook went out and pulled a jug of lime-juice towards him.

"Yeah." Rennie answered sourly.

He looked at the man and the hook over his shoulder. He knew, the whole Navy knew, about the giant chief bosun's mate with the hook in lieu of a hand.

For a moment Rennie felt a twinge of excitement. This was a famous ship he had come to join - so well-known that he had taken the trouble to come up on deck in *Pelican* and watch her sail in. Now he was a member of Bentley's crew, a team and a ship whose

exploits, solid enough in fact, had become almost legendary through the cumulative exaggeration of sailors' yarns.

In the next instant the pulse of excitement was crushed. It was not difficult for him to manage that. In normal circumstances he would have felt quietly exultant that he had been drafted to a ship like this - now all he could feel was the blatant injustice of his transfer.

"We've got a good bunch in here," Hooky said, and grimaced at the jug. "That flamin' stuff's hot!"

"Seems to me that's all I've heard since I joined," Rennie growled,

"Come again?" Hooky squinted up at him.

"What a wonderful crowd of angels man this hooker!" Rennie jammed a blue suit into the aluminium locker. "Most ships I've been in you find at least a couple of messdeck horrors, but aboard here they seem to be all textbook sailors. Or so I'm told. My God!" he ended disgustedly.

Hooky quietly laid his cup on the table.

"You seem a bit brassed-off, cobs," he said gently.

Rennie looked at him.

"What the hell d'you expect me to do? Dance round like a fairy."

Hooky's voice was still quiet.

"So you're chokker, fed-up to the gills. That's fair enough. But there's no reason to go round like a fathom of misery. It'll wear off. You'll settle in. A week's time'll find you glad you joined. This *is* a bloody good ship, cobs-right from the top to the lowest."

Rennie swung on him. His face was taut.

"Not you too, for God's sake! Not in my own blasted mess!"

A muscle twitched along the side of Hooky's jaw. He stared back into the clean, sharp face, tight now, and he liked what he saw. In his vision also was the prematurely grey hair. He smiled, and the muscle relaxed.

"Thanks for showin' me up to myself," he said, "I suppose a man can get to thinking the sun shines out of his whatname. Here—burn?"

He held out the cigarette packet and Rennie looked down at it. He wanted a smoke - he felt the need for it in his mouth and stomach.

"No thanks, not now," he said, but his voice had lost its acid tone. He turned back to his unpacking. "D'you know what time we sail?"

"Sure. The Old Man keeps us informed when there ain't no leave. Three-thirty."

Rennie nodded, and Hooky stared at his thin back. It was on his lips to ask if Rennie wanted him to take her out, this first time. There was that reef fouling the entrance... Then he remembered *Pelican:* she had made a name, too; and she was a destroyer. He said:

"When we get clear I'll give you a run round the books, if you like."

The coxswain was responsible for keeping many books and papers, from captain's defaulters and service certificates to canteen stores and the registered-letters' book.

"Thanks,"' Rennie said drily over his shoulder, "but books are books, I'll manage."

Hooky's lips pursed in a soundless whistle behind his new messmate's back. But he said nothing. A figure darkened the doorway and a squat, heavy man came in.

"Oh, Pete," Hooky said, glad of the interruption, "this is Jack Rennie, the new 'Swain. Pete Luxton, chief gunner's mate..."

Rennie turned and took the proffered hand, nodding curtly. Luxton reached for the limejuice jug and Hooky made a rude reference to the incompetence of messmen who forget ice-cubes in limejuice. Rennie went on unpacking.

At 3.20 that humid afternoon special sea-dutymen were piped to close-up. Normally Bentley would have remained in his cabin until the first-lieutenant reported ready for sea. But this afternoon he was on the bridge shortly after the pipe sounded. He wanted to escape from the close heat of his cabin up to the wind-cooled bridge, and he had another reason.

He had the answer to that second reason not much more than a minute after sea-dutymen closed-up. The voice, competently curt, sprang from the wheelhouse voice-pipe:

"Bridge? Cox'n on the wheel, sir."

"Very good," Bentley acknowledged formally. Then he straightened and caught Randall's eye. A small smile twitched between them.

Bentley gave his wheel and engine-orders and the long destroyer moved smoothly out towards the reef. He had his eyes on the froth-

fringed gap but he was thinking: He's passed that test all right. And then because he had been long trained to consider every facet of a problem, his mind ran on: Maybe Rennie knew he would be sent for and ordered to the wheel anyway; maybe he was so quick with this particular duty of a coxswain because his own life depended on the safe handling of the ship through the reef.

The doubt lingered, an annoying irritant to mar his satisfaction in the clean getaway from the anchorage.

"On the bearing, sir," Pilot reported.

"Port fifteen," Bentley ordered.

She came round, as quickly as if Smales had been handling her. But the alteration was a simple exercise-an ordinary seaman could have done it as well. The real test would come when they were in the gap. It was almost ahead of them now, and Bentley could see the long smooth hills of water rolling down and smashing into abrupt white on the coral.

He steadied her for the middle of the gap. Rennie's replies to his orders came back clipped and economical. They were almost there. Bentley snatched a swift look around - he did not want another craft fouling his approach at the last minute.

The harbour nearby and the sea outside were clear. The ship began to lift a little in the oncoming swell; the result of the roots of the long ocean rollers striking the shallow bottom, being retarded, and sending their heavy crests toppling forward.

The bow lifted. It hung there, poised, the forefoot almost clear. The motion was made more alarming through contrast with the smooth passage of a minute before. Then the wave ran on past the point of balance and the bow swooped down, the flares spraying out a fan of white water on either side.

They were in the gap.

Her speed seemed to increase abruptly, an illusion caused by the closeness of the coral on both sides. The crash of the rollers on this resistant barrier was a long, continuing roar. She was compassed by a frothing maelstrom of white and green, flashing above the ugly black of the reef itself.

Bentley was directly behind the binnacle. His eyes never left the compass-card. She rolled wickedly, and he felt her shaking as the

screws lifted clear. The lee gunwhale dipped and the sea reached up for her, spouting from the feet of the guardrail stanchions.

She lifted, hesitated, then reeled over on the opposite side. He saw the black lubber's line, which indicated the ship's head, begin to swing. The black coral waited a few yards to port. He was leaning towards the voice-pipe, his eyes riveted on the compass, when he saw the lubber's line steady.

Twenty seconds more and she was through. The confused rolling of the confined space eased into the rhythmic swooping of the open ocean. The reef and the roar and the flung spray dwindled rapidly astern. Bentley glanced at Randall standing beside him.

"He can handle her." he said quietly, And, crisply into the voice-pipe:

"Special sea-dutymen fall out."

The coxswain acknowledged and a moment later the quartermaster reported closed-up at the wheel. *Wind Rode* sailed on across the trackless reach of blue, alone on an empty sea, running south-south-east into the approaching night.

The night came on from the east in a sable flood and she ran to meet it darkened, quiet, alert.

It was a night like this that the torpedo had struck.

Just like this, Rennie remembered, standing on the upper-deck below B-gun, the wind and the sea whispering about him. Just before the moon rose, before they had a chance to sight the periscope aimed with such malignant purpose on the old ship's belly.

The bow-wave flashed briefly below him and the wind sighed its tune in the rigging above him, and his memory raced back to that night. He did not try to stop it - the memory came often, and often he had tried to force it down. But the terror always squeezed up again through his consciousness.

He had not been on the upper-deck that night, He was in his coxswain's office after supper, a tiny cubicle with shelves of books and one porthole. Preparing the list of captain's defaulters for the next morning's session.

No one had seen the torpedo in the blackness before moon rise; the outworn asdic set had failed to pick up the screech of the screws. The missile struck a little forward of the engine-room, which had

given the engineer, before he died, time to open the safety-valves.

The coxswain's office rocked as though a giant hand had punched the ship in the guts; she reeled like a clubbed man, and when she came back from that punishing roll the water was pouring into the passage outside the office.

He knew this because from where he had been flung to the deck he felt the cold salt filling his mouth and eyes. He struggled out into the passage and the ship lurched and a giant cataract plunged down the ladder leading to the upper-deck.

Swept back bodily, he grabbed the door-jamb of his office. The emergency lights had come on, and in their subdued glimmer he stared into his office and he saw green water against the glass of the porthole.

Water... against the glass. It was then he knew, with a numbing paralysis of shock, that the ship was sinking. Not damaged, not split open; sinking, Already beneath the surface.

The horror of the realisation acted as a catalyst, reversed the trend of his mind's dissolution. He clawed his way back into the office, knowing in one flash of certitude what he must do. With all his force he strained to shut the door. He managed it, and then he locked it, feeling no sense of the ludicrous in that action; all his senses were occupied by the silent threat of what was behind the door. From down all its sides, through the keyhole, water sprayed in a forceful, menacing promise.

He knew the door would not hold back that weight for very much longer. But now he had another weight to overcome. Stumbling, half falling, he groped for the brass dogs of the porthole. They would not move at first-there was an increasing tonnage pressing against them from the outside.

He took up his portable typewriter and with the edge he struck at the clips, struck again and again. The edge crumpled and he twisted the machine and struck with the other side. The first clip moved.

He had no sense of time. The whole concentration of his mind-power was on moving those clips. He had the third and last clip almost screwed off its thread when the heavy porthole snapped open.

The whipping brass took him on one arm but it was the solid jet of water which picked him up and flung him back against the door.

He stayed there, pinned against the wood, seeing the thick column of water jetting in, knowing at least that now with the pressure equalised the door would not cave in. Then the emergency lighting went out.

He leaned back against the door, feeling the pressure of the jet easing against his stomach as the office filled, straining his head to keep his mouth and nose above the creeping liquid cold.

Floating things bumped against him, swirled by the incoming current, brushed across his face in the utter blackness. He knew the deckhead was not much above his head, and still he waited, knowing that he would not have the strength to battle forward against the water jet, waiting now for the pressure to approach equalisation inside the office and outside in the sea.

He stood strained against the door, feeling the water reaching up for his mouth. His face was set in a forced mask of composure and the terror mounted in his brain.

The first water lapped into his mouth. He stretched his head as far back as he could and filled his lungs. But when he brought his face forward again to make the plunge under towards the porthole his nerve failed him.

Gasping, he jerked his head out of the water, wiping his eyes with dripping hands. The small pocket of foul air seemed like salvation. And then, without halting to think, knowing that thought would paralyse his will, he ducked under and pushed himself towards the porthole.

It was as though the sea had tried him, found him not wanting, and had finished with him. He squeezed through easily, his thin body snaking out and upwards under the frantic thrust of his hands.

With all his unreasoning, animal will he forced himself upwards. He had no idea how deeply the ship had sunk, and when a few seconds later he broke the surface it was some time before he realised he was safe and ceased the senseless thrashing of his arms.

Spluttering, gulping in the cool night air, he saw only the forrard end of the ship had sunk beneath the surface. While he stared, the moon came up, flooding with its silent silver the macabre scene: the debris fouled water, the broken boats and rafts, the two bronze propellers still slowly turning in mid-air.

He paddled towards a smashed seaboat, its bow-end kept afloat by the buoyancy chamber, and hanging there on the lifelines he watched the stern begin to lower itself under the oil-scummed sea.

As far up as the after gun it sank quite slowly. Then a bulkhead somewhere inside must have burst open. With a hissing and frothing all that was left of the old ship was sucked down into the lightless deeps of the Mediterranean.

A destroyer picked him up in the morning; him and the four who had been on deck and escaped the hammer of the explosion. At first in the sickbay, he had wondered mildly at the surgeon's concern with him - he felt physically well, hungry in fact, and only a little shaky. The night clinging to the boat had relaxed his tautened nerves.

"Nice night."

Then, later that day, he had gone to the bathroom to shave. And had looked at himself in the mirror... his hair had changed colour.

"I said it's a pearl of a night. What the hell's up with you, 'Swain? You often go off into trances like this?"

Rennie's head jerked round. Hooky was staring at him, his lips smiling and his eyes concerned.

"Ah... Can't a man think if he wants to? Even on this hooker?"

"Sure, sure. Except I wouldn't like you to have them deep sort of thoughts while we're steaming through a reef." Hooky chuckled.

"I'm thinking in my own time," Rennie told him curtly. He nodded and walked off.

Hooky stared after the thin figure, its hair shining whitely in the new moonlight,

"Brother,'' he muttered, "something's eating you!"

CHAPTER FOUR

IT IS CLOSE ON 600 miles from Moresby to the Louisiade Archipelago in the Coral Sea, and at her economical cruising speed it took *Wind Rode* a shade under two days to get there.

The day following her departure from Moresby passed quietly enough. The ship was as clean as she would ever be, yet Randall had no difficulty in finding productive work for his hands.

Two hundred men living in a space three hundred feet long must of course dirty that space: so there were always men working between decks to keep clean mess-tables and bulkheads and decks. But it was on the upper-deck that the first-lieutenant had most of them working.

Salt-laden air can put a sheen of green verdigris on highly-polished metal in a matter of hours, and most of that brass and steel was on guns; guardrail pins can be scraped clean one day and carry the beginnings of rust the next; she carried many reels of steel-wire rope, and as her safety alongside in a blow depended on that wire it had to be regularly unwound and oiled; her paintwork was gleaming, but only constant washing-off of crystallised salt kept it that way.

Then there were the men engaged in drilling and the normal running of the ship - the bridge team, asdic-operators, radar-men, lookouts, lifebuoy sentries, telegraphsmen.

So that twice that day Randall walked round his domain and found it good.

Randall had been no more than just in his claim to know sailors. Added to his experience was the man's own nature - he was a first-class officer, yet in certain attributes -toughness, directness, lack of social graces and a contempt for sham-he was more sailor than officer.

Now, about three o'clock of the afternoon after their departure, he was walking forrard on the foc's'le. The captain of the top saluted him, and together they strolled on towards the bow, talking seamanship. But Randall's eyes were on a man chipping rust from the anchor cable.

He knew the face and name of every man in the ship - it is not only businessmen who like to have their names remembered... So that, watching this man from the bridge, he had known at once he

was one of *Pelican's* seamen.

What had attracted Randall's interest was the fact that the new man every minute or so turned his head to look up at the bridge. At first Randall had put this interest down to novelty in his surroundings, for *Wind Rode's* big bridge and aerial-cluttered foremast was a considerable departure from *Pelican's* comparative simplicity.

But the watching had gone on too long. The man's action, he decided, was furtive. He was not watching the bridge so much as he was concerned about his being watched.

Officer and petty-officer came up to the seaman. In the next ten seconds Randall knew that here they had a snag,

"What is your name?" he asked pleasantly.

The seaman was sitting on the cable, chipping at a link between his legs. He turned his head round and up. A smalt, sharp-faced, cunning visage looked at Randall.

"Pascoe," he answered. And went on chipping.

The petty-officer's reaction was automatic and instant.

"On your feet when you talk to an officer!" he snapped, "and answer, sir."

Pascoe got up immediately, the hammer in his hand.

"Able-seaman Pascoe, sir," he said, humbly. His eyes were on Randall's chest. They shifted from side to side.

Randall felt disgust. He knew this fellow, recognised his type infallibly. On the surface belligerent, in reality gutless; waiting and ready to take advantage of any weakness in authority, and falsely humble when faced with strength. A messdeck whinger who had tried the first-lieutenant on for size, and was now ready, in front of him, to play along. In the mess he would boast of how he had answered him, sitting on his backside, without describing the end of the scene.

Randall would have preferred outright and genuine disgruntledness. Then he could have reasoned with an honest complaint. But any attempt at reasoning here would be construed as a weakness, to be played upon for all it might be worth.

"What part of ship were you in *Pelican?"* he asked brusquely.

The answer came with a leering, almost fawning smile, eager:

"I was on the quarterdeck, sir. I'm pretty well up on all the fittin's

there, sir. I'd be more use down there, sir.'

For a moment Randall remembered Bentley's injunction to go easy on the new men. But not with this fellow, he decided; this man had to be shown promptly exactly where he stood.

"You'll stay where you are," he said curtly, and held the shifty eyes with the penetrating force of his own. "Where I can keep an eye on you."

He turned and the petty-officer walked off with him. Randall was sorely tempted to turn round again. He knew he would surprise a look of malevolence on Pascoe's face. But sometimes with those types, once they knew you were awake up to them, they gave the game away as not worth the effort. It might be better not to overdo the effect he had made.

He walked on and climbed down the iron ladder to the deck below. This was the iron-deck division, and comprised, between foc's'le and quarterdeck, the midships portion of the ship.

Here he saw two more new men but they were working well and seemed members of the normal breed of sailors. He spoke for a few minutes with the captain of the top and then moved on to the quarterdeck.

The man was big and dark and hard. He was sitting on a centre-line bollard splicing an eye in a length of guardrail wire, dressed in khaki shorts and sandals. As he pulled the tough strands through, the muscles in his biceps and back rippled beneath the sunburned skin.

"Who's that?" Randall asked the captain of the quarterdeck.

"Beuring, sir."

"How do you spell that?"

The petty-officer spelt it out. Randall nodded and walked up to the splicer.

"Able-seaman Buering?"

The big man's head turned round. Randall looked into a dark, almost swarthy face, its expression saturnine. There was none of Pascoe's shiftiness here - his brown eyes stared boldy into Randall's. At once he rose to his feet, the wire dangling from one large fist.

"Yes, sir?"

The voice was respectful, enquiring. Randall, hefty himself, felt the force of the man. This was the type who might make a good

leading-seaman. Might... To make a sound leader of men you needed more than physical strength. He said:

"You seem to be handling that wire all right..." His eyes completed the question.

"I was in the bosun's party in a cruiser, sir."

"I see."

Aboard *Wind Rode* each part of ship did its own wire and rope work; in a cruiser a man in the bosun's party would be splicing and knotting all day. This man could be useful.

The dark eyes were still on him, watchful. Randall felt a vague disquiet. The man's attitude, his speech, were guiltless. It was those eyes...

"Have you ever gone through for leading-seaman?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I... I'm not interested, sir. I'm only in for the duration. It's not worth it."

"The war might go on for years."

"Yes, sir."

