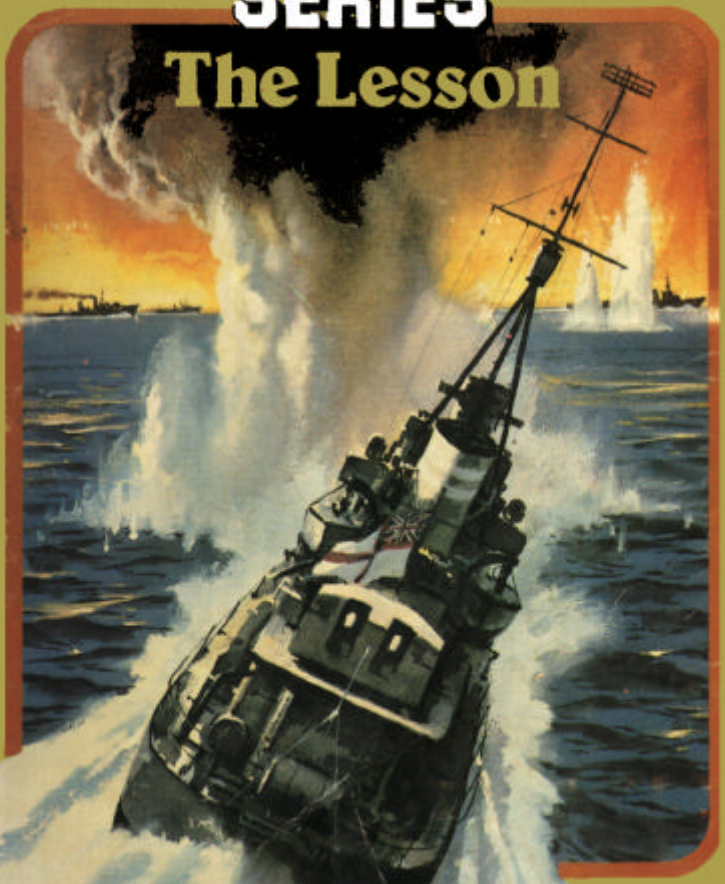
J.E. MACDONNELL #30

COLLECTOR'S SERIES



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THE LESSON

J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

THE LESSON

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CHAPTER ONE

H.M.A. DESTROYER *WIND RODE* was the subject of a venomous violence. It had been in progress for more than three hours, and her motion was still the same. The gale and the driven rain were on her port bow, originating somewhere out in the Tasman Sea and slewing across that watery world and meeting nothing to obstruct them until they reached the slim steel hull sixty miles off the New South Wales coast.

The direction of the attack was unfortunate for a destroyer. It caused her to screw as well as pitch, to arc her mast trucks across the weeping sky at the same time as she dug her nose deep down into the side of each advancing ridge.

So that as a wave exploded up over her stem as she dipped, another surged inboard over the lee gunnels as she rolled. She was a thing tormented, her foredeck a flinging mass of green and white, her waist covered by the same ominous carpet. Her bow lifted and she streamed pouring white scarves from the scuppers and the water in her waist tumbled aft and threshed round the depth-charges on the quarter-deck before emptying itself back over the stern.

She was iced with salt from her foremast truck to her funnels and the derricks on her stern, and as gleams of filtered afternoon sunlight struck her, she shone and glittered as though a giant's playful hand had showered her with tinsel.

A seaman came cautiously forward from the quarter-master's lobby, facing the gale's onslaught. He moved in rushes, from handhold to handhold, and he had both hands for himself. His legs were soaked above his knees and his body was wet with spray all over. Yet as he approached the bridge structure you could see that his mouth was moving. He seemed to be singing. Mr. Lasenby, Gunner, was halfway up the bridge ladder on his way to take over his watch. She reared, and he hung there, his whole body straining to prevent his being hurled backwards off the ladder. High in the air her bow paused, while the water cascaded in great volume back from the cunning camber of her decks. Then she dropped. Lasenby surged forward the rest of the rungs to the bridge, his body feeling leaden as its weight forced down on his feet. Then he was on the compass platform,

and moving swiftly to the binnacle before her tortured twisting began again.

He hung on to the binnacle beside Pilot, the officer of the watch. Both men's faces were wet with spray, their eyes squinted to slits against the forceful slap of the wind. And each face smiled at the other.

A hundred feet off the port bow the crested top of a wave was whipped off, blown into white smoke. The hard gust of wind reached them, brutal like the blow of a fist. She reeled, and they reeled with her, and above them to windward the wave towered, like a wall of green glass topped with snow.

For breathless moments it hung there, huge, menacing, a crested cap of doom. Then *Wind Rode* came upright with a stately and valiant motion and she soared up over the wave like a seagull. Its enormous weight ran beneath her keel and passed the point of balance and then her bow dipped down again, and again the foc's'le was smothered. And again it rose.

"All well?"

The gunner's voice was not so much raised, as penetrating. There was some protection directly behind the wind-break. Pilot nodded, his eyes not leaving the ridged immensity ahead of them.

"All well. Course 190, one-two-oh revs on the clock and doing about ten knots up top. Old Man in his sea-cabin. B-gun closed-up, nothing else. She's all yours."

He made no comment on the weather - it was stridently apparent all about them. He turned from the binnacle and slapped the Gunner on his wet oilskinned back, and the gunner grinned companionably back. A bucketful of spray lashed into Lasenby's face, but the grin still lingered. Pilot disappeared down the ladder, and the gunner splayed his legs widely apart. He had the ship.

The ship was in torment. She was soaked overall. Below decks there was no comfort. It had been like that for more than three hours, and looked like continuing. Yet a seaman sang into the teeth of the great wind and the gunner grinned into its spray. *Wind Rode* was steaming home.

The tail-end of the storm chased her in through Sydney Heads at ten o'clock the next morning, streaming her funnel haze far ahead of

her encrusted bow. She had already been given a berth, and Bentley eased her up to Cruiser Wharf at Garden Island. The long pier was empty of cruisers, but two destroyers lay ahead of *Wind Rode's* position.

She came in as destroyers usually do, neatly and economically. The heaving lines flung out, then the berthing wires, and within a few minutes she was snugly secured fore and aft.

She had come halfway round the world to this resting place, from Gibraltar, and she was tired. Bentley savoured for a second his next order. Then, crisply, he gave it:

"Finished main engines."

Far down in the fumy boiler-room the stoker petty-officer got the order. "Thank Gawd for that," he muttered, and set to work reducing her strength from 40,000 horsepower to nil. She would be fed her electricity now through shore lines.

"I think," Commander Bentley said on the bridge to his first-lieutenant, "we can pipe leave."

Randall did not hide his face-dissecting grin. He spoke to the bosun's mate, and that young seaman performed his duty with despatch. Bentley had a few minutes before his official shoreside work began, and he - took off his binoculars and made for the ladder. Randall followed him.

They did not speak as they walked aft along the iron deck. The subject of leave in Sydney had been so thoroughly thrashed on the long way home that now there was nothing to add. Nothing to do but to stare at the remembered sights, listen to the clatter of the dockyard and the hooting of the ferries, and gloatingly anticipate your own leave.

They reached the quarter-deck, and stopped clear of the bustle. Hooky Walker was busy there, and the men under him worked cheerfully with no inducement other than what their eyes could see. No shells and boxes of pom-pom ammunition coming inboard now, but boxes of butter, cans of fresh milk, crates of apples and oranges, sacks of potatoes, bundle after bundle of newly-baked bread. And, in the dark canvas bag, the accumulated mail of almost a month.

Captain and first-lieutenant watched, the summer sun pleasantly warm on their backs, their faces pleasant. For the first time for many

months both men were completely relaxed, and at peace.

The quartermaster, who could not afford to let his attention wander in this peaceful and busy naval port, came up to Bentley, saluting.

"Yes, Leading-seaman Billson?"

"Captain comin' along the pier, sir," Billson said crisply, "looks like he's headin' for us, sir."

Bentley and Randall looked up, their eyes sighting along the cluttered wharf. And the most pleasant feeling of that pleasant morning warmed itself inside Bentley.

It had been a long, long time, but the officer walking towards the gangway would be recognised instantly after a much greater time than that. Especially by Bentley. His frame was thin, skinny almost, the knees showing knobbly above the khaki stockings. He walked with a deliberate, almost mincing step, carefully lifting his feet over wires and cable, and keeping his head held high, moving it neither to right nor left. It was a sharp axe of a face beneath the peaked cap - pinched-in, bony, the mouth primly pursed.

A parson's face, you would have decided, or a maiden aunt's. Except for some indefinable aura of authority about the tight face and the steady eyes —and the four tarnished gold rings of his captain's rank on his shoulders. The dullness overlaid on that gold spoke of salt, and salt denoted experience. No dock-yard captain, this one...

"Man the side!" Randall ordered curtly, and cursed the storm which had made of his ship a Chinese scow. Bentley said, a low smiling tone:

"Well, well. Just like him to visit us instead of waiting for the official call to him."

"He is Captain (Destroyers) now?" Randall queried quickly.

"He is."

Then Captain (D), senior officer in command of the Ninth Destroyer Flotilla, set his deliberate foot on the gangway and walked his skinny frame and pinched face up towards the quarter-deck.

The pipes shrilled, hands whipped up in salute, and Captain Sainsbury said, in a prim, unsmiling voice: "Good morning, Bentley. It has been a long time."

"Morning, sir," trying to keep the delighted and idiotic grin off

his quarter-deck face, “it certainly has been! You remember Randall?”

It was a stupid thing to say — Sainsbury had sent Randall to *Wind Rode* to help Bentley with his new ship. But he had to say something, instead of continuing to pump the bony hand of the man he loved and respected most in the world.

“I think I do, yes. How are you, Randall’? Nice to see you back.”

Randall, Bentley noticed, was unashamedly outdoing the legendary Cheshire feline. And then he noticed something else. It riveted his attention. He knew, of course, the feeling that had prompted Captain (D) to make this call to his junior ship, and it was that recognition that had sent the warmth flooding through him. But never in all the years he had served under and learned from this prim officer, had he seen him smile more than once, possibly twice.

Bentley stared. It was not a smile. A pleading photographer would have been disgustedly frustrated. Yet... The pursed mouth was moving. The lips had parted, if only sufficient to show a gleam of white. Now the lips were quivering, extending the merest fraction, actually twitching in a gesture which in Captain Sainsbury, V.C., was a positive guffaw of delight.

“Lord...” Bentley breathed to himself, and then his own facial muscles let go in a stretch to outdo Randall’s. And at once, as though his own muscles had received a contractual order from the expansion of Bentley’s, the visitor’s face returned to its habitual primness. He looked about him.

“The storm caught you,” he said, matter-of-factly. It was not a meteorological judgment, it was directed at the state of the ship. Randall, responsible for that state, answered:

“Yes, sir. We were still shipping them just outside. The ship will be washed down by this afternoon.” Sainsbury nodded, and once again Bentley marvelled at the manner in which a master could get his wishes interpreted and carried out without even mentioning them.

“Would you like to come to my cabin, sir? Some Bols gin - from a Dutchman in the Med....”

“Thank you, Bentley. I see you remember my preference. Perhaps you would bring it down to the wardroom?”

Bentley had learned everything he knew from this un-tigerish-looking little man. And he knew now that Sainsbury’s preference for

the wardroom was not in the least accidental. There were some new faces in *Wind Rode's* officers' mess, they belonged to men who would be serving under Captain (D) in the future, and that captain wished to meet them. He himself had done precisely that when he had taken command of the old *Wind Rode,* his first command.

"Certainly, sir. Bosun's mate?"

They walked towards the wardroom hatch and Bentley glanced at his watch. Ten minutes past eleven. He grinned, faintly. Even the time had been planned. The sun's over the yardarm at eleven a.m. in British warships in harbour, and, especially on this first shore-based morning, every officer in *Wind Rode* would be in the wardroom. Some of them, he thought - the surgeon, the torpedo-officer, the engineer - were in for a shock. Pilot and Lasenby knew of him, they had sailed under his command. The others? They would believe they were now sailing under a pedantic school-teacher. Until they learned of the two letters their new captain was entitled to wear after his name; or saw the plain maroon medal ribbon on his bony chest...

Sainsbury stepped into the wardroom first and the officers laughing and drinking there saw the four rings on his shoulders and rose at once. Bentley said:

"This is Captain Sainsbury, gentlemen - Captain (D). As you know, we're now attached to the Ninth Flotilla. You remember Pilot, Guns, sir?"

"How are you?" Sainsbury nodded, his mouth tight and his eyes keen. "Nice to have you back with us." His eyes trained on.

"Lieutenant Baxter, the torpedo-officer, sir."

"Baxter." The bird-like nod again, and Torp's face formally polite, unimpressed. "I hear you did a good job against a raider not so long ago."

The younger face pleased now. "Thank you, sir. It was a sitting shot."

"M'mm. And this, of course, is the engineer-officer."

"Yes, sir," the heavily-built, bald-headed officer leaned forward in what looked like an oddly old-fashioned bow, "McGuire, sir."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. McGuire. You would know Mr. Piggott, no doubt? I thought you would. A pity he went. Good man."

"He was that, sir."

Monty McGuire, Bentley noticed, had seen the ribbon of the captain's Cross. But then Monty had been judging men for longer than he had. His shrewd eyes were still on Sainsbury's face, and Bentley knew that it would go hard for any boiler-room gang which from now on allowed more than a haze of heat to escape from *Wind Rode's* funnels.

"And you are the surgeon," Sainsbury said.

Dandis nodded. He was thin also, but his earlier redness of face had been overlaid with a weathered patina of brown. There was nothing clairvoyant about the captain's knowledge of his profession - Landis wore between his two rings the red cloth of the surgeon.

"Yes, sir.

"You have been in the ship...?" One year and two months, sir."

Sainsbury's eyes closed a fraction. Bentley knew he had liked the precision of that answer.

"I see. Well now, Peter, you mentioned something of Dutch Bols..."

Bentley smiled and spoke to a steward and he and Sainsbury sat down in chairs a little clear of the other officers. He was thinking as he lit a cigarette that a commanding-officer is on deck all the time- that "Peter" of Sainsbury's was deliberate. There was no need of the inference of "old ships" and friendliness with the flotilla-leader in this mess, but Sainsbury, like himself, could not have helped offering that assistance any more than he could have stopped breathing.

The gin came quickly and Sainsbury sipped and smacked his lips appreciatively.

"I don't suppose you thought of an old shipmate and brought a spare bottle of this?"

"Didn't know at the time that I'd be meeting up with you," Bentley answered easily. "But to save you pulling your senior weight I'll arrange for a bottle to be sent over."

"I'm quite sure," the older man said, finishing his drink, "there's an admiral's flag in your kit-locker. Now... I think we've kept those young fellows repressed long enough. I want to talk to you."

They got up and the mess rose with them. "Cabin," Bentley said to Randall, and the large and the thin figures passed out through the curtain. The mess sank back. Randall waited. Torps began it.

"What an odd fellow," he said, his eyes squinted in puzzlement. "Has he had the flotilla long? The flotilla...? He looks the last bloke in the world to drive a destroyer, let alone a dozen of 'em!"

Randall waited. He guessed where the defence would come from, and he was not mistaken.

"A book," Monty McGuire said portentously and unoriginally, "is not known by its cover. Didn't you look at anything except his face? His chest, f'rinstance?"

"Chest? What the hell has that to do with it? I noticed it was one of the skinniest I've seen, if that's what you mean."

"Trouble with you young whippersnappers," the head of *Wind Rode's* engineering department pronounced from the eminence of his position and experience, "you only see what's on the end of your ruddy guns or torpedoes. On that skinny chest you mentioned was pinned a maroon ribbon. And entitled to hang from that ribbon is a bit 'o brass called the Victoria Cross."

"What!" said Torps, and "Steward," said Randall, hiding his secret and satisfied grin.

Happily unaware of this assessment of his character and ability, Captain Sainsbury preceded his pupil and friend into the cabin under the bridge. They sat down they drank, they talked of ships and men they knew, and of the strategical position in the Pacific. Bentley learned that Sainsbury's flotilla had been split up between various American units, for experience and while Sainsbury's own *Scimitar* was in Sydney for refit. So that now, for practical purposes, his command consisted of *Scimitar* and *Wind Rode*. Both ships would sail north together.

"When?" Bentley asked.

"You can grant seven days' leave to each watch," Sainsbury told him. "After that..."

After that, Bentley knew, he had better keep steam in his boilers. Seven days was not much to men who had been in the Mediterranean for nine months, but fourteen days was a long time to keep a Fleet destroyer out of action. He hoped his men would understand that. They would understand, all right, but they would certainly not agree...

"Now," said Sainsbury, and leaned back in his chair. "What've you been up to? That German raider I heard about. From a little I

know it seemed a sharp and nasty affair."

"Whatever happened," Bentley grinned, "I learned it from you."

"The devil you did! I never taught you to tear into a neutral harbour with guns blasting. You were damned lucky you didn't blast your own Service head off! Not to mention the ship. That fellow must have had you lined up the moment you poked your nose round the point!"

"We managed," Bentley said, and smiled.

Sainsbury noted that smile, curiously. It was partly reminiscent, a little prideful - and it held some other quality. Not arrogance. Not as bad as that. Cockiness, perhaps. Could it be that this pupil of his had become... too sure of himself?

Sainsbury rubbed his bony fingers across his chin, looking at the deck. He wanted to know more of what had happened to the nature and character of the young captain he loved like a son. His eyes came up, a quick, keen flick, and he said:

"Tell me about it. The whole action."

Slightly surprised, for the man in front of him had been in more actions than he'd had hot dinners, but unaware of the intention behind Sainsbury's request, Bentley began to talk. Sainsbury listened to every word, every nuance of the quiet voice. There was in the spoken tale a natural pride in his ship's performance, an appreciation of the risks he had run, and no boasting whatever. As he had expected. He had been wrong, then, Bentley had not fallen into the fatal error of cock-sureness.

Yet as he sipped his gin, his thin knees crossed, Sainsbury's acute perception was not fully satisfied. Consciously he analysed the feeling, and he knew it was that smile which was still bothering him. It was little enough to go on, he mused. But of one thing he was sure - before two months were out he would know precisely what changes, if any, had been brought about in Bentley's nature by his succession of brilliantly-fought actions. With that he had to be content, and characteristically he washed the faintly troubled thoughts from his consciousness.

"You're looking forward to your leave?" he said, in a voice meant to be bright, and which sounded one degree less than pure vinegary.

"That I am! I'll hop up to Queensland, of course."

"A girl, of course?"

"Of course!" Bentley's voice was sarcastic. "Now what ruddy hope have I had of mounting a full-scale love affair? Madagascar, Bombay, Suez, Malta, Gibraltar? No wonder the birth-rate's falling here!"

"Ah well." Sainsbury sighed, "no doubt you'll find yourself something to last seven days, at any rate. There should be little trouble."

He looked at the burned, handsome face opposite him with an envy which, suddenly, astonished him by its acuteness. The expression on his face was so odd that Bentley glanced at him curiously. Then Sainsbury lifted his glass and quickly emptied it. He stood up, and his face had returned to its normal mask of puritanical authority.

"All right, my boy, enjoy your leave - you've damned well earned it. I shall look forward to your return. You must dine with me as soon as you get back."

"Certainly, sir."

They took up their caps, and the big, hard frame followed the spare one again through the door.

CHAPTER TWO

IT IS HEREBY CLAIMED, with an absolute surety of conviction, and with no brooking of any argument, that there is no time since Time began which rushes past so swiftly as a sailor's leave on return from over-seas service. It seemed to every officer and man aboard *Wind Rode* that no sooner had they entered through Sydney Heads than they were exiting in the opposite direction.

It was a bright, sunny morning, which made it worse. Good drinking weather, wonderful for the beach, just great for taking the kids to the Zoo, a day when all the floosies would be out in force down in the Mine-Swept Area between Bridge-street and the Fortune of Fights. Popsies in bright cotton dresses and slim legs in silk stockings. There would be Yanks too, of course, but they were pests you usually managed to slip in ahead of.

And where were they? Back in the old routine, back to the old sweaty smell of messdecks, back on watch, back through the Heads, back right on the bottom of the list for refit and shore-leave. Unless the old girl took a tin-fish in her belly... But then your own belly might be involved. It was a cruel world.

Disposed to starb'd, to seaward where a senior officer should be, steamed destroyer *Scimitar,* identical in every detail to their own vehicle. The coast lay rocky on their port hand, where they had expected it to lie. The direction, then, was north, into the Pacific fighting. Zeros instead of Messerschmitts, suicide-bombers instead of Stukas. But the result the same - constant danger, unremitting alertness, night after night at sea, healthy and stodgily - dull food, infrequent mail: no beer, no dances, no girls. Destroyers at war.

They had been on their northerly course for little more than half-an-hour, with Avalon beach and Barrenjoey light on the port beam, when the signal came from the flotilla-leader. It told them that an aircraft would fly out from Richmond, towing a target drogue, and that both ships would carry out anti-aircraft firing practice in ten minutes' time.

The guns closed-up and the voice came up to the bridge from B-gun directly below it.

"We don't need this... rot! Where does he think we been? Down

at the... south... pole?"

Bentley's first and automatic reaction was to lean over and have that man up on the bridge. And for the first time that he could remember he held himself back. The signal had come as a surprise to him. The owner of the voice was right. For the past nine months, for almost every day of that time, and most nights, the guns had been in action against enemy aircraft or ships. The crew could man them and fire them accurately in their sleep.

He felt Randall looking at him. He knew why. The voice had been quite audible. He said, curtly:

"We'll use ten rounds a gun, Number One."

"Aye, aye, sir," Randall answered formally, and Bentley knew that the first-lieutenant was in his secret, that he too felt as the owner of the voice did.

And, deep in Bentley's consciousness, a faint warning bell chimed softly.

Be damned! he thought, almost aloud. *The crew's not stale, they're fresh from leave*. There wouldn't be a more experienced bunch than his in the whole of the blasted Pacific, friend or enemy.