Randall realised that his own thoughts had trapped him into what almost amounted to a request to this fellow to put in for his leading-rate. Normally seamen worked their guts out to get a first-lieutenant's recommend. He said, more brusquely than the conversation warranted:

"Carry on with your work."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Over on the other side of the deck, beside the starb'd depth-charge thrower, Randall said quietly:

"Know anything about him? He works all right?"

"Yes, sir," the petty-officer answered. Randall looked at him sharply.

"Well?"

"Ah... I was with him in that cruiser, sir. The *Canberra.* Just after the stoush started," He stopped.

"He got into it early then," Randall said.

"Yes, sir."

The petty-officer looked out at the brightly blue sea and Randall

glanced at his face shrewdly. He was a senior seaman rating, completely trustworthy and professionally competent - he wouldn't have lasted a dogwatch where he was if he hadn't been. Now, obviously, he knew something about Beuring, and just as patently he didn't want to talk about it.

Maybe Beuring had committed some offence in the cruiser, and surely he would have paid for it. Now his immediate superior wasn't holding it against him. Just so long as the offence wasn't repeated here. Let sleeping dogs lie was also Randall's philosophy. He said, casually:

"I'd keep him on wire-work. He's happy at it and there's plenty of it around."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Randall returned the salute and walked slowly forward towards tea in the wardroom. His face was thoughtful. Pascoe, Beuring... One certainly a fowl, a messdeck horror; the other... ? He wasn't sure.

What he was sure of, as he halted at the head of the ladder and took an automatically cautionary stare about him at the smiling sea, was that in a ship as well-run and disciplined as *Wind Rode* any stepping out of line by those two would be promptly and effectively hammered down. If not by the petty-officers, then by the coxswain.

Lieutenant Randall knew sailors, all right. Unfortunately he was unimaginative. Forgetting Pascoe and Beuring, happy with his ship and the work going on aboard her, he ran down the ladder and strode into the wardroom.

Events have a habit of happening quickly in a destroyer, whether they concern the raising of speed or the fighting off of an air-attack - or the machinations of men.

Wind Rode's crew certainly were as highly-trained a unit as was afloat in the area. They were also men. And these men, for months on end, had enjoyed practically no diversion, no recreation, whatever, Commander Bentley was perfectly aware of this; and normally he would have had his crew ashore playing sport or ridding themselves of inhibitions in a pub. But up in this unfriendly area, where the lines of Allied naval shipping were stretched so dangerously thin, there was nothing he could do about this other, important, side of his

training. So, with more important considerations to concern him, he forgot it.

He was to regret the omission bitterly. But, as he reasoned with himself later, there was nothing he could have done to circumvent what happened.

A catspaw is a brief ruffling of the surface of the sea, a forewarning of the wind to follow. It is a small thing, not significant in itself, but a seaman will note it, and prepare for the squall behind it.

The first catspaw to ruffle the serenity of *Wind Rode's* calm and efficient life came into the coxswain's office about nine o'clock that night, in the bulking form of Hooky Walker, chief bosun's mate.

This office was larger than *Pelican's*. It opened from the passageway near the sickbay, but it had no porthole. Rennie had noted that fact, almost subconsciously, as soon as he had stepped into it the day before. Somehow the absence of his former terrible escape route had soothed him; it was not there to remind him, and exit from the place lay only a few yards along a passage which led straight out on to the iron-deck.

The coxswain was sitting at his tiny workbench, the captain's book of defaulters before him, when Hooky stepped in. The big man's bulk seemed to fill the little office. Rennie looked up, and nodded. Hooky sat down, pulling out the makings.

He said nothing while he rolled the white cylinder, and Rennie felt impelled to break the silence.

"I've never seen a book like this before," he said, gesturing with a finger at the defaulters' book, hardly a name in it. "Not worth keeping."

"Like I said," Hooky replied soberly, "she's a taut ship. Though..." slowly poking the strands of tobacco down with a match-end, "things could change. Fast."

The tone of his voice brought Rennie's head round.

"Meaning?" he asked.

"Meaning we've got trouble," Hooky said seriously, and lit his cigarette, Rennie's hand went out to his own packet.

"Let's have it."

"Here it is then. A bloke on the foc's'le messdeck's just reported

to me that there's three quid missing from his locker."

"Oh hell, it's on again!" Rennie muttered.

"What's that?" Hooky asked sharply.

Rennie glanced sideways at him.

"Nothing, nothing at all. You're sure the money was pinched? It could easily have been mislaid."

"It wasn't mislaid," Hooky shook his head heavily. "The bloke looked everywhere for it before he came to me. There's a tea-leaf loose up forrard. And he's got to be stopped."

"Why didn't he come to me?" Rennie queried sharply.

"Fair enough," Hooky nodded. "But I happened to meet him outside the canteen. He looked so worried I asked him what was up. He told me."

"I see." Rennie rested his chin on the back of his hand. His face in the electric light looked drawn, tired. Hooky waited, silent. Then Rennie jerked his head round to face him.

"What the hell d'you expect me to do about it?" he flashed.

"Eh... ? You're the coxswain, ain't you? What d'you do? You tell the Jimmy and we organise a search, that's what!"

Rennie laid down his cigarette in the ashtray. The surge of anger had left him. Slowly he shook his head.

"No. That won't get us anywhere. How the hell are you going to pinpoint three quid? I've got five in my pocket right now." He leaned back in the chair. "A search would be a waste of time."

"We've gotta do something!" Hooky growled. His voice was made angry by realisation of the truth of what Rennie had said, and by the coxswain's apparent defeatism. "You know what thieving can do in a ship, especially a destroyer!"

"I know," Rennie nodded soberly.

There was some element of worried knowledge in his face that made the big chief look at him with squinted eyes.

"It's a funny thing," he said slowly, "we had none of this before, not until those bods you brought come along."

"I didn't bring them!" Rennie stepped. "You can put that down to your precious bloody captain!"

Hooky was too interested by the coxswain's sudden heat to be angry at this reflection on Bentley. He thought for a moment, rolling

the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, before he said:

"Listen, 'Swain, this is ruddy serious. I know you're brassed-off, and I can guess why. But you and me got to work in together on this thing. I was in a ship once where thievin' started - it bloody near split the crew to pieces. A man got that way he couldn't trust his best go-ashore oppo. I don't want that happenin' here. Searches, kit-lockers locked, a man not game to go to his cobber's locker for a packet of fags..."

He paused, his eyes intent on Rennie's pinched face. Rennie breathed in, then slowly out through his pursed lips.

"You don't have to tell me," he said tiredly, "I've just come from that sort of thing."

He might have struck Hooky in the face.

"What!" The big man jumped up, staring down at Rennie. "You had a tea-leaf in *Pelican?* Why the hell didn't you tell the Old Man?"

Rennie glanced up at him, then down again.

"Button your flap, for hell's sake," he said in a patient voice. "Why should I pass on all the gossip to Bentley? What happened there is Holland's business."

Hooky swore.

"Now it's happenin' here! And the mongrel came over with you!"

"You can prove that?"

"Eh?"

"You see what I mean? Sure we had thieving on board the old hooker. But how the hell do I know the bloke responsible is not still over there? Listen to me, Buffer - some decent matloes came over with me, don't you make any mistake about that! They're just as browned-off as I am, but that don't make 'em crooks."

"Some, eh?" Hooky said quietly, "what about the others? Pascoe's one of them others, I'll bet me deferrers."

"Pascoe's a bludger and a messdeck lawyer, yes, but no one's got any proof he's a thief."

"But it narrows the field down, chum."

"*You* think so?"

"I sure do. And I'm gonna tell the Jimmy what I think, right now!"

He swung, and had the sliding door half-open, when Rennie's

hard voice cut across the room.

"Chief bosun's mate!"

The title, as much as the tone, jerked Hooky's head round. He looked at Rennie, his eyes narrowed, waiting. Rennie didn't keep him waiting.

"I'm the cox'n of this ship," he rasped, "if there's anything to be passed on up top, I'll look after it. Is that clear?"

There were several things on the tip of Hooky's tongue, all of them vehement. Then into his angered consciousness the impression of Rennie's face crystallised - hard now, but deadly weary, the skin pallid under that crown of tell-tale hair. Hooky nodded.

"Okay, 'Swain, it's clear." He pulled the door open. "Remember- I'm with you when you want me."

For a few minutes after his visitor had gone Rennie sat at his bench, his forehead resting against his fingertips. Beneath the hands his face was creased in lines of tiredness and worry. He was trying to think, and decide, through the turmoil in his mind.

At that moment it was not the happiness and efficiency of the ship which was at sake, but Rennie's judgment and loyalty. He knew what he should do about Pascoe and the stealing report, at the same time as he knew he couldn't care less. What he didn't know was why he felt that way.

It was not an abstruse psychological problem; any normally acute observer, apart from the patient, could have diagnosed his condition accurately enough. Rennie had been at sea, at war, a long time. He had had a medically shocking experience in an old destroyer, and he had been sent almost immediately to another ship of the same vintage. In those early days a man's condition was judged mainly by his physical health, and the coxswain's wound was deep and invisible.

He had served and fought eighteen months in the old *Pelican.* Now, with surcease at long last in sight, he found himself in another ship-new routine to master, more work, strange ways and faces to become accustomed to. Normally he would have compassed those problems easily enough, but he was not normal. And, most bitter of the forces arraigned against him, was the enervating blow to his hopes of relief.

The measure of his moral debilitation was indicated, not by the

fact of his sending for Pascoe, but in the way he handled him.

He caught a passing seaman in the passage.

"Tell Able-seaman Pascoe I want him."

"Pascoe, Chief?"

"One of the men from *Pelican.* Foc's'le messdeck."

"Oh. Right, Chief."

When the sharp face showed at the door Rennie gestured him in and told him to shut the door. Pascoe did this and turned round, his face as watchful as a fox.

"Pascoe," Rennie started, "some money's been stolen from your messdeck."

The coxswain watched, disinterested and expectant, the outraged protest form on Pascoe's narrow face. The words came, glib and vehement in denial:

"So you send for me? Anything goes wrong anywhere and who do they send for? Me! Two hundred blokes aboard this hooker and who do they send for? I tell yer, 'Swain, I've had a gutful of this! Over there I was the one they always picked on and here it's the bloody same! Some silly sailor loses his dough and kicks up a squeal. It ain't fair, I tell yer! I'm gonna see the Old Man about this, I tell yer straight! I've had a gutful! No proof, no nothin'. Just send for Pascoe! You just watch me-right now I smack in me request to see the Old Man about unfair treatment. I ain't gonna take..."

"Oh, get to hell out of here!" Rennie said wearily.

Pascoe did not put in his request to see the captain. Captains, Rennie knew, were people his compulsory shipmate kept away from.

The day dawned bright and clear, as it did most times in that tropical area, and *Wind Rode* ran on for the archipelago. Her daily routine moved as smoothly as her own powered progress through the turquoise water, and when night once again shrouded her she was fifty miles from her objective, out of sight below the curve of the earth from watchful eyes ashore.

By the time the islands were visible through night-glasses, the cool night air had condensed the sun's vaporisation into an overall cape of clouds; which absence of moonlight suited Bentley perfectly.

He closed the ship up at action stations and took her at a fast clip round the islands. He did not really expect to find any significant

build-up of Japanese naval forces - the Admiral would not have sent him in alone if there had been a chance of that - and so he was not surprised when the circuit was completed and they had found nothing.

Wind Rode's presence there was meant to be a cautionary check-just in case the enemy had ideas about mounting an attack to retake Guadal Canal. Apparently he did not. At a little before midnight Bentley slowed his speed back to the economical knottage and had her laid on course for Guadal Canal, several hundred miles to the north-east.

Action stations fell-out. There was no clatter or loud talking. Through long experience - a surfaced submarine charging its batteries might have listened eagerly to noises in the quiet - the men filed below to their hammocks and the watch on deck took over their duties.

Hooky Walker did not go below at once: he waited in the shadow of the port seaboat.

He was not taking the air, nor a last surreptitious smoke before turning-in - his wait was deliberate. Randall knew sailors, but Hooky had forgotten more about that complex subject than the lieutenant ever knew - he had been one himself.

Now Hooky was not only suspicious, he was worried. Thieving, with the ship about to enter Brisbane or Sydney, he could understand. But not up here, where every port was either embattled, in the hands of the Japs, or else newly-occupied after a destructive landing. There was no scope whatever for shore-leave, for the spending of money.

A thief would be a fool to steal now and alert the whole ship. Certainly there was plenty of money about, but a cunning man would wait and make a rich haul a few hours from a place where he could take it ashore and enjoy it.

That was what had Hooky worried; the fact that the thief would act now. There must be a reason for his wanting cash at this time, and the sailor-wise chief bosun's mate had a pretty good idea what that reason was.

He waited another ten minutes. Now all about him the ship was still. Above him he could see the outline of the starb'd lookout's head as he quartered the sea, complementary eyes to what radar might miss; further aft a shadow moved now and then about X-gun, the

duty mounting. *Wind Rode* never moved from harbour without a third of her main armament ready to open fire.

Quietly, his steel hand glinting faintly against the brown of his shirt, Hooky eased from the seaboat and walked slowly to the passage leading to the mess-decks.

Had he been returning to his own mess he would have diverged at the passage entrance and climbed the ladder to the foc's'le head. His entry into the passage meant only one destination - so that he was not surprised, but convinced of the accuracy of his suspicions, when from the canteen door some yards along the passage a dark shape detached itself and hurried forward.

Hooky did not increase his pace, nor did he call out. The man ahead was unrecognisable, and already he was through the first messdeck door - the alarm would have been given. All the chief bosun's mate hoped to do on this first night was to verify his suspicions. Then, later, the trap could be laid.

He passed through the iron-deckmen's messdeck. All quiet there, the space lit dimly by the blue police-lights, the cocoons of hammocks swinging a little as *Wind Rode* eased herself from side to side. But he had not expected to find anything so close to the upper-deck - the trouble would be as far forrard as they could get.

He stepped over the foot-high coaming and was in the foc's'le messdeck.

They had no time to douse the lights and swing into their hammocks. He knew they were going to brave it out. He knew something else - the first to speak of those six men sitting at the mess-table, shrouded in cigarette smoke, would be his man.

"What's all this?" Hooky demanded, and his eyes ran over the table, seeing, as expected, nothing but cigarette packets. "Lights-out went long ago."

"Hullo, Buffer. These blokes were just putting me in the picture about the ship - you know, what she's been up to. Sorry - didn't realise it was so late."

The speaker was big. His voice was reasonable and his smile was twisted.

"What's your name?" Hooky asked, and kept his tone normally stern, the accents of a chief who had discovered a misdemeanour.

The time was not yet for action.

"Beuring, chief - just joined from *Pelican."*

He said nothing more, made no further excuses. Their offence was not serious. The others kept their eyes on the table, silent.

"If you birds can't sleep I'll find some work to keep you awake," Hooky promised. "I'll give you three minutes to turn in."

"Sure, chief," Beuring smiled, and his eyes held Hooky's. "We were about to break it up anyway."

"Then start breaking!"

They pushed up from the table and Hooky walked back on to the upper-deck, pulling the darken-ship screen carefully to behind him. He climbed the ladder, and outside his own mess he leaned for a moment on the guard-rails.

There it was. Now he knew. Beuring had brought with him a curse more virulent in a small ship without recreation than smallpox. It might have been banker, but he was almost certain it was crown and anchor. There were rich pickings on the celibate ship, and once the word got round Beuring would be knocking them back with a stick.

Hooky saw again the narrow watchful face of Pascoe sitting beside the big man. There you had the perfect example of cause and effect. Already the poison had begun to act. Pascoe had stolen money to gamble. If he lost, he would steal again. But it wasn't only Pascoe. He himself, as well as Smales, knew that though *Wind Rode* was a taut ship, there were more than a few men who would return their haloes to store just as soon as the slightest slackening in disciplinary supervision allowed them to.

Beuring would reef their money from them; he was cunning, experienced, completely ruthless. The man's face was a living portrait of his character. They would lose, and because they were so desperate for entertainment, they would not wait a fortnight till payday. There was hardly a kit-locker in the ship which didn't hold twenty pounds. And there wouldn't be one in fifty which was locked.

He could see the old vicious pattern repeating itself, the same disruptive cancer which had spread in the ship he had warned Rennie about.

Rennie... If only old Smales were here. By now both of them

would be closeted with Randall. Then up to Bentley's sea-cabin. First thing in the morning the captain would clear lower-deck and he would put the fear of God into guilty hearts. From then on there would be hardly a moment when a petty-officer or leading-seaman wasn't prowling through the messdecks.

He pushed himself up from the rail. He felt he should go to Randall right this minute. And he knew he would not.

Hooky Walker was absolutely loyal to his captain and officers. But there are more loyalties than one man can hold. He had just as strong an obligation to his messmates. He was the chief bosun's mate, a very senior rating in charge on the upper-deck. But there was a chief even senior to him, a man whose specific task it was to handle this situation. Bentley would be the first to query the absence of the coxswain.

The picture of Rennie's face came back easily in his memory. What a hell of a thing to hit him with so soon, to go over his head about. He couldn't, and he wouldn't, do it. Rennie must be told, of course. Then wait and see how he handles it.

Relieved at his decision, Hooky stepped into his mess. He saw at once that the coxswain's hammock was empty. Rennie must be still down in his office. Hooky undressed and swung up. The morning would do.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MORNING DID NOT do, at all.

Even a cheetah like a destroyer is bound inexorably by the law of mathematics. From midnight to dawn round the Louisiades is five hours, and five multiplied by fifteen knots makes a figure which patrolling fighter aircraft can cover in fifteen minutes.

In accordance with his usual practice, Bentley was on the bridge a few minutes before dawn action-stations was due to be sounded. So that he heard at first-hand the radar report:

"Bearing 225 degrees, angle of sight 45, two aircraft. Identified enemy. Coming towards."

Bentley's first reaction was not to look astern on the reported bearing, but at the sea about him. He knew that radar would have picked up the aircraft at long range, and that they had a few minutes of grace. What concerned him immediately was the state of visibility.

There was no doubt about the breaking dawn. But the lightness was ahead to the east; the ship herself was steaming in dark-grey, semi-opaqueness. From ten thousand feet she would make a difficult target to sight. The only trouble was that, just as there is no twilight in the tropics, nor is there any dilatory nonsense about the sun's rising.