And the bell chimed again, the bell of experience and judgment. And the yeoman's voice drowned the faint and warning impulse.

"Aircraft bearing Red two-five, Beaufort, sir."

The plane flew down past the destroyers, now in line-ahead, twice. On the second run the drogue was ripped, so that it towed along collapsed, with the wind of its passage beginning to shred it.

"Cease firing," the signal flashed, and the two ships fell silent. In the sudden quiet the voice pitched sharply up to the bridge.

Now maybe he's satisfied!"

Randall's glance was quick and enquiring. This time Bentley nodded. The big lieutenant stepped to the wind-break. His voice was hard.

"Captain of the gun?"

"Sir?"

"Take charge of your crew!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

It was short, it was cryptic, but it was enough. The man could not be charged - he could easily claim that his remark was directed at

anyone or anything except Captain Sainsbury's starchy meticulousness. Yet the gun-crew knew that the bridge had heard, and that the bridge would not tolerate any more of the same.

The gun-captain's tones came up, low and vehement. Justice had been done.

The run up north was fast, stopping only at Brisbane and Townsville for fuel and supplies, but Captain Sainsbury managed to get in many more drills, both gunnery and seamanship. No comments were passed now, or even thought - they were with a cranky old bastard who had to get his pleasure somehow; they had shipped with that sort before; they would just have to put up with it until he managed to get other ships under his starchy wing.

But the old coot did not get other ships to sail under his management. They reached Manus and they joined the U.S. 7th Fleet, to find that the rest of the Ninth Flotilla was still scattered widely over the Pacific. *Wind Rode* and *Scimitar*, apart from a six-inch cruiser, were the only Australian craft in that starred and striped concourse of grey metal.

They worked together.

They escorted carriers and cruisers on patrolling sweeps, they screened battleships against submarines; they shepherded troop-transports, some full, some returning empty, they steamed north towards the Carolines, east towards the Gilberts, and sometimes west towards the Indies. Several times, Junior ship in a junior Navy, *Wind Rode* delivered hand-messages of apparent importance. But always both ships were together, and Bentley and his crew were under the Argus-eye of Captain Sainsbury, as well as that of the American admiral.

And sometimes, thought not as frequently as in the confines of the Mediterranean, they were in action. Once it was a squadron of bombers from Jap-held Truk which caught the cruiser force. One American cruiser had her quarter-deck ripped open, and *Wind Rode* engaged two torpedo-bombers and shot both of them into the sea.

They had been in Manus a month when Sainsbury sent for Bentley. The younger man had not seen his old teacher frequently, for the area was becoming increasingly busy, and both ships had been almost

constantly at sea. Now as he crossed the wide harbour in the motorboat he was looking forward to his visit.

Sainsbury met him at the gangway, and together they walked forward along the iron-deck, talking casually. Bentley did not look about this other ship - everything in her was identical with his own, and just as shipshape. This time he went in first through the cabin door. He sat down and his host said:

"I'm afraid your Bols is finished, Peter. But I could do you a glass of Scotch."

"You said Scotch?" Bentley said, surprised. "Scotch as from Scotland?"

"That's right. And from Townsville. The Americans have an aircraft flying between here and there daily. It arrived yesterday."

"And you have a friend ashore with the Yanks."

"Quite so. He pilots the aircraft, in fact. I happened to pick him up from the sea about six months ago..."

"It's who you know," Bentley grinned, and took the glass. "I'm going to enjoy this."

He sipped, and he did. It was Scotch all right, made smoother by the knowledge that there would be very few men indeed in that Fleet this morning in a position to drink real Scotch.

Sainsbury sipped appreciatively, a small intake. He put his glass down.

"Don't imagine you're in for a binge," he said drily, "this has to last. In any case, you've got little more than an hour."

"Oh? Something up?"

"Could be. Early this morning an aircraft sighted four Japanese destroyers about two hundred miles due east. She was low on fuel, and had to return to base. But she was there long enough to be pretty sure that there was no large naval force in the area. The destroyers are probably just sniffing around for what they can find, or see. Anyhow, the admiral wants us to sniff around them. If we can find them. We sail in an hour."

"Just the two of us?"

"Yes."

"Well, now. A special mission!"

"You could call it that. At least it will mean independent

command."

At the words Bentley's memory flashed back over thousands of miles of sea to the Gulf of Guinea. He had been in "independent" command then, hamstrung by his senior officer's inexperience and caution. But now he felt none of that earlier frustration. This time he would be sailing under a master.

"Just like old times," he grinned. He felt un-accountably excited, a feeling which the object of their mission did not fully merit. They would be lucky to sight four destroyers so far east. But he would be with Sainsbury.

"Not at all," the vinegary voice checked him, "we will not be sailing into any neutral harbours." Bentley's grin did not retract.

"They're all enemy out there, sir."

"Nor enemy harbours. There are few Naval commanders in a position to waste ships, and certainly not this admiral. The main object of this mission is for us to return to base."

"Yes, sir. But I suppose we have permission to fire a round if we sight those Japs?"

"We might do that," Sainsbury returned soberly. He was looking at Bentley keenly, but the younger man placed no significance on that - the old master always looked like that. He said, putting his glass down:

"Wonder why he picked on us two?"

"You know why," Sainsbury answered drily.

Bentley did. Hands across the sea and all that, but the two Australian ships were still foreigners. The admiral needed all his ships, and it was a natural decision to send off on this probably fruitless mission his two cock-sparrows from Down Under.

"Yes," he smiled, and stood up. "I don't suppose..."

His voice died in mid-breath. He had been about to say: "I don't suppose you'll send us to drill on the way over?" And he realised just how completely he agreed, in the privacy of his own judgment, with the remarks which had floated up from B-gun on the way north.

"Yes?"

"I don't suppose we'll catch up with those Japs?" Bentley finished.

"I really haven't a notion," Sainsbury told him blandly. His eyes

closed the slightest amount. “You really want to, don’t you?”

“Catch ‘em?” Bentley was genuinely surprised. “Why, of course!”

He looked down at the thin officer, his expression half-smiling, half-puzzled. But Sainsbury’s face was a mask.

“Then you’d better leave my whisky bottle and get back to your ship,” the captain told him. “We will proceed at thirty knots, course east.”

“There’ll be a porpoise close behind you,” Bentley grinned, and went out.

Bentley’s misquoted words had not been literally meant. The “porpoise” was disposed well clear on the leader’s starb’d beam, as her captain knew she would be. This way, barely in sight of each other, the two destroyers were driving forward and searching a path almost fifty miles wide. And this way, of course, there could be no drill.

As he stood on the bridge behind the binnacle, idly watching the bow slice through a sea as smooth as a lawn, Bentley thought of this. And his mind returned naturally and casually to the short scene in Sainsbury’s cabin. That was a funny question to ask. *You really want to sight those Japs, don’t you?* As with anything which puzzled him, even as slightly as those words did, he applied to them his analytical perception. And he very quickly decided that they meant as little as Sainsbury’s reference to leaving his whisky bottle. He forgot the remark, deliberately and completely, when Randall said beside him:

“What d’you think, Peter? Any chance?”

“About as much as an ice-cube in hell. They know the Fleet’s based in Manus. I’d say they’re just scouting around in the hope of picking off a fast unescorted merchantman. Or else, seeing there aren’t many of that species about here, they hope to sight the Fleet sailing and signal the fact back to the main monkey. But they would have seen the aircraft that spotted them. By now they’re probably cruising back to base, enjoying the balmy air.”

Randall nodded. It was peaceful up here, with the ship going quietly about its duties. His opening remark had been idle, and he agreed with everything Bentley had said. Now he said, not idly:

“Anyhow, in this position we’re saved those ruddy drills.”

Bentley heard the low words and even as he felt mild surprise at their appositeness to his own earlier thoughts he looked round the bridge. Pilot, the officer of the watch, had his stern poked out from the chart-table in the far port corner. The bosun's mate was absent on an errand. The signalman was behind Pilot, whistling soundlessly as he rubbed at a spot of rust on the ten-inch lamp with emery paper.

Bentley's feeling for Sainsbury was a deep and masculine love and respect. Yet Randall was his close friend, as well as his second-in-command. They knew each other as well as they knew the mirrored reflections of their own burned faces. He said, also quietly: "I've been thinking about that."

"About those drills?"

"Yes. You know how I felt when we heard that jack-me-hearty give voice on B-gun. But I minds the time - and I remember it bloody well - when I went to drill at every opportunity."

Neither man looked at the other. Their eyes were constantly roving over the smiling sea ahead of them, and on either bow. Their sight would have done that if they'd been drinking coffee, or eating. Randall said:

"I remember it, too. But there comes a time when your commonsense and judgment tell you that you can have too much of drill, just the same as beer, or a woman. There's nothing these boys couldn't do with their eyes shut, and you know it. Once - yes. But not now. Look at those two torpedo-bombers. Look at the sub. In my book an over-trained crew is worse than a crowd of green Rockies."

For the first time he looked at his friend, curiously. "What's up, Peter? You think we're stale?"

Bentley lit a cigarette and drew on it deeply. The smoke speared from his mouth bluely, and then the wind over the windbreak caught it and whipped it away to nothingness.

"No," he said at last, "I don't think we're stale. I agree with you."

Randall nodded slightly, and his eyes trained ahead again. Bentley thought: *I'm right. The proofs in the eating - or the firing. It's taken* a *long time, but now she's a damned good ship. There's nothing to worry about, not as far as efficiency's concerned. A man should use his commonsense. They're top-line, every man jack of them, and a man would be a fool not to recognise that. Recognise it and be bloody*

thankful!

"We'll be in the contact area just about dusk," he said conversationally. He took his binoculars off and hung them round a soft-iron sphere. "Sea-cabin, Pilot."

Discipline is a wonderful thing. To enlarge on that "boss's-man" claim - when you know you have to do a thing, when you know for absolute certain that there is no profit, only loss, in bucking your fate, you entertain no regrets or pointless wishful thinking of what might have been.

Wind Rode's men knew they had to be up in the Pacific, they knew they had to fight a war, to go where they were told and do what they had to do. As well, they had experienced the wrench of parting from loved ones many times before; knew that they would soon settle down into the old routine. It's easy when you know simply that you have to.

So she was now, once again, a happy ship. There was not in her the stomach-churning excitement which she had carried all the way home from the Mediterranean. But nor was there any griping - except for the perpetual whingeing which sailors claim as their natural right, and which meant nothing. Indeed, if Hooky Walker and his petty-officers had not heard this sailorly complaining about food and leave and beer and women and night-watches, they would have been deeply worried.

Sailors were shaken from their warm hammocks to go on watch or lower the seaboat or heave the anchor inboard, and they whinged forcefully - and they jumped to the tasks and performed them with experienced competence. Then they whinged that they would have to hoist the seaboat and lower the anchor, but there was no malice in their grumbling.

A civilian would have thought them a morose mob. But Hooky and his henchmen heard the humour in the old gripes, saw the jobs done, and knew and were content. There was, in fact, no better place to hear outsize gripes than in the petty-officers' mess. There the whingeing was done by experts. And so was the work.

For hour after hour they drove on across the polished sea. The sun was hot, the wind was kind, the sea gleamed and glittered in a million of reflecting facets. And, unbelievably, the sailors whinged

about this lovely weather. For they of all weather - bound people knew that there is nothing so constant at sea as change, that that hot air was rising up into the stratosphere, that there it was being cooled before it would come sinking down in the form of sullen clouds and high wind. Every man knew, not from meteorological knowledge but from experience, that by night-fall their beautiful day would have turned into strong wind and possibly rain.

And it was thus.

An hour before Pilot's worked-out time for night-fall, it was already murky. The erstwhile balmy air, now wet cloud, hung low and sullen over a leaden coloured sea. Visibility was still clear, but it would be a rainy moonless night.

Radar was playing up a little, as in those comparatively early days of its use it normally did through temperature inversion. The sea had risen, thought not enough to bother the destroyers, not enough to reduce their high speed.

Scimitar's crew was as well-trained as *Wind Rode's,* and it was the pure accident of geographical position which allowed the junior ship to sight the masts first. Due to the earth's curve, fifteen miles is about the limit of sight from a bridge at sea, and from her station fifteen miles to port *Scimitar* could not see what was now in Bentley's informed binoculars.

Objects come into sight swiftly when the hunter is travelling at thirty knots. Not masts now, but bridges and hulls filled the circle of Bentley's interested vision. Four of them, four Japanese destroyers in close formation, steaming at an economical speed of twelve knots, obviously unalarmed, obviously on their way home to base; having sighted nothing of interest, expecting to sight nothing more with the lowering night about to fall about them.

Bentley was eager, but he was still an experienced commander. He took his glasses from the targets and trained them right around the horizon. Nothing. Even as he searched for possible friends of his enemy he was judging that he himself would make a small target, coming up from astern. And that the japs, having already traversed that guiltless area behind them, would hardly bother to scan it thoroughly now. Having steamed all day with sight of nothing, they would not expect enemy ships to be coming up on them at thirty knots.

No, he decided, the Japs would be intent on what lay ahead of them, and lulled even more deeply into their security by recognition of the dark night shortly to fall.

He had thought, naturally and at once, of signalling Sainsbury. Not by wireless, but by light. Yet a light might be sighted by a casually roving eye, and in any case *Scimitar*, hull down to port, would hear his guns plainly enough. Not more than an hour was left him. He had to jump those four ships on his own, and fast.

His glasses were still at his eyes. From the straight line of mouth below them the words came quiet and crisp:

"Clear for action."

Her men had been getting ready for the never-neglected closing-up for night action stations, when all her armament and communications would be tested so that they should be ready for whatever came upon them in the dark. So that now her guns and tubes were manned quickly, and the breeches of the six four-point-sevens loaded with the long yellow shells.

They waited round the guns and the tubes. They felt the ship's high-powered shuddering, and they were quiet, and felt fearful, as they always did before action, and confident. They had their own knowledge of their superiority, and they had *Scimitar* and its Victoria Cross captain on their port quarter.

The odds of two to one hardly exercised their minds. They could not remember a time when they had gone into action against equal odds, and they had certainly never fought with the balance of weight in their favour. Those conditions were yet to come, and this was the time when the Allied forces were inferior in numbers, before the great armadas of shipping built up to overwhelming strength in the Pacific.

She drove on, her bow rising in great swooping lunges over the swells and then sinking down so that the sea bubbled almost up to her upper-deck. Bentley had an eye for that sea, and the height of its rise. If it had been rougher, at this speed A-gun might have been out of action. But there was less than an hour for it to rise further, and in that time he hoped to have completed his savage business.

He stared ahead, at the plainly visible hulls of his enemy. The Japs had not increased speed, nor had they altered formation. All

ships were steaming in line-ahead from the leader, and though this formation lessened the breadth of the hitting area for his shells, at the same time it lengthened it. If he shot over the last ship in the line he would almost certainly land somewhere on the next one or two ships ahead.

But, he knew, he must not land over. He must land on. God knows they had done that often enough before, and there was no reason why Lasenby could not do it now. There would be no deflection to worry about, only range. And Lasenby, Gunner, was a past-master at correcting for range. He was still alive, wasn't he?

The pointer on the range-repeat in front of Bentley clicked over inexorably and steadily. Another minute, perhaps two, and he would open fire.

He looked at the Japs, and then he looked all about him, and his mind was as taut as piano-wire with all the considerations weighing upon it. And then the most important consideration of all rushed in on his consciousness. Sainsbury would have seen his masts drawing ahead of the ordered beam position. He would be wondering what the hell was going on. If he transmitted his thoughts into action, if he opened the glaring eye of is ten-inch signalling lamp at them...

Closer, further. Bentley could not distinguish *Scimitar's* thin topmast drawing aft on his port quarter, and he had not the time to search for it.

"Yeoman?"

"Sir?"

"*Scimitar* still in visual?"

"Yes, sir. Bearing Red one-three-five."

"Good." He might have known the yeoman's hawk-eye would still have her. "If she starts to signal, shut her up quickly."

"Shut *Scimitar* up, sir, aye, aye, sir!" Ferris repeated, and no one noticed any humour in the words. Closer. In the director above the bridge, Lasenby had his target fairly in his monocular sight. In his magnified vision the Jap destroyer seemed strangely foreshortened from this dead-astern angle; she seemed to be all bridge and funnel and quarter-deck; telescoped together into a nice fat target. The director held its rangefinder as well as radar aerials, and Lasenby knew that that high length of foremast was making a perfect ranging

point for the operator - he would be constantly "cutting" it in two, and each time he put the two parts together again with his little wheel he was sending down a range to the transmitting table.

"Come on," Lasenby muttered to himself in silent urging to Bentley, and at once he took his eyes from his sight and breathed in deeply. This would have to be as accurate shooting as ever he'd performed, and neither eagerness nor impatience must be allowed any part of it. Calmed, his face went back to the sight.

The point of aim, already passed to the director-layer, would be the base of the funnel. Hits anywhere round there would be most satisfactory. He might open up the funnel, making a streamer of red for them to follow through the night, or he might smash into the controlling bridge. And anywhere aft of those points... There were the boiler-rooms and the engine-room, the torpedo-tubes, the depth-charges packed on the quarter-deck. There were the after magazines, the depth-charge magazine, all open to entry to his shells from this firing position.

All he wanted was the permissive order to... "Open fire!" the voice crackled in his phones. Mr. Lasenby, Gunner, began his drill.

Orders went down. Wheels turned in the transmitting-station and at the four forward guns. A palm of a hand pressed in hard on a large brass knob. At the gun-mountings a fire-buzzer hooted. Then *Wind Rode's* forepart exploded in fire and smoke.

She had been a lucky ship only insofar as she had kept herself in first-class condition for the deadly game she had been engaged in. There was not much luck in what she did now; any more than the shell which sank the *Hood* had been lucky. That German projectile had been hurled at the battle-cruiser's magazine and had reached its target through a combination of highly-trained gunners and excellent instruments. *Wind Rode's* broadside spat out with the same equations urging it.

Because the target was dead ahead, there was no deflection to be set, no divergence of the guns' aim. The four shells landed with only the distance apart of the parent barrels between them, and they landed smack at the base of the Jap's funnel.

Bentley saw the vivid splash of red against the murk with a grim and intense satisfaction. His stomach had quietened now, as it always

did with that first broadside. And, because he had trained himself to keep his mind open, aloof from the confined fact of his shell's hitting, he could think about what was happening aboard that enemy destroyer.

Wind Rode's guns were loading again, and by now the initial shock would have been thrust aside in those alerted Japanese minds.

There would have been an instantaneous reaction in another ship. *Scimitar* would be thrusting to reach her full thirty-six knots, her bow would be swinging to starb'd, to close the range to where her consort had opened fire.

And there was the first visible reaction. The white-spawning stern of his target was moving to his right. Bentley saw it, Lasenby saw it, the director-layer and trainer saw it. She was altering course to port. This would mean a correction for deflection, but it also meant that her port side was now open to entry to the Australian's shells. Providing they got there quickly, before she thrust herself up too high a speed.

"Enemy altering to port, sir," Randall reported. Bentley did not answer. He was thinking with forced calm, pushing down on his exultation, thinking that the Japs were altering to run across *Scimitar's* eager bows.

But there were still four of them. That number had to be reduced.

It took about seven seconds for *Wind Rode's* gunners to load the four forward breeches. In that time the target's stern had swung little. Not much, but enough. The enemy's lack of vigilance was to cost him cruelly. Bentley had closed the range until he was sure of maximum hitting effect, and the next four shells drove into her.

One landed near the base of the streaming funnel. Another hit near the torpedo tubes, with no more visible effect than a spectacular gush of bright red. The last two punched into her port side, aft.

A destroyer's side is thin steel, and a battleship's shell would have pierced right through and out the other side without exploding. But she was not hit by a 15-inch shell. Those two 4.7-inch projectiles had their fuses startled by the jolting impact on meeting the steel of her side. The fuses burned, swiftly, and exploded the main T.N.T. charge of the shells inside the compartment behind the steel side.

That compartment was the magazine which served the Jap's after

gun-mounting. It was crammed with shells and long brass cylinders of cordite. The white-hot splinters from the Australian shell-casings ripped into the brass containers, opening them, spilling their contents. Then the brief but intense heat of the exploding T.N.T. did its work.

On *Wind Rode's* bridge they saw the flame first. It leaped up from the destroyer's after part, a thin high jet of white flame. Then, instantly, the jet widened into a bursting wall of fire. It writhed far into the gloomy sky, and up and around it, smothering it from sight, then opening as it swirled to reveal again that ghastly light, came the pouring smoke.

"Down!" roared Bentley.

The blast of displaced air dewed out and took hold of the cause of that disruption and shook her. The bosun's mate did not duck in time. Air as solid as a fist took him in the face and hurled him in a sprawled mess of arms and legs to the rear of the bridge. The cosmic noise beat into their ear-drums, dulling their hearing and numbing their senses.

Bentley came upright. His ship was still driving on at thirty knots. He saw the water to port leap upwards in a pillar of white and the sound of the shells' exploding seemed like a puny pop-gun in comparison with the shattering disruption which had left of the Japanese destroyer nothing but a still-writhing mountain of black smoke.

"Shift target!" Bentley snapped, "next in line!" The guns swung.

They swung, they steadied, they fired. But the Jap line was now at full speed, and *Wind Rode* was losing her speed as she turned to follow. The range was opening, the deflection was increasing, the target was moving fast across the line of fire.

The next broadside plunged into the sea astern of the third Jap destroyer. She was fully awake, and her returning salvo screamed over their heads. Another degree or so less of elevation and *Wind Rode* herself might have changed into component atoms.

Bentley heard the clang of the loading rammers below him. He trained his sight to the left. There she was, dimly grey hull, brightly white bow-wave, and as he looked at *Scimitar* her forepart spat four red tongues of fire.

He had been wrong in his assessment of how much light would

be left them. The sullen sky seemed to be pressing closer down upon them, malignantly, as though it had given them their chance and now wished to hide the enemy ships from further hurt. Another few minutes and it would be dark.

Wind Rode's guns bellowed and Bentley himself crossed to the voice-pipe.

"Radar? How is your contact?"

"Not clear at all, sir," the radar-officer answered him, "there's a hell of a lot of interference out there." Bentley straightened. He had known the answer. The sky ahead was black with rain; here and there close to them the sea gleamed fitfully with the last reflections of the dying light, but further off sky seemed to be joined with water as the laden clouds dropped at last their burden.

"Look at that!" Randall said suddenly, in a satisfied, excited tone, "leading ship."

The first destroyer, the one nearest to *Scimitar*, carried at her four gun-mountings hundreds of rounds of ready-use cordite. Sainsbury's shells had found some of it on the foc's'le. Out of confinement cordite burns with a clear, almost smokeless flame. The remaining two destroyers were practically invisible, dark shapes against the darker mass of rain they were racing to meet. But *Scimitar's* target was a flaring beacon.

"Shift target," Bentley ordered, "leading ship in the line."

Because it was out in the open, that burning cordite had done little structural damage. The leader was still under full power and steering normally, though now she had turned to starb'd, away from the second threat which had so spectacularly revealed itself.

In the next ten seconds that betraying flare had become the aiming point for twelve guns. She was fighting back, her challenge spaced flashes of red in the darkness, but either under orders or else through their own inclination the other two destroyers had hauled off clear of their revealed sister. They were now completely out of sight.

The Jap was handled gamely and competently. She twisted and zigzagged and her defiance cracked back at them, but where she was plainly revealed, her attackers were only dimly silhouetted against the lingering light behind them. Bentley could visualise plainly enough what was happening around that flaming cordite - it would

be too dangerous to handle and throw over the side, and the fire-parties would be hindering the gun-crew.

The action was one-sided, yet it took a long time to finish.

Both Australian ships were hitting continually, every minute closing the range. The Jap burned in four or five places along her decks, but no shell had yet reached a vital part. Bentley thought of torpedoes, and forgot the thought - a destroyer's draught is comparatively shallow, and she can twist too quickly.

He thought of something else, and this time the thought lingered. If those other two Japs had any sense or guts they would circle in the darkness and come up behind the Australians, whose flashing guns made them readily detectable.

Hampered though it was, he ordered his search radar from its forrard bearing and on to a wide sweep astern. He had no doubt that Sainsbury had done the same.

But nothing came up from astern to help the battered Jap. He was alone, and alone he died, his sides opened, his steering smashed, his engine-room flooded. They were still firing into the flames when the flames, as abruptly as the candles on a birthday cake, were quenched.

"Cease fire!" Bentley ordered.

Silence fell over the ship. The rest of the bridge team waited, but the captain had work to do. He made sure he had a radar bearing on *Scimitar* - she was close to them now, and at that range operated efficiently enough to maintain contact. Satisfied, Bentley also waited.

Soon it came. The noise was deep, a vast low bellow of sound which rumbled up and through the water and beat against *Wind Rode's* resonant sides. The Jap's boilers, strained to capacity with super-heated steam, had met the cold water under the surface. They knew, with a reaction of feeling that left them a little sick, that she was finished.

There was no need of wireless silence now. The R/T speaker on the bridge crackled, and Sainsbury's thin voice sprang out. There was no exultation in its tone, not even satisfaction - only crispness and decision.

"Maintain your present station," the voice ordered, "we will search for one hour, then return to base. Over."

"Roger and out," Bentley replied in the same un-impassioned tone. It was not affected. He felt only the tiredness of mental strain, and that sickness in his stomach. Naval warfare is remote, not intimate. He had felt no personal animus towards his enemy - he had not even seen the face of one of them. It is not pleasant to see a ship die.

They searched for the stipulated hour and during that time the rain fell upon them in windless, soaking sheets. It pattered on the bridge structure like handfuls of flung leaden pellets, huge drops; it streamed from their oilskins and forced down inside their collars, making their binoculars as well as long-range radar useless. Water hissed down on the foc's'le, penetrating easily into the gun-mountings and mounting up in the scuppers into bubbling streams that roared softly as they poured aft and then back over the side.

They found, as they expected to find, nothing. The two Jap destroyers had a long lead on them. They could be anything up to fifty or sixty miles ahead in the streaming blackness. And every minute took them closer to their base, while time had the reverse effect on the Australian ships. They had a long way to steam home, and they had gulped fuel during the fast journey in pursuit.

Bentley was thankful when the thin voice came through and ordered his ship on to the return course. Because there was no wind, the cloud mass in which they had been searching for hours was stationary. At two in the morning the first stars appeared, sparkling pinpoints playing hide-and-seek amongst the thinning wrack above them. An hour and fifteen miles later they were clear, with a diamond-studded sky above and *Scimitar* gleaming grey to starb'd.

Strict wireless-silence now. Alert radar search, and asdic operating. Bentley, who had not left the bridge, listened tiredly to the steady whirring of the aerial over his head, and to the regular pinging of the asdic pulses. Nothing on the surface, nothing below.

Freshened by three hours' sleep, the Gunner came on to the bridge to relieve Pilot. Randall was already in his bunk. Bentley listened as the watch was turned over, then he said to Lasenby, his voice weary and grumpy:

"Sea-cabin, Guns. Usual calls." "Aye, aye, sir."

As he made his way slowly down the ladder, peeling off his oilskin

coat, Bentley reflected without much interest that he had made no comment to Lasenby on the accuracy of his shooting. It had become like that lately, he recognised; the ship's efficiency was accepted without comment. But then why shouldn't it be? Once again, one more time added to all the others, her superiority had been conclusively demonstrated. And, he was sure. Lasenby expected no laudatory praises. He had been shooting accurately for too long.

Bentley stepped into his warm dry cabin and forgot Lasenby and the ship's efficiency; forgot everything but the delectable thought of his bunk, and sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

CAPTAIN SAINSBURY DID NOT send for him until four hours after they had come to their anchors in the ship-crammed harbour. Aware of the delay, Bentley put it down to the senior man's consideration - he was giving him plenty of time to make out his report.

Yet there was something about that unusual lapse of time which exercised Bentley's mind, if only slightly and without worry. Sainsbury would have to put in his report to higher authority, and it did not take four hours to describe Bentley's part in the relatively minor action. He had, in fact, completed his brief essay on *Wind Rode's* fight an hour after he'd finished breakfast the next day.

But it did not occur to him to worry. There was nothing to concern him - they had found the enemy ships, they had sunk half the force without serious damage to themselves, they had returned to base expeditiously and safely.

Fresh in starched khaki, he ran down the gangway to the twitter of the pipes and stepped into the motorboat. Although he knew it would have been done, automatically he noted that the motorboat had been scrubbed; the wooden thwarts gleamed saltily in the hot sunlight and the paintwork was spotless. This boat was taking a captain to the flotilla-leader, and first-lieutenant Randall was fully conscious of his responsibility.

Scimitar lay to her anchor to seaward of the battle-line, as shining as her gun barrels. It seemed incongruous that the peaceful craft had been a few hours before thrusting at full speed, her paintwork shrouded in the acrid smoke of her own violent action.

But she was here, Bentley reflected idly, alive and afloat, while her enemies were ripped to pieces deep down to the pressured depths. The reason, was simple - efficiency. It had been demonstrated effectively enough.

He was only faintly surprised to see that Sainsbury was not at the gangway to receive him on board. The first meeting, yes, but now they were back in the old formal routine. He waved aside the officer of - the watch's offer to conduct him, and strode forrard to the captain's cabin under the bridge.

It was a bright hot afternoon, with the almost certain promise of a night in harbour, and he was smiling as he knocked, heard the thin-voiced "Come," and stepped into Sainsbury's spartan cabin.

"Ah. Good afternoon, Peter. Take a pew. Gin?"

"Beer thank you, sir, if you don't mind. It's about a hundred and five out there."

"As you wish."

Sainsbury, Bentley noted, did not have to push a buzzer. His steward came in at once, took the order, and withdrew. They talked desultorily until they had their drinks. Then, with the door closed behind the steward, and a beer bottle standing beside the gin bottle on a silver tray, Sainsbury said:

"You have your report?"

"All ready, sir. I-ah-thought you would have wanted it sooner."

The first shock came at once, delivered in stilted tones from the vinegary face:

"Normally I would have, Peter. But there are elements about this report with which I am not completely happy."

Bentley stared at him. "Not... happy?"

"That is so."

"I'm afraid I..." His mind, normally acute, was meshing swiftly. Could Sainsbury have had further orders about which he had kept silent? "I don't quite get it. We sighted the enemy force, we sank two of 'em, no real damage to ourselves. After all, sir, two out of four...

"Precisely, my boy. Two out of four. It could have been four out of four."

Now Bentley was fully alert. He had known this man to smile, but never to joke. There was something here to step around very carefully. But not to worry about. There was not, yet, any censure in the senior officer's tone or face.

"It could have been, yes, I suppose," he said carefully. "But I'm damned if I can see how. Short of the other two scuttling themselves." He was about to say: "Damn it all, you were there! You know the weather conditions!" He said:

"My radar was mainly inoperative at long range, as I imagine yours was. The weather was all on their side, apart from the start they got. We hadn't a hope of finding them in that muck."

"Precisely," Sainsbury said again. "But we could have found them in the morning."

"I... beg your pardon?"

Sainsbury lifted his glass and sipped delicately. Then, with an old-world motion of his hand, he replaced the hardly-denuded contents on the table.

"I see you don't follow my point," he said, and under that deliberate and pedantic tone Bentley felt like a schoolboy before a patient master. "This is what I mean. We sighted those enemy destroyers just before dusk. They had not sighted us; nor, under the conditions prevailing, could they have been expected to. My intention, if I had been the sighting ship, would have been to track them all night at their reduced speed. Then, in the morning, we could have closed up to maximum hitting range and sunk all four of them. Do you follow me?"

Bentley followed perfectly. Yet he was more concerned with his feeling of relief than with his perception. He smiled.

"Yes, sir. But pursuing that course we *might* have got the lot. As it was..."

"I do not doubt we should have... got the lot, as you say."

"I wish I could share your optimism, sir."

"I trust that in future you will. As well as my intentions."

No doubt, no doubt at all, about the rebuke there. Bentley's smile contracted.

"Of course, sir." His answer was immediate. His respect for the man facing him went much further than that engendered by the rings on his thin shoulders. "Providing I know what your intentions are."

"Then let us make them plain. When you are in company with me you will make known to me all sightings of interest."

"Naturally, sir." Bentley felt his face flushing.

"Then why, may I ask, did you fail to do so yesterday?"

Normally Bentley would have not bothered to answer that question - the reason was apparent to anybody but a blindfolded mole. But the man asking it was Sainsbury. He answered, his own voice patient:

"We could not assume that they would not sight us, sir. Radio-telephone was out of the question, of course. So, for the same reason,

was a signalling lamp."

"Why?"

The word was dry, brittle. Bentley breathed in. "Because, sir, a casual look aft from any one of those four ships might have spotted my lamp."

"I am not, Peter," Sainsbury told him, "completely an idiot. I am perfectly aware that from your position when you first sighted the enemy a signalling lamp might have been seen. But you increased to full speed. You drew ahead of your original bearing relative to me. You could have turned a few points to port, which would have placed me well on your port quarter. And from that bearing not Tojo himself could have seen a battery of signalling lamps?"

The shock of realisation of the truth of Sainsbury's words hit Bentley like a fist in the guts. The feeling was so acute that unconsciously he was forced into analysis why he had not carried out that elementary procedure. He had the answer at once, truthful and complete. He had sighted the enemy. His only thought had been to close with them, to fight them and sink them.

"You're quite right, sir," he answered simply.

"I think I am. Another beer?"

Bentley nodded. He watched the skinny claw of a hand lift the bottle and pour. And then hard fact punched into his consciousness. Sainsbury was right - but only a minor point of ship handling. The crucial guts of the matter was that Bentley was also right - he had blown one ship to pieces, and he had helped to sink another. Signals or no signals. He said:

"But I think you should come my way to this extent, sir. We *did* account for two of them. The other way... it's simply conjecture."

"Conjecture based on a certain amount of experience my boy. It does not always pay to rush in, you know. We would have come on the enemy ships fresh and alert. They, on their part, would have been sleepy, with most of the ships' companies still in their hammocks. Don't you agree?"

"I suppose I must, yes, sir."

Sainsbury was looking at him keenly, Bentley noticed. But he always looked that way. He sipped his beer. The older man was quiet. He was thinking: *You don't agree at all. You think I'm a cautious old*

fool, betting possibilities against proven fact. I don't think you're cocky. Not headstrong. Over confident. Yes, that could be it. But still a damned good young destroyer driver. Perhaps the lesson will come. When it does, I only hope it's not too drastic...

He said:

"Well, my boy, that's all. Another beer?"

"No, thank you sir. There's a deal of ammunition to come in yet." He paused, his hand reaching for his cap. "Ah-the report, sir...?"

"The report will go in in accordance with the facts. The proven facts..." The prim mouth twitched slightly. "Enemy sighted, two enemy sunk, two enemy escaped in darkness. I presume that coincides with your own assessment?"

"Yes, sir," pulling at his nose, his face to Sainsbury looking suddenly boyish.

"Very well. I wonder... perhaps you are already engaged? But dinner?"

"Delighted, sir!"

"Perhaps your Randall might like to join us? It's been a long time."

So it was all over. No more lecturing, however indirect. Randall's presence would preclude any formality. Bentley's grin was genuinely pleased.

"We'll descend on you," he promised, "thirsty." They walked along the iron-deck side by side.

"Nice of the old boy to ask us," Randall smiled in Bentley's cabin. "All well? I mean, the delay?"

"All well-now," Bentley told him. He thought for a moment. The last thing his nature would permit would be to derogate a captain to a junior officer. But Randall was more than that, and Bentley could not be maliciously derogatory about Sainsbury if he tried. He told him of what had transpired in the leader's cabin.

Randall reacted as his friend knew he would. His tough face wore an expression of complete definiteness. "Jump 'em at dawn?" he growled. "Fine. On paper. Of course you did the right thing! You see the bastards, you sink 'em. All night astern of 'em? They could've sighted us, they mightn't have been asleep at daybreak, they might've

been waiting for us!" He stared at Bentley belligerently. Slowly, Bentley nodded.

"I agree with his plan of action," he said soberly. "But I also agree that there were too many 'if's'. Now we *know* we got a pair of them. Maybe," he went on, and crossed his legs slowly, "he's becoming a bit over-cautious. He's getting on, you know. Must be all of forty-five. Pretty old for a destroyer-driver in this sort of scrapping. In his day, of course... But it's natural after what he's been through that he should favour the cautious approach." He looked briefly up at Randall. "Isn't it?"

The big lieutenant nodded definitely.

"M'mm," Bentley mused. Then, quickly, he pushed himself up. "How's the ammunitioning?"

"Finished forrard. Give me half an hour on the after magazines."

"Fine. We're expected at 6.30. One thing about the old fellow - he still likes his gin. And he can still hold it! Now let me get some real work done while you bully your sailors."

It had been a pleasant dinner, with Captain Sainsbury in mellow and reminiscent mood, and it was well that they'd enjoyed it. Sailing orders for both Australian ships had come shortly after breakfast the next morning.

Admirals are much the same whatever flag they sail under, and no praise had been forthcoming for their action against the Jap destroyers. Yet the American Admiral was quite satisfied with the way they had conducted themselves. It would not be stretching the fabric of truth too much to record that actually he was pleased.

He had reason to be. Leaders of large offensive forces are always short of knowledge regarding a enemy's intentions and strength. Aircraft make fine reconnaissance units, but their surveys are necessarily swift, lacking in methodical and detailed examination. Destroyers, on the other hand, are ideal for sniffing around enemy country, for drawing his fire and having a good slow look at what he has to offer in the way of unpleasantness.

The American admiral was, like most admirals, short of ships. Yet he had felt compelled to act on his aircraft's information that four enemy destroyers were in the vicinity. Not very hopefully, he

had sent out a pair of Down-Under boats - and they had not only come back, but they had ensured that half that enemy force would not.

Navies, too, are much the same in salient points as the admirals who command them. In the Australian Navy a man or a ship who has proved himself / herself is usually in constant demand. The U.S.N. was no exception to this rule. The admiral wished to know what, if anything, was happening north of him. So the sailing orders for *Scimitar* and *Wind Rode* came just after breakfast.

Now they were well at sea, and the time was a little before dusk.

Vasco Nunez de Balboa, when he first sighted his "pacific" ocean on September 25th, 1513, must have been enjoying a sunny, windless day. Future navigators, wriggling under the discomfort of wet oilskins and saltwater boils, have decided unprintably that the largest of the world's oceans might be misnamed.

Though to the north it is limited by the narrow Bering Strait, to the south this three-eighths of the world's total sea area is wide open to the winds that blow. The Pacific boasts a mean depth of about two and a half miles, and sometimes, especially from the low decks of a destroyer, it boasts waves damned near as high.

On this particular late afternoon the Pacific was not completely belying its balmy name. There was only half a gale blowing, and only half of *Wind Rode's* decks were under water. The sun was setting on their port beam, and over miles of disturbed water the backs of high waves rolled across the face of the crimson disc. On her starb'd bow a white-crested ridge of only-apparent liquidity broke with a loud hissing roar, and Lieutenant Randall, officer of the dog-watches, for the hundredth time ducked his head as the spray lifted on the wind and came driving at the bridge.

Randall had been well trained, by Bentley as well as Sainsbury, and constantly he studied those waves and their effect on the ship. Not because he thought the ship was in any danger - she had out-ridden seas much fiercer than these - but because he had to keep continually in mind whether or not A-gun could be manned in the event of their coming upon a companion on that wind-swept waste of water. If it were impossible to man the forrard mounting, then *Wind Rode's* main armament was reduced by a third. But so far, he

decided, there was no reason why A's twins could not bellow as well as the rest.

He glanced to port. The sun was lowering to rest, like a great yellow plate, its edge on the horizon. He nodded to the waiting bosun's mate. The young seaman pulled his pipe out as he ran down the swaying ladder, and his resonant voice came above the shrill plaint of the wind:

"Hands to night-action stations."

In obedience, men began to run along her decks. They did not race, yet they moved quickly and with purpose. Like the bosun's mate, they had been waiting. They had performed this precautionary chore thousands of times, and not once had anything been sighted while they had been closed-up, testing through. Yet there is always a first time, and never was the platitude more true than at war at sea. Certainly, only *Scimitar* was in sight now, but darkness comes swiftly in the Tropics, and with their visibility limit of fifteen miles there could be a whole Fleet steaming a few minutes away beneath the curve of the sea.

Bentley heaved himself on to the compass-platform and Randall reported:

"Ship closed-up for action, sir."

The captain nodded, and raised his binoculars. From B-mounting below him he could hear sounds and voices the import of which was so familiar that it barely impinged on his consciousness.

"Check base clips."

That was the gun-captains' voice, and his order would have the clips off the bases of the ready-use cordite cartridges, ensuring that the firing-pin could get at the primer if she had to go into action in a hurry in the dark.

"Cox'n on the wheel, sir."

That was Chief Petty-officer Rennie, closed-up in the wheelhouse directly under his feet. Normally a leading-hand or able-seaman steered her, but when she might need the full use of her manoeuvrability, it was Rennie's responsible and practised hands that would swing her.

"Guard-rails...?"

The gun-captain again. The pins would be coming out of the rail

stanchions, making sure they were not stuck in, so that if she had to fire at maximum depression at a surfaced submarine the velocity of her shells would not be impeded by the triple row of wire bounding B-deck.

While the guns were being tested mechanically, high up in his director Mr. Lasenby, Gunner, was checking his communications with guns and the vital transmitting-station far below him. Nobody expected that there would be anything wrong with gunnery communications, but they were tested just the same; just the same as they had been checked when first she had cleared harbour that morning. You never knew...

Down aft round the tubes, and the depth-charges on the quarter-deck, the same checking procedure was being carried out. She had many potential enemies, on, above and below the sea, and she had to be ready to engage all or any of them at one and the same time. Pom-pom, oerlikons, machine-guns, torpedoes, depth-charges, asdic, radar, flares, signal-lamps, 4.7-inch guns. All tested, all found correct.

Except for one thing, the most critical of all.

Lasenby had his controlling director trained forty-five degrees on the port bow, and the layer's sight elevated. Then he ordered all three twin mountings on to the same bearing, to follow director. When they had reported "On," he told them to read off elevation and training pointers.

The initial part of his testing had been routine, boring. But now as the reports came up to him, he listened carefully. If one of those mountings was out, if its pointers differed from the master-sight, then, firing at a speeding target at long range, the crew of the affected gun might as well be in their hammocks. He listened. Then he relaxed.

"All guns train fore and aft," he ordered, and as the mountings swung in obedience under the thrust of their hydraulic pumps, he sent down to Bentley the report which told the captain that the ship's fighting efficiency was now entirely in the hands of the men who manned her. The ship would not fail them...

The sun was almost set. The sky, wind-blown, was clear. Pale gleams ran over the faces of the waves, glinting faintly in deep hollows, leaving the watery backs dark and ominous. Bentley kept his men at their stations.

A minute. He looked to the west. Between him and the sliver of remaining light a huge roller reared, ran, and then broke into a smoke of spray. The sun, as if put out, vanished.

No gleams now, no reflected glints. Now the whole sea was a vast and turbulent immensity of blackness, relieved only by the white flash of a toppling crest. Bentley glanced up at the sky. Remote, agelessly distant, the stars glittered hard and cold above the noisy hissing of the ocean. There might be other aerial bodies up there, but he could neither see their wings nor hear their engines. He lifted off his binoculars.

"Fall out action stations," he said.

Five minutes later she was quiet again, her men at supper and her scuttles and hatches darkened. On the black and white sea she was a dimly-grey, lightless wraith, her presence and movement betrayed only by the wake churning at her stern. But it would take a close and very experienced eye to distinguish that whiteness from the breaking, crests with which the ocean was carpeted.