"Sound action," he ordered.

The clangour shrilled out and the feet began to run.

It would be true to assume that Commander Bentley had been to action stations more than a thousand times in that war. Just as true is the fact that the strident ringing of the bells never failed to jump his stomach-and increased his alertness to bow-string tautness.

It is not surprising therefore that even on this latest of his multiplicity of action-stations he knew that something was wrong. He knew, and in the next second diagnosed what had concerned his watchful mind.

"What's wrong with the close-range armament?" he queried Randall.

"They haven't reported closed-up yet, sir," Randall, now the gunnery-officer, answered.

"I know that! Find out why."

"Aye, aye, sir."

It took ten seconds on the phone for Randall to find out why.

"Two men adrift from the pom-pom mounting, sir," he reported.

Bentley's frown was more puzzled than angry. The pom-pom was normally one of the smartest weapons in the ship. And now its efficiency was crucially important.

"Names?"

"Pascoe and Hawkins, sir."

There was no doubt now which feeling predominated in the captain's face.

"They're from *Pelican,"* he stated, more to himself than Randall. "What are you doing about it?"

"I've sent below to rout 'em out," Randall answered.

Bentley nodded and turned back to the binnacle. He thought of increasing speed, but that might serve to make their wake more plainly visible. He was listening to the radar reports coming in, and outwardly he was his normal, briskly competent self.

But he was really thinking of the pom-pom, not even yet fully manned. If those fighters came in, and if they got through the barrage of the big guns, then the multiple-barrelled pom-pom was the ship's main protection. It fired a total of something like 500 explosive rounds a minute from its four barrels, but to maintain that rate of fire, especially when under menacing attack, it had to be completely manned with loading numbers.

"Pom-pom crew closed-up, sir," Randall reported quietly.

"Where were they?"

"In their hammocks."

"What!" The connotation of hammocks, sleeping, and the rest of the ship closed-up, with two enemy aircraft about to dive on her, shocked Bentley. His lips drew down at the corners and his face was tight.

"See to it afterwards," he ordered Randall.

"Aye, aye, sir!" the big lieutenant promised grimly.

The director-phone buzzed and Mr. Lasenby reported:

"They've sighted us. Peeling off now."

"All right, Guns. Usual procedure." And to Rennie: "Full ahead both engines! I'll be swinging quite a lot, 'Swain."

He had his pom-pom. His voice was controlled, assured.

"Standing-by, sir," Rennie answered confidently.

Bentley had his pom-pom. But it might as well have been mounted down in the gunner's store.

The two aircraft got safely through Lasenby's barrage, due partly to their speed and more to the dim target they presented in the bad light. Bentley swung the ship to throw them off and the pom-pom opened fire.

The four lines of tracer reached out efficiently enough, and the shells elevated and were about to bite into the leading fighter when both aircraft rocketed overhead in a bellow of sound. That was all right. Next time the pom-pom layer should have them nicely.

But the Jap pilots didn't play the same way twice. On the second run they came in low above the lightening sea. They were plainly visible now, but the big guns could not fire nearly as fast - their barrels were almost horizontal, and the breeches had to be brought down to the loading level after each broadside.

Even so, Lasenby had his guns beautifully laid. They got through the long barrage, but the short-range wall of bursting shells took the leader. It was very quick. He was only a few feet above the sea, spearing in at better than 400 knots, and when the shells fired his engine his nose dipped and he went straight in. The second fighter came on.

She had her oerlikons, but they were much lighter than the pom-pom and they were single-barrelled. Every man watching knew that it would be between the fighter's four cannon and the pom-pom armaments that were almost exactly equal in firepower.

Aircraft and pom-pom exchanged fire and a lacework of tracer glowed between them. Both pilot and layer were, momentarily, aiming low. The ship's shells fled beneath the fighter and the cannons' messengers lashed the water off her side into abrupt white.

The plane's nose came up a fraction and her shells followed. The pom-pom's tracer also elevated. Bentley watched, one part of his brain waiting to give the course-alteration order, the other fascinated by the intimate duel.

He saw a single red explosion on the leading edge of one wing and he waited for the destruction to be completed. The pom-pom

ceased firing.

He noticed it at once because the hammering crash of the cannon-shells bursting on the upper-deck was a sound quite distinct from the pom-pom's rattling cough. "Hard-a-starb'd!" he roared, "get it on, man!" She was built to turn fast and her life depended on this turn. Her skin was thin to give her speed and behind that outer layer waited the boilers, straining to hold their contents of super-heated steam. They could hold it all right-provided there were no sharp-pointed explosive shells hammering to get in.

On the quarterdeck, in the open, lay thirty depth-charges, each dark-grey cylinder packed with 300 lbs. of amatol.

Fast as she was, it was the after oerlikon which saved them. Smaller than the pom-pom's the shells stitched out and needled into the fighter's fuselage behind the cockpit. The pilot felt their shaking arrival and swung his machine violently. With a supercharged snarl, red-balled wings canted, the plane skated past the careering stern and headed back towards the islands.

On the bridge Bentley watched it go, his lips beneath the glasses a tight line. Before the machine dwindled too far he saw a ragged strip reaching back along the fuselage where the oerlikon had sheathed its claws.

"I think he's had enough," he muttered to Randall.

"He might have friends."

"He might. We'll alter course to north. If they come out after us they should patrol to the east. Keep her at thirty knots."

"Aye, aye, sir."

An hour later they had gained 30 miles and the sky was still guiltless of threat. The ship was still closed-up at action-stations. Randall came up the ladder from his visit to the pom-pom mounting. His face was hard.

"Well?" Bentley looked at him.

"Faulty loading," Randall growled. "That new man Pascoe."

Bentley walked from the binnacle to his long-legged stool in the starb'd forrard corner. The lieutenant followed.

"Why were they put on the pom-pom?" Bentley snapped.

"Two reasons. The pom-pom crew was down two men, and the chief-gunner's mate tells me both Pascoe and Hawkins claimed they

were on *Pelican's* pom-pom."

"You've seen them? As defaulters?"

"Not yet. The cox'n's still on the wheel. But I will!"

Bentley looked out over the racing bow. It was a long time since he had felt so bitter. In their hammocks after the alarm had sounded, responsible for the pom-pom's misfiring

"What was their excuse for being adrift on the gun?"

"The old one. Didn't hear the pipe. When someone shook them they thought it was the normal closing-up for dawn action. Thought they had another five minutes before they had to get up there. Of course I asked them if in *Pelican* the bells were rung only for actual action, as they are here,"

"And they knew that?" Bentley asked, very quietly.

"Yes," Randall nodded, "they admitted that."

Bentley did not hesitate. He was not thinking of clean punishment returns now.

"I want them placed in my report," he ordered, "just as soon as we fallout action-stations."

"That," said Randall, "had been my intention!"

She ran on fast speed for another half-hour. Lookouts were doubled and every radar set she mounted was in constant searching operation. But the islands astern sent out nothing more to hinder her.

Randall pulled out cigarettes and offered one to Bentley. He lit both cylinders and said through the smoke:

"We're all alone, a juicy trophy. Yet they're not doing anything about it. If they were they would have been howling all around us by now. I can't understand it."

"I think I can," Bentley answered grimly. Randall glanced at him, but the captain went on: "We'll fall out now. I'll see those two as soon as you put them through."

"Aye, aye, sir," Randall acknowledged formally.

Naval justice is prompt and definite. There are no legal lights on the lower-deck, and the only time a man is run in is when he's palpably committed an offence.

Even so, Rennie had never attended a captain's session as brief, or as definite, as this one.

Bentley had both men brought before him together - their offences

were identical. The coxswain doubled them up to the table and ordered, "Off caps!"

They stood there at the table, judge and offenders. Pascoe and Hawkins saw a tall and broad-shouldered officer, and gold on his shoulders and cap peak glittering in the hot sunlight, the face beneath the cap as uncompromising as granite.

Bentley, his fingertips resting on the table, saw a watchful, unlovely face, flanked by another whose heaviness of outline was overlaid by sullenness mixed with apprehension.

"You admit the charges?" he asked formally.

"Yes, sir," they mumbled together.

He did not ask to hear their excuses. He knew they were absent from their gun in the face of enemy attack. A broken leg could be the only acceptable excuse for that.

"I am not here," he went on, his voice and eyes arctic cold, "to discuss the failure of your drill on the pom-pom. That will be remedied." Pascoe swallowed at the utter finality of those four words. "What I'm concerned with is your failure to man the gun. I'm not interested in the routine aboard your last ship, nor how it was run. Aboard *this* ship you fly when you're piped to action or the bells ring." The tap of his fingers on the table emphasised the words. "Your actions could, and damn near did, lose the ship. Seven days' stoppage of leave."

The coxswain's mouth opened to repeat the judgment and Bentley's raised hand closed it.

"You'll think you've got off lightly," he rasped, "considering where we are. But remember this - that leave stoppage will be considered when you put in for privilege of leave out of watch in Brisbane or Sydney. And remember this, and don't forget it! - if you're adrift from your gun again I'll have you in cells!"

For five seconds his stare probed into their eyes. Then he nodded to the coxswain.

For some minutes Bentley sat on his stool on the bridge, his face set and thoughtful.

It was not that he'd had to hand out punishment; what worried him was the *offence*. His ship could be likened to a racing car. A tractor would bullock its way along with fouled plugs and incorrect

settings: a racer required a constant refinement of attention.

His ship's efficiency had been finely-tuned; honed to a razored cutting-edge. Because of this quality, a fault which in a less-sensitive organisation might be without effect, here could blunt and clog the weapon he and Randall had gone to such trouble to forge.

He remembered what Smales had said to him, on this very spot, about weak links in the chain. They had to be watched, the wizened coxswain had warned him. Now he had two more rotten apples. The rot could spread, fast.

He thought of the famous crooner who had come on board for a drink after entertaining the troops on a shell-blasted island. It was a good party. Someone had asked how it felt to be at the top of the tree. The singer's face had momentarily lost its happy smile, "That's what worries me," he'd said, "when you're on the top there's only one direction you can go."

It was the same with *Wind Rode's* efficiency. But that singer, judging by the radio, was still on top. He had staved off his fall. It could be done. It had to be done here.

Another consideration slid into his worrying mind. Because the ship was so soundly trained she had come out of almost every action on top of her enemies. Weapons, whether aircraft cannon or submarine torpedo or destroyer guns, were aimed and fired by men. *Wind Rode's* men to date had proved superior in the handling of theirs.

Now, a couple of hours back, the train of successes had been broken. They had six big guns and a multiplicity of smaller weapons; they should have got both those Jap aircraft. Definitely, no mistake about it, long before the fighters got within damaging range. As it was, only a lucky shot from the oerlikon saved them from possible damage.

It was no matter for the chief gunner's mate or the Buffer - the men's seamanship was seasoned for sure, they could fire their guns with their eyes shut. It was, simply and nakedly, a problem of morale. For the coxswain.

"Bosun's mate?"

The young seaman came running.

"Ask the cox'n to speak to me."

"Cox'n. Aye, aye, sir."

The coxswain was in his office, entering in permanent ink the captain's quickly pencilled judgment. He wrote shakily, because the ship was shuddering with her speed. Down here, where he was not much above the level of the engine-room, the movement was more pronounced than on the bridge.

Rennie was not interested in his work. He laid his pen down and wiped his face with a sodden handkerchief. The action against the aircraft had not lasted long, and normally it would not have affected him. But now he felt drained, tired and despondent.

He simply had no interest in his job, neither in this immediate task nor in his wider sphere of duties. And absence of interest in a seaman for long at sea in a small ship like a destroyer can be insidious poison.

The coxswain, in short, was fed right up to the back teeth.

Nevertheless, his mind, probably because of the inherent soundness of his training and nature, persisted in revolving around *his* problem.

Hooky had told him, after the action had been broken off, of his suspicions about gambling on the foc's'le messdeck. The big Buffer's warning had not been needed - no man knew better than Rennie what that sort of thing could lead to.

But Rennie's problem was not the suspicion of thieving and gambling, but whether he should tell the captain about it. If he did, he felt sure, the furore would start: the emphatic instructions to petty-officers, the fruitless searches, the upsetting of the whole damned ship.

Even while the thoughts swirled in his mind he knew he was merely indulging his own dislike of the expected results of his revelations; he knew that there was no question about what he would have to do. If he kept silent the able-seaman who had lost the money would surely put in a formal complaint about his loss to the first-lieutenant. Then it would all come out, with the coxswain, already informed on the matter, on the nasty end of a very sticky stick.

A knock sounded at the door and the bosun's mate poked his head in.

"You sent for me, sir?"

Bentley turned in his chair.

"Yes, 'Swain." His tone was crisp, not unpleasant. "I want to talk to you about this morning's business."

"Sir?"

"Go on."

"I have something to tell you, sir. It might be better down below."

Bentley looked shrewdly at the thin brown face. He said:

"Is this personal?"

"No, sir. Ship matter."

"I see."

Bentley slid from the high-legged stool and his eyes went to Randall, talking to the officer of the watch beside the binnacle.

"Number One?"

"Yes, sir?"

"My sea-cabin, please."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Go on down," Bentley said to Rennie, "I'll follow shortly."

While the two men climbed down the ladder Bentley took his normal precautions. His was not the nature to worry about what the coxswain had to say - he would know in a few minutes. He checked with both asdic and radar offices, scanned the horizon himself with his binoculars, and warned the officer of the watch to keep asdic and radar sets on their toes.

He had a look at the chart, and measured off their distance from the Louisiades. They were more than a hundred miles clear, and increasing that distance fast. A hundred miles of ocean was a large area for aircraft to sight a destroyer in.

Satisfied, he hung his glasses on their strap round the binnacle and went below.

They got to their feet when he stepped into the cabin and he waved them down again. He thought of his steward, and dismissed the thought. The man had been chosen for his reliability, and sending him off somewhere would have served only to rouse a curiosity which probably now was dormant. It was not at all unusual for a coxswain to be in his captain's cabin.

"Well, 'Swain," Bentley started, "what's the trouble?"

A coxswain is used to giving concise reports; and this one was

talking to his captain.

"I think there's thieving and gambling on board, sir."

Automatically the eyes of Bentley and Randall met. Both men's faces were grim.

"You're sure?" Bentley asked. The shock of concern he felt made his voice curt.

"Pretty sure, sir. A seaman reported the theft of three pounds. The Buffer thinks he's on to a gambling ring on the foc's'le messdeck."

Bentley took up a cigarette and lit it. He breathed the smoke out slowly.

"All right," he said, "let's have all of it - names, times, everything."

The coxswain gave it to him. He finished, and he looked into the hard burned face. Here it comes, he thought - stand-by for panic stations!

He was disappointed. Or relieved. The captain of a ship is of necessity a man whose brain can encompass several problems of considerations at once. Bentley was a very competent captain. He was listening to Rennie's flat voice, judging the picture the words projected, at the same time as his mental vision was in a sea-cabin aboard an old destroyer in Moresby.

He saw Holland turning abruptly from the porthole, and the sudden smile on his rugged face. He remembered the strange collapse of Holland's opposition to his request for men, and he recalled his exact words:

"I've got a good bunch here," Holland had asserted in answer to Bentley's own claim, "except..."

It was then that the queer, cynical expression had crossed the older man's face, and his opposition had changed to genial acquiescence. Holland must be still grinning his head off - he and the first-lieutenant who had been angered, and then delighted, on the quarterdeck.

Now Bentley had all the answers. Holland, cunning as an old fox, had unloaded his fowls, his mess-deck malingerers, on to him.

Rennie stopped talking. In the silence Bentley's voice came low and clear.

"The old bastard! It had nothing to do with my father at all!"

"What's that, sir?" Randall queried quickly.

Bentley gave a self-conscious laugh. It sounded more like a grunt.

"Nothing, nothing at all. I was thinking." He glanced at Randall. "We've been taken-bamboozled by an old devil I should have had more sense than to try to handle."

Then his eyes trained on to Rennie, and his voice changed.

"You knew that at least three of the men who joined with you from *Pelican* were fowls. Why didn't you tell me?"

Alarm bells rang suddenly in Rennie's head. This was a completely unexpected development. He had to think, fast.

"It all depends what you mean by fowls, sir," he sparred.

Bentley looked at him. Grey eyes, cold, penetrating; mouth a taut line, curved down at the corners.

Perversely, Rennie felt a stirring of anger at that bleak, knowing look; at the ease with which his evasion had been dissected for what it was. His own face tightened.

"I'll admit those three weren't the best aboard *Pelican, sir,"* he said, defensively, "but different ships, different cap tallies. They might have made out here all right. It's not right that I..." The idea came to him: it was tailor-made, and it was true. "I didn't want to cruel their chances in a new ship." His voice after the minute pause had firmed. "It's not right that I should put their weights up before they had time to prove themselves."

The steady stare was still fixed on him and he knew that the only person in that room he was kidding was himself.

"Not right at all," Bentley nodded. "But now they have proved themselves. I want to know everything you know about those three men."

Disgust at his own pretence, as well as irritation at Bentley's prescience, made Rennie still resist.

"Excuse me, sir, but I don't agree that they have proved themselves."

He stopped, his face stubborn. Bentley said, very quietly:

"Go on."

The need for a cigarette in this unfriendly atmosphere was a physical sensation in Rennie's mouth. He said:

"Pascoe fouled up the pom-pom's shoot, and he was adrift. But

we're not talking about that, sir. The question is thieving and gambling. There's no proof Pascoe took that money, and none that Beuring was running the crown and anchor. There are two hundred men in this ship, sir," he ended.

Bentley saw Randall fidget impatiently in his chair. He could appreciate his deputy's irritation - he was fighting to contain his own. He took up the box of cigarettes and offered it to Rennie.

"No, thank you, sir."

"As you wish." Bentley laid the box down on the table and leaned forward with his elbows astride it. "Now, cox'n, you listen to me."

The voice was level, reasonable. Rennie's eyes narrowed watchfully. He had seen captains like this before - reasonable until they'd got you to admit your wrong, and then the change, the whipcrack of accusation.