Bentley knew that his own supper was ready, just as he knew that he should eat now, so that he would be ready if anything eventuated out of the night. Yet he lingered on the bridge.

This break in routine was slight, yet of sufficient significance to make him consciously think about it. Always and deliberately honest with himself he recognised that Captain Sainsbury's mild rebuke was concerning him, if only slightly.

In a bitterly-fought war like this one, when commanders had to act in the heat of a violent moment, mistakes in ship-handling and strategy were common. With a torpedo racing for your bilges or a dive-bomber about to unload a few feet above your deck you could hardly sit down and get out a slide-rule and apply it to your future conduct. Yet his "mistake" did not come into this time-lacking category. He had had several minutes in which to decide his course of action, or, rather, ponder on whether it was the correct one.

He was quite sure in his own judgment that he had acted correctly. The admiral had made no comment on the escape of the two destroyers. Yet the worry remained to irritate him. Had Sainsbury been all on the surface? Had his rebuke been aimed patently at his own failure to signal him? Or was there something else?

Was it not his action Sainsbury had been concerned about, so much as what that action in rushing in to engage the enemy revealed of his character? But what the hell was wrong with his character? Or motives, for that matter?

His bunched fingers tapped quietly at the compass-ring. He was confusing the issue - if issue there was.

The implications of what he had done were as simple as the facts. He had sighted enemy ships, and he had sunk them. He must remember that. Must keep this thing in its correct and uncomplicated perspective.

But why should he remind himself to do that? He heard the ladder chains rattle behind him and then he heard his steward's voice, mildly remonstrative:

"Your supper's ready, sir."

Bentley gave the ring a final and heavy thump and jumped down from the grating. He enjoyed his meal.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALL NIGHT THEY STEAMED.

They were on a scouting patrol, and though there was no actual objective, there were two reasons for their presence on a course which was heading them towards the Japanese Carolines.

First, this was very much enemy territory, and the admiral wished the Japs to know that he was on the offensive, that he had ships to spare to search and find and report back to him. The Australians' presence was intended to convey that this area was not a Japanese preserve.

Second, and more important, it was highly probable that they would sight something. The western Pacific was a large battle station, but there were large naval forces engaged in it. With the Indies to the west, the Carolines to the north, and the Gilberts eastward, all enemy bases, the chances of meeting an enemy ship were excellent. It was, if not a happy, then a well-stocked hunting-ground.

Nor were the Australian ships running a stupid risk in venturing into it. They were new ships, the fastest of their class, and they could outrun most things they might meet if the odds were too great. They could not, of course, outrun a battleship's shells - but they were at war, and there were risks so unavoidable that you did not bother to assess them.

Neither could they escape by speed from aircraft. But they had to the south of them aircraft and ships whose main object was to come to grips with any red-balled units the destroyers might run into. A signal would almost certainly bring prompt succour. Almost certainly. The admiral might have his own hands full. But that, again, was one of those unavoidable risks which had to be accepted without thought if you valued your sanity.

The hours and the watches dragged on. Lasenby relieved for the middle watch, and Randall took over; from him at four o'clock. Bentley had been on the bridge at midnight, and he was there a few minutes after Randall. They stood side by side on the grating round the binnacle, swaying in unison to the ship's rolling, sipping expertly from cocoa cups from which, in inexpert hands, the thick sweet liquid would have spilled at each heave of the destroyer's flanks.

They had done this, in this way and at this time, countless times. They were much more in each other's company than a man and his wife. So they did not speak, for they knew each other's professional thoughts: would the wind continue, would it increase - or would it change direction, thus mounting a confused sea which for a time before it decided on the direction of its run could prevent A-gun firing efficiently, if at all; would Sainsbury hold on this course, or would he decide to bear across to the westward; would he consider another day's run sufficient, or would he press on into the next night; and would - and each man's mind returned to this possibility again and again - would the coming dawn reveal an empty wind-driven waste, or the masts; or even hulls, of enemy ships?

Bentley held out his cup behind him and the ready bosun's mate took it. He waited there for the first-lieutenant to finish.

"I don't think it will ease much," Bentley said, "perhaps with nightfall..."

Randall nodded and passed his cup back. It happened often in the Tropics like that - the setting sun seemed to draw the wind down with it. But for most of the coming day they would pitch and roll across this pointless sea on their apparently pointless mission. You didn't feel this way when you were in company with a Fleet. It was hard to suppose that a great mass of ships was not out with a definite target in mind. But now, in company with only a sister-ship, alone on a wide sea, it was easy to feel lonely, shiftless.

He remained silent, leaning and straightening beside his captain, left leg taking the weight, then right. There was nothing to say. He could not even make a spoken guess at what they might meet. They had no knowledge whatever of what could be in this area—that was why they were here. The dawn might bring battleships, or a cruiser squadron, or a flotilla of destroyers, or a battery-charged submarine on the surface. Or it might bring nothing except a rolling, tossing field of blue and white.

Of one thing was he certain. There, was nothing within a radius of fifteen miles. The wind was blowing but there was no cloud, no interference; radar was operating efficiently. There was another certainty - at fifteen knots, their economical speed, a matter of minutes could bring something into sight, if it were there.

Bentley lowered his night-glasses from their careful sweep ahead and looked out to starb'd. Only that he had waited for it every night for years he would have missed the minute lessening of the darkness over there, the faintest diffusion of grey in the black.

"Dawn action," he said.

They closed-up, grumpy and sleepy, and they repeated the routine of a few hours before. Though now, beneath the querulous reports, there lay an intangible tenseness. It was just another dawn, one of hundreds spent precisely like this one, yet it differed significantly from the closing-up for night-action. Then the dark opacity enveloped the other fellow as well as you; his vision, too, was strictly confined. Now the day would shortly reach widely on all sides, and he, too, would be closed-up for the same reason you were - to sight first, to fire first, to kill and sink before you got your own quietus.

They clustered round the guns and they knew there was nothing on radar because no order had come down to load. They would not be jumped, then. If there were something out on that wide and windy stretch the captains would have time to see and assess, to position their ships, to fight or run. And in a destroyer with a skin not much more than a quarter of an inch thick, but great power in her boilers, time to decide meant life.

The pinch of grey in the east widened. They could see their breeches plainly, pick out the threads of the block and the firing interceptors. They could see the waves and detect the crests not as flashes of white but as wind-whipped curls topping lowering foreheads. The foc'sle became visible, and the guard-rail stanchions marching in ordered procession to meet at the bull-ring.

Then it was full light, and *Scimitar* was there, long and graceful and assuring, rolling easily to the waves, her stern tossing white and her funnel streaming a haze of heat from its capacious lip.

And nothing else was there to keep them company, friendly or otherwise. The sea's dark ominousness changed magically into the full brightness of sunny day. The waves were no longer black ridges crowned with menacing crests but familiar swells, long and methodically moving under the wind's suasion, blue, white, throwing back the young sun's light in a million sparkling facets that cheered them as intangibly as earlier they had been tensed.

And into their faces, on to their backs, the sun beamed warmly. They wriggled out of their duffle-coats. No, they would not be jumped. Not this bright and - empty morning.

"Fall-out action stations," Bentley ordered, and Lasenby passed the order to all guns, and the torpedo-tubes and the depth-charges got their permission through their own phones.

It seemed just another morning, and they reacted the same way they had done every other morning over the past dangerous years. They grumbled at the needless call which had got them out of their hammocks and they were secretly thankful that it had been needless.

They punched a friend on the back at the same time as they gripingly wondered what evil concoction the cooks had dreamed up for what in the ship's log passed as breakfast. They bustled on their way to the mess-decks and the bathrooms and they privately and irreligiously gave thanks for the sounds of normalcy all about them.

And then they heard the alarm.

Not the bosun's pipe this time. This time the strident, demanding clangour of the action bells. A sound never used for exercise, nor for closing-up for testing through, but only for the real thing. This time they ran, urgently.

It was the fastest the ship had ever been closed-up for action. They cleared the guns and tubes away and the captain's voice told them the reason for their delayed breakfast - not battleships, nor cruisers, nor destroyers. Aircraft. A large force, winging southward from the direction of the big Jap naval base at Truk, and due, if it maintained its course, to pass almost directly over both destroyers.

There were no aircraft in visual yet. Radar had bounced back from their distant bodies. So their minds were not claimed by the devoted attention of firing the guns. They had time to think.

An electric atmosphere of tensed quiet pervaded the ship. Men waited, and subconsciously checked their weapons, even though they knew they were as perfect as knowledge and familiarity could make them. Very little was spoken. The problem of maintaining threatened life was too great, too consuming, to allow indulgence of idle words. Even if they had made conversation, the thought of what radar had revealed ahead of them would have kept bobbing up in their consciousness like a red buoy shouting to them the fact of danger.

It was not only Randall now who stared about at the sea, seeing, judging. That 25-knot wind, strong enough on the surface to ruffle the sea into ship-rolling waves, would have practically no effect on the aircraft coming towards them at three hundred knots. But if its velocity increased the added movement of the ship could affect their accuracy, even their loading of the guns. And against an airborne target, even more than against another ship, they needed to send up there as many shells as they could; steady, continuous broadsides, to make the aircraft fly through as much bursting steel as possible.

But so far, as they waited round the guns with their braced legs alternately bending and straightening, they knew that the enemy could be engaged efficiently.

There was another feeling pervading the ship apart from tenseness and controlled fear. Loneliness. Loneliness made more acute by the nature of the threat. From surface craft, no matter what their size or numbers, they could, if necessary, run, and be certain of out-distancing the pursuers. But here, while both ships were physically alone on the great circle of ocean, there was added the psychological ingredient of knowing that running would avail them nothing.

There was one hope, so slight that it was more a tentative wish, a prayer, than a concrete hope. It was expressed by the breechworker of the right gun of A-mounting:

"Maybe the bastards are on a raid to the south. Maybe they'll skip a shot at us."

No one answered him. No one dared to believe him. From the large force the captain had warned them about, the Japs were certain to spare enough planes to wipe out this fortuitous blot they had come across on their way to bigger things. They would have to, the men round the gun reasoned, if only to ensure that no word of their position and course and strength was wirelessed back to their southward target.

The reasoning was sound, but it had lost its significance. Bentley was already in possession of Sainsbury's warning signal. So would be the admiral back in Manus. It was highly probable that the Jap aircraft had also intercepted that warning. They would not be feeling kindly towards the little ships who had negatived the element of surprise.

Radar, constantly echoing from the airborne fuselages, told them

that the range had decreased, that the course was unchanged. *Wind Rode* and *Scimitar* were still directly in the path of the oncoming squadrons. It was time for the first move. Sainsbury made it.

The coloured flags hauled up the foremast, remained there while Ferris repeated them, then the signal whipped down. Both ships came round, and when they were in the ordered position, *Wind Rode* was on her consort's beam, and well clear.

The move had several advantages. The sea was now on their port quarter, behind them, which lessened their rolling. And they were heading back towards base. Sainsbury had also increased speed, so that every hour of life granted them would see them twenty-five miles nearer home. As well, their dispart formation would tend to lessen the chances of bombs missing one ship and catching the other ahead of her.

All three advantages, except perhaps the reduced rolling, were minor. But they were something, they added a little to their chances of survival, and both captains knew that in warfare at sea a little could lead to the lot.

There was nothing more to be done. Nothing except wait. Yet it is in moments of taut waiting like those that the strong, inarticulate spirit of comradeship amongst fighting men is born, or strengthened. Once the guns began firing there would be nothing to think about but the open breeches and the filling of them. Now, as each man waited, and looked up at the sky, and tasted the peculiar tang of fear in the back of his throat, he felt the warming strength of companionship all about him: the companionship of men whose skill and courage he knew, whose loyalty and sticking power had been proved. Every man in the ship felt this abstract and steel-strong feeling, from the captain on the bridge to the operator staring into his glowing radar screen. More than their physical boundaries of bow and sides and stern, it made of the ship's company a tight little island of men, trained, skilled, fearful and quietly determined.

The blue and white sea sparkled all about them, the waves ran at the stern and lifted her, the red, white and blue ensign snapped at the gaff and pointed its proud benediction over her length, and occasionally a cough of brown smoke broke from her funnels as Monty McGuire built up his steam pressure for what might be

required of her. Side by side, well apart, both destroyers steamed on under the warm, benign sky.

As usual, it was Ferris who sighted them first.

They were high up, black spots climbing the inverted dome of the sky. Radar was right. A large force, thought too distant yet to distinguish its component parts. But Bentley had no difficulty in judging. In this area, on that course, there would be bombers, possibly some torpedo-bombers, and escorting fighters. The fighters could have been flown off from carriers strategically placed a few miles to the north.

The thoughts of carriers jabbed at him, a quick jolt of excitement. That would be something to trail all night... The feeling was short-lived. His concern was not with carriers, but with what they had spawned. He raised his glasses. As he stared at the enlarging black blobs in the lenses he remembered that no confirmatory signal had been received from base. There had been time enough for it to get back to them. The warning was crucial. It was possible the admiral had not received it. Sainsbury should make...

A buzzer pierced into his thoughts. Ferris stepped to the voice-pipe. His voice came.

"Leader's made another signal, sir. Repeat of the first."

Under the glasses Bentley's lips twitched. He must remember he was with Sainsbury, not that other galoot in the Gulf of Guinea...

The blobs had grown wings; as thin as the spider web in a gunsight, but still detectable. The first sound wave to reach them from those scores of pistoning engines was so faint that no one remarked on it. The sound died, like an illusion. It could mean nothing to them, for they could see their enemies and they knew their range, yet every man on the bridge strained to pick up again that illusory pulse against their ear-drums.

The noise reached out again, a murmur, yet holding in its distant weakness a vibrant depth. Again it faded on the vagaries of high air-currents. Then it was with them, solidly, permanently, overcoming with its multisonous beat distance and currents, a blatant boom of sound.

The thrumming dissonance seemed to fill the great circular solitude about them; it wiped out the significance of the abysses of

sea and sky and concentrated all attention upon its clamouring self. The pulsing beat grew stronger, and there was nothing in their world but that and the steady, sombre machines which made it.

Remote and disciplined, steadily and with purpose, as though manned by robots, the bomber squadrons climbed high over the two little ships, their discharged thunder shafting down and the red balls plainly visible on wings and fuselages.

Now the main force was overhead, and the sky was filled with their bodies and their sound. In every man aboard *Wind Rode* the first hope grew: The destroyers were too small, they were not worth the waste of bombs, the bombs and torpedoes were needed for the main target. They might even have been mistaken for friendly ships.

The main force moved on, compact, rigidly in formation, its outriders of fighters on either side; un-deviating, uninterested. Hope grew, and experience drowned it. Those machines were not manned by automatons. They held half a dozen men each, men who would be staring down, talking, cursing, because their surprise had been destroyed. Humans, like themselves - and interested.

Side by side, Bentley and Randall saw the six bombers peel off from the rear of the formation, which had not yet passed over the ships.

"Stand-by to receive," Randall muttered. Bentley took up the microphone.

"Stand-by," he warned. "We will open in controlled firing, switching to barrage if they get strength. Stand-by," he said again, and juggled the instrument back into its clips.

Ferris was at the wireless-office voicepipe again, holding a message he had hauled up in the little brass cylinder on the end of its cord. He looked at the captain. There were a few seconds yet.

"Captain, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Leader's made to base the composition of the formation."

Bentley nodded. Obviously he did not wish to be bothered with the signal's wording. Ferris crumpled the message into his pocket. Then, instead of staring where every other eye was trained, he searched around the horizon. There could be other things than aircraft in this unfriendly area. And he was a signal-yeoman. No signals came

from *Scimitar* telling him when and how to open fire, and for that Bentley was grateful. They had been master and pupil - perhaps still were - and in matters of ship-handling and gunnery, they thought with one experienced brain.

The six bombers had straightened out from their lowering dive. They were coming in for the first run. It was time to disturb them, to upset the cockiness which had brought them down so low to blot out these twin excrescences.

"Open fire," Bentley ordered, in a flat, curt voice. And "Commence, commence, commence!" went to the waiting guns.

This type of firing was totally different from surface shooting. It required a different control-table in the transmitting-station. But the guns were dual-purpose, designed so that the barrels could elevate almost vertically.

They were cocked up steeply now, their breeches filled with time-fused shells. The director-layer's finger squeezed, and six muzzles vomited flame and billows of brown cordite smoke.

Bentley had eyes for everything, everywhere. But there was another man besides Ferris who was concentrated on one job. Pilot had the ship, and his orders were to follow *Scimitar's* gyrations. This would serve the double purpose of preventing a collision, and keeping the fire-power of both ships massed against their common enemy.

Bentley was watching, his head craned back, where the six shells had flowered suddenly and blackly against the blue, just ahead of the bombers. It was good shooting for an opening salvo, but it had to be better. Ferris noticed what was happening, and his voice came just before the roar of the next broadside:

"Fighters coming in port beam, sir!"

Bentley's head swung swiftly. He could spare only a second, for he had to be ready to swing her clear of what those bombers would shortly unload. Three fighters, low, their intention unoriginal and obvious - strafe the gun-crews and give the bombers a respite to line-up their targets. Randall had the microphone and Bentley turned back to his main enemy.

"Short-range weapons engage fighters Red eight-five!" Randall ordered.

In the next few seconds there was demonstrated the diverse capabilities of a modern warship. Each of her enemies in the sky had one main purpose; the big planes had been designed to bomb, the fighters to protect them. Yet *Wind Rode* was fighting off both forms of attack, simultaneously, at the same time as she used her main defensive potential, her power to turn like a cat.

The 4.7's roared skyward and the pom-pom and oerlikons opened up in a smaller, but deadly, cone of explosive shells. And while her gunners aimed and fired and loaded the ship herself was swinging to throw off the aim of both bombers and fighters.

The bombers had not yet unloaded. Towards the fighters a red lacework pattern of tracers streamed out. The pom-pom had taken the right-hand fighter and its barrels fastened on it and stayed there. The fighter was low, but he was still diving. The whole of his back was visible to the layer and trainer. The two-pounder shells reached out and buried their fused noses into the cockpit and the wing-roots. Inside, they exploded. There was no fire, no outward effect of their entry. But the Zero continued its dive, and it dived straight into the sea.

The oerlikons hit, but they failed to score. The cannon-shells of the remaining pair of fighters slashed a brief and savage tattoo against her decks, then they were over, noses tilted upward, clawing for height.

Two men of the first-aid party ran along the iron-deck, towards the tubes, where three bodies lay crumpled, and staining the steel with dark red.

Randall, the gunnery-officer, was temporarily disengaged. He looked up and he growled what everybody on the bridge had seen:

"Bombs away!"

They tumbled from the spawning bellies, wobbling and almost level before the rushing air took charge of their vanes and straightened them so that the armoured noses pointed directly down.

"Port thirty," Bentley ordered.

Below him in the wheel house Rennie knew what that large alteration of course meant. His hands spun the spokes until they merged into a blur. The fluid in the pipes received its pressures and the steering-engine above the rudder-head obeyed that forceful

impulse. The rudder was large, deliberately so, and the friction of the sea against it at twenty-five knots was considerable. Yet the area of thick metal turned easily.

Now the rushing water forced against this obstacle. Anchored strongly to the stern, the rudder swung the whole length of her swiftly to port. Her inertia caused her to heel violently to starb'd, so that guncrews cursed and hung on to keep their footing. She had half-completed her avoiding swing when the stick of bombs entered the water and exploded.

From below the water a steel-fisted blast reached out to her plates. She reeled in a disordered plunge to port, and the trucks of her slim masts waved in straining protest across the sky. She lay on her side for a critical moment, trembling under the blow. Then her ballast and her cunning design brought her back quickly, valiantly, and the heads of men on the upper-deck turned and stared viciously at the foiled towers of white thrown up by the bombs as they slipped astern and cascaded back into her wake.

"Not... bloody... bad," said Randall, and licked his lips.

"Let's hope they don't get any better," Bentley answered tightly. "What are those fighters doing?"

"Still climbing, sir," Ferris reported, his neck muscles wrinkled as he stared upward, "looks like another run."

Nobody disputed his judgment. The fighters were climbing, but not in an opening direction, and the bombers were wheeling in a slow, methodical bank to come back over them. Bentley glanced across at *Scimitar*. Though her wake too was circled with ulcers of foam, she seemed unharmed.

"Stand-by for another run," he spoke into the microphone. "Short-range weapons, watch those fighters. And keep an eye lifting for others that might come back from the main formation."

Randall touched him on the arm.

"Those bomber boys are in range. Don't see why they should be left alone till they get in position." Bentley nodded. Randall spoke to the director.

The transmitting-station had much more to handle in anti-aircraft firing than against surface ships. Planes can turn much faster, their speed is greater, there is height as well as range to contend with, and

the targets can drop or rise in their element. Barometric pressure at the heights to which the shells flew was different from sea-level, so was wind force. There were, as well, the other normal considerations- *Wind Rode's* own speed, her course relative to the target's and the corrections for deflection caused by her speed. But the ship's fire-control table was brilliantly designed to allow for all those equations, so that the guns received simple measures of training and elevation and fuse-lengths.

Her mountings carried semi-automatic fuse-setting machines, and at the order "Commence, commence, commence!" the long shells were thrust into the fuse machines, then whipped away and dropped on the rammers. The drill had to be fast, for every second wasted meant that the fuse setting, correct now to reach those bombers, would be out by that much time when the shells burst. The drill was fast.

The bombers were flying from left to right, so that they could come down upon the ships from their previous direction, astern and to the northward. Six ugly flowers bloomed ahead of the six bombers. The bombers flew on. Seven seconds. Then the sextuple blossoms of black erupted smack in the middle of them. "Oh... bloody lovely!" Randall ejaculated.

It was. Beautiful shooting. The bombers were spaced fairly widely apart, and the bursting radius of a 4.7-inch shell is not great. But six of them had exploded close together, close to the right-hand aircraft. Five flew on, but the sixth took almost the full disruptive force of that perfectly-aimed broadside. Bentley saw one wing rip off and make its own private descent, zig-zagging as it fell like a piece of paper dropped to the floor. The parent body followed it almost at once, reeling over on its side and plunging straight down in a vicious spiral whose twistings would have the crew either pinned helplessly in their seats or else flung violently from side to side.

The guns kept firing, but the remaining five aircraft had altered course while the shells were in the air. They burst well behind them.

Bentley knew he should keep his eyes and his mind on that quintuple threat, but his stare was drawn with fascinated interest to the falling bomber. He felt no sickness in his guts now. That first stick of bombs had shaken him badly; the men who had aimed them were much more personal enemies than the crews of those destroyers in the night.

He watched with a quiet exultation as the aircraft neared the sea. A few hundred feet up the other wing tore off under the enormous strain. But it made no difference to that hurtling descent, except that the body met the sea a few seconds before the wing. White jetted from the blue, and hung in lacy curtains for a few moments before falling back and forming a frothy circle ominously similar to those left by the bombs.

"Fighters coming in, sir," said Ferris.

Bentley turned to study them. The pattern had not changed then. Bombers almost ready to drop, fighters strafing to keep the gun-crews down. It would have worked, except that the ship carried her own special weapons for dealing with fighters. She was now divided into two separate parts so far as fighting was concerned. The crews of the big guns were lining up their sights on the bombers while the pom-pom and oerlikons and machine-guns snarled their challenge at the Zeros.

From foc'sle to quarter-deck she was wreathed in cordite smoke. Her deck plates shuddered under the 40-ton recoil from each big gun and the multiple roar of her defiance crashed out across the sea. Above this fierce uproar the ensign whipped and snapped at the gaff, and below it the turbines spun with a powered whine in their casings and the two huge propellers drove her on over the ridged sea.

She was - fighting magnificently, a panther clawing at the same time as it twisted to avoid its host of enemies. It was the forrard oerlikon's claws which clutched down the next victim. An oerlikon shell is smaller than a pom-pom's, but more of them spit out every minute. Almost nine inches long, the shells flew at thousands of feet per minute and slammed into the fighter approaching at three hundred miles per hour. They struck, and the layer held them fastened there.

These were the few seconds which determined whether a ship lives or dies. The layer was hitting, and all he had to do was to keep his trigger pressed. Now it was up to the gun. If Lasenby or the gunner's mate had been lax in their training and inspection, the gun could have jammed. The fighter's shells, unimpeded, could have lit a fire on her quarter-deck which by the grace of the devil might have blown her stern off. But the gun did not jam, nor misfire. Its trigger was back, its bolt was free to slide back and forth, it kept on coughing,

and recoiling, and the line from its flaring muzzle was extended out to join its explosive potential to the Japanese fighter.

Many eyes were fastened on that fighter, until they saw, expected and sudden, the flash of flames spring from its back and whip under the wind into an enveloping carapace of fiery disaster.

The oerlikon's gunnery had been excellent, but it was luck which really saved her. The Zero was out of control, heading for the quarter-deck. If it had hit there it could not have missed splitting open at least one depth-charge. Amatol, like T.N.T., requires a naked flame to explode it. There would have been all the flame required.

For all his alertness and ship-handling competence, Bentley could not have swung his ship in two directions at once. He had her under full rudder to escape the covey of bombs plunging to meet her. It was pure luck that he had turned her to starb'd. The blazing fighter hurtled closer and the quarter-deck slipped to port to meet it.

It was very close, so close that as the quarter-deck slid in under the flaming threat the Zero's starb'd wing clipped the top of the depth-charge loading derrick. Every man on the stern was flat on his belly, hands clasped in token protection over his head. So that they did not see the wing hit. But there was little effect to be seen. The Zero was so low that an instant after its contact with the ship it was in the water, a few yards from the ship's side, and the burning petrol was darting its tongues in all directions over the sea. A few seconds later and the whole mess was well astern.

Physically, *Wind Rode* had barely felt the impact of that critical escape. The Zero carried no bombs and its entry into the water did not disturb the ship's two thousand tons. But there was something heading for her which held a deliberate and much greater capacity for disturbance.

The sound of falling bombs was not a sound-effects whistle, but a harsh sort of tearing noise. She was still swinging to starb'd, towards *Scimitar*. Then... one, two, three, four, five, six, the stalks of flung water erupted in succession from the sea close on her port side.

Under the inertia of her turn she was heeled over to port, towards the explosion area. The force of the blast met her bilges, under the surface. It was so fierce, that it acted on her like resistance against the drop-keel of a yacht. She heeled even further to port. For the

fraction of an unbearable second she remained clubbed over on her side, trembling and still, with an immobility more awful than the wildest motion.

Then Bentley, hanging with both hands to the binnacle, shouted. The wheel came off her. The rudder moved fore and aft, then over in the opposite direction. Gratefully she felt the relief. She heaved her wave-washed flanks upright and drove on. She would need an almost full outfit of new crockery, but she was alive and under full control.

"Four bombers left, sir," Ferris reported through the welcome silence of the cease-fire, "one heading to the north."

They were temporarily safe, and Bentley's eyes trained round to check on that departing aircraft. The sky was still blue and smiling, and he picked up the smoke trail easily. It was already distant, and he knew it was caused by *Scimitar's* guns. Then Randall spoke, in a hard, curt tone, and no one on the bridge saw the smoke descend to meet the sea, nor the small, remote splash on the horizon which marked the bomber's grave.

"*Scimitar* hit," Randall had said.

In that moment of crisis, when they became aware that half of their defensive strength might have been denied them, it was understandable that every face should turn towards *Scimitar*. Every face except that of the signal-yeoman. His telescope was still trained on the quartet of bombers above them to the south.

Bentley stared through his glasses and his brain was using every faculty of experience to tell him the extent of the destroyer's damage. Because of the smoke his eyes were drawn to her bridge. The smoke was not thick, nor was it very black there was little to burn there. But the even line of the wind-break was broken. Its edge was crumpled, like an empty water-tank subjected to heavy pressure.

The bomb might have penetrated the bridge structure on her far side and blown upward. Or it might have landed right on the compass-platform. But she was still steaming fast, still holding a steady course. But then the cox'n could be responsible for that...

His mind compassed these possibilities in a second. He had to know. Ferris's lamp was too low. Bentley reached forward and jerked out the microphone of the radio-telephone.

"*Scimitar*. Are you badly hurt?"

He stood braced against the ship's movement, the black instrument in his hand and his eyes on *Scimitar*, waiting. The next few seconds were so pregnant with cruel possibility that he was to remember them for a long time. It was quiet on the bridge, the silence barely disturbed by the drone of the distant bombers and the hiss of water down her sides. Over them wafted the heat and stench from the funnel, borne on the following wind; and up to them came the harsh bite of burnt cordite.

Then the silence was broken. The voice was strained, but still vinegary:

"No. Bomb exploded beside the bridge. You look after yourself. Out."

Bentley leaned forward and slowly replaced the microphone. He was not sure whether Sainsbury's injunction had been benediction or testy instruction. But he was sure the old chap was still alive, and kicking. His grin at Randall was faint, and relieved. The next instant it was gone.

"Bombers turning, sir," Ferris called.

They watched the ominous alteration of course for a moment, then Randall growled:

"How many bloody bombs do those swine carry? I thought we'd had our full dose."

Bentley shook his head slightly in negation. Not more than twelve bombs had been unloaded in the two runs, and those fully-equipped carriers up there would have cargoes to spare. A moment later they knew they had additional worries.

It was radar this time, from the search aerial which had remained in contact with the main force now well to the south. The information from the voice-pipe was concise:

"Three aircraft right ahead. Moving fast, towards. Probably fighters."

So they've been stung, Bentley thought grimly. Not so much now a matter of strategy in sinking two enemy destroyers, but a more significant question of national prestige. Two bombers down, two fighters, with no visible damage to either destroyer. It looked like a long fight. They could not hope to shoot down every aircraft which came against them; but there was the other consideration that if they

could hold out long enough, the leader of the main force might withdraw his detached units for the main objective to the south. Already a good deal of time had been wasted, and he would need every aircraft. There were more than two lonely destroyers down there to challenge him.

These equations slipped through Bentley's consciousness while he was stretching forward to take up the microphone of the Sound Reproduction Equipment. His men had fought well and steadfastly, and now, with a brief respite allowed them while the rescuing fighters came up to join the bombers, was the time to give them a shot of confidence.

"D'you hear there," his voice reached throughout the ship, "this is the captain. We have held them off so far - well done. *Scimitar* has been slightly damaged, but as you can see she is still very much with us. Her captain is also very much still on deck. Radar has contacted three more fighters sent back from the main force. Apparently the other didn't like what was dished out to them. I believe that if we can hold out long enough, the enemy leader will have to recall these pests in our vicinity. Also, I want you to know that a signal has been passed to the admiral. He knows what we're up against. There's the chance that he may not be able to send us any help right now. But I want you to remember that we've come through before without any outside help. We have a few minutes yet before the fighters get in position. Gun positions are to be cleared at once. Heave all empties over the side. We'll leave the gunner to explain his lack of cartridge cases to the armaments officer in Melbourne when we get back to Sydney."

He paused, knowing there would be no hilarious laughter at his humour, but knowing also that his men would realise the situation was not so grim that the captain could not attempt his weak jokes.

"One more thing," he went on, "fire-discipline. It is absolutely essential that the fighters are engaged efficiently while the main armament takes care of the bigger pests. Close-range weapons hold your fire until your targets are in maximum effective hitting range. Each time you open fire I want to see at least one little yellow bastard get his. That's all."

Once again in precise formation, bow level with bow, but well

apart, *Wind Rode* and *Scimitar* forced on to the south towards their base.

Regulations required that all empty cylinder cartridges be stowed after use and returned to the first available armament store, which in *Wind Rode's* case would be Brisbane or Sydney. Those heavy brass containers were valuable, and they could be used over and over. But there was something more valuable at stake now.

Bentley's decision had been wise. The guns had fired fast and continuously, and the area behind each mounting was cluttered with cylinders which rolled everywhere as the ship heeled. Some of them were still hot, but that did not deter willing hands. From the three mountings, as well as from pom-pom and oerlikon platforms, a cascade of brass poured over the ship's side. Shortly the loading areas were cleared.

The ready use ammunition of the big guns had not been touched: their shells and cordite came up on hoists from the magazines below. But on the close-range weapons articulated belts of shells and magazines for the oerlikons were sent up swiftly, and stowed ready in the lockers.

Before the fighters had joined their big brothers *Wind Rode* was in the same state of cleared readiness she had been an hour before, when the action commenced.

There was little to do elsewhere. But though the guns had been fed, her men had not. Without orders, there issued from the galley great aluminium kettles filled with strong coffee, and mess-deck fannies crammed with sandwiches. Men at the guns gulped the scalding liquid and stuffed roast meat and bread in after it. They'd no breakfast, but they had not realised how hungry they were until they saw the food and drink being handed up to them.

It was a quick meal. It had to be. The fighters were orbiting round the bombers, and it was not difficult to understand that the fast black specks were receiving their instructions - keep the upper-deck gunners down while we fly over and finish this business.

No word had come from *Scimitar*. There was no need of instructions between those two battle-wise ships. Her windbreak was still oddly out of line, but the smoke had ceased. Distantly from *Wind Rode's* bridge they could see the white-capped heads of their

comrades moving on the leader's.

She made a splendid picture. At thirty knots the stem chiselled a graceful arch of white from the blue; it lifted in a watery curve up level with her gunnel, and dropped down again to meet the sea back near B-mounting, so fast was she moving. The arch was constantly renewed, as though its symmetry was a permanent part of her. From its point of re-entry, and from the wider bilges further aft, other ridges of white ran out in the same continuous birth and movement, until the appreciative eye was drawn right aft to the boiling at her stern. This propeller induced turmoil reached up close to the edge of the quarter-deck, and astern for miles over the sun-glittering blue - a frothing origin leading back to a wide long sword of smoothness. Halfway to the horizon the wind and sea began to win over this smooth wake, nibbling at the edges with small curling waves of intrusion. A mile further back the elements were completely victorious, and the sea stretched to the horizon, trackless.

She was a beautiful thing, sailing in her element on a colourful ocean, and only the buckling of her bridge and the presence of the covey of vultures above her spoiled the picture.

The thought brought Bentley back to harsh reality. Now as he looked at it, the sea was still colourful and friendly, bearing them back towards their base and safety; but the presence of his enemies reminded him that that same sea was also waiting to draw them down to deep death.

The mental image troubled him. In the face of action he had never thought like this before. Normally his whole mind was engaged by professional considerations. Into it slipped the memory of his earlier thoughts about what Sainsbury had said. Because his mind was so edgy, tight with tension, he came straight to the point - *was he wrong*? In all the years of his success had he come to the point where he had acted with less judgment and accuracy of decision?

Deliberately, he pushed his imaginings down. There was a time and place for introspection, and this was the time for inspection - of those separating black shapes pinned up there against the blue.

"The fighters have broken off," Randall commented, his voice steady. "I'd say any minute from now." Bentley's hand stretched out.

"Stand-by," he said into the microphone.

CHAPTER FIVE

WIND RODE AND *SCIMITAR* were projected into an action which in strain and savagery surpassed anything either ship had undergone before.

They had been in bigger actions, with ten times the ships and aircraft engaged here. Here were two ships and eight aircraft. By world standards, a minor affair. But in those other fights each ship had been part of a large whole, units included in an overall and collective strategy of defence. There the enemy threat had been general, its fierceness dissipated over scores of ships.

Here the threat was concentrated. Separated only by a distance wide enough to permit manoeuvring, the two destroyers were in effect one unit subjected to the focused and determined intention of eight aircraft They had no help, they were miles from base. It was a private fight, with no Fleet to draw off attention and allow them respite. They were gladiators in a ring in a fight to the death, with no end-of-round bell.

Aboard *Wind Rode* they waited for the first on-slaught to fall upon them, and they received it and beat it off and then they stumbled and scrabbled for foothold as the ship shuddered under the blast of bombs.

They were seasoned fighting men and they had met the first attacks with experienced and forced calm, manning their weapons in a disciplined fashion. But then their calm had been bolstered by hope - hope that they would be merely attacked in passing, before the attackers flew on to rejoin the main body.

Now they knew that they were to be sunk. Too much time had elapsed for the fighters and bombers above them to be of any use over the prime target. The Japs would stay there until either ammunition was exhausted or their target sunk. *Wind Rode's* men knew what they were in for.

A man's feelings work like this in the face of deathly danger. At first, when he knows that he is committed to defend his life against a savage and malignant force, a chill of fear feathers up his spine and a nausea that he can taste rises into the back of his throat.

Some men, of different racial stock, and untempered in battle,

like the Italians in the Middle East Desert, are adversely influenced by that fear and its horrible taste. They fail to fight effectively, they see themselves about to be overwhelmed, and they throw down their weapons and give in.

Wind Rode's men had been bitterly tempered in battle. And they came from a tough stock. They felt fear, all right, and they tasted its ammoniac secretions and then there occurred what always happens with men like that. The feeling vanished; it was subdued under a sort of stubborn be-damned-to-you-all sensation.

The physiology of fear is interesting. Some re-searchers believe that when the "be damned" stage is reached a sort of shock curative process takes over. Fear is still present in the mind, but it is no longer allowed to interfere with the effective and disciplined training a man has undergone.

The men of *Wind Rode* and *Scimitar* were like that now. The only effect of their fear was to make them recognise the threat to their lives and brace themselves to repel it. They fought stubbornly.

There were still eight aircraft, four bombers and four fighters, in the hot sky above them. Neither the 4.7's nor the close-range guns had scored killing hits in the first of the reinforced attacks. And the Japs, cunning in their tactics, allowed them practically no time at all to recover or replenish their ammunition. The bombers turned and sailed over them again and the fighters wheeled and came howling down.

A machine diving at you at close to four hundred knots with its engine screaming is a will-melting thing in itself. Not courage, but experience, is the strength you need to face it from behind the practically unprotected sights of an oerlikon or pom-pom. And when that machine's wings break into balls of smoke and flame and the flail of lead lashes all about you, then you need everything else you're capable of dredging up to prevent you flinging away from your gun and diving for shelter.

Wind Rode's men had that something else to bolster them comradeship. Unthought of, but solidly present in their consciousness, was the knowledge that on either side of them were men feeling the same as they did, men who also would not run, but who at the order from the fire-control-officer would slam out at those fighters just as

heavy a measure of steel as they were receiving.

Two fighters were diving for *Scimitar*, two for *Wind Rode*. Each aircraft mounted four cannon, so that the firepower of aircraft and ship were close enough to equal, with the odds a shade in favour of the destroyer. But this small advantage in firepower was outweighed by the fact of the fighters' swift manoeuvrability. It would be experience and training, and common guts, which would decide the issue.

Training ensured that the oerlikons took the left-hand fighter, while the four-barrelled pom-pom engaged its mate. Just under five hundred high explosive shells a minute poured out from the belching muzzles at the Jap. The barrels were converged so that their outpouring formed a cone. Into this net of destruction the Zero flew.

He was firing, but all men on the upperdeck apart from guncrews had taken shelter. His target was the pom-pom, and though the ship was swinging desperately a kick on his rudder could have negatived that avoiding action. But his aim was a little out, perhaps through a miscalculated deflection due to the ship's fast movement. His shells ripped into the funnel, and instantly the grey steel spouted innumerable little gouts of brown smoke, like a gigantic kettle bursting at the seams.

Then the pom-pom had him.

He was not diving. He had straightened out from the headlong plunge and was coming in fast and low over the sea, a line of black wing, a propeller arc, and behind it a black blunt muzzle topped by the glistening perspex of the cockpit.

The pom-pom's cone was of precisely the right dimensions. Some shells exploded against the wings, some at the wing-roots, and other hammered powerfully at the anvil of the engine.

It was a violent action, and the effects came violently and with abruptness. From the engine of the Zero there shot a tawny-golden flash. It sprang from a base of wind-blown black smoke and it flowered with catastrophic swiftness into an enveloping cape that streamed its fiery folds around and above and below the aircraft's nose. The moth-winged shape rocketed towards the ship, a bellowing bull with a matador's red cloth over its horns.

There was no danger of its hitting the ship. The pilot was still

alive, and he was no suicide graduate. The flaming nose pulled up convulsively to clear the ship. This slowed its speed, and as it climbed above them they could see that the fuselage was melting under the fierce breath of petrol driven flames.

The Zero's climb was short. At the peak it tilted over on one wing and came spinning down. The ship's swing and the Zero's gyration had taken *Wind Rode* clear of danger. Almost vertical the fighter plumetted into the sea fifty yards on her starb'd beam. Few eyes lingered on the splash and the smoke.

The bombers were in position. On the bridge Bentley received three reports almost simultaneously. "Number Two oerlikon out of action," Randall told Bentley, in a dispassionate voice which said nothing of the twisted metal of the gun, nor of the lacerated bodies surrounding it. The oerlikon had taken the full blast of the second Zero's cannon.

"Bombs falling," reported Pilot, and leaned over sideways so that his mouth was close to the wheelhouse voice-pipe, at the same time as his head was craned up to stare at the sky.

And "*Scimitar* on fire," informed Ferris.

The bombs were in the sky, so Bentley knew that cannon-shell had found something inflammable on *Scimitar's* decks. This would not be difficult. He wanted to get his glasses on her, at the same time as he knew that not for one second could he take his eyes from that falling cluster of black blobs.

"Hard a port!" he snapped, and Pilot repeated the order down the pipe.

At thirty knots the ship heeled at once. The next few seconds were of such frenzied madness that an inexperienced civilian could with justification have jumped over the side.

The ship was leaning so acutely that her lee gunnel was under water, marked by a foaming maelstrom where the sea surged inboard. X-gun was still bearing, and still firing, and the discharge shook the tormented ship. Then the bombs plunged into the sea dead in her wake, and her stern was lifted clear so that the propellers raced and she seemed as if she would shake herself to pieces. The bellow of the guns and the blast of the bombs combined into a hellish tumult that would have unhinged the sanity of minds less practised in bearing it.

"Midships, steer south," Bentley ordered in a hoarse voice, and then he turned to look at *Scimitar*.

It was Ferris again, Ferris the Argus-eyed, who told them.

"One bomber hit," he called, "on fire and dropping fast."

That must have been X-gun's last salvo, and though they were grateful for this diminution in their enemies they spared only a brief and hateful glance for the funeral pyre staining the pellucid blue of the sky. Every eye on the bridge was on *Scimitar*.

She was, Bentley noted thankfully, still steaming fast. Not engine or boiler-rooms, then. The smoke was streaming from abaft the funnel, now and again; streaked with a tongue of red. That was exploding ammunition, and it was the pom-pom's ammunition. Once, far away from here, his own pom-pom's ready-use shells had gone up, and he could visualise only too starkly the mess aboard *Scimitar*. Her main close-range weapon was finished.

Scimitar was on his starb'd beam. His reaction was swift.

"Close *Scimitar*, " he ordered Pilot, "take all avoiding action to port."

The bridge understood his manoeuvre clearly. Before, a fighter could have flown over *Wind Rode* and still had time and space to get down again at *Scimitar*. But now with *Wind Rode* close alongside her, the damaged destroyer would be protected on one side at least. Pilot took her over with care.

"Fighters coming in," Randall said harshly.

For the next ten minutes *Wind Rode* fought the most intense action of her violent life. Her guns were choirs of flame. Coloured tracer thrust out vehemently through the sky, mingling into a fiery pattern with the shells from the fighters. The roar of her desperate defence was loud and continuous. She shuddered with her speed and she jumped under the shock of recoil of her big guns. A white cloud of foam opened at her bows and the faces of her gunners grew coppery with fumes. And their straining bodies grew tired.