Bentley noted Rennie's expression. He said;

"I don't for one moment believe you're being loyal to those men for the reasons you've given. There is another reason. What it is doesn't concern me at this time. What interests me is this. You mention Pascoe in connection with the stolen money, you said it was a crown and anchor board in the foc's'le. *You* mentioned those things, cox'n. Therefore it's quite obvious that those two men fit the offences. And that you know they do."

Rennie opened his mouth to speak and Bentley raised his forefinger. He was the captain. It was enough.

"This is not a legal court ashore, cox'n. You know damned well we haven't the time or the skill to worm our way through the accepted processes of proof and prosecution. Damn it all, man!" he snapped abruptly, "it's the efficiency of my ship at stake!"

Silence hung heavy in the sun-dappled cabin. A searchlight of sunshine came through the porthole and speared the pistol cupboard, the circle of brightness moving rhythmically up and down as the ship rolled.

Bentley breathed in. He tapped his forefinger gently on the table His voice was controlled.

"I must know whether you suspect Pascoe and Beuring of these things. Knowing that, we can watch them. Instead of two hundred men, we narrow it down to two. You understand that? Of course you

understand it." He paused. "I must remind you you're the cox'n," he finished evenly.

Yes, you must remind me of that! Rennie thought. Even though no man in this bloody Navy's ever had to do it before! His thoughts were confused. He rubbed his chin uncertainly, and Bentley's eyes on him were not watchful, or condemning - they were oddly sympathetic.

"Well?" he said, gently, and Randall cleared his throat, angrily.

"Yes, sir," Rennie said slowly, "I suspect those two. We had trouble in *Pelican*... Nothing proved, but it was there." His eyes came up and held Bentley's. "I tried everything I knew to clamp down on it there," he said, his voice defensively bitter, "but you can't identify money, you can't beat a cockatoo placed at every hatch to the messdeck. And try and find a rolled-up crown and anchor sheet in a ship! You'd search for a month. You can't do it!"

"Yes, 'Swain, we can do it," said Bentley quietly. The familiar title made Randall stare at him. "We'll bring the Buffer in on it and have a talk later. That's all for now."

"Yes, sir."

Rennie got up. His face was still stubborn, but there was misery in his eyes. He stepped out into the passage and closed the door behind him.

"Well!" Randall exploded, "that old coot unloaded his fowls on to us, all right - but he might have kept his bloody cox'n! In all my experience..." He shook his head angrily. "He's worse than those three chooks put together!"

"You're dead wrong, Bob," Bentley said slowly.

"Eh? Wrong about that...! Any cox'n worth his salt would've had those slobs up here with their caps off now!"

"And I would have had to dismiss the case," Bentley answered drily. "No..." he shook his head slowly. "Rennie's all right. There's something bothering him, that's for certain. I think I know what it is. Right or wrong, we've got to find out, fast. There's a hell of a lot depends on just how fast."

Wind Rode's men had been trained by their captain - so had her officers. Many doubts in his time had entered Randall's practical and unimaginative brain, but never the slightest regarding Bentley's

intelligence.

"All right," he said now, "let's have it. What's up with our touchy cox'n?"

"You've hit it in one," Bentley said soberly. "He is touchy, and in a way I don't blame him. Normally I'd expect a senior rating to get on top of his grouch in double-quick time. But Rennie's got more to overcome than an outsize whinge."

"The hair?" Randall asked. His face was interested, thoughtful.

"I'd say so, yes. He must have had a pretty nasty time in *Bantam* to shock him like that. In fact, I'd say it was some incredible experience. The man is tired out. All interest in the job and the ship has been wrung out of him. Our job is to revive that interest. We've got to... we'll make him proud of the ship."

"You seem sure of yourself," Randall said curiously, "how did you get on to all this?"

"I've given it a deal of thought. Cox'ns are a pretty taut bunch, you know that. When one comes along who's off the beam there's a damn good reason. Somewhere."

"I imagine you're right," Randall sighed, "though how we go about ramming discipline and pride into a man who's supposed to be responsible for it beats me."

"There's another thing," Bentley went on musingly. "Rennie must have heard we're a pretty sharp bunch. In fact, I claimed that for us myself... So what happens? We come up against two lousy Jap fighters and they come near to towling the hide off us."

"But that was only one action!" Randall expostulated.

"That's right - the only one he judges us on." Bentley's hand went out to the cigarette box, and he pulled it back. His mouth felt dry. "What we have to do," he said deliberately, "is get into another action and show that fellow just what we can do."

Randall looked at him, his eyes squinted. "It's as important as that?" His voice was incredulous. "As important as that," Bentley nodded definitely. "Without a solid cox'n we're sunk. You might even take that literally. None of the chiefs or petty-officers will act over the cox'n's head to stop this rotten business. Nor should they. It's Rennie's job, exclusively. Surely you see that?"

"I see it," Randall growled. His big fingers fumbled in the cigarette

box. “What in hell are you going to do? Make a signal to Tojo? Please come and get us, chum?”

“Not quite,” Bentley smiled, “but we can deliver a few messages.”

“To who?” his friend asked ungrammatically. “To the sponsors of that little raid this morning. Their airfield could do with a visit.”

“My God!” the big man ejaculated, “you’re not going to send a landing party?”

“Not on your life - once is more than enough.” Bentley grinned reminiscently. “But there’s nothing to stop us bombarding.”

Randall leaned back in his chair. He breathed in and out, very slowly.

“All right, chum, you’ve got the chair. But next time I ship to sea I’ll be in a cruiser - where there’s a bloody admiral with some sense always hanging around!”

“You’d die of boredom in half a dogwatch,” Bentley grinned.

He bent forward and this time took up a cigarette. He lit it and for a moment stared at the circle of light from the porthole. There was an intent, speculative expression on his face. Randall, watching, had seen that look before... Bentley’s mind now was meshing smoothly along the tracks of judgment and experience. He had had this idea nebulously in his head ever since, on the bridge, he had come to his decision as to why the second fighter had broken off the attack, and why nothing had been sent out to get them. *Wind Rode* was on a more or less detached mission: she had been ordered by the Admiral to those islands back there. There was nothing to prevent his putting his idea into operation.

“Right!” Bentley swung in his chair to face Randall. “Have you wondered why that fighter didn’t send out his friends after us? So have I. And I came up with this. They wanted us to clear out. My bet is they could have mounted an attack that would have swamped us. Why didn’t they? Because that would have shown their hand. Those fighters came from the Archipelago - they must have, with their limited range. I say the Japs have built a long-range airstrip - and already they’ve got it very well-stocked!” Randall lacked his captain’s perceptive imagination, but when he was confronted with a familiar situation his reaction was quick enough. And to Randall fighting was more than familiar.

"Guadal Canal?" he said quickly.

"It must be. The Americans have been there only a bit over a fortnight. The harbour's crammed. Even if the Japs don't intend landing and retaking the island, a large bomber raid on that shipping would return very juicy dividends. And as soon as the build-up of shipping is completed, then the Japs send over another raid. The strategy's perfect, and simple. The Yanks have to keep their men ashore supplied - the fighting's not over by a long shot. All our friends back there have to do is to wait each time for the transport position to improve again, and then - bombs away!"

"M'mm." Randall sounded a little doubtful. "it looks plain enough - but you're basing all this intention of the Japs on the fact that they simply didn't send a flock out to do us over."

Bentley was not worried.

"What more do you want? They sighted us, they had a crack at sinking us. Obviously, there *is* an airfield back there. And just as obviously it carries more than two fighters. I tell you they wanted us to get to hell out of it! I wouldn't be surprised if that bloke who got away hasn't already been hauled over some very hot coals for attacking us in the first place."

He got up and walked to the porthole, looking out at the iridescent blue. But he wasn't seeing the water. He turned suddenly and came back.

"I'm sure of it, Bob! Those two fighters were a patrol, nothing more. When they saw we were scooting on our way clear they shouldn't have attacked at all. But they had big ideas. They didn't come off. But do you think the Japs would let a lone destroyer get away? Unless they wanted it to?" Randall was convinced. He nodded his heavy head. "Okay, I'm with you. We sneak back tonight and bombard. Providing we can find the airstrip..." He pulled thoughtfully at the loose skin of his throat. "But there's one thing that still bothers me."

"The airstrip? There's sure to be some activity on it. And don't tell me you're concerned about whether we can hit a ruddy great airfield?"

"No, I'm not worried about hitting the strip. It's our other problem."

"The cox'n?"

"Damn it all, haven't I convinced you yet how important it is to bring him back on the ball!"

"Don't jump down my blasted throat!" his friend growled, "let a man get a word in, will you?"

"All right," Bentley smiled, "word away."

"Thanks!" The big lieutenant squinted up at his chief. "I know it's important to get him moving again - what d'you think I am? A Wren or something?"

"I could make one or two interesting suggestions if you were," the captain answered crudely.

"I bet! Seriously - there's one thing that bothers me. You think Rennie's okay. In short, a normal cox'n." "I'm sure of that, too," Bentley nodded. "All right, then. Then tell me this, bright boy. If Rennie's such a crack hand why in hell did Holland unload him? You've spent the past half-hour convincing me just how important a cox'n is. I wouldn't be surprised if old Dutchy Holland wasn't of the same opinion. Then why? I can understand his offloading his fowls. But why his cox'n?"

"I can answer that one too."

Bentley sat down and smiled into the waiting, sceptical face.

"I'll have to delve a bit into psychology," he warned.

"You always do," Randall grunted. "But we've got till nightfall."

"Just a minute."

Bentley leaned sideways and juggled out of its containing hooks the flexible speaking-tube to the bridge. His buzz was answered almost at once.

"Officer of the watch sir?"

"Decrease to 15 knots, Pilot."

"Fifteen knots. Aye, aye, sir."

Randall heard this exchange clearly. It jolted him a little. Now that he had heard Bentley's order the reason for it was immediately apparent. But he, the first-lieutenant, hadn't thought to decrease speed. The ship was careering on at thirty knots, gulping up fuel and distance - at a time when it had already been decided to return to the archipelago after nightfall.

But maybe, he solaced himself for his remissness of forethought,

if I were the captain I'd have thought of it. The solace gained was consciously minute. He looked at Bentley, and behind his facade of tough, burned face the old admiration and respect for a superior ability was tingling.

We make a good team, you and I, Randall thought - just so long as you're there, on top. What he omitted to think was anything at all about his complete lack of envy and chagrin at his friend's superiority. That, he would have been surprised to know, formed the basis of Bentley's respect and liking for *him.*

"All right, Freud," Randall grunted, "lay it on the couch."

"It's nothing complicated," Bentley smiled. "Certainly, old Dutchy's as foxy as they come, and tough as overdone steak. He got rid of his offal, and he's probably still grinning his ugly old head off about it. But I happened to mention - probably because he's an older man, and you sort of feel you can talk to him like that - about how hard we'd worked to get this bucket up to scratch.

"He's shrewd, but he's fair. Also..." his smile as he looked at his friend widened a little, but the significance of that facial gesture was lost on Randall. "Also, he hasn't an envious or really nasty bone in his leathery old body. To him I must have been a young commander who'd worked fairly hard and who now saw all that work going down the drain for lack of a senior rating. So, to compensate for the fowls, he handed over a taut hand."

Bentley pressed back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"Diagnosis completed," he grinned.

"You're probably right," Randall conceded, believing Bentley implicity. "There's only one snag. Holland thinks Rennie's a taut hand, so do you. The only bod who doesn't know about that is Rennie."

"He's just forgotten it - temporarily. We might find him a different character in the morning."

There's a few of us might be different in the morning," Randall growled. He was looking at the circular patch of blue sky and now he had forgotten Rennie. "What do we use? Direct-action shell?"

"Yes."

Bentley knew that Randall's question was rhetorical. He was the gunnery-officer, and he knew that direct-action stuff, shells which

burst on impact, was the only ammunition for a mission of this nature. They did not want to burrow in with armour-capped projectiles - the object was to lace the airstrip and its cargo with explosive force and white-hot splinters.

Randall wished to discuss the mission further.

"Once we find the strip," Bentley went on, only too willing to talk, "we'll open in rapid broadsides. Everything can join in pom-poms, oerlikons, the lot." He nodded appreciatively, his mind eight hours ahead. "With full broadsides from the main armament we can drop 60 shells a minute on that strip. Training slowly from left to right we can lambast the whole area in a few minutes, then come back and do it over again."

Randall picked up a cigarette slowly from the box. His stomach was beginning to churn, just a little. Bentley was right. Shells weighing 45 pounds and a little under five inches in diameter against a battleship's armoured hide were slightly more dangerous than flung potatoes: against parked aircraft they would be smashingly efficient.

One shell, if it landed favourably, could completely destroy the nearest aircraft, and badly damage another two. *Wind Rode* could land six of these shells every six seconds, in a concentrated blast against which nothing on a hastily-built airfield could stand.

A battleship or cruiser could fire much heavier projectiles. But a destroyer's were more than heavy enough for this job, and her rate of fire was immeasurably greater. *Wind Rode* - modern, fast, her guns radar-controlled - was the perfect weapon for this type of bombardment.

Randall brought his thoughts back to practicality.

"We'll need the weather with us," he warned.

"No doubt about that," Bentley agreed. "The least promise of a moon and the whole thing's off. If they sight us snooping around they'll let go with everything. We must have a night like last night."

"That's a pleasant thought."

"What's that?"

"Last night. There we were stooging around like a Manly ferry... Brother! If they've got there what you think they have, why the blazes didn't they get on to us?"

"I've thought about that little possibility, too," Bentley grinned,

"and promptly heaved the thought overboard! But I like to think the reason for our getting away with it is simple enough. First of all a patrolling aircraft's not much good, high up there on a dark night; second, the Jap boys would have been madly working, I should think-finishing the strip, servicing aircraft, stowing bombs, fuel - a thousand things. Third, and probably the main reason, is that from landward on a cloudy night we'd show practically no silhouette at all. The only thing visible about us would be a piled-up white wake."

"Which means," Randall said throatily, "we go in there tonight at a bit under two knots!"

"Message understood," Bentley laughed. He stood up. "We've got a hell of a lot to do. Pilot's on watch now. Get hold of the Gunner and bring him up to the bridge."

For the next hour or so Bentley was closeted with his officers on the bridge. His first consideration was chartwork. Though he had been round the archipelago once, this time he would be setting different courses. He would need to take her in quite close - last night he had been looking for ships; tonight his object would be activity on an airfield. And the Louisiades were not one whit different from other coral islands in the Pacific in their possession of sub-surface reefs running out from innocent-looking points of jungle-clad land.

With Pilot laying-off courses on the white parchment and making notes of shoals and reefs, tidal currents and identifying features, Bentley turned to the gunnery side.

He was a gunnery specialist himself, and Lasenby listened attentively to the captain's instructions.

There was much to do. Now at the guns, and handy in the magazines, *Wind Rode* carried armour-piercing shell for ship-to-ship action and time-fused for aircraft. All this would have to be changed.

She would be firing as fast as ever she'd fired in her violent young life, and the correct ammunition had to be ready in the ready-use lockers and close to the shell-hoists in the magazines. Her other ammunition had to be struck down out of the way, clear, and stowed securely against the possibility of her rolling under full helm.

The other, more important, consideration was in the field of fire-control. The controlling table in the transmitting-station was now

set up for ship action. It could be switched in a moment to handle aircraft. But bombardment was a different problem altogether.

The most significant difference was that the target would be stationary. Enormous research and development had gone into the equipment which allowed the ship's mountings to compensate for target-speed, whether it was the thirty knots of another destroyer or the 400 of a diving aircraft.

Now the bombardment procedure against an immobile target had to be drilled into the gunnery team. It was a long time since she'd bombarded, and the procedure for correcting fall of shot, perhaps barely visible behind clumps of trees, had to be brought out, studied, and learned with meticulous efficiency.

These things were important. But the over-riding factor was timing.

The ship had steamed more than a hundred miles since dawn, some of it to the east, lately to the north. At high speed she could cover the backward ground easily, but it was desirable that she commence her attack not too early - but not too late.

Too early would find the enemy still busy, awake and alert; too late would catch him bedded-down, with no activity to reveal his whereabouts. Bentley had to try to find his enemy tired, but still about.

There was another nice calculation he had to make: just how far he could run to the north, away from the target, with the minimum use of precious fuel, at the same time allowing himself time to get back to it before it was too late.

It was not merely a schoolboy exercise concerning distance and speed; there were several other complicated calculables.

He had to be back on-target at a precise moment which Would conserve his fuel and which would allow him sufficient time to bombard efficiently, at the same time as it allowed him enough to get well clear before dawn brought its retribution. He had to surround his ship with a large area of water to puzzle the searchers.

Again, he had to try and estimate how long it would take him to pinpoint the airstrip. If he wandered round the islands all night he might discover his target too late for him to do anything about it. Then the whole purpose of the operation would be humiliatingly

negatived; possibly producing the exact effects he was planning to circumvent.

For half an hour after the gunner had gone about his business Bentley worked at the little chart-table on the bridge. Then he dropped his pencil and sat down on his stool for ten minutes, thinking, judging, striving to find the loophole he might have missed.

Then he jumped down from the stool and at the chart-table checked his calculations again. Then he called Pilot over.

"Yes, sir?"

"We'll make our landfall at twelve-thirty tonight," Bentley said flatly.

CHAPTER SIX

ABLE-SEAMAN BEURING'S EXPERIENCE of ships and the sea was not large, nor was it of long duration. He had been in the Navy two years, and he would leave it just as soon as Tojo's demise allowed him to.

But Beuring's knowledge of men was very comprehensive indeed; especially of those types who frequented pool-rooms, two-up schools and similar gambling establishments, experts and suckers alike. And especially of policemen.

This last knowledge was simply a necessary requirement of his livelihood, as automatic as Rennie's experience of steering. And, as well as being a highly competent steersman, Rennie was the ship's policeman.

So that Beuring wasted no time in setting-up his crown and anchor board that afternoon.

He was guided in his decision by two factors - the ship was in tropical routine, which meant all work for the day ceased after lunch, and the men were idle; and Beuring was well-versed in the axiom that, being suspected of a crime, you repeated that crime quickly, while authority was congratulating itself that you'd been scared off.

Hooky's apparent casualness on the messdeck last night had not deceived Beuring for a second. He knew several things from the Buffer's visit: first, the coxswain would have been told; second, sooner or later the axe would fall; third, he had to hop in and trap as much of this gold-mine as he could before that fall; fourth, neither Rennie nor the Buffer would suspect that he would begin operating again so quickly.

In all of these assumptions Beuring was absolutely accurate.

Bentley had not yet informed the ship's company of his decision regarding the airfield; whether they went back or not depended directly on the weather. There would be time enough to make his broadcast when the ship was committed.

So that hot afternoon the men had their dinner at noon and, bored, sat around on the messdecks or tried to cool off on the upper-deck. The brief excitement of the air attack had worn off quickly - for *Wind Rode* it was a minor break in the routine. And they had not

even the mild inducement to sunbake - there wasn't a man on board who through his long sojourn up north wasn't burned coppery brown.

Sitting against the ship's side in his mess, Beuring knew all this. He knew also that his little game of last night would by now be common knowledge throughout the ship. So that he was not surprised, but secretly and cynically amused, when men in twos and threes began casually to wander into the foc's'le messdeck.

Expecting a brisk trade, he had already posted his cockatoos at ladders and hatchways. No one in authority could now approach the foc's'le without his knowing about it. The minimum warning time he had was two minutes. More than enough for him to stand up and stuff the painted square of canvas into the ventilating shaft above his head.

It mattered little to him if the crown and anchor board were found in its hiding-place. Nothing could be proved against him. The most minor of his worries was that one of his messmates would inform on him. A sailor's loyalty to an erring messmate might be misguided, but it was unshakable. Added to this safeguard was the fact that there was hardly a man in *Wind Rode* who did not want to enliven his routine-ridden existence with a little gambling excitement. That the diversion was illegal served only to savour it.

Beuring was safe, and he knew it.

An hour later he had won for himself a little over fifty pounds. The game was willing, and for high stakes. There were some 150 non-ranking ratings in the ship, and all had at least ten pounds compulsorily saved.

Beuring sat behind his board, his saturnine face unsmiling and watchful, the competent banker; the dice rolled and the green notes changed hands. Some he paid out, and put more into his pockets. He kept most of his winnings out of sight - partly from the eyes of authority, but mainly from the sight of his victims. They might begin to wonder...

A figure sidled on to the bench beside him and an envious voice decided:

"You're doin' all right, Beuring."

The big man's dark eyes glanced down at the sharp, avaricious face turned up sideways to his.

"You did your roll last night, Pascoe," he said curtly, "terms here are strictly cash. Beat it and make room."

Pascoe's face tightened. He said nothing, but put his hand on the scrubbed white of the table. The notes were crumpled, but they were legal enough.

"All right," Beuring nodded, "but I don't want no whingeing if you lose it."

"I ain't lost it yet," Pascoe snarled, "stow the gab and get on with it!"

Beuring's face showed no resentment at the smaller man's tone. His money was as good as any other's... While it lasted.

An hour later and the pockets of his overalls bulged. His face was composed, still watchful, and his mind was exulting. Never since the old days in the *Canberra* had he fallen amongst pickings like this.

Two stokers were also winning. They were happy, and Beuring was happier. As in any other business, satisfied customers were good for trade...

A voice, half-whine, half-snarl, spoke beside him:

"You got the rest of it, you bastard - you might as well have this."

Pascoe threw down a dirty ten-shilling note. The dice were picked up but Beuring's eyes were on Pascoe. All of the large group of players were interested, but Pascoe's face was intent - the waiting, dedicated expression of the helpless gambler.

Once again he had lost all his stake. The warning twitched in Beuring's mind. He didn't like either the bulging of his pockets. It was time to pack up, to stash the winnings. It was a criminal shame to stop the plucking, but Beuring lived by another axiom - too much of a good thing...

"All right, boys," he said crisply, and clawed Pascoe's note in with the others, "we'll break it up for now."

"Like hell!" one of the winning stokers complained, "it's just getting interesting."

Beuring played that cunningly.

"I know it is," he smiled, and his nod took in the other heavy winner, "you boys have collected a packet there. Ah well, you've got to be in it to win. But this school's a bit big, fellers. Let's knock

it off for half an hour. Don't want the cox'n smellin' around."

"He's spine-bashing in his mess," someone called from the back. "Come on, I just got here!" Brother, oh brother! Beuring exulted. Aloud, he snapped: "Look, I'm runnin' this game. It's my neck, remember. I say we break it up for half an hour. Then if you want to have a burl, you know where to find it." He rolled up the canvas and edged his way along the seat. Pascoe's eyes followed him, staring at his pockets. The group dwindled away.

"What d'you say, Pilot?"

"No doubt about it, sir. That lot's up there to stay. I'd say it will get thicker during the night. There could be patches of moonlight, but I think the cloud cover will be close to a hundred per cent."

Bentley liked the conviction with which the lanky navigator committed himself. He also agreed with him.

Late that afternoon a sweep of air had come cooling up from the south. The temperature drop had been almost ten degrees. The sun had worked hard during the day, and now the result of its evaporation was cooling and condensing into thick banks of vapour.

His head tilted back. Bentley conned the sky. He was thinking: I can turn round now; there'll be plenty of time for the weather picture to develop further. If the cloud thins and the moon shows we can still turn tail and get to hell out of it.

In a destroyer you act quickly when your judgment has decided. He leaned over to the wheelhouse voice-pipe:

"Starb'd twenty, Increase to 250 revolutions."

The acknowledgment came back and the engine-room bells pealed. She began to lean almost at once. By the time she was halfway round she felt the increased thrust of her screws. Further she tilted, faster wiped the slim bow round the horizon.

"Ease to ten."

"Ease to ten, sir."

"Midships. Steady."

"Steady, sir. Course 205."

"Steer 205 degrees."

"Steer 205, sir." A moment, then: "Course 205, sir."

Shaking, but not too much - she was held down to 25 knots - the ship sliced back over her wake. The sun was poised above the watery

edge to starb'd, a huge orange ball whose almost level rays had lost most of their heat.

Able-seaman Beuring was playing his board, a brief harvest before the pipe to supper would deprive him of customers. At the end of the table Pascoe watched the game, his tongue sliding between his lips, his mind full of avaricious envy and his pockets empty.

In his hotbox of an office Rennie was checking over his predecessor's books, a necessary torture before the ship was darkened for the night and closed scuttles and darken ship screens made of her innards a sour, sweaty furnace.

All afternoon he had waited for the captain's summons, for the conference with the chief bosun's mate and then the spate of unenforceable orders.

Rennie knew that there were only two ways to fix a gambler. You had to catch him in the act, or you had to have an informer. The first method was impossible because of cockatoos, and the second was not the complete answer.

You knew who your gambler was, but you had still to prove his operations. All you could do was to front him with the charge, which of course he would deny, and then warn him off. Sometimes it worked, but not, he was sure, with a man like Beuring.

Beuring had nothing to lose through his superiors' suspicions - he was not after promotion, the Navy was not his career, and even stoppage of leave suited, rather than negatived, his purpose. The only object forfeiture of leave would achieve would be to retain him in his sphere of operations.

So Rennie waited for the summons, distrustful of its results and not eager for the extra work it would entail.

But the hours had passed and nothing had come down from the bridge. Against his inclination a slight interest in what Bentley was up to began to stir. This captain's name was a byword in the Fleet, and he could be expected to come up with something original.

Then he felt the ship heel and noted the shaking of her speed. The loudspeaker outside in the passage cleared its throat and the captain's voice boomed out, and then Rennie thought he understood the full reason why his summons had been delayed. Bentley had been merely planning an offensive operation.

"This is the captain."

The captain spoke only for the delivery of a significant message. But the ship's sudden alteration of course had commanded their attention anyway.

The gambling on the messdeck stopped. Men in the steamy bathroom looked up from their dhobeying. B-gun's crew lowered their magazines and moved to the speaker on the face of the bridge. Hooky Walker sat up in his mess, leaving the leather cushion behind him dark with sweat. Rennie leaned over and heaved the door further open.

"I have reason to believe that the Japs have built up a considerable force of aircraft in the islands we reconnoitred last night. Object is almost certainly a strike at the shipping at Guadal Canal. I hope to pinpoint the airfield. We will be in a position to bombard at a little after midnight tonight.

"It's been a long time since we carried out a bombardment against a shore target. But the control teams have been drilling this afternoon and we can expect some fast and accurate shooting. Once we find the airstrip we should do considerable damage.

"Our handling of the air-attack this morning was not at all satisfactory. We should have got both those boys. I expect a much better effort tonight. That's all."

The speaker clicked off.

Rennie's first reaction to the captain's information was natural and involuntary - his nerves tautened and the old stirring of tension began in his stomach. Unless you were a completely insensitive clod you always felt that way when your captain told you he was taking the ship into action.

But as he sat there, sopping the sweat from his face and chest, his brain took over from his instinctive reflexes.

This is how he got his name, he thought - always willing and eager to hop in where another commander would have gathered reinforcements about him. They had beaten off an air-attack, and now they were well in the clear towards Guadal Canal. Yet this gong-hunting nitwit had to decide to take on half the blasted Jap air-force on his lonesome.

To be successful, a strike against Guadal Canal would require

not less than fifty aircraft. Fifty-against one destroyer. Did the clot believe they wouldn't take off once he started banging? And what the hell did he base his superiority on? That stoush this morning wasn't so hot. Not by a hell of a long shot. He admitted it himself.

Now they were headed back at high speed into a suicidal trap. Now he should be somewhere between Moresby and Townsville course south, no worries, content in his job, three weeks leave coming up...

Rennie slammed shut the ledger he was working on and shoved his chair back. He was in the passage when a young seaman came up to him.

"Excuse me, 'Swain. I've got my first badge coming up. Can I see you for a moment?"

"No!" Rennie snapped, and strode down the passage.

Commander Bentley was, happily for his peace of mind, unaware of his coxswain's reaction to an operation which was designed partly for his benefit.

He watched the night falling wide and dense on all sides of the ship and he listened to the whine of the wind in the rigging and the wet swish of the water rushing down her sides.

But these normal sights and sounds impinged only casually on his consciousness. As always when a decision to engage had been made, his brain was planning far ahead, judging, forecasting, allowing for eventualities, remembering past experiences.

A recent memory slid into his mind. His head turned to Randall beside him. The ship was closed-up at night action-stations, the complementary precaution to her routine at dawn.

"That fellow Pascoe," he said, "what've you done with him? He's not still on the pom-pom?"

"Like hell he is!" Randall, the gunnery-officer, growled. "I've shifted him to the port oerlikon, ammunition supply; He can't bugger-up anything there. Even a Girl Guide can carry drums of ammunition!"

Bentley grinned slightly. The reference was perhaps unfair to a fine body of young womanhood, but the meaning was clear enough. He said nothing, but he was thinking of the training and sense of responsibility which had caused Randall, without orders, to remove

the weakness from the important pom-pom.

Suddenly he felt confident again. They would do it-they would lambast that Jap airfield and they would get away and they would hold the ship together.

They had to. The whole ship's company would know that he had planned and decided on this operation by himself. He was the instigator, he was responsible, he was not acting on senior-officer orders.

Already, perhaps foolishly, he had planted in their minds a conception of their own inadequacy. It might have been better if he hadn't mentioned that air-attack. If they failed this time, if the shooting was not accurate, if they could not lather that strip before a vengeful enemy could get off to them, it could take months of painful rehabilitation before they could be lifted back to their old efficiency.

If they were still alive to care...

He thought these things, standing beside the binnacle in the cool night, grateful for the rush of air past his face, and he was perfectly aware of the strangeness of his thoughts.

Two months ago they would not have entered his head. Two months ago his sole consideration would have been the planning of the operation. His weapons and their men were seasoned and sure - all he had to do was to order them into triumphant action.

But now he had a disinterested coxswain and at least three rotten members affecting his crew. Now he had a thief and a gambler. And now his crew, hard-worked, denied leave, were ripe for disaffection.

You can drill men for hours every day; you can drive yourself to set an example of alertness and application to duty; but you cannot prevent them from gambling, and stealing, and listening to whining voices which bring their dissatisfactions out into the open. Not when their grievances are soundly based.

The abrupt realisation of where his thoughts were taking him had an actual physical effect. He stepped down from the wooden grating and walked quickly to his stool. He hoisted himself up and his thought moved on:

Damn it all! He was condemning his men without a shade of proof. Assuming in them weaknesses which had no real base other than his suspicions and prophecies. He had trained them well,

certainly, but the basic material had to be there. You don't mould steel out of dross. They would come out of this just as solidly as they had out of the other actions. He must cling to that, be must believe in it completely.

His problem was not what *might* happen to his men, but to root out the cancer now growing amongst them. The surgery of action was required, not the unfounded, gnawing doubts of presumption as to the future.

His head swung round.

"Bosun's mate?"

"Sir?"

"Cox'n on the bridge!"

The coxswain had picked up his lifebelt - you never moved without it at night at sea - and was about to seek the coolness of the upper-deck when the bosun's mate poked his head into the chief's mess. His eyes found Rennie in the hot red lighting - ordinary light destroyed night vision.

"Captain, Cox'n - on the bridge."

The head withdrew and Rennie glanced at Hooky's interested face.

"Looks like the flap's started," Rennie said sourly, "you'd better join the happy throng."

"He didn't mention me," Hooky answered doubtfully.

"He did in his cabin this morning. Talked about a conference. Come on - it'll be hard enough listening to all the guff about detection without having to repeat it to you afterwards.

"Okay," Hooky said, and kept the anger out of his voice.

They climbed up to the bridge together.

Bentley was still on his stool, and remained sitting there when Rennie said:

"Cox'n, sir. I brought the Buffer in case you want him."

"Good idea," Bentley said at once, and Rennie knew his forebodings had been right. "We'll talk here."

"Yes, sir."

"Now," Bentley started, and he deliberately kept his voice at normal pitch - it would not hurt for the word to get around that

authority was on to the business down below. “Have there been any more reports of thieving or gambling?”

Reports of gambling...? Rennie mentally sneered. He said:

“No, sir. Nothing more.”

“You’ve been through the messdeck this afternoon? The petty-officers are helping you?”

Watch it, Rennie’s mind warned. This bloke doesn’t muck about.

“Well... no, sir.”

“Oh? Why not?”

Bentley’s voice was curt. He knew that the bosun’s mate and the signalman would hear it, but he didn’t mind that. The news that the Old Man was on the cox’n’s back about this wouldn’t do any harm.

“Because, sir,” Rennie answered, his tone also crisp under Bentley’s, “the chief bosun’s mate was on the messdeck last night. I consider that anyone running a board - if they were - wouldn’t be such a fool as to set it up so soon after that.”

“I couldn’t agree less, cox’n,” Bentley said levelly. “If I were running this crown and anchor board I’d have it going again ten minutes after the Buffer did his rounds. For precisely the reason you have just put forward, And, it seems, I’d be doing the right thing. Eh?”

“Not necessarily, sir,” Rennie answered, needled. “We don’t know it was running again.”

“There’s lots of things we don’t know,” Bentley said flatly, “what we have to do is start assuming. And I’d say it’s safe to assume that board’s been in operation this afternoon - maybe even now.”

“Yes, sir,” Rennie said.

There was little else he could say. He was still, as Bentley believed him to be, a taut hand; and he was before his captain.

“We’ve got to stamp on this, hard,” Bentley continued, “and keep the pressure on. If we can’t catch them we’ll frighten ‘em. I want you two to go below right now. You forrard, cox’n, you aft, Buffer. And don’t be at all shy about broadcasting why you’re on the prowl. All right?”

“And the cockatoo, sir?” Rennie asked drily.

At that moment Bentley came very close to delivering as scorching a blast as anyone had heard on that bridge. Rennie’s tone

did not escape him, and the defeatism of the man exasperated him. But he was still the coxswain, and a patent reduction of his authority through a publicly delivered rocket could do great harm.

There was also to be remembered Rennie's mental state. Bentley tried consciously to remember that when he spoke.

"The cockatoos will screech," he said evenly, "but that won't worry us. My main concern now is stopping this business, scaring it off. Sooner or later thief or gambler will slip up. Then we pounce. Until then, I want the messdecks regularly patrolled. Is that clear?"

"Clear, sir," Hooky answered heartily, and didn't give a damn what the coxswain thought.

"Very well, then, get to it. I also want lights-out at ten o'clock enforced. Tired men, with what we've got on our hands, are not a pleasant prospect."

He nodded, and the two men saluted and turned for the ladder.

They did not speak on the way down, and at the foot of the ladder Hooky turned aft, heading for the quarterdeck mess-deck beyond the tubes. The coxswain walked slowly forrard. His face set, for though Bentley had made no specific charges Rennie felt he had been reprimanded.

Stirring in his mind, as Bentley had meant it to, was a secondary animosity, this one directed against Beuring,

In *Pelican* he had had little trouble with the big dark man. There had been occasional pilfering, but nothing serious, nor had there been wide-spread gambling. *Pelican's* men numbered fewer than *Wind Rode's,* and for long they had been awake up to Beuring, and had kept their lockers secure against the suspected Pascoe.

But here the field was unharvested, lush. Only for this gambling, and its inevitable effect, Rennie felt he might have made of his new berth a tolerable experience. Now he was in the middle of trouble.

So that when he saw the shadow merge into the night ahead of him, Rennie's thin face firmed into a mask of anger. Could he have seen it, Bentley, the psychologist, would have been grimly satisfied.

They were quicker this time, for now Beuring knew for certain that authority was on to him. When Rennie stepped into the messdeck Beuring was sitting at the table with only three men for company. Before him, the page half-covered with handwriting, was a letter-

pad.

"Night, 'Swain," he greeted the visitor casually, "how d'you find the new berth?" His hand took in the larger messdeck. "Like the Troc. after the old bird, eh?"

Rennie was as much deceived as he felt like sparring.

"You've been at it again, Beuring," he stated flatly.

"What's that, chief? Writing letters? Ah well, you know me- always one for keeping the floosies happy!"

He grinned, and Rennie's next words tightened the gesture.

"You're a quarterdeckman. What are you doing on the foc's'le messdeck?"