4.7 shells and their propelling cordite are heavy. For almost two hours the gunners had lifted and loaded and rammed, straining to keep their footing on the heeling and shivering decks. They could last for some time yet, but they could not hope to maintain their earlier accuracy of aim and drill. The Japs, on the other hand, though

under mental strain, were physically unaffected. Their firing and bombing required only the pressing of buttons.

Bentley saw another cluster of blobs descending to meet him and he thought with weary desperation that surely now their bomb-loads must be exhausted. The Jap had unloaded cunningly, not in large sticks but a few at a time, knowing that only one bomb penetrating those thin decks below them could rupture the target cruelly.

"Hard a port!" Bentley said, for the twentieth time that morning.

A moment later her stern was slowing round with all the torque that rudder and screws could give her. In closing up on *Scimitar* he knew perfectly well that he was concentrating and enlarging the bombers' target, but that was merely one more added to the appalling risks they had been subjected to during the morning.

Wind Rode may have been just a fraction more competently handled, or her coxswain got his wheel on faster, or the Japs' main aim may have been *Scimitar*. They would never know.

They saw the bombs hurtling closer until their speed became too great to follow. They saw the familiar and hateful spouts erupt off their starb'd quarter. They heard the multiple concussions, they watched the towers of water shred back into the sea, and then they saw what one bomb had done to *Scimitar*.

Their sistership was slowing down, rapidly. Above her foc's'le stretched a steep mushroom of oily black smoke. The smoke was thick, but it did not hide the jagged hole savaged in her port bow.

The bow had not landed directly on the foc's'le, but close aboard in the water. Its punch had reached upwards and through her thin side. Now her forepart so was open to the sea. There would be a good deal of water in there, Bentley realised with a wearied grimness. Compared to her earlier manoeuvrability, she was now a cripple.

"Midships!" he shouted hoarsely above the roar of the guns, "bring her round, Pilot!"

Through the exhaustion in his mind his intention was rockhard. He would move around her, shephereding her as best he could from the triumphantly savage objective of the bombers forming-up again in the sky. As though he had read his mind - which was probable - Sainsbury's voice cracked from the R/T speaker:

"Close me and circle round. I am down to ten knots, probably less. Pom-pom and one oerlikon out of action. They cannot last much longer. We must hold them off. Over."

The effect of his ordeal was apparent in Sainsbury's voice. Bentley tried to make his own tones normal. "Will co-operate. Well dish these swine yet. Over." There was no answer to his forced bravado.

Rapid and white-flashed, *Wind Rode* ran round her crippled sister in a tight circle, under a blue sky and upon the rolling plain of a blue sea. Bentley knew that his tactics would be accurately interpreted by the Japs. He did not bother about it. They would know *Scimitar* was damaged, if not from sight of the hole in her side then from the reduced bow-wave at her stem.

He took up the microphone. Before speaking he drew in several long breaths. His men were more strained than he, and the desperation in his mind must not be communicated to them through his voice. He said, as firmly as he could:

"This is the captain. *Scimitar* has been damaged. She is down to ten knots. But she is still in action. The Japs cannot possibly last much longer. Their ammunition and bombs must be almost exhausted. We have got to hang on for a few minutes more. We will hang on. Good luck to you all, and good shooting. That's all."

He replaced the microphone and the Jap fighters fell headlong upon them.

Their attack was directed exclusively at *Wind Rode*. *Scimitar* could wait. With both ships crippled they could be picked off at leisure.

The attack was cleverly executed. Bentley watched the fighters coming in and then his gaze switched up to the bombers. They too were beginning a run. He did not think they had any bombs left, but he could not be sure. Therefore he could not divert his big guns from them to place a barrage before the fighters. The howling demons would have to be met by his close-range weapons alone, minus Number Two oerlikon.

The pom-pom and oerlikon crews were less physically tired than the 4.7 gunners, but mentally they had undergone more. An armoured shield surrounded each twin mounting, and the gunners behind it were not only protected, but they had been too busy at their loading

to even see the fighters and bombers attacking.

It was completely different with the close-range weapons. They were unarmoured, and every man of their crews had intimate sight of the snarling threat. They were experiencing that visual unpleasantness now.

The strain on one of the pom-pom's loaders was so intense that he retched. But he kept his gun supplied through the wrenching paroxysm. And no one heard the convulsive protests of his stomach and nerves above the coughing roar of the mounting.

The fighters bore in and laced her upper-deck with steel and speared up into the sky. They tilted over on red-balled wings and came hurtling down again. Four men were left on the deck. They were hauled clear with compulsive urgency by their mess-mates and left to one side, where the limp bodies moved with horrible and false animation to the roll of the ship. The big guns were firing at the bombers, but now the heavy aircraft were zig-zagging to avoid the clusters of black flowers. At last Bentley knew that their loads were exhausted. But the fighters knowing this also, kept too close in to the ship to allow him effective use of his barrage. She had only her close-range guns.

His eyes reddened and stung by cordite fumes, his brain battered by the uproar he had borne so long, Bentley saw the fighters plunging down and heard the powered scream of their straining engines. He was ready to give his wheel order, and he knew that any second from now might see the ship's finish. Depth-charges, torpedo warheads, ready-use ammunition, even the boilers behind their thin skin of ship's side - they were all open to entry by the Zeros' two-pounder cannon-shells.

The pom-pom opened fire. Automatically, dazedly, he waited for the oerlikons to join in. There came only a single snarl. Then he knew that he had lost another of his precious close-range guns. And knew that the guns he had left could not possibly cope with the multiple threat diving for him.

But the fighting instinct inside him was still forceful. His mouth opened to order men from the 4.7 mountings down aft to the inactive oerlikon. Randall's bellow slashed across his intention.

"Cease firing!"

Bentley could not believe his ears. Nor, when he followed Randall's thrusting finger, his eyes. It was understandable. His attention for the past two hours had been completely engrossed on the bombers and the handling of the ship. There had been no time to survey the scenery.

But he was looking at additional decorations to it now. Graceful, glorious decorations; twin-tailed, twin-engined hawks, a sweet half-dozen, slicing down like sun-glinting streaks, earning their name. Lightnings.

The Jap fighters had not seen them. Understandable again. They were as preoccupied as Bentley had been. They eased out of their dives and came in for the ship; they showed the full lengths of their backs and the Lightnings streaked for that nicely-presented target. "Hard a port!" Bentley croaked.

The Jap fighters could have, but they did not, follow *Wind Rode's* comparatively slow alteration. Two of them smashed into the sea astern of her an aircraft is difficult to fly with one of its wings blud-geoned off. The other two hung on their propellers, clawing desperately for height. Four Lightnings zoomed up after them.

Sweaty, dirty, panting, the destroyer's gunners glared upwards with squinting eyes. It was too soon yet for relief. They felt, every man of them, only fierce exultation. With every fibre of their exhausted wills they urged the pursuing Lightnings on.

Two Lightnings closed the left-hand Jap and as though their firing buttons were actuated by one finger, separate streams of tracer leaped out and converged on the Zero. He had no time to manoeuvre. His outline vanished in a formless, thrusting ball of smoke and flame, from which pieces of aircraft spun out and fluttered seaward.

The last Zero whipped in a tight bank to starb'd. They were well trained, those American pilots. One continued on and boxed the Jap in on his left-hand side. The other swung over on his wing-tips and as the Zero flew across his line of sight he pressed his button.

The shells raked the fragile machine from nose to tail. The Jap was in the vortex of fire only a second, but he absorbed many shells in that instant of time. Glycol streamed from his engine and his speed slowed and his nose went down towards the sea. Coolly, with disciplined thoroughness, the Americans followed him down and shot him into the sea.

They had jumped the Japs and they had suffered no damage whatever. Five of them took off after the fleeing bombers, and the remaining aircraft flew round *Wind Rode*, low, and for him, slow.

"God bless the admiral!" someone said on the bridge. No one answered him. They were watching the Lightning. There he came, swiftly graceful, a helmeted knight of the sky. As he came level with the bridge a gloved hand was raised, and plainly they saw the thumbs-up benediction. His greeting was not par-simoniously acknowledged.

Bentley brought her in close alongside *Scimitar*, but with his lookouts and his asdic alert. All sorts of undesirable maggots may have been put on to this possible feast by the Jap aircraft. Relief had them now fully in its enervating grip and they felt almost listless, a condition only slightly alleviated by the Lightning's news that the enemy attack had been beaten off with damaging losses, thanks to the timely warning from the destroyers. *Wind Rode's* men were too close yet to their own ordeal to be influenced by a success miles to the south.

Yet the captain could not afford the luxury of listlessness. They were still deep enough in the wood, and the enemy formation, what was left of it, might pass over them on its way home. Bentley had slipped from the bridge and in his cabin treated himself to a stiff brandy. Combined with his natural resilience, the spirit helped him back to the alertness of normalcy. He could see Sainsbury's thin figure behind the binnacle. The sight bucked him. Through the R/T he spoke almost cheerfully:

"How are you holding?"

"Tolerably well," the acerbic voice came back, "forepart is holding a good deal of water but the bulkheads are staunch." Bentley's lips twitched at the old-fashioned word. "I shall put a collision mat over if you'll be good enough to watch out for submarines."

"Wilco," Bentley obeyed. "Our Lightning friend will stay with us for as long as he can, also his friends when they get back. We'll make it."

Once again his cheerful prognostication went un-answered. Captain Sainsbury was busy giving orders. *Scimitar* was stopped now, a sitting duck. Bentley took his ship round her as fast as he

could relative to his asdic's efficient operation, about a mile clear. His asdic gave him another mile towards the horizon, so that *Scimitar* was fairly safe within a circle of two-mile radius.

Nevertheless, Bentley watched the weather and the time anxiously. Luckily wind and waves were still astern, and so long as they remained there *Scimitar* could make more speed with the heavy collision mat pressed in against her wound and pumps keeping the water down. But it took him some time to complete the circle, and an interested submarine could easily slip in and deliver its messengers before he could get in position to stop her.

But neither submarines nor aircraft came to interfere with the evolution hurrying along on *Scimitar's* foc's'le. Watching as he came up her port side, Bentley mused on the value of continuous drill. An undrilled team would have taken three times as long to get that big mat over the side on its steel chain.

The train of thought led him naturally to remember how he had privately objected to Sainsbury's insistence on drill when they left Sydney. He pulled himself up sharply - too sharply. His men had just fought their guts out; it was disloyal and unfair to think that they could have done with practice drill. Collision mats? They could have had one over the side in a trice, equally as fast as *Scimitar's* men...

The foc's'le cleared except for an officer and the chief bosun's mate who would watch the mat for the first few minutes of its tests. Sainsbury's voice pitched from the speaker.

"I am about to proceed at ten knots. Take station my port beam. Course 185. From now on wireless silence will be observed. Over."

The tone was curt, authoritative. In any case, Bentley could hardly commend his senior officer in public on an efficient evolution.

"Roger," he answered, and replaced the microphone.

By the time he had taken station, *Scimitar's* stem was carving a thin bow-wave. No further comment or information came from Sainsbury, and Bentley assumed the mat was doing its designed job. At ten knots, in line abreast, cripple and protector moved off to the south. The men of both ships were worried, but they were spared the realisation of their fears.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY CAME IN through the entrance to Manus harbour early the next morning.

The opening was bounded on either side by low coral banks. Once, not long before, those banks had been beautiful, lush with green growth and topped with traditionally graceful palm trees. But the recapturing American Fleet had altered all that. Now the undergrowth was seared, and the palm trees reduced to shredded trunks under the deluge of shells which had poured against the harbour.

There was other, more recent indication of explosive violence. A tank-landing ship was aground to their left, stern-first, so that its open mouth hung slackly in the water. The grey paint on its sides and super-structure was scorched into great bubbles.

They moved slowly in and Randall pointed, wordlessly. It was an eight-inch cruiser, and its stern was very close to the scummy water. Along-side it tugs and other small vessels were moored, and from one they could see black water being pumped. A heavy bomb or torpedo smack on the stern was their unspoken and collective diagnosis.

There was other damage - a wharfside shed was still burning - but it seemed the harbour and the Fleet had got off lightly. They knew why, but it was nice to see their knowledge vindicated.

“Flagship signalling, sir,” Ferris reported, and a moment later he read out the message - the yeoman had a habit of doing that when the news was pleasant.

“Welcome home,” the admiral said, “nice job of reporting. Consider yourselves my permanent scouts.” Bentley thought of two or three replies in the same relieved and jocular vein. But he was junior ship. It was up to Sainsbury. He read the senior ship’s reply himself. It was brief, and it was typical.

“Thank you,” Sainsbury replied.

A glance flicked between Bentley and Randall.

“Fair enough,” the big lieutenant grunted, “if I’d had my bridge buckled and my bow blown open...”

“Coming on the bearing, sir,” Pilot warned them, and Bentley

forgot acid experienced natures and busied himself with bringing the ship to her anchor. *Scimitar* moved slowly on towards the floating dock. It was capable of taking a battleship.

Wind Rode's damage was relatively minor. Bentley had had experience before of American get-up-and-go, and he was not surprised at the facility with which his funnel was restored and the damaged oerlikons plucked out and replaced with brand-new guns. An hour after he'd anchored, with everything well under control, he stepped into the motorboat and was taken to the dock.

Sainsbury had not sent for him. In earlier times, when they had shipped or sailed together, Bentley would have felt no qualms whatever about his mentor. But lately there had been in Bentley's mind an altered impression of Sainsbury, and adjectivally that feeling was composed of the words *old... cautious... tired*. The old chap had been through a bad time. Bentley wanted to see him.

He disembarked at the stern end of the huge dock, in which the naked body of *Scimitar* lay cradled like a toy boat in an empty bath-tub. Above him as he walked along the wet steel floor were the two screws and the rudder. He knew - he had for years devoted himself to knowing - the precise potentialities of those instruments of propulsion and control. Yet involuntarily he stopped, and his eyes moved with appreciation over the destroyer's stern equipment.

Nearest him, the starb'd screw was large, bigger than those of many 15,000-ton merchantmen the 2000-ton destroyer had escorted. Its four blades were of tough phosphor bronze, and the sunlight gleamed dully on the powerful pitch of the clover-leaves. Even stilled, clear of the water they had known so long, the blades shouted to a seaman's eye their tremendous gripping strength.

The shaft which spun the propeller and drove *Scimitar's* tonnage at more than forty miles per hour was solid metal, as thick as his thigh. It was supported by its strong A-bracket a short distance from where it disappeared through a water-tight gland into the hull. From there it ran to the reduction-gearing, and beyond that was the turbine.

Whenever his own ship was in dock, Bentley sneaked down to look at her revealed symmetry, under the pretext of an official inspection. Now, yesterday's violence was still vividly in his memory,

and he stared up at the rudder with un-mechanical but absorbed interest.

How many times yesterday morning had he ordered the mate to that rectangle of metal to be swung hardover? Every time it had swung, and every time its designed function had been performed and had saved the ship.

It looked simple enough, just a steel face secured to a thick metal rod which ran up into the tiller flat inside the hull. But Bentley knew that its reducing thickness and its size and position had been meticulously calculated to give the maximum effect in the shortest time. Perhaps the position was most important of all. The rudder was sited, and the hull was designed, so that the rushing water at thirty knots could find easy access to its angled face: just ahead of the rudder the hull sloped upwards to allow this. There was also the consideration of the rudder relative to the screws. This had been worked out to a fine degree of perfection, so that the fierce back-thrust of water from the eight big blades would effectively beat against the rudder.

No wonder that she swung like a cat at high speeds, that a destroyer never needed a tug when coming alongside. No wonder, he thought, that we missed those bombs.

He looked about him. He caught himself in that surreptitious act. He grinned, a twisted malforming of his mouth, and he dropped his hand to his side. He had been about to reach up and pat the lower blade of the starb'd screw.

A man's in his dotage, he thought, quite without convincing himself. Even as he derided his sentimentality, he knew that he was standing on the bottom of this dock, unharmed and alive, directly because of the designed efficiency of a pair of screws and a rudder-face. He moved with purposeful steps towards the stairway which led to the top of the dock, and the gangway.

He had almost reached the stairs when he remembered that though *Scimitar* was whole and healthy down aft, it was a different condition up forrard. He changed direction, and a moment later was standing under the bow.

The dock had not long before been pumped to the surface, and workmen had not yet started on her damage. He approached from

the starb'd, the whole, side. He looked up, and he caught his breath at the perfect beauty of that line of slim stem and flaring bow which reached high above him. Then he crossed round the bow and saw what had happened to her.

Even to a war-experienced mind the contrast between smooth symmetry of design on the one side, and the savaging on the other, came as a shock. It was like seeing a beautiful woman, all grace one moment, and the next cruelly injured. He stared at the gaping hole, its edges jagged and punched inwards, the once-clean grey paint now scabrous, and shock gave place to anger. It was a terrible thing that a craft as graceful as this one should have been subjected to such barbaric injury.

Once again he hauled himself down to earth from his flights of sentimental fancy. He had caused some injury himself. Those bombers and fighters had been graceful machines also, and now they were lying on the dark bottom of the Pacific, torn to pieces. Which only went to prove the insensate stupidity of the cause of all this - war itself.

Quickly, deliberately, this warship captain veered from that line of thought. He returned the salute of two asdic-operators who had come down to examine their dome, and then he walked directly back to the stairway.

His visit was unexpected, and the officer of the day had barely time to muster up one bosun's pipe to welcome him on board. Bentley declined his offer of assistance and walked forward by himself.

Passing the pom-pom he stared up at the mounting with what was now a wholly professional interest. In any case, the blackened ruin on top of the platform did not lend itself to sentimentality. From his own experience of exploding ready-use ammunition he was sure that every man of the pom-pom's crew had died. That gun would have been, before they died, a private and unendurable hell.

His face grim, he climbed the ladder, turned into the narrow: passageway, and knocked on the door at its end.

"Come," invited Sainsbury's voice.

Bentley opened the door. Sainsbury was at his desk facing the door. He looked up at his visitor. Bentley's foot was raised to clean the coaming. It came down and met the deck of the cabin, and there

it halted. For perhaps five seconds Bentley remained immobile, staring at his old friend's face. Then Sainsbury pushed his chair back and stood up.

"Good morning, Peter. This is a nice surprise. You may come in, you know."

Bentley recovered his shocked wits. He moved on in and took the chair Sainsbury indicated. The older captain sat down again.

"I... thought I'd come over and see how things were," Bentley said huskily. Sainsbury nodded, and lowered his eyes while he shuffled a sheaf of papers before pushing them to one side. Bentley was free to study his face.

He seemed uninjured - he had risen easily enough. That length of sticking plaster on his forehead obviously hid nothing but a graze, a flesh wound. But his face... The expression was strained, the skin carved into channels of worry. Bentley had expected that. He had seen younger commanders more physically affected after a gruelling action. It was the colour of Sainsbury's face which rivetted his attention and his concern. The skin, normally and naturally sunburned, was now a sickly grey - a pallid diffusion which must have originated from some tremendous strain to force its discolouration up through that tough patina laid on by wind and sun.

Sainsbury looked up. Bentley hoped he covered his feelings in time.

"You've had a look at her?" Bentley nodded.

"We came out of it rather lightly, don't you think?" Bentley looked straight into the tired eyes.

"Yes," he lied.

"These chaps here work quite swiftly. I should say not much more than a week before we're at sea again. The admiral seems to have taken quite an interest in his - ah - permanent scouts. The base engineer has been on board and he tells me we're to receive top priority. Damned nice of them."

"Yes," Bentley said again. It was all he could say. He wanted to talk, about anything, so that his friend would not notice the commiseration which he felt was naked in his eyes and face. But all he could think of was - Sainsbury's obvious eagerness to get to sea again. The will was still oaken, but that sort of intangible strength

was not of any use when allied to an old, exhausted body.

"Your damage, now. You made no mention of it, so I assume it is minor?"

Even through his shocked concern Bentley recognised the incongruity of the restrained words and the pendantic tone. His damage was minor, but not through any fault or intention of the vultures they had battled against for so long. He nodded.

"A few holes in the funnel, two oerlikon out of action. I shouldn't be surprised if she's not completely whole by the time I get back. As you say - they work fast."

"Good. Then you'll be able to enjoy your rest. From a... private message the admiral sent me," he answered Bentley's querying look, "I understand that he intends to keep us together as much as he can. You will wait for me."

Sainsbury looked down at the desk, and his eyes blinked. He was still looking down when he said, in a soft voice that Bentley had never heard him use before:

"I'm rather glad about that. About our staying together, I mean. You and your ship fought quite well out there."

Shock compounded on shock. *My God,* Bentley thought, *the old chaps about to break...*

Quickly he stood up. Sainsbury glanced up in mild surprise, then he rose too.

"Well," Bentley said in a tone meant to be hearty, "now that I know everything's under control I'd better be getting back. These Americans are smart boys, but they mightn't take to young Randall being on their backs. He takes his gunnery-officer title pretty seriously. Well, sir..."

Sainsbury nodded. Bentley's hand went out to his cap on the desk. He was still looking at that grey face and his nervous hand, sweeping towards the cap, knocked it off the desk on to the deck at Sainsbury's feet. Automatically, the captain bent to pick it up.

It was a natural gesture, and it engendered no implications in Bentley's mind. That was too full of what he had heard and seen. So that he did not see Sainsbury's face twitch, nor did he notice that as he was bent over the older man remained there for a second or two.

Then Sainsbury came upright and Bentley took his cap.

"Thanks," he murmured, "maybe I can return that dinner invitation...

His voice died as abrupty as though a hand had been clamped over his mouth. His eyes swung away and trained blankly on the bulkhead wall. They came back, and they flicked off again. He turned, bemused, for the door. *The eyes of Captain Sainsbury were watering.*

Bentley grabbed the door handle and pulled the door half-shut behind him.

"Don't bother about the gangway, sir," he said huskily. "I'll let you know about that dinner."

"All right, my boy," came the strained voice through the opening, "try and make it soon."

Then Bentley was outside in the glaring sunlight and jamming with pitying helplessness and frustration his cap upon his head.