Beuring's eyes narrowed. He hadn't thought of that - he couldn't say he was visiting, not with the writing-pad ostensibly in use before him.

"I reckoned it'd be cooler up here, 'Swain." He tried to make his voice easy.

"You're a liar!" Rennie answered deliberately.

"Now look here..."

"Shut up and sit down!" Rennie's voice was vicious; several heads poked up from hammocks. "You're up here to run a crown and anchor board! I'm warning you, Beuring - I'm going to get you for this."

Beuring was on his feet, his eyes hot.

"You can't call me a liar, cox'n! I can put in to see the skipper about that!"

"You can," Rennie sneered, "but you won't You haven't the guts to stand before the captain. But I'm telling you this, Beuring - one more step out of line, one more cockatoo who cringes away when I walk along the upper-deck and you'll be standing before the captain all right!"

His spare frame turned to take in the messdeck.

"And that goes for any sucker dumb enough to fall for this fowl's crooked racket! D'you hear me? The heat's on."

The thin face swung back to Beuring. The seaman was several stone heavier than his opponent, and rank did not matter in those few tense seconds. But it was Beuring's eyes which fell before the cold anger in Rennie's.

"Dingo," said Rennie in a hard clear voice, and then he swung on

his heel and strode from the messdeck.

Outside near the guard-rail he halted. He was breathing quickly, and he felt enervated after the vehement few minutes in there. He put his face up to the cool clear stars and gradually the tension eased. It was then he wondered, idly and briefly, at the sudden return to his old form which the exchange on the messdeck had represented.

"Anything forrard?" Hooky's deep voice spoke beside him.

"No," Rennie answered without turning. "If they were up to anything they got rid of it damned quick." He was about to tell his messmate what he had said to Beuring, but the anger had evaporated.

"I'm turning in," he grunted, and walked off to the mess.

The bridge was quiet, and tense.

Radar had reported a land echo half an hour before. Bentley had worried about the enemy's possessing radar, but he solaced himself with the reflection that if they had, they would have spotted the ship last night. It seemed they had not had time to establish aerials on the hills in the middle of the island.

At 20 knots, silent, not a chink of light showing in the blackness of the cloudy night, *Wind Rode* slid on towards the black bulk of the land. Bentley had delayed closing-up for action so that his men would gain the maximum of rest, but now as he lowered his glasses he knew he must wait no longer.

"All right," he said quietly to Randall, "get them closed-up. And warn the petty-officers to keep them quiet about it."

The warning was not needed. Hit and run forays like this were peculiarly suited to a destroyer's function, and *Wind Rode's* men were acutely aware of the requirement of silence.

All armament had been tested through during night-action stations. Now there was no calling of orders and reports, but a muted whine of the hydraulic pumps as the three heavy mountings followed director, pointing where it pointed, out over the starb'd bow towards the land.

All down her length black barrels fingered the sky as the pom-pom and oerlikons trained on to the target bearing.

From captain to ordinary-seaman supply-number, the ship was one tensed and watchful brain. The time was forty minutes past

midnight.

Bentley had allowed himself two hours for cruising round the island in search of betraying activity. He was not concerned about last night's failure to sight any of it - then he had been looking for ships, and he had kept his own vessel well off the coast, and the glasses of his lookouts concentrated on the shoreline.

This time he would be much closer in, looking for a different target.

He had allowed himself two hours, but he was not surprised when the first sign came within twenty minutes of the beginning of their patrol. Destroyer warfare was full of surprises - what you had to do was not to waste time marvelling, but instead grab Lady Luck fervently by both hands.

Every man on the bridge heard it at almost the same time. The sound was so clear, and sudden, that only the starb'd lookout made a half-hearted report.

They waited on the bridge, every head turned to the land, listening- the sound reached them in a pulsing drum of noise: the rhythmic thunder of massed aircraft engines. Bentley heard, and acted.

"Stop both engines!" Then, "Anything on radar?"

"No radar contact, sir," the answer came at once.

It those aircraft were air-borne he was taking a risk in stopping her. But he had to weigh the risk against the chance of a pilot spotting their white wake. She eased to a stop, and in the next second they knew the position of those aircraft.

In the middle of the large, eastern island, off whose coast they lay, a fairly high hill rose, clothed to its peak in thick jungle. From behind that hill, exhaust pipes glowing like red meteors in the dark sky, surged suddenly a large group of aircraft.

"Radar office, bridge!" the voice sprang from a pipe, "large formation aircraft, coming towards!"

Somebody answered that report, but all eyes were on the thundering group. Radar was a precious ally, but it was never more unneeded than at that moment.

"Heavy bombers!" Randall said huskily, "almost certainly flown in from Rabaul."

"At least twenty," Bentley answered from under his glasses, "twin-

engined Bettys. They're coming in..."

His voice broke off abruptly. The second sign was even more vehement and obvious than the first. And once again nobody reported it - the double line of flares which sprang into red life directly opposite the ship.

Nobody commented on their luck. Good fortune was mingled with the most critical danger. It needed only one of twenty pilots to pick out the long grey shape.

"Those flares will help us," Bentley said suddenly, "they won't be able to see a thing to seaward from the strip."

"First aircraft coming in to land," the signal-yeoman reported flatly.

Bentley swung his glasses. He could see the plane clearly, every detail of it in the upflung light of the flares, and the sight confirmed what he had already guessed-the Japanese working parties who had built the strip had cleared most of the trees from this, seaward, side. The reasons were obvious, just as was the advantage the clear line of fire would give to his guns. He picked up the director phone.

"Keep your eyes on that first aircraft, Guns. It should taxi up to the right-hand end of the strip. That will be your aiming point."

He juggled the phone back and Randall said, raising his voice against the multi-engined thunder:

"You're going to wait till they're all down?"

"Yes." Bentley clipped. He knew what Randall was getting at, and he had made his decision. It would be spectacular to catch each aircraft as it touched down-and suicidally dangerous. First, they would be firing at a speeding target; second, it was not hard to guess what the rest of the bomber flight would do to the revealed firer.

"I'll wait till ten minutes after the last one's down," he went on. "If they've come from Rabaul they'll be low on fuel. The ground-crews will service them right away. That means the planes will be inoperable, plenty of petrol about."

"A very nice set-up," Randall nodded.

Neither man spoke of what was foremost in his mind - there would be another very nice set-up if the ship were discovered. But, Bentley was thinking, projecting himself as he always did into the enemy's point of view, it was highly probable that every pilot of those circling

planes was watching the flare-edged landing strip. As well, there would be no suspicion amongst them. The strip had been lit, therefore it naturally followed that the area was safe from intruders.

Bentley took up the engine-room phone. The engineer answered it.

"Chief? Captain here. About twenty aircraft are in the process of touching-down." He paused, but Mr. Fry made no comment. His silence was comment enough, Bentley thought grimly.

"There's a slight set here, drifting us in towards land. I'll have to make a few engine movements, but until further notice all orders will come down by phone. It's possible the bells could be heard ashore."

"We're that close in?" Mr. Fry grunted.

"We've got to be. Every shell must count."

"Mmmm. I suppose you'll want full power once we start to run?"

"You're so right! Every ounce you've got."

"You'll get it!" The gruff voice paused. Then: "Happy hunting with those bloody bang-bangs!" He hung up.

The next fifteen minutes were as queer a space of time as any man on that quiet bridge could remember. They were used to danger, but not this sort - here a Damocles bomb hung over their heads, and their chief aid, their speed, they could not use to avoid it. There was no doubt that any sort of wake would be spotted instantly from the air. They might as well burn a searchlight.

They had to sit there and wait; and every aircraft had to be down before they could take a hand in the game. But, spicing the tension, making a familiar sensation unique, was the exultant thought of what they could do to those parked machines once they did start to fire.

Another aircraft bellowed in. They were so close they heard plainly the abrupt screech of rubber as the tyres bit, and spun. The bomber slowed, then taxied on up to the end of the strip. The engines spluttered, died.

Silence. No one spoke. Eight pairs of binoculars on the bridge were scanning the sky. The signal-yeoman broke the quiet.

"I think that's the last one, sir."

Randall stepped to the radar voice-pipe. He spoke into its mouth, listened, then came upright.

"No further radar contacts, sir," he reported to Bentley.

"Right."

Still the captain made no move. He had a few minutes before he irrevocably committed the ship. The doubts came back again: there were at least twenty bombers on that strip; could one ship handle a force like that? Should he get to hell out of it, organise reinforcements? Was this a calculated risk - or suicidal stupidity?

And would those bombers be still there tomorrow night? Or would they take-off at dawn for Guadal Canal?

He took up the director phone.

"Guns?"

"Sir."

"We'll open in divided control. A and B mountings will take the aircraft, under director control. I want X-mounting to crater the airstrip. No need to hole the lot of it - a line of craters across the strip half-way down will hold them on the ground. When that's completed X-mounting will revert to primary control. Clear?"

"Have got, sir. That's a damn good idea."

"I hope so," Bentley said drily. Then he added, in a different tone of voice:

"Stand-by to open fire."

He put the phone back and the flares went out.

At once his eyes went to the right-hand end of the runway, the target area. And he knew that the Japs could do what they liked with their flares-just so long as those half-a-dozen pin-points of light among the parked aircraft remained to show him where they were.

"What's the ship doing?"

"No forward movement, sir," Pilot answered - he had kept continual watch on his bearing points. "We're being set inshore very slightly. Almost negligible."

"Watch it," Bentley ordered automatically.

His gunnery mind was judging - you've got your targets, no wind across the line of fire, no enemy speed, no own-ship speed, range near enough to point blank. A gunnery picnic.

Now... But a matter of seconds after he opened fire? What if he failed? What if his ship was crippled, even if she were not blasted to pieces? What would be the Admiral's reaction to that? You

commanded a destroyer, you were encouraged to take calculated risks. Wonderful - providing you brought it off.

He could still swing the ship's head and sneak safely away. If he gave the order to fire he would be staking his career, his life, his ship on the accuracy and efficiency of his gunners.

That, he knew with absolute certitude, was the really vital point of his doubts. Could he trust the training and morale and plain guts of his men?

Abruptly he swung to Randall. His voice was a curt snap in the silence of the bridge.

"Open fire!"

There was no radar control in this shoot. Radar is uncannily accurate, by day or night, but the system needs a distinct target to echo from. Here the target was a flat strip of beaten coral, the aircraft it held, with trees to confuse a radar-aerial's function.

It was Mr. Lasenby, Gunner, who controlled the shoot. Visually, personally, as he had been trained to do under the Navy's insistent maxim that you never know when your complicated instruments might fail.

He was firing his four forrard guns in almost the same way as his bearded predecessor had done at the Battle of Jutland nearly 30 years before: staring through his powerful monocular sight at the ranks of silver wings and the lights of the servicing-parties, sighting his fall of shot and ordering verbal corrections.

These last were few. His range-finder had for the past ten minutes been ranging on the target, and the layers and trainers at the guns were following with meticulous attention the director's guiding pointers.

The first broadside of four shells landed, abrupt stabs of red, a few yards short. Lasenby ordered "Up two hundred, rapid broadsides!" and the next quartet of messengers burst smack in the middle of the parked planes.

At first, no petrol flamed. It took three broadsides before a sheet of red leaped vividly into life. The fiery wall lit the target area beautifully. Through his glasses Bentley could see men striving to shift the doomed aircraft, some shackling tractors on to undercarriages, some with desperate intent trying to push the bombers

bodily.

But you can't move an aeroplane very far in six seconds, and that was all the time it took for *Wind Rode's* sweating gunners to ram fresh food into the guns' hot maws.

He knew then that he would bring it off; knew that his doubts were wrong and his careful calculations correct. All they had needed was to remain undetected while the planes were landing. The Japs had failed to sight them, and now they were paying for their omission.

Bentley had known his fire would be effective against a target like this, but he was grimly pleased to see by how much his expectations had fallen short.

It was slaughter. The big aircraft were as helpless under the ship's flail as if they had been stranded on the sea from which destruction was plunging upon them.

Not even an answering shot challenged the sea-raider; the surprise was complete and numbing. And it was doubtful, he decided, if the Japs had had time to mount any sizeable guns - they would naturally rely on aircraft to beat off an attack.

Those aircraft were now almost wiped out as a recognisable threat. The whole target area was aflame, and still the forceful deluge poured ashore. He transferred his glasses left, to where X-mounting's shells were bursting in a steady line across the strip. It looked as though he had been overcautious there - he would bring the two after guns back on to the main target.

He spoke to Randall and the gunnery-officer gave the order to the director phone-number. There was no appreciable diminution in *Wind Rode's* bellowing but the red bursts on the strip died out.

Bentley leaned to the wheelhouse voice-pipe and gave the order which would swing the ship slightly so that X-mounting could bear on the end of the strip. He came upright and the signal yeoman's voice came, unemotional, efficient:

'Two fighters taking off, sir."

Bentley saw at once the two moving shapes-gleaming, reflecting in the waxing firelight. His reaction was immediate.

"Burn the searchlight on those fighters! Close-range weapons engage!"

The fighters, low and squat, were moving slowly clear of the

holocaust, but shortly they would pick up speed down the runway. No one thought, or had time, to light the flares. The aircraft were heading into darkness.

Then a great yellow eye opened from the destroyer's midships and the shining finger was laid upon them. The pom-pom opened fire in a staccato snarl of sound which pierced through the deeper roar of the big guns.

It was long range for a pom-pom, but the target was clear and comparatively slow. The stitches of red tracer curved out over the sea and shore and bit into the leading fighter's fuselage.

"This will be good," Randall said viciously, "if X-gun did its work properly!"

X-gun had. The leading plane was on fire, a few yards in front of its companion, when its nose dipped abruptly and its tail flung skywards. The second pilot must have seen the shell craters in the light of the bright beam. He jerked back on his column. His nose, the propeller a spinning arc of silver in the searchlight, lifted-and the next second smashed forcefully into the upflung tail of its mate.

There was a splatter of chopped pieces, clear in the light, then the second fighter thumped back to earth and rocketed on in a slewing rush of spurting coral and petrol-driven flame.

"Close shutters," Bentley ordered, "close-range weapons cease fire."

The big eye winked shut and the pom-pom stuttered, to silence. There remained the timed crash of the ship's full broadsides.

Then Bentley put into operation a small facet of his plans, one he had decided on well before radar had made its landfall.

"Cox'n?" he said into the voice-pipe.

"Sir?"

"You've got your deadlights closed down there?"

The coxswain hesitated a second - of course the shutters were down over the wheelhouse portholes. Wondering, he answered:

"Yes, sir, they're down."

Bentley kept his voice normally crisp - he must not reveal that his next words had been planned.

"We're pretty safe now, I think. Open the deadlights for a moment and let your team have a look. It's worth seeing."

He knew he had succeeded when he recognised the controlled eagerness in Rennie's voice.

"Aye, aye, sir. Thank you, sir!"

Bentley straightened behind the binnacle, staring at the inferno off the port bow, hearing the slam of each broadside and feeling the blast of displaced air like a hard slap on the face.

What he was doing was perhaps as dangerous as anything he had planned for that violent night. He had succeeded completely in his mission. Now he was deliberately jeopardising that success. It would not take the Japs long to fill in a few craters and make the strip operable; he should be taking the ship out at top speed, making the most of every second left to him of their disorganisation.

Yet still he waited, letting the guns loose off more destruction.

Below him Rennie had the deadlight unscrewed. He leaned forward past the mouth of the voice-pipe and stared with concentration at the sight before him.

He could see the shells bursting, and in the lurid light the broken, twisted remains of many aircraft. But the most spectacular effect was a little to the right of the strip. A shell had found the fuel dump. A solid sheet of flame fluxed a hundred feet into the air, and from its lofty peak the smoke poured continuously at the sky.

Rennie too could hear each regular broadside, and feel the concussion against his face, and the jerking of the ship. He was quite close to B-mounting, and clearly to him in the loading intervals come the stamp of feet, the metallic clang of the power-rammers, the shouted "Ready!" and then the warning note of the fire-gong.

He was not gunnery-trained, but he had been at sea more than long enough for him to know that this ship was drilling faster and firing more accurately than most he had known.

The telegraphsman said, "Let's have a gander, 'Swain," and Rennie came back to his wheel. He said into the belled mouth of the pipe:

"Some sight, sir. We're really doing 'em over!"

Not till afterwards did he reflect that Bentley must have been waiting at his end of the pipe. His voice came back at once.

"Yes, I think we've done what we came for. All right, 'Swain-stand-by to get under way."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The coxswain could not know that his captain had a small, tight smile on his face; nor that Bentley had recognised in his voice an appreciativeness which came very close to pride.

But the captain had put thought of his coxswain from his busy mind.

"Let's get out of here." he grunted to Randall. "Starb'd twenty! Full ahead both engines!"

This time the engine-room bells clanged, triumphant, uncaring.

There were other eyes engaged apart from Rennie's while he was staring out the porthole - searching eyes.

When Beuring had broken up the crown and anchor game that afternoon, and had walked off with his pockets bulging, Pascoe had quietly followed him. He knew the gambler would not hide his takings in his kit-locker, but he was disappointed when he saw Beuring step into the bath-room. He waited at the canteen, and his cunning little eyes lost their disappointment when he saw the big man emerge, minus bulges. Beuring's pile, then, was hidden somewhere in the bath-room.

Pascoe was too experienced in his craft to step into the bathroom at once. Now that he knew the compartment, he could afford to wait. His chance, the perfect chance, came as soon as the fighters had been disposed of and the captain ordered "Cease-fire".

The rest of the oerlikon's crew clustered to the guardrail, exulting among themselves, their eyes riveted on the destruction ashore. Pascoe had slipped quietly away.

Now he was in the bathroom, and his eyes went at once to the ventilating shafts. There was not a soul within a hundred feet of him, and those who were below decks were closed-up at ammunition-supply posts. But he had to be quick, for to be missed, and reported, at a time like this would very definitely mean his neck.

Swiftly his eager eyes scanned the white-painted shafts. In all of them, spaced regularly through each compartment, were fitted small access doors, about four inches square. There was one directly above the mirror.

Pascoe reached up and twisted the handle. He knew he had struck pay-dirt when on the inside of the handle his groping fingers found

tied a piece of small, strong cord. He pulled. A moment later and the white cotton bag was in his avaricious fingers.