By the time he reached the funnel his brain was functioning normally. His analytical dissection of what he had seen and heard in the cabin was swift and decisive, brooking no argument in the certitude of its accuracy. The poor old boy was finished. He has the V.C., *and* the D.S.O. and Bar. He had been driven to the absolute end of his endurance. They had no right to keep him in command, of all things, a hard-fought destroyer. With what he'd gone through it would be bad enough if he were in a cruiser or carrier, where responsibility would be shared. For the whole of a savage war he'd driven destroyers. That was a young man's job. The dear old fellow had burned himself out. That last action was the final, breaking straw. It was unfair, cruelly unfair. Hadn't he done enough, for God's sake!

At the gangway he barely noticed the salutes. He hurried across the lofty plank to the dock's side. Randall. Under that tough unimaginative exterior lay a well of commonsense. He had to talk this over with Bob Randall, shipmate and solid friend. Together they would decide what to do.

He jumped into his waiting boat and he did not see the great, still screws nor the saving rudder. He saw only a pair of strained eyes. Watering, wet with broken-willed tears...

The boat carved a furrow across the blue harbour. In his cabin, Captain Sainsbury leaned back against the desk. His face was almost white. He was breathing shallowly, his eyes closed, and his tongue

came out to wet his lips. His hand was laid gently on his right breast.

Slowly, with his mouth compressed into a straight thin line, the fingers loosened the shirt buttons. He pulled the shirt open, gingerly, and looked down. It was as he had expected after that crippling bend to the deck. The bandage was wide and thick, but not thick enough to stop the redness oozing through.

He walked slowly and carefully to the door, and pulled it open. His messenger straightened from the passage wall, his eyes enquiring.

"Ask the surgeon to come, please," said Captain Sainsbury.

The sights and sounds of the busy harbour made no conscious impinging on Bentley's intelligence as the boat took him back. His brain was meshing smoothly, as it always did when confronted with a problem which required thought before decision.

The action both ships had just fought had produced a more important result than the loss of several Japanese aircraft and the saving of two Allied warships. That fight, or the recent and apparent effect of it, had crystallised his mind on a subject which had given him thought over the past days. Natural sentiment regardless, he was sure now that he was right, and Sainsbury wrong.

He was right to have jumped those two Jap destroyers, and Sainsbury in his rebuke was wrong - his judgment had been influenced by tiredness, and strain resulting in a caution of action which had no place in destroyer fighting. You saw them, you hit them. It was as simple and uncomplicated as that. Years ago, Sainsbury would have acted the same way. His present reluctance... no, it was not reluctance, it had not degenerated to that. His present prudence, or discretion, his safety-first tactics, resulted palpably from a will and a body driven to the edge of exhaustion.

It was not his fault, Bentley reasoned; it was nowhere near his fault. You didn't win the right to wear a bronze Cross through the exercise of discretion... It was the system, the lack of ships, the fierceness of this whole bloody war which had brought a once-brilliant destroyer driver to his present state.

Paradoxically, there was a brightness to his worry and misery. Now he could stop worrying about the correctness of his tactics. Now he could fight his ship as he had always handled her - hard and

swift, knowing that the doubts Sainsbury had cast upon his methods had no foundation in reality.

And now, with his own worries resolved, he was free to think about what should be done with the old chap. He thought of the admiral, he though of Navy Office; and the other thought slipped in, was rejected, and slipped in again. He despised himself for owning a character which would allow a thought like that to be born, let alone surface. The thought persisted.

All right, he reasoned, almost aloud. *Jump out, let's have a look at you, and then you can bloody well jump over the side!*

This was the insidious thought he examined. *Scimitar* and *Wind Rode* had been subjected to precisely the same number of attacks, by precisely the same number of aircraft. The attacks were the same, both ships were the same. But his ship *had* escaped almost untouched. His ship...

The sternsheetman, coming aft to get his boathook, glanced casually at their august passenger. He was astonished to see a twisted expression of the most complete disgust on his captain's face. Automatically and apprenhensively the seaman ran his eyes over the stern-sheets. But he found no fouling scum polluting the boat. He took up his boathook, and the motorboat swept in alongside. The seaman would never know the reason nor the origin of his captain's expression.

His face a disciplined mask, Bentley ran up the gangway and returned the salutes. Randall was there as well as the officer of the day, as Bentley knew he would be. The first-lieutenant was also anxious about the state of the old master's ship. He would, Bentley thought grimly, be a damned sight more anxious in a minute.

"Cabin, Number One," he said curtly, and they walked off and the quarter-deck relaxed.

There was that in Bentley's expression which held Randall from speaking as they walked along the iron-deck. In his cabin Bentley glanced at his watch. The sun was over the yardarm, but his gesture had been purely automatic - he wanted a drink, and he meant to have it, time regardless.

"What'll you have?" he asked.

"Same as the boss," Randall grinned. The smile did not reach his eyes.

Bentley pressed the teat and when the steward came in he said:

"Whisky. You can leave the bottle here."

"Yes, sir."

Randall sat down slowly. He made no comment on Bentley's choice. But he knew him better than he knew any man, and this was the first time in his experience that his friend had drunk anything but iced beer towards the end of a burning morning. Whisky had been reserved for the relaxation of the pre-dinner hour. Randall waited, curious, a little apprehensive.

The whisky came, the steward departed, they murmured the conventional "Skoll," they drank. Randall put his glass down. He pretended not to notice the low level in Bentley's. But he had known this captain a long time. He said, levelly:

"All right, let's have it. What's wrong?"

Bentley took up his glass and swilled the amber liquid round with a slow movement of his hand. Then, without touching the drink, he put the glass back. His eyes stayed on the table.

"He had tears in his eyes," he said simply.

Randall's big body swung forward. For several seconds his stare was magnetised to Bentley's troubled face. Then he eased back in his chair.

"Go on," he said, very quietly.

Bentley told him. Randall moved only once, and that was when he gulped down half a tumbler of whisky. Still talking, Bentley automatically filled the glass. "There's no doubt about it," he finished the unhappy story, "the old feller's had it. He's ready to break. God, it was horrible...!"

"It's bloody horrible that he's been driven to this!" Randall growled savagely. "I remember when he was..." He broke off, and clutched up his glass. "What in hell can we do? We've got to tell somebody about it. I don't give a damn about the ship! We've got to get him off there, fast!"

Bentley nodded in reply, but it was a movement of only half-agreement.

"We have," he conceded, "but not right now."

"What!"

"Now just hold on a minute. He's got a week, possibly more, in harbour. If we start shooting our heads off now about him he certainly

won't thank us! Give him time to recover a bit. Damn it all, he only got in this morning! What if the admiral were to go aboard and see him like he is?"

You're right, as usual, Randall thought. He said: "Okay, then. But if we wait too long he might recover enough to believe that he's really all right. He could take her out and God knows what might happen in the next attack. Surely you agree that it's better for him to be taken off her here, in harbour, than to break while he's in command at sea!"

This time Bentley's nod was definite.

"No argument there." He was thoughtful. Randall's presence and reaction had stimulated his own mental processes. "How about this? I'll give him a day or two, to get hold of himself, then instead of talking to anybody else, I'll go and see him myself."

"Good!" Randall reacted at once. "He knows you, he'll respect your judgment."

"And intentions, I hope," Bentley said worriedly. He had suddenly realised that though the idea seemed sound it would be far from easy to implement.

"What's up now?" asked Randall.

Bentley gave a short grunting sort of laugh.

"Funny thing," he said, and his glance flicked briefly up at his friend, "but I feel like a schoolboy advising his master. He's years older than I am, and I've got to go over there and tell him that he's finished. Any other captain but Sainsbury would heave me out of his cabin."

"Maybe, maybe. But you're not a pupil any more, y'know. There are a few bods aboard here who reckon you've reached master's rank yourself. Damn it all, Peter, it's not the sub-lieutenant going over there. You've got a command yourself. I've never known you," he ended wrily, "to forget that fact before."

Bentley looked at him. Burned, nuggety face, honest blue eyes and nature as dependable as the compass. And unimaginative...

"I suppose you're right," he finished the discussion. He could not tell even Sainsbury how he felt about him. There were some things locked deep in privacy.

"When will you do it?"

‘The day after tomorrow. A couple of nights’ rest will do him good. How are the oerlikons coming along?”

Randall began talking. The two philanthropic plotters picked up their third drink.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE JAPS AFTER THEIR MAULING left the harbour alone for several days.

It was hot and peaceful under the tropic sun. Moored all over the blue polish of the harbour, the grey ships at anchor floated in complete stillness on the unruffled water. Against the backdrop of jungle green hills their masts rose in slender and steely tracery, a complementary forest which, instead of leaves, sprouted radar aerials and signal halliards and fighting lights on yards.

The reef-bound harbour held a great weight of metal. Anchored well in lay the battleships and carriers, ponderous units of power and destruction. Then came the heavy, but more graceful cruisers, most of them almost as fast as destroyers, mounting eight-inch guns as well as torpedo tubes. Nearest the exit were anchored the destroyers.

The greyhounds were there for two reasons. They could get to sea twice as fast as the big ships, and whenever the Fleet sailed they had to be out first, to conduct a preliminary sweep for interested sub-surface observers.

The harbour was not attacked, but it was not idle. Every hour almost would see destroyers or a brace of cruisers slipping out on some offensive or convoy business. A few days later they returned, as quietly and unheralded as they had left, and sometimes from *Wind Rode's* decks they could see a funnel leaning drunkenly, or an area of superstructure blackened. And once a cruiser came through the reef, listed so that they could see the whole of her high upper-deck. The torpedo hole which had caused the list was invisible under water. Hurt, and defiant, the cruiser moved slowly past them towards the dock.

The Battle Fleet sailed one day, leaving the harbour looking strangely empty. It returned the next day, apparently undamaged, and they were secretly glad to see the great ships and their attendants back. The word got around that the battlers had been after a big prize, but had sighted only a few enemy aircraft, which had thought better of tackling the imposing mass.

That "big prize" was a fairly constant topic of discussion. A Navy

is rife with rumours, but sometimes a buzz is based on fact. This one was. No one except the Admiral and his staff knew for certain, but it was generally accepted among the minions that somewhere, a Japanese Battle Fleet was out.

The rumour was easy to believe. The Jap Navy was in considerable strength all about them - the Indies and the Philippines to the west. Truk and Yap and Saipan Islands to the north, the Gilberts and Tarawa Island to the east. Sooner or later it could be expected to react violently towards this American prong of advance. The last bombing raid would have given the enemy precise information regarding American naval strength in the harbour, and though none of the sailors now waiting there knew for certain the whereabouts of a large Jap force, they had no doubt whatever that it existed, and no doubt of its intention.

One thing was sure. They would know in good, or bad, time.

Their first day in harbour, and the first all-night-in in their hammocks, *Wind Rode's* men enjoyed with thankful completeness. It was not often that they had an undisturbed night, and with such a comforting mass of metal all about them.

They woke refreshed the next morning and they went about their work with an unusual absence of griping. The American workmen were handling her damage, and the crew were confined to their normal chores.

Some washed salt from her paintwork, some chipped rust, others scrubbed out the mess-decks; gun-sweepers greased the breech-blocks, the gunner's party restowed the magazines, the gunner himself was busy bringing his ledger up to date. In this large book was entered every article of gunnery equipment she carried, and every shell and cordite cartridge and bullet. Also entered was the ammunition she had received on board yesterday.

The navigator's yeoman corrected the charts with the latest information received on reefs and lights. The former was extensive, the latter meagre. Ships, merchant and naval, were sailing now in waters which before the war they would have avoided like the plague. The reefs had reaped a steely harvest. All guiding lights, on the other hand, had been extinguished for the duration. This made the yeoman's task easier and the harvest richer.

Torpedomen had hauled back their long, shining charges to check the intricate machinery which could send them over miles of sea at thirty-five knots and at any depth. Depth-charge crews examined their hoisting tackles and the firing gear of the throwers. Radar and asdic operators went over their equipment with devoted care. And over all the seamanlike bustle on her upper-decks, Hooky Walker, chief bosun's mate, presided with an experienced and careful eye.

He talked idly to captains of tops and he tested as he talked the lashings on wooden spars. If the ship were to sink, those spars could be turned into swift spears rising to meet swimmers in the water. He watched the whaler being painted and he bent down and pulled out the pin of a guard-rail stanchion. Greased, it came out easily, as it should have.

Hooky cast an apparently casual glance at the shackles securing the end of the iron-deck guard-rails. He saw that the pins were moused in with wire; a man standing on that top rail would not be suddenly projected into the sea. He looked at the motor-cutter's falls and he decided that they would last for another month before requiring end-for-ending. This would place the unused part of the falls through the blocks, and give the present working ends a rest.

But all this was routine. All these tasks were carried out whenever she had a spell in harbour. As that second day at anchor drew to its working close, as the time approached when normally leave would be piped and two-thirds of the ship's company could step ashore, *Wind Rode's* men, subconsciously anticipating the delights of shore, realised that there was nothing for them among the hills of this outpost.

They could have gone swimming, they could have arranged a cricket or football match with *Scimitar's* men, Equatorial weather regardless, or they might have taken a brisk and beneficial walk along the wharves and through the Quonset huts which crawled over the hills.

Sailors are by regulations supposed to be afforded ample time for recreational and physical benefits when in harbour. Captains like to see their men busy at some form of sport ashore in their leave periods. Unfortunately, captains' and sailors' likes rarely coincide. *Wind Rode's* men wanted to go ashore. But they did not want in the

slightest to play cricket or football or indulge in meditative strolls through the jungle. They wanted to lubricate their tonsils in a cool, rowdy bar, they desired to roll out of that bar and into the arms of an understanding and obliging popsy, they dearly wished to get their exercise in a completely unregulation fashion.

Here, in Manus harbour, a few degrees south of the Equator, they could do none of those things. So they remained on board. And they began to gripe.

Not extensively at first; not nearly as comprehensively as they were capable of. But as the hot night drew on, and the time approached for them to do nothing but return to their stuffy hammocks, they forgot with what eagerness they had done just that the night before.

They whinged. They whinged with the most expert facility, and the objects of their complaints were wide and varied. The Navy, the captain, the weather, the Japs, the war, the Navy. Manus, the food, the absence of suitable drink, the Navy, the lack of women, of entertainment, of dance-halls, of excitement, the Navy...

The Navy. This bloody forsaken outfit! A man should have his flamin' head read! Should've joined the Blue Orchids in the Air Force. Where were those bastards? In London, in Cairo, in Canada, grog galore, doin' all right for themselves in the blackouts with patriotic popsies.

The Blue Orchids were also over Alamein and Berlin and Bremerhaven, but geographical exactitude was of no significance in these messdecks sweltering in remote Manus harbour.

The Navy, the Air Force. But not the Army. Only puzzled pity for the Army. They would never understand how a man could volunteer to hawk on his back his gun and ammunition and tucker through the Desert or over the Kokoda Trail; not when their own gear was carried for them by a ruddy great ship. They never understood, either, the Army man's preference for falling on solid ground if he caught a packet...

So the two days of Bentley's reprieve and Sainsbury's rehabilitation passed. The men were looking forward to getting to sea again, but Bentley was dreading his trip in the motorboat.

His work in harbour was not extensive or irksome - Randall was

in charge of storing and upper-deck work - and he'd had little to do but think about his mission and what he would say to the man who had taught him everything he knew.

He thought about this almost constantly, and always he returned to the same conclusion - he would need to be wary, but he would have to state his case simply. You did not adopt subterfuge with a man like Sainsbury. Those squinted eyes could see into a man's mind as easily as though his forehead were composed of glass. Or once they could...

There, he finally decided as he was dressing on the fateful morning, might be his winning card. Sainsbury was not the man he had been. He knew that well enough! It was quite possible that the old chap was aware of his condition, that he would welcome another opinion to help him decide that he should give up. There was, Bentley recognised without false modesty, not another man in the Fleet more suitable than himself to help Sainsbury in his decision. The old fighter would respect his advice; he would know it was completely without malice and wholly altruistic.

Bentley combed his hair and put on his cap. He felt much better, confident almost. He pulled open the cabin door and stepped out into the passage.

Randall was waiting at the gangway, even more anxious than he had been that other time two days before when the captain left the ship. But none of the quarter-deck staff gave any significance to his harassed look - the expression was a natural one with first-lieutenants while their ships were cluttered up with shoreside workmen and their gear.

The pipes shrilled, hands whipped up in salute. Bentley stepped on to the gangway platform and Randall, ostensibly to ensure that the motorboat was ready below, leaned over the guard-rail.

"Good luck," he muttered.

Bentley did not answer. His face unsmiling, he ran down the ladder.

The torpedoed cruiser was in worse shape than *Scimitar,* but she could be kept afloat with pumping. And in any case the destroyer could not be shifted from the dock - the damaged plates had been ripped off her and the hole only partly covered. *Scimitar* retained her priority for the dock's use.

Bentley landed where he had before, but now there was no time wasted in reflection on screws or rudders. He made his way quickly up the stairway in the dock's side and over the gangway.

His walk along the deck was almost a stride. It was characteristic of the man that he should want to put his decision into force in the briefest time. It did not occur to him that in striding towards the captain's cabin he was acting precisely in the manner for which Sainsbury had rebuked him.

He knocked on the door and the thin voice bade him enter.

Bentley barely acknowledged Sainsbury's pleased greeting. His gaze was fastened on the older man's face, and he saw with relief that the greyness had diluted down to an almost unnoticeable pallor. He conceded that the officer rising from his chair had shrewdness in his eyes, but certainly no suggestion of tears.

"And to what," asked Sainsbury, his bony hand waving to a chair, "do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Under normal circumstances Bentley would have grinned at the words. Sainsbury was not being light hearted; in his stilted fashion he was asking an actual question, and he wanted an answer.

"I wanted to talk to you, sir," Bentley said.

"I see. It's a little early for liquid refreshment... A cigarette, perhaps?"

"Thank you." He reached forward. "The bow's coming along all right?"

"Very nicely. I should say not more than a couple of days. Then we can resume our scouting for Red Indians - or yellow Japs. I must say *I* shall not be averse to getting to sea again. It is really quite stifling boxed up between these dock walls. A fresh sea breeze will do us all a power of good, don't you think?"

"I suppose it will, yes."

You've certainly recovered, Bentley thought. *Almost - for you - sprightly. Too sprightly. It's an act, it must be an act. You remember how I saw you last. It's as though you're drugged. Now the act's making you seem bright Falsely bright.*

"Well, my boy, what did you want to talk to me about? You look troubled. Anything wrong on board?"

There it is. The cunning of experience. Making me feel like a

schoolboy - coming for help instead of offering it. But you always affected me like that. You couldn't help it. You can't help it now. No, not now.

He looked into the pinched, austere face and he tried to project his own understanding in his look. His voice was quiet, sympathetic.

"No trouble on board. I've come to talk about you, sir.

The cigarette halted an inch from Sainsbury's mouth. That arrested movement was the only visible measure of his astonishment.

"About me, eh? Then I suppose I had better let you get on with it."

Bentley drew on his cigarette. It was a subconscious wish for delay. Then he blew the smoke out. He was finished with procrastination.

"I want you to understand, sir, that in what I have to say I'm actuated only by my... regard for you. There is no other consideration. I must make that quite plain."

Sainsbury twisted in his chair. The movement made him grimace a little, but Bentley placed no significance on that. He heard the voice, acid and exasperated:

"For heaven's sake, boy, get on with it! What the devil are you trying to say? This is the first time I've noticed you beating around the bush! Well?"

"Very well, sir." His own tone was firm. He should have known better than to muck about. "It's your condition, sir. I...

Sainsbury's look stopped him. The captain's head was a little on one side, and his squinted eyes mirrored an expression of acute puzzlement.

"How the devil did you know?" Sainsbury asked slowly.

"I'm afraid it was obvious, sir. You looked - well - bloody awful. Absolutely done in. I admit I was shocked, but I should have expected it. You've been through a hell of a lot. Too much, in fact. And this last business..."

Sainsbury's bony hand stopped him.

"It's very kind of you, my boy, to feel like this. But I assure you I feel perfectly all right now."

"No, sir. That's the trouble. You only think you do."

"What the blazes do you mean? I only *think* I do?"

"It could happen again. It will happen, just as soon as you're under strain. It's happening all the time, sir. This is a hard war, and you've fought more than your share of it. It would be quite terrible if you... let go while at sea."

He paused, and looked up. But on that thin face with its penetrating eyes and pursed mouth there was no indication of the astonishment jolting Sainsbury's mind. He did not speak. Bentley went on:

"I'll never forget the way you looked when I came in here the other day. That's why I'm here now."

This was it, this was the point of no return. He drew in his breath.

"Precisely why," Sainsbury asked, his eyes glinting with the loom of ice, "are you here now?"

"To ask you," Bentley replied steadily, "to ask for a relief. To ask you to go down south for a spell. Your experience will be invaluable down there." He leaned forward, even in the face of that glacial stare. "Please sir - before it's too late."

His voice ceased. Silence hung heavy, almost palpable, between them. Sainsbury's face was pinched into a mask of tight anger. Bentley had never seen him like that. This was the real Sainsbury, V.C. Not prim, not maiden-auntish. Tigerish.

"Am I to understand," the steel-hard voice broke into the silence, "that you consider me too old for command? That my usefulness as a captain is finished?" The short fierce gesture of his hand sliced across Bentley's voice. "You... you bloodly little whippersnapper! I taught you all you know! The one thing you've learned outside my teaching is cockiness. Yes, damn you, cockiness! And now you come into my cabin and..." He broke off, and he leaned forward so that his eyes bored into Bentley's. "Who else knows of this idiot notion of yours? Eh? Where else have you aired it?"

Bentley held on to his anger with both hands. He forced himself to remember that he was faced by a sick, exhausted old man. A man whom he still loved with a manly, inarticulate strength of feeling. He answered the fierce question directly - he was incapable of lying to this man.

"Randall is the only one who knows, sir."

"And that paragon of first-lieutenants agrees with you?"