He had stuffed most of the notes into his overall pockets when he froze. Quick footsteps sounded outside in the passage. Desperately he glared about him, but there was nowhere he could hide. He was trapped.

The steps came closer, right up to the door, and passed He blew out his restricted breath. Some seaman sent on a mission, he judged. Shaking, he emptied the bag and flipped it back in the shaft. Half a minute later he was back on the oerlikon platform. He would not need to steal again on this commission.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ONCE DURING THE REST of that exultant, apprehensive night, they heard, somewhere to the south of them, the sound of aircraft. Bentley closed the ship up again, but when radar reported the contact opening the range to the south he fell the gun-crews out.

He remained on the bridge till dawn, and when he finally went below for a shower and breakfast she had put 150 miles behind her. Now, to find her, a Jap aircraft had more than twenty thousand square miles as a haystack for this needle.

They did not find her. She made her Guadal Canal landfall on a clear, hot morning and every man who could gathered on the upper-deck to stare at the huge concourse of shipping.

Rennie stood outside the chiefs' mess, waiting for special sea-dutymen to be piped to close-up. Hooky Walker came up beside him and leaned his good hand on the rail.

"Strike me purple!" he invited in a wondering tone, "look at that lot, will you? Wouldn't those Jap mongrels've liked to get in amongst it!"

"They would have—only for Bentley," Rennie said quietly.

Hooky glanced at him curiously, then up again at the row upon row of transports.

"Oh, I dunno," he grinned, "we lent a bit of a hand, y'know. Ah... what'd you think of the old bucket now?"

He felt he had been too obvious, too soon, when the cool grey eyes looked back at him.

"What I've always thought," Rennie said evenly, "as far as I'm concerned she's a good ship—to be out of. By now I should be pulling into Brisbane, not this forsaken dump!"

The words were plain enough, but the tone lacked something of its earlier acidity. Hooky thought: You're all right, Rennie, but you're not with us—not yet. He said:

"Yeah. And tonight you'd have blown all your dough on some floosie. Speakin' of dough... The messdeck's been quiet since we put the heat on. And is that slob Beuring ropeable!"

"Eh?" Rennie turned his head to look at him.

"Yeah. You don't see him like I do. Ever since we beat it away

from the island he's been goin' round like a bear with three sore heads. I reckon we've hit that gent bloody hard."

Rennie was silent a moment.

"I don't know about that," he said thoughtfully. "I know that bird pretty well by now."

At least you're willing to talk about it now, Hooky reasoned. He asked:

"What d'you mean, Jack?"

It was the first time he had used the Christian name. Rennie did not show if he noticed it.

"Beuring's been at this game a long time," he said, "he must have felt the heat on before. He's had the board out at least twice, and you can bet he's made a nice packet already. Even if he hadn't, that boy's the sort who'd bend with the storm, lie low till the panic died down. No," he shook his head, "he'd be going about as usual, the willing seaman to our faces and grinning his great head off behind our backs. If something's bothering him now, it's not our efforts on the messdeck."

"Then what the hell is it?"

"Search me. But you can bet your deferrers something, or somebody, has got at Beuring."

Rennie stopped. He turned his head from the shipping in the harbour and he looked at Hooky speculatively.

"I wonder..." he said, softly.

"Eh?"

"Nothing... . Just thought."

Hooky waited. When Rennie did not add to his words, he said:

"You want to clobber this business, don't you?" It was more a statement.

"Damn it all! Of course I do! I'm the ruddy cox'n, aren't I?"

Well now! Hooky thought, that's more like it. I dunno what's changed you, cobs, but something's got under the old skin. He said, warmly:

"Don't worry, Jack—we'll trap these birds!"

When he had moved off to the foc'sle, Rennie lingered a moment at the rails. Hooky's attitude of friendliness was not lost on him, and the knowledge started a train of introspective thought. Most men in

authority are self-analysts, and Rennie's mind went smoothly and subconsciously into the process of dissection.

There was no doubt, he acknowledged to himself, that a good deal of the earlier bitterness had watered down. Why? His heartfelt outburst against Beuring, probably, and almost certainly because of the effect the ship's superb shooting had had upon him last night.

His mind went back to the scene he had witnessed through the porthole, and, diagnostically, he found something about that porthole to exercise his curiosity.

It wasn't the flames, or the shell-bursts, or the sustained rate of fire. There'd been not a week when he hadn't been in action in any one of three ships himself, No, it was the porthole itself which held the odd element.

And then he had it. Never before had a captain granted permission to open the deadlights: first, he had more to do in action than think about a triviality like that, and second the deadlights were shut for a very good reason—to keep light in and flying splinters out.

And now the whole reason was clear in Rennie's vitalised mind. The captain's action had been deliberate. He had planned to have him see just what the ship could do. Of course he was right in this judgment—hadn't Bentley been ready and waiting at the voice-pipe for his comment?

Anger sharp and bitter twisted in Rennie's guts. He had been treated like a child, like a raw ordinary-seaman; shown the working of the ship with a paternal pat on the back and a "Now, sonny, you must try and be as good as the other boys."

For a moment he let the anger rise unchecked, enjoying its righteous fierceness. But the diagnostic analysis went on also unchecked. And with rueful honesty he admitted that his anger was against himself more than Bentley; that his lack of interest had been so apparent that the captain had been forced into a tactic like that.

His self-analysis did not go deep enough to make him wonder at the change which had made him admit his fault; instead his thoughts ran on to encompass another interesting point—Bentley was a very clever officer indeed. He could have come his rank and ordered him to buck up— with sullen results. Instead he had chosen the subtle method. With—and an inward grin twitched—solid results.

There were only two flies in the healing ointment— Beuring and Pascoe. With them out of the way, off his mind; with a ship as good as this one, commanded by an intelligent, perceptive man as well as a skilled officer, he could put in his time comfortably enough. Sooner or later they must be sent south for leave. And with a bloke like Bentley deciding what they would get into, shell or bomb damage might make it sooner than later...

He gazed out over the sun-sparkling water towards the shell-riven island and suddenly he felt more content than at any time since he'd joined the ship. Unthought of, there was another element working on Rennie's mind—the peculiar fatalism of sailors, the knowledge that whatever "they" do to you, it's not worth a fried frankfurt trying to kick against it. You're in the outfit, you do what you're told. As simple as that.

A pipe shrilled and the bosun's mate called:

"Special sea-dutymen close-up. Cable party muster on the foc's'le."

The coxswain put aside his soliloquising and mounted the ladder to the wheelhouse.

The interview with the Admiral aboard his battleship was pleasant.

It could hardly have failed to be, with what Bentley had to tell him. But it was not his professional prospect which had made the destroyer commander's heart lighter that morning.

They had anchored, and the coxswain had come to the bridge to make his usual report. Bentley had listened, and then he said:

"That was a nice come-to, 'Swain. You seem to have the hang of her now."

Rennie had smiled back into the lean burned face.

"She's a pearl to handle, sir."

That was all. The words were not even vehemently, or enthusiastically, delivered. But Rennie had said them with a little appreciative sideways nod of his head, and he had spoken completely naturally. No forced respect, no disciplined agreement—and no wariness, or withholding; simply the easy maturalness of a man pleased with his work and his tool.

"Well," said the Admiral when his visitor had finished, and tried to keep the wonder out of a face which he had thought had seen too

much to feel that sensation ever again, “you seem to have done what I’d call a complete job back there. I guess you’re mighty pleased with yourself?”

His voice was pleasantly nasal, drawling. His uniform was different from that of the British admirals Bentley had met, but his weathered face held the same stamp of surety and experience and wisdom.

“I’m pleased to have got out of it sir,” Bentley replied truthfully.

“I guess so, I guess so,” the older man chuckled. The smile eased away and the voice changed.

“You think you got all of them?”

“I can’t say that for sure, sir. They may have had some stowed in dispersal bays. We counted fifteen aircraft burning, and there was a hell of a fire from the fuel dump. I think this, sir,” he ended definitely, “there certainly aren’t enough serviceable aircraft left to mount an attack on Guadal Canal.”

“M’mm. Trouble is, they could fly in reinforcements.”

“Even when they know we’re on to them, sir?”

“Even then. This target here is tempting enough for ‘em to take all sorts of risks.” He slowly took up his pipe. The lined face was thoughtful.

“What I expected, actually, was a seaborne attack. I know there’s a Jap cruiser force operating somewhere in the area. But the monkeys have avoided my reconnaissance.” His eyes flicked up to Bentley’s face—quick, probing, seaman eyes. “You sighted nothing of surface craft?”

“No, sir. There are a couple of harbours, but I was right round the area night before last. And if there’d been anything there last night I think they might have made their presence known.”

“They sure would have,” grinned the Admiral. The gesture again was brief. “All right, then,” he ended crisply, “there’s nothing else?”

There was certainly something else. Bentley wanted to ask for a relief, for his ship and his men to be sent south for leave. He could imagine how the waiting face before him now would change if he asked for a favour like that, especially after an action on which it would be assumed he was trading. There were many ships out through those portholes which had been out here longer than his own.

He wanted to ask this favour, and he said:

"No, sir, nothing else."

"Good. Now I have something for you, Bentley. You've earned a few days' leave. I'm sending you back to Moresby."

"Thank you, sir." Moresby was better than nothing— shore-leave, fresh milk and food, mail.

"It's a busman's holiday, young fellow," the admiral said shrewdly, reading correctly the expression on Bentley's face, "you should know by now you get nothing for nothing in my outfit."

"Yes, sir."

"I have some important despatches I want delivered personally in Moresby. And I want you to take another look at that airstrip. They won't expect you back so soon." The short grin came again. "Only a damn fool would do that. But I want to know if there's any build-up activity going on there. And remember this, young feller— if you do sight anything in the way of a build-up, get to blazes out of it and then signal me. Understand? You won't bring it off a second time."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then." The Admiral nodded and Bentley stood up. A hand came out and Bentley's fingers were taken in a hard grip. "Nice work, son. Damn it all! You brought off a brilliant action! Now get on your way!"

"Yes, sir," Bentley grinned, and got on his way.

The sea about them was beautifully and monotonously blue. Guadal Canal was an hour astern, its shattered palms dropped below the liquid curve.

"This is the captain speaking."

There was no urgency, only curiosity, as they settled down to listen. They expected this—Bentley, like all sensible captains, believed in putting his men into the picture as soon as he could. He gave the important news first.

"We are bound for Moresby. I can't tell you, of course, how long our stay will be, but you can count on shore-leave—and mail, and cold beer. Perhaps even a dance."

He paused, and if he could have seen them he would not have been surprised at the unsmiling faces on the messdecks. Twenty mails

a day, bathing in cold beer, would not make of Moresby anything but what it was—a steaming dump.

"We have a little chore to do on the way across. It is possible, though not very probable, that the Japs have begun already to build-up their aircraft on the base we visited last night. Naturally the Admiral is interested in proceedings there. So we have been ordered to joke around and see what we can see. However, we..."

He was about to tell them that they would not this time engage the enemy. But Bentley knew better than most that a destroyer looking for trouble usually found it. There was no point in establishing in their minds an expectation of running from danger.

"... we should not be long on the job. I doubt very much if the Japs have the aircraft so quickly available to reinforce their stocks, even if they wanted to, now that they know the game's up as regards their secret strip. We should make Moresby in the afternoon of the twentieth. Incidentally, the Admiral was more than slightly pleased at last night's effort. So was I. Good work. That's all."

The crackle in the speakers died and Pascoe sneered:

"So that's all we get! 'Good work, boys!'"

"What are you griping about, mate?" a voice jeered, "he wasn't talkin' about you."

Pascoe muttered obscenely and got up from the mess-stool. He had little fat on his frame but he was sweating as profusely as the others. The wind had changed to dead astern, and *Wind Rode* was running under the sun wrapped in her own heated miasma.

The time was two o'clock, and work had ceased for the day. Scowling with his own unlovely temperament and with the humid heat Pascoe made his way into the passage, heading for the upper-deck. Men came behind him, for there was some shade on deck, and the wind might change.

Pascoe was passing the bathroom when the memory came back again. He indulged it consciously, as he had done forty times since he'd found the shaft's treasure. Now his thin mouth curved in a cunning, secret smile.

Not only had he lifted that big slob's roll, but he had it hidden in a place which was less safe than the captain's cabin, but not by much.

It was this thought which pleased Pascoe almost as much as the

actual possession of Beuring's money. He was sure in his own mind that nobody else would have thought of such an inviolate hiding place.

Two thefts of money had been reported to the coxswain, and every man in the ship knew a thief was loose. Those who had locks had secured their kit-lockers. A man would as soon have gone uninvited to his best friend's locker as he would have poked the captain on the nose. So rottenly potent had been the effect of Pascoe's thieving throughout the ship that a man disliked even being found on the messdeck alone. He did his business, and got out quickly.

Kit-lockers were absolutely taboo. Beuring's stolen money was now resting in Pascoe's kit-locker.

Men filed out on to the upper-deck, leaving the ovens below empty. Pascoe wandered aft, looking for a place to squat. Between the engine-room fans and the wired cage of the potato-locker was a passage about three feet wide and six feet long. It would have held three or four men comfortably in its cool shade, but now Pascoe saw it was occupied, by a man on a stretcher.

His mouth had opened to remonstrate. Then he saw the dark-coloured bulk of Beuring lying on the stretcher, his eyes closed. Pascoe changed his mind, and walked on. He solaced the consciousness of his cowardice with the helpful reflection that with what he had of Beuring's the big lout could have the passage.

Unknown to Pascoe, the coxswain was a few paces behind him. And he was looking for Beuring.

He saw the skinny figure halt, look into the passage, and then hurry on. When Rennie came up he also halted, and looked thoughtfully down at Beuring.

The coxswain was no Sherlock Holmes in deduction, but neither was he dull. And for years his official functions had kept him acquainted with the characters and operations of men like Beuring and Pascoe. It was a different Rennie who had listened to Hooky's description of the gambler's morose attitude, and he had given considerable thought to the reason for it.

He knew Beuring, he knew his type. Also he knew, naturally, that Beuring was in no official trouble. Therefore it required only a minor exercise in deduction to conclude that Beuring's trouble was

money. The gambler must have hauled in a nice pile during his operations. The point which interested Rennie was—did he still have it? And, if not, who did?

"You've got a good spot there, Beuring," he said casually.

The dark eyes opened. Rennie saw the belligerence in them change to watchfulness.

"It's not bad," Beuring grunted.

"Then I'd like to get in on it." Rennie's hand brushed the feet aside. Beuring sat up.

"You wouldn't like the whole bloody stretcher?"

"No thanks, this bit will do me fine."

Beuring waited, and Rennie recognised his wariness. He said: "Anything worrying you, Beuring?"

"You ought to know there ain't. You're the C.I.B. all rolled into one."

"I don't think you'd come to me with your worries," Rennie answered easily. It was not part of his plan to get nettled.

"I tell you I ain't got none!"

"My spies tell me different. They say you won a packet with that little canvas board, but you look like a bloke who's lost the lot."

"Who're you kidding?" Beuring sneered, and Rennie knew he was up against experienced cunning. "You got spies? They say I run a board? Why ain't I up before the Old Man then? I hear it's worth a few days' stoppage."

"Not a few days' stoppage of leave, Beuring—at least fourteen days' cells."

"Well, well! Only trouble with that lash-up of fourteen days is that we don't rate cells aboard this hooker."

"Oh, that can be easily fixed. I've no doubt the captain would settle you in the cable-locker—until we got to Moresby, then you'd be shipped south to Garden Island. They've got cells there, Beuring," Rennie ended solemnly.

"So I hear. But there's another snag. I don't run a crown and anchor board—and you ain't caught me."

Rennie shifted his attack.

"No, I haven't caught you, but you do run a board. I don't suppose I'll ever catch you. Not the way you pay your cockatoos."

For a second he thought he'd laid it on too thick. Then Beuring chuckled, an odd prideful sound, and he knew that his enemy's ego was his target.

"You're smart, Beuring, I'll hand you that. This is strictly unofficial, of course." He stopped, and fumbled for cigarettes. Several men went past, their eyes curious at sight of the oddly-assorted pair.

"So smart that I can't understand how you let a drongo like that beat you to it."

His voice was casual, but he was nearly taken by surprise at the big man's reaction. Beuring's dark face tightened and his eyes glowered.

"What the hell d'you mean by that?"

Rennie camouflaged the exultation surging through him.

"Come off it," he chided, "I know he lifted your roll. What makes you think he'd stop at you? The Number One target? I bet it took you hours to work out a place to stash it in." He shook his head. "Time you learned the safest place is the most obvious. Like a kit-locker, for instance."

That was a purely lucky stab in the dark, unintentional. He didn't know it then.

"I dunno what the hell you're gabbin' about," Beuring snarled. Rennie saw that his hands were balled fists.

"Look." He leaned forward confidentially. "I said I'd get you, Beuring. And if you slip up I will. But the tea-leafs more important to me than a gambler. This bloke made a sucker out of you. I want him. I want him stopped, fast. You make out a complaint about him and I'll have his locker searched within ten minutes. Now—how about it?"

The hot eyes stared into his.

"Who's this bloke you're talkin' about?"

Rennie's small smile was patient.

"You know damn well who I mean. Well?"

"So that's what you pratted yourself in on me for?" Beuring snarled. "You can get...!"

Rennie had no difficulty at all in feigning anger. He said coldly:

"You talk like that to me and you're up before the Bloke, smart!"

"That'll do me! You come along here makin' charges against

innocent men... Ah, leave me alone!"

Rennie left him alone. He walked quickly forrard and be had reached the door of his mess before he allowed the jubilation he felt to show through the angered mask of his face.

Hooky looked up as he stepped in.

"Hullo, hullo," the big man growled, "you look like a six-weeks' leave pass. In this flamin' heat...!"

"I think I've got him!" Rennie exulted. Hooky looked at him. "You remember you said Beuring was liverish. I reckoned someone had pinched his roll. I've just had a few choice words with him, and now I know it went off."

Hooky lifted himself from the bench.

"Pascoe?"

"Who else? I needled Beuring. He's ropeable. I also mentioned a safe place these days would be a kit-locker. If he goes down there we've got him!"

"Like hell! What if Pascoe hasn't stashed it in his locker?"

"That won't matter a damn. There have been reports of stealing. I find Beuring at another man's locker."

"Yeah, I see what you mean," Hooky said slowly. Then he swung his feet to the deck. "Come on—it won't take him long to go through a locker."

"Hold your horses, chum! I might as well take the Eighth Army down there. I'll handle it."

"He's tough."

"This is the Navy, not Woolloomooloo. If I catch him, he comes quietly."

Hooky nodded, and Rennie slipped from the mess.

He had guessed, rightly, that Beuring would watch him enter his mess before, and if, he made his move. He also guessed that the gambler would waste no time if he had convinced him—there would be hardly a man below decks in this heat.

He went quickly round the foc's'le and then down the ladder and into the passage on the opposite side to his mess. He was quite aware that he was relying on Beuring's believing that his real reason for accosting him was to enlist his help in trapping Pascoe. On that, and the ugly seeds he had planned about Pascoe's superiority in cunning.

He was dressed in shorts and sandals and his feet made no sound on the cortisone. He passed swiftly through the deserted iron-deck messes, and stepped over the coaming into the foc's'le.

He saw at once that the bait had been swallowed. Beuring was not only at Pascoe's kit-locker—his right hand clutched a bundle of notes.

Rennie stepped up behind him and Beuring swung.

"Able-seaman Beuring," Rennie said, "I'm charging you with stealing money on the mess-deck. Get your cap and muster on the bridge."

Rennie's voice was genuinely formal. He had laid the trap and he had caught his man. Now his whole interest was in the official presenting of the charge, and bringing the offender before the officer of the watch. Not till after did he appreciate the beautiful irony of the situation—he had not caught a gambler, but a thief stealing his own ill-gotten money.

But Beuring was more perceptive. He stared into the coxswain's face and he knew he was trapped—not accidentally, but deliberately. Trapped getting back his own money, money which he could not claim as his own without revealing where he got it.

Red rage flooded into his brain. The man standing stiffly before him was the epitome of everything he had lost—of Pascoe, of his money, of the lush racket which was now blasted. But most of all of Pascoe.

That rotten little mongrel had pinched his dough, this man here had used him to trap him. The redness flooded, blinded.

"You slimy bastard!" he mouthed.

"That's enough!" Rennie ordered harshly, "you're in bad enough as it is!"

"Then this won't hurt me!" Beuring snarled, and struck.

Rennie had never in his time as a petty-officer or chief had a hand raised against him. Nor was he a boxer. The fist took him on the cheek and spun him round against the mess-table.

Beuring struck again. The blow, aimed more with blind rage than science, smashed into Rennie's thin chest. He gasped with the force and hurt of it, but he forced himself up from the table and flung himself at the big man.

A fist took him on the mouth. He felt the numbing shock of the pain and he tasted the warm blood. He tried to close with Beuring knowing he could not match him, feeling the savage blows on his chest and face and striving to get a hold on those viciously-striking arms.

His body was thin and wiry, but it weighed almost three stone lighter than Beuring's. And he was an older man. He was almost exhausted by the killing punishment. Yet still he kept on his feet, even though all he could see of Beuring was a snarling, sweat-running face through a mist of pain and exhaustion.

He felt a hand clutch round his throat and he saw dimly the bunched fist go back and he waited for the blow which would finish him. Then he heard the voice. He did not know who had spoken, but he recognised the words:

"All right, you bastard!"

Then what looked like a thin flash of light swept down before his eyes. The hand let go his throat.

He fell, gasping, back against the mess-table. He did not see Hooky's steel hand jerk, and swing Beuring round by the wrist; nor the glare of astonishment on the dark man's face and the huge fist which smashed that face back clear to the ship's side.

He felt, some seconds later, a powerful arm about his shoulders and a concerned voice saying:

"Come on, old feller, come on... Up now. Take it easy. We'll get somethin' on that face. Easy does it."

"Beuring..." Rennie panted.

"Don't you worry about Beuring!" Hooky growled, and the, hate in his voice was naked. His big arm went around the coxswain's shoulder and he half-led, half-carried him to the sickbay.

"I'll see Pascoe first," Bentley ordered curtly.

"Aye, aye, sir," Rennie acknowledged, and turned and spoke through the sticking plaster on the side of his mouth:

"Able-seaman Pascoe! Double to the table! Off cap!"

Pascoe stood there, his eyes on the table, and Rennie read the charge. "Money found in his kit-locker on the foc's'le mess-deck suspected of being stolen."

Every officer in the ship not actually on-watch was mustered round the table abaft the bridge. It was eleven o'clock of the following morning, and the sun shone down hotly on the attentive scene.

"Able-seaman Pascoe," Bentley said in a controlled voice, "there was a little more than £175 in the notes Beuring was found removing from your locker."

The implication in his voice was obvious, and it was meant to be.

"Do you admit the charge?"

"Yes, sir."

Pascoe's voice was low, subservient. Since he had been charged the day before he had thought a lot about his defence, such as it was. He knew that no one would believe him if he claimed the money was not in his locker with his knowledge—this was a court of summary justice, not the labyrinthine maze of legal quibbling ashore. And he couldn't say he'd saved a sum as large as that. He was in, up to his neck, and he had decided to do the only thing which might mitigate his sentence.

"But it wasn't my money, sir."

"You admitted the charge," Bentley said coldly.

"Yes, sir, but the money belonged to Beuring. I took it from where he'd stashed it, sir. He won it gambling on the foc's'le mess-deck..."

The eager betrayal ran on. Bentley did not interrupt. His secretary was getting it all down. The seaman gabbled and the captain listened, the composed sternness of his face hiding his disgust.

Pascoe stopped and Bentley said:

"Have you finished?"

"Yes, sir."

Bentley looked at the downcast eyes and worried face and he knew what Pascoe was after and he knew he had wasted his time. This fellow was unworthy of the slightest leniency. Bentley wasted no time.

"Remanded for punishment," he rapped, and the coxswain repeated the sentence.

Pascoe doubled away, his face strained. "Remanded" meant that lower-deck would be cleared and a warrant read out against him. And that meant fourteen days' cells.

"Able-seaman Beuring," the coxswain said, and he succeeded in keeping his tone down to that unimpassioned correctness he would have used to caff up a man requesting to grow a beard.

Beuring did not double up to the table as Pascoe had done. His was just about as serious a crime as he could have committed—he had struck a senior rating. Even gambling and thieving took second place to that. Now he was under escort, guarded by a leading-hand and a hefty able seaman, both with belts and bayonets slung round their waists.

The leading-hand ordered:

"Prisoner and escort, quick march!" And, at the table, "Off cap!"

Beuring's cap came off and the leading-hand quickly bent and took it from his hand. A prisoner on a charge like this must be allowed no incentive to increase his culpability, and a cap flung in a captain's face would be even more unthinkable than striking the coxswain.

In the same unemotional voice Rennie read the charge. Bentley said:

"Have you anything to say?"

"No."

"Answer 'sir'!" Rennie snapped, his body taut.

"No, sir."

Bentley looked sideways.

"Coxswain?"

"At about two o'clock yesterday afternoon, sir," Rennie started, "I spoke to Able-seaman Beuring on the upperdeck..."

Bentley, who knew all the circumstances from Randall, to whom Beuring had been first taken, listened impatiently behind his facade of impartiality. He had never felt less impartial in his life. But the officers heard Rennie's story with open interest—most cases they attended were simple uncomplicated offences against regulations; but this one as Rennie's voice unfolded it possessed a novel touch of sublety. And none of them had been present at a charge so serious.

"... then he struck me, sir. I tried to grapple with him and secure his arms. I..." For the first time Rennie's voice faltered. He was admitting his physical inadequacy. "I failed to do that, sir. He continued his attack and I was almost unconscious when Chief Petty-officer Walker came on the scene. The offender was subdued and

taken under escort before the officer of the watch, sir."

"And you, Cox'n?" Bentley said, very softly.

"I was taken to the sickbay, sir."

Silence fell on the little group. From down near the quarterdeck came the muted clang of a chipping hammer. Above their heads the search radar-aerial swung disinterestedly, its noise of operation a rhythmic electronic whirr.

For a moment Bentley kept his eyes on the table, where they had been all the time Rennie was talking. Vivid in his boxer's mind was that scene on the mess-deck—easily he could fill in the details omitted in the coxswain's terse and official account. The savagery of the big man's attack, the guts it must have taken to withstand it—and the mental picture of Hooky bounding into the mess-deck...

His head came up and for the first time he looked into Beuring's eyes.

"You still have nothing to say?"

"No, sir. Except that I wasn't runnin'. no board and the Buffer struck *me*."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

Then Bentley started to speak. He leaned forward a little with his finger-tips resting on the table, his face a few feet from Beuring's and his eyes, cold with anger, fixed in a condemning stare.

They would remember those words for a long time. And what did most to sear them in their memories was the odd impression that it was not the captain talking, but a man. A tall, wide-shouldered man, the boxing champion of the Fleet, telling what he thought of another man.

There wasn't a man aboard that ship, and very few in the entire Navy, who did not know of Commander Bentley's heavyweight title. Things like that about a captain get about much more efficiently and comprehensively than stories about his professional competence.

And now it was Bentley the boxer, his voice biting with contempt, assessing a charge and a subject on which he was expert.

"Able-seaman Beuring," he said, and his quiet tone cut like a knife across the intent silence, "you are a thief and a gambler and a liar. You were struck by the chief bosun's mate in a legitimate attempt

to prevent further injury to a senior rating. You attacked a man at least three stone lighter than yourself. You knew that man could not hope to fight against your size and strength. Able-seaman Beuring..."

He paused, and Randall, watchful, saw the dull red mounting up Beuring's neck.

"You are a mongrel and a coward," Bentley finished. "Remanded for court-martial!"

The escort marched off their prisoner.

"Cox'n."

"Sir?"

"I want Pascoe held in the cable-locker flat. Beuring is to go in the tiller-flat aft. The usual guards. We'll get rid of them in Moresby."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The officers were still there. Bentley was still behind the table. The scene was still official.

"I want to say this to you, cox'n. You've conducted yourself in a manner which brings the highest credit to your branch." A recent memory of other praise delivered slipped into his mind. He smiled.

''Damn it all, Rennie! You did a fine job. I'm glad and proud to have you in my ship!"

They all smiled, Hooky with a creasing grin that threatened to disturb the anchorage of his ears. Rennie smiled, and behind the gesture was the thought that the pain in his mouth and the bruises on his chest were worth it.

In a destroyer at sea at war there is little of interest to talk about. You know your messmate's pay, his ambitions, his prospects, his family, how many suits he owns, even how he handles his women.

So that for the next twenty-four hours the ship buzzed. There were endless variations on the coxswain's staunchness, on Beuring and what the captain had said about him.

The whole ship was familiar with Bentley's words—Hooky had deliberately passed them on. It was the captain's attitude which intrigued them most. Bentley had said practically nothing about the charges of gambling and stealing—he had dealt with Beuring as a man. That was something they could relish and appreciate completely.

And there was another fascinating facet of that novel trial. The layer of the pom-pom put it succinctly at teatime that afternoon:

"What tickles me," he grinned, "is that Beuring can't say the Old Man was pulling his rank. The bastard can't say what he'd do if Bentley took his rings off. Because if he did the skipper could take that slob with one hand tied behind his back!"

The talk went on; interested, vehement talk. The whole ship was revitalised. But the most significant effect of Rennie's action was one of relief. They talked and joked and swore about what had happened, but underneath every man was glad that the cancer had been chopped out.

Now you didn't have to skulk on the mess-deck, ready to bolt when the cockatoo whistled; now you could leave your locker open, pinch a packet of fags from your cobber's overcoat, be received when you were alone on the mess-deck with nothing but a "G'day, bloody hot, ain't it?"

By the second day, shortly before the ship was due to make her island landfall, the excitement had eased. But the rejuvenation remained. They had been given a salving interest, something they could talk to men in other ships about. And they had been reminded that they had a captain who was all man, clean through.

The night was clear, moonless and dark. The shape of the island was a merging black bulk ahead. Closed-up for action, *Wind Rode* slid slowly on, her radar and a score of binoculars searching.

"I see no evil," Randall grinned under his glasses, "not that I'm complaining."

"It looks quiet enough," Bentley agreed. "But I didn't expect any activity. Not so soon, anyway."

"You'll take a look right round the island?"

"Yes. Then we'll get to hell out of it. The memory of a certain night is tingling up the old backbone..."

"Enough's enough," Randall nodded, "I'll take her round, shall I?"

"Yes, please."

The ship turned a little to port and headed for the southern end of the island, aiming for the side opposite the scene of their night-action. They had the tip of the island abeam when Pilot remarked casually:

"You'll remember there's a harbour just round the corner, sir?"

"Yes, Pilot. But you needn't worry about sending a berthing

signal."

"No, sir." Pilot smiled dutifully at his captain's humour.

She crept on, a black shadow in the quietness of the night, her reduced speed keeping the telltale wake to a minimum of whiteness. There certainly would be Japs ashore, and they could have guns. But their main defence lay in the Admiral's psychology:

"They won't expect you. Only a damn fool would go back so soon."

He might be a fool, Bentley was thinking, but at least he was ready for any result his foolishness might precipitate. Ready with a full head of steam straining in his boilers. Apart from aircraft, which he did not fear here, the only thing which could catch him would be a motor-torpedo boat, and the Japs did not go in for that sort of animal.

A minute later he knew with a jolt of alarm in his guts that he might have to use that steam, that he had a hell of a lot to fear.

It was the signal-yeoman again, as it usually was:

"Captain, sir! I can see ships in that harbour!"

Bentley's sight was keen, but it was some seconds before he could verify what the yeoman's hawk eyes had picked out. The harbour entrance was narrow, and its inner end was backed by confusing jungle, but dimly he could distinguish against the dark background at least two objects of a lighter grey.

He called, quietly:

"What do you make of them?"

"Cruisers, sir," Ferris answered at once, "I can see two, and what looks like the stern of a third."

Through the tense alertness of Bentley's mind another recent memory came crowding. The Admiral had mentioned a cruiser force in the area, had said he expected a seaborne attack. Here it was, holed-up, probably refuelling from a tanker for the strike at Guadal Canal.

The Japs had been cunning, too. Though the island was patently a handy fuelling stop for the attack on Guadal Canal, they could reasonably expect that no Allied ships would be sent to investigate it after the devastating attack of a few nights before. Nor would a ship have been sent; *Wind Rode* was there only because she was on

her way back to Moresby.

The harbour mouth slid slowly abeam and for an electrifying second the thought exercised Bentley's mind. But he tossed it aside at once. To do any good in there, to make sure his torpedoes took crippling effect, he would have to get inside the harbour. Once inside he would be able to manoeuvre only at slow speed; those cruisers, once he was sighted, would blow him out of the water.

And his attack would need to be wholly successful. If he succeeded only in giving the alarm, the cruisers would get clear in a hurry. Then they could either deliver their attack on Guadal Canal, or else be lost to the Admiral's bomber squadrons.

His attack on the airfield had been a calculated risk. An attack now would be calculated suicide.

"Port twenty," he ordered down the voice-pipe, and sub-consciously kept his voice low. "Half ahead both engines. Pass that order by..."

The clang of the engine-room bells rode over his voice. In the silence of the night they sounded like a fire-alarm. The telegraphsman, standing close to Rennie's voice-pipe, was efficient—too efficient.

"Pass all orders by phone," Bentley snapped.

"Aye, aye, sir."

The shaking started and her bow began to swing. Now her life depended not on offensive action but on just how quietly and quickly she could get away from it.

Her line of advance on the turn was taking her, as Bentley had known it would, past the harbour entrance. Her wake was higher, but he had to risk that. Those cruisers could fire just as easily from an anchorage as in the open sea, and he had to give her enough speed to manoeuvre to slip the salvoes.

What worried him was the sound of the bells. They would carry clearly on a night like this. And they could not be expected to be mistaken for cow-bells...

Two minutes later, with the ship past the entrance, out of sight of what was inside, and no slam of guns behind them, he knew that the bells had not been heard.

"Full ahead both engines!" he ordered Rennie, "by phone, remember!"

"By phone, sir," Rennie acknowledged, and the order went down.

Mr. Fry must have guessed something was up in this unhealthy neighbourhood. He gave her her power quickly, and she shuddered and the wake piled up high under her squat counter.

At 35 knots she surged away from the island into the friendly opacity of the night.

Randall turned from staring astern and lowered his glasses.

"I take it," he said drily, his voice a little throaty, "you don't intend to take on that cruiser squadron?"

"You were never more right in your life," Bentley said fervently.

"Thank God for that," his friend and deputy answered in the same tone. "Ah... might I ask why we've grown cautious—and sensible—all of a sudden?"

"Surely." Bentley was smiling—his nerves had let go. "The Admiral gave me orders to clear out if I found a build-up of enemy activity."

"And to send him a little note to that effect, no doubt."

"No doubt at all. I'll stay at this speed for an hour, then get a coded signal off. His bombers should be over before dawn."

"Thank Gawd for the Air Force!" Randall said, only half joking.

"Yes," Bentley said musingly. He hung his glasses by their strap round the binnacle. "There's another reason why I didn't go in there, Bob."

"Oh? Apart from the obvious one that we'd have been blown to hell?"

"That's right. You see," the captain said gently, "I don't have to prove anything to anybody any more. Not now."

He leaned to one side and his voice was brisk.

"Cox'n? You can hand over the wheel now. Fall out special sea-dutymen."

"Fall out special sea-dutymen. Aye, aye, sir!" the coxswain answered.

His voice, too, was brisk.

THE END

The Coxswain

In every battle Wind Rode had come out on top.
Weapons, whether aircraft cannon or submarine torpedo or destroyer guns, were aimed and fired by men. The destroyer's men had proved superior in the handling of theirs.
Now the train of successes had been broken. They had six big guns and a multiplicity of smaller weapons: they should have got those Jap aircraft. As it was, only a lucky shot from the Oerlikon saved them from disaster.
It was not seamanship or training: simply a problem of morale.

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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