"Yes, sir, he does. We both think it's in your own interest to..."

"I will be obliged, sir," the icy voice lashed at him, "if you will be good enough to leave my ship!"

"But..."

Sainsbury pushed himself up. He stood behind the desk, his knuckles white upon it and his face granite. Bentley had once outfaced a full Admiral, his normal courage reinforced by the confidence of his cause. Yet now, even apart from the direct order he had been given by his flotilla leader, he could have stayed and protested no more than as a boy he could have against the edict of his schoolmaster.

"Aye, aye, sir," he said, his voice low. He took up his cap and stepped through the door.

Sainsbury stood unmoving, his eyes unseeing on the door. Anger moved hotly in him. They thought him too old, finished. Too old at forty-three! Bentley knew what he was doing, he was no fool. To come here and face him with that monstrous charge he must believe in it utterly. He... and Randall. Both of them discussing his uselessness.

He moved angrily from the desk, kicking his chair aside. The sudden movement brought his hand to his chest. He remembered, irrelevantly, that he had not mentioned his wound. The thought slipped from his mind - it was of no significance. They thought him finished...

He moved slowly round the desk. One of his own flotilla captains. It would have taken a good deal of guts for Bentley to come here. The boy... Yes, a great deal of courage. And conviction in his own judgment. He had taught him that, too... Young Bentley would be feeling very badly now.

Sainsbury paced slowly back to the desk. The charge of age, of inability to perform his captainly function, he would have normally laughed at. But what bit at him, and kept his anger simmering, was the recognition that the protege he had trained to be one of the most brilliant destroyer-drivers in the Fleet believed completely in that inability.

Why? he thought, his face still hard and troubled. The one destroyer of that foursome which he had engaged he had sunk; the aircraft had been beaten off.

Certainly *Scimitar* had been damaged, but what the devil could you expect from hours of fighting against a dozen bombers and fighters? Why did Bentley - and Randall - feel this way about him?

Sainsbury in his search for the answer to that question came nowhere close to the final reason. He did not know how badly he had looked when Bentley had seen him in the cabin two days before. He had made no mention of his wound because he was not the sort of man to look for sympathy, especially in an environment where every day men were being hurt much more seriously than he had been. Neither did he remember that he'd had tears in his eyes from the effort of bending to retrieve Bentley's cap. He was now well on the way to recovery from the slice which a bomb splinter had carved across his chest. It simply did not occur to him that his wound had anything to do with Bentley's judgment on him.

Nor, in fact, was the wound really significant. It was Sainsbury's assumed caution and wariness in action which had first made Bentley suspect that his old friend and mentor was a spent force. Sainsbury's appearance because of his injury had served merely to crystallise Bentley's opinion.

Quietly Sainsbury's thin fingers tapped at the top of the desk. Why? He had engaged that destroyer with complete competence. She was sunk, wasn't she? They'd beaten off... Abruptly, the reiteration of his thoughts brought him up with a round turn. What the hell was he doing, trying to justify his fighting ability and ship-handling? There was not a man in the world to whom he owed that hard payment. He owned the highest decoration his country could bestow, he had been given command of a flotilla.

That's enough of that! He was not at fault. Where was his judgment? The answer to his question was simple, and troubling. Bentley had presumed to judge him from an assumed Olympian height of infallibility and experience. The boy was cocky. He had grown too big for his boots.

Lonely, looking more than his age, Captain Sainsbury lowered himself slowly into his chair.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"YOU LOOK AS THOUGH your mother-in-law had died," Randall said. He spoke carefully as well as curiously, for he had not seen Bentley looking like this before. The thunder in his face when he had stepped over the gangway on his return had eased down to puzzled worry.

Something's died, Bentley thought. He sat on the corner of the desk, staring down at his shoe as his foot swung slowly.

"He ordered me off the ship," he said.

The quietly-spoken sentence was to Randall not so much unexpected, as so incredible in its implications, that for a moment he simply stared at Bentley. Then he repeated, stupidly:

"He ordered you off the ship!"

"He called me 'sir,"' Bentley said, and pushed himself up and began pacing the cabin. "I should have had more blasted sense than to try and bulldoze him into doing anything like that," he ended, angry with himself.

"Bulldoze...? You didn't rush him?"

"Of course not. I tried to be as diplomatic as I knew how. His face... I felt couple of sword blades pass through my guts! Never again. D'you hear? Never again!"

"Now just a moment," Randall remonstrated, his bull of a voice meant to be soothing - it was an unaccustomed role. "Take it easy. No matter what he said - and remember, we expected something like this - he's still a sick man."

"My God, don't you think I kept on remembering that!" He swung on his friend, his face tight. "You're a good hand in *my* cabin. But what would you've done over there? Eh? Kicked off another man's ship!"

"I'd have left," Randall answered simply. Through the worry in his mind he was oddly pleased - it was the first time in his experience that he had felt superior to Bentley's normally cold certainty of action, his self-possession and command of himself. Then he remembered the reason for his captain's present attitude, and there was left to him only the worry.

"Well, there's nothing we can do now," he decided glumly. "You'll

have to keep your nose clean, that's for certain. He could have it in for you from now on. Although," shaking his rugged head, "Sainsbury's not like that. Not like that."

"You worry about yourself," Bentley told him callously, "he knows you feel as I do."

"What!"

"He asked me who else knew about it. I told him." There had to be some lighter side to the grim business, and he enjoyed the consternation in Randall's burned face. "What was it, now? Oh, yes. That 'paragon of first-lieutenants' he called you . His tone was not flattering."

"My God!"

"You would never have made a good captain," said Bentley, "now I know you never will make a captain - good or bad."

"We're in this bloody mess together," Randall said miserably.

As we've always, been, in every mess, Bentley thought and the memory wiped the malice from his expression. He sat down on the desk.

"Forget it," he said, gruffly kind. "As you say, he's not a man like that. What worries me now is that he might feel he has to prove himself. He might get out there and do something damned stupid against his better judgment."

Randall nodded. The face which could put fear into the hearts of ungodly sailors was now miserable. "On the other hand," Bentley said slowly, "what I said might make him think. Maybe not right away, but perhaps in a few weeks he might put in for a relief."

"Sure," said Randall gloomily, "after showing us just how good he still thinks he is. Y'know something? We might've killed the old bloke."

"I doubt it," Bentley answered in a forcedly light tone - Randall's words could be uncomfortably close to reality. "He's had his time, but he's still cautious, remember. He'll make out all right."

"I hope to God you're right! Look here - I could go a whisky."

There was no argument. Bentley pressed the teat.

Unaware of, uninterested in this local conflict of opinions and characters, the great Fleet went about its business. Ships sailed, ships

returned, and some stayed out under that vast cover of blue. The Japanese Fleet was not sighted visually, but reports kept coming in to the Admiral from Intelligence services and coast-watchers operating behind the enemy lines. What had been a mess-deck buzz was now accepted fact - the Japs were out, and sooner or later they would make their move against an Allied island or landing, and then this mass of ready ships would sail to meet them. It was simply a matter of time.

Wind Rode was returned to her former cleanliness, and her men to their customary fretting at being kept in a harbour to which, a day after sailing, they would give everything to return. Their whingeing had crystallised into a barbed point of invective against the real cause of their incarceration so far from home ports - the Japs. The Sons of Nippon became the object of, some quite brilliant improvisation in the field of cursing, in which reflections on their legitimate parentage formed only a minor key in the overall pattern of abuse.

This was a healthy state of affairs. It removed that other prime object, the Navy, from the list of their targets, and it ensured that they would fight with vigour when they met their enemy. There was no 'if' about it - the tempo of action was increasing all about them, and it would be surprising if they went to sea and returned unsighted and unmolested.

Scimitar had brand-new plates on her left jaw, and when she finally came out of dock the rectangle of new paint was plain against the rest of her seasoned grey. The cruiser, tugs lashed to her sides, waited to occupy the vacated berth.

Slowly *Scimitar* slid her revitalised length through the lines of ships. She came to her anchor just ahead of *Wind Rode*. Bentley was on deck to watch her. In other circumstances he might have sent her captain a welcoming and facetious signal - there was little enough opportunity for humour in their deadly game but now he satisfied himself with the formal piping due to a senior ship's passing.

He was standing clear on the quarter-deck with Randall, and as his hand went up in salute to his flotilla-leader he wondered what Sainsbury's thoughts were. No communication whatever had passed between either captain since the junior officer had been ordered back to his ship. But *Scimitar* merely returned the salute, as any other

ship would have done, and Sainsbury brought her neatly to her anchor. Watching, Randall muttered:

"I don't suppose there's any chance of him accepting a dinner invitation?"

"As much chance as an ice-cream dog trying to catch an asbestos cat in hell," Bentley grunted. His glance flicked sideways to his friend. "I've been kicked in the teeth once. Once is enough."

"Okay, okay, it was just a thought. I imagine well be back to work soon?"

"I'd bet on that," Bentley said calmly.

His money was safe. Shortly after breakfast the next morning Ferris brought in the signal to his cabin. The message was from *Scimitar,* and after the traditional opening: "Being ready in all respects for sea," it went on to inform him that his flotilla-leader required his company on a patrol beginning in one hour's time.

"Acknowledge," Bentley ordered briefly, and when Ferris left he read the signal again. Then he tossed the sheet impatiently on to his desk. Sainsbury's - any senior officer's - orders to proceed to sea were always couched in that formal fashion. What had he expected? Some guff about all is forgiven?

He called for his messenger, and when the head poked in said:

"First-lieutenant, please."

Randall heard with bored calmness the orders from his captain which could result in their sinking into oblivion, then he asked:

"Nothing else in the signal?"

This unconscious parallel with his own thoughts irritated Bentley.

"What else did you expect?" he said gruffly.

"Nothing, nothing. What d'you think? Just the normal patrol?"

"I expect so, insofar as any patrol can be normal. I hear things are getting a bit heated out there. Something's going to blow soon."

"That's what the mess-deck thinks," Randall grinned. "When it does, I hope the whole ruddy Fleet's in on it. My taste for lonehanded combat's gone a bit sour. Ah... just the two of us?"

"Just the peregrinating pair," Bentley nodded, "the top brass wasn't kidding when he said he'd use us together. I can't blame him. The two foreign erks go out and leave him all his own destroyers."

"Fair enough. For mine. I'd rather work with devils I know." He

took up his cap. “We’re all set now. I hope it’s a nice uneventful cruise.”

Bentley knew him so well that he accepted the real, opposite meaning of Randall’s last words. *You’re as sick of this blasted place as I am,* he thought. He said:

“How are the troops?”

“Whingeing like all hell - and rearing to go!”

“The silly beggars are never satisfied,” Bentley grumbled - and felt the old excitement stirring. He was taking his ship to sea, and he had two hundred men tired to boredom of doing nothing, men who would welcome any change from the monotony of this big and remote harbour, even if it meant a change into deathly danger.

Suddenly he felt happier, more content. He had a splendid ship, and he commanded a fine team.

“On your way,” he grinned, “special sea-dutymen at 8.45.”

When Randall had stepped his bulk through the door Bentley went to a cupboard and took out his binoculars in their leather case. He pulled the black glasses free and, as he had done thousands of times, he focused them on the funnel of a ship far down the harbour.

Unbidden, a memory slipped in. The last time he had used these glasses they had been trained on a buckled bridge, searching for a prim, thin face...

He lowered the binoculars. He was seeing that face now, without mechanical aid, granitehard and he was hearing the biting voice:

“Be good enough to leave my ship!”

Slowly he laid the binoculars on the desk. No anger, now. A profound pity and regret moved in him. If they ran into trouble out there, this patrol might see the ignominious finish of the finest man he had ever known. Breaking on his own bridge under attack, gibbering perhaps, the whole bridge team witness to the collapse of a four-ringed captain, the first-lieutenant taking command...

Bentley shook his head, an instinctive and involuntary gesture to clear his mind of the horrible picture. There was absolutely nothing he could do about Sainsbury now. An official approach was not only repugnant to his nature; it would achieve nothing. *Excuse me, Admiral or First Naval Member, but I think Captain Sainsbury should be relieved of his command.*

If he were so crass as to try that, they would think he had been relieved of his senses. He took up the binoculars and walked down the passage to the chart-room.

They were ready to get under way.

On his bridge, the cable-party on the foc's'le below him, the cable heaved in until it was up and down with the anchor just holding, steam on all boilers, Bentley waited for the executive signal from *Scimitar.*

It came, and he ordered: "Weigh."

The cable-holder ground with an iron clanking and the links banged slowly along the deck and down through the navel-pipe. Hanging over the guard-rail, a seaman played a forceful jet of water on the cable, sluicing off the mud. The cable swayed slightly back and forwards and the cable-officer reported:

"Anchor aweigh."

Shortly the tonnage of iron came into sight through the clear water and he added:

"Clear anchor."

Wind Rode was now technically under way, unsecured to the land. Bentley gave his orders and slowly her nose wiped round towards the entrance. He watched *Scimitar* with an unwonted attention: normally destroyers got under way with a minimum of fuss and time. But he was worried. Had his words affected Sainsbury so that the older man might try some flash manoeuvre to prove his competence? Destroyers were easy to handle when you knew how, but there was the other side of the coin - because of their relatively light weight and enormous power, they could also get into trouble, and fast.

His worry was groundless. Sainsbury took his ship out as neatly and carefully as always, swinging her economically with rudder and opposite-turning screws and then aiming her sharp nose straight for the opening.

Bentley felt slightly foolish. He should have known that now the old chap was under no strain - he could take his ship to sea in his sleep. It would be if they joined action that the trouble might start.

Bentley was no gong-seeking striver after bubble reputation. He had been too long at war not to know that his earlier excitement

would fade into a prayer that an action would soon end once the shells or bombs started arriving. Yet, for the first time in his career as he followed *Scimitar* out, he found himself consciously hoping that this patrol would prove abortive, that they would sight nothing to strain further the already overburdened will and strength of his leader.

His hope, not the patrol, was to prove abortive. They had been at sea two hours, with Manus vanished under the earth's curve astern, when the first signal came. Ferris did not read this one out: he came across and handed it to the captain. *Wind Rode*, Bentley read, was to assume that half of her forrard mountings' crews were out of action, and that she had a fire in the foc's'le messdeck. The affected guns were to be kept in action, and the fire was to be put out and the bulkheads shored up.

Automatically he gave the necessary orders, his face a mask. He heard the gun-crews closing-up and the thud of drill projectiles being ejected, and he saw the fire and repair parties running along the iron-deck towards the messdecks. Some were sweating in fearnought suits, some dragged hoses, others lumped big wooden spars and wedges.

He heard and saw these familiar things but his mind was thinking: Is it deliberate, this long-known drill? Or is it the normal order of a meticulous, if pedantic, leader? Whatever the reason for the drill, there was no doubt about what the men involved thought of it.

Bentley's expression was so forbidding that Randall changed his mind on the subject of drill-crazy captains he had been about to mention. He said instead:

"I'll have to get all that gear cleared away double-quick. If we run into anything..."

Bentley's reply was unintentionally snappish:

"If we run into anything we might need those hoses!"

His reaction had been due to an unreasoning irritation with the drill order. But, as he voiced it, he realised that he had spoken nothing but the simple truth. Those hoses would be handy if shell or bomb started a fire. Had the cunning old devil deliberately specified fire-drill with that eventuality in mind?

Of course not, his commonsense told him. Radar was operating

perfectly, and there was nothing on the sea or above it. And if there were, his men were trained to provide whatever remedy the situation called for.

"Yes, Number One," he said in a normal tone, "I'd get it cleared away fast."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Randall's voice as well as the words were formal. He moved away to watch the drill at B-gun. It occurred to Bentley that he'd better pull his own socks up if the efficiency of his ship were not to be affected by his concern for Sainsbury.

The drill was completed and the fact reported by signal to the leader. It brought a formal acknowledgment. But then, Bentley had to remind himself, what else could it bring? The man who had ordered it was not on board to check his consort's efficiency.

The drill cartridges were restowed, the hoses and shoring-up spars were returned, and the ship settled down. The sun climbed up the cobalt vault and neared its zenith, and Pilot shot it when it got there and put the ship accurately on the map. The men went below to dinner and quiet and peace pervaded the ship.

Bentley left the bridge for his own lunch. He had started on his salad when Ferris knocked and brought in another signal. Bentley hid his irritation; he fully expected the square of paper to hold promise of another drill during the afternoon. But the signal merely told him that they were to continue on this course till nightfall, when they would turn to the south. Both ships were due back in base at ten o'clock the following morning. Thankful, vaguely annoyed because of the feeling, he finished his lunch.

It may have been because of his unnatural sense of irritation that, when the report came three hours later, he welcomed the promise of action it held. This was something on which he could lavish all the anger he might feel.

"Bearing oh-one-five," the asdic but had reported, "contact moving left to right. Classified submarine." The bearing put the submarine on the starb'd bow. Its position here indicated almost certainly that the Jap was heading for a look at what the harbour held. Manus lay one hundred and twenty miles to the west.

Bentley's first reaction as he heard the report and the metallic

pinging of the asdic was exultation. Here were two fast and experienced destroyers sitting on top of one submarine - a most desirable state. While one ship remained in contact, signalling every change of the enemy's course, the other could run down at full speed and loose depth-charges. No need for the attacking ship to worry about speed interfering with its own asdic transmissions, and a minimum of time for the submarine to affect an avoiding course alteration. If he and Sainsbury did not get this fellow then they should retire to a more suitable occupation, like instructing Girl Guides.

The second reaction, following quickly on the first, was a sense of frustration that he had only one asdic set. He could not afford to lose contact with what he had found, yet there might be other friends of the Jap around. But they had to accept that risk. The imperative thing was to get to work on what they knew they had.

Sainsbury's signal lamp blinked. The stutters informed Bentley that the leader would maintain contact while *Wind Rode* performed the pulverising. This suited Bentley and his mood perfectly. He snapped orders and *Wind Rode* bore down on her enemy.

She had been at twenty knots and she picked up speed swiftly. While it would be risky to raise or lower the asdic dome at this speed, the streamlined container was safe as it was now, in the lowered position. *Scimitar* lay on her port beam, and Sainsbury's information came concise and explicit.

Bow-waves curling at her stem, the destroyer rushed in for the kill.

On the quarter-deck she mounted two throwers and two sets of rails. This array meant that she could drop a pattern of four charges at once, one to port, another to starb'd, and two more straight down over the stern. The first pattern could be quickly followed by another, and each charge contained three hundred pounds of high-explosive amatol. Yet that half-ton of explosive could be immeasureably increased in its effect by the incompressibility of water surrounding the submarine. The submarine was strong, but it was already withstanding the pressure of hundreds of tons of water. All that was required to open it up to that pressure was for Bentley to drop his patterns close enough.

He was intent on doing just that.

At this speed his own set was mainly inoperative through the rush of water past the dome. But *Scimitar* was in firm contact, and she was handled by a man who once had sunk five U-boats in one day in the Atlantic. It was his knowledge and experience which now guided the speeding *Wind Rode*.

"Stand-by," Bentley warned.

He was almost ready to drop, and the target was altering course. Had he been on his own his speed would have been much less than it was, and the submarine would have had time, with its smaller turning circle, to slip inside the lethal area of his pattern. As it was he swung *Wind Rode* and she answered quickly. He was almost directly above the submarine.

This was before the time of automatic firing of charges from the Asdic Control Room. He snapped orders and the big levers on the bridge jerked back and the throwers spat the hurtling canisters. From the rails two more dropped into her boiling wake.

She thrust on. Now was evidenced the value of two hunting ships working together. It would have been impossible for Bentley's asdic to maintain contact, through the turbulence raised by her screws. But Sainsbury was free of that interference. His information fed across and Bentley swung her under full rudder.

Astern, the swelling sea seemed to flatten. A flash of brief and intense whiteness flicked across the surface. Then the sea erupted.

It was not the conical uprising caused by shells or bombs. A huge dome of water lifted skyward and retained for a second its beautifully symmetrical shape. The next instant the balloon shattered into sky-reaching splinters of flung white. The cascade hung there and the deep voice of the explosions vibrated against her plates. She was still shaking from the effects of her own discharged fury when the water fell back into the tossing sea.

"Stand-by," Bentley said. She ran in again.

It was an unfair fight, with the outcome inevitable, and they enjoyed it immensely. There was only a fraction of her ship's company engaged in the vicious attacks, so that the gunners who had withstood those bombers and fighters were able to put their feet on the guard-rails and worry about nothing but the result of their bets on which pattern would get her.

It was the third pattern, and Leading-seaman Billson, in charge of the pom-pom, won three pounds ten for his accurate prediction on the time of death of seventy Japanese sailors.

Even then, with victory certain, one of the depth-charge crew was heard to whinge. Not at his loss of five bob, but at the fact that they'd had to throw over twelve charges, which meant twelve charges requiring hoisting inboard when they got back to base...

To no one's surprise on the bridge, it was Ferris who first reported:

"Submarine surfacing, sir."

Every glass swung on to the bearing. They thought the infallible yeoman had erred, until through the slight moiling on the water which he had noticed there speared a black, sharp bow. It emerged at an acute angle; well out, so that water poured back from the eye-sockets of the torpedo tubes. Then the bow lowered and a moment later the fore-casing, and then the bridge came into streaming view.

Leading-seaman Billson's pleasure at his win affected his sense of duty not in the slightest. He bellowed his orders and the first three men out of the conning-tower were met by a lashing swathe of two-pounder shells. One man was flung abruptly backwards out of sight as several shells hit him in the chest. Another simply dropped down. The third had been about to climb over the bridge and jump into the sea, urged by some dreadful private knowledge on the state of his boat. The pom-pom's welcome smashed into the steel directly below him and ricocheted upwards. He slumped forward, and his two arms hung lifelessly down from the jack-knife of his body across the edge of the bridge. Once or twice his body jerked, but it was not from some spasm of life but from the entry of more shells. the pom-pom ceased firing. It waited.

There were no further targets. She must have been opened fore and aft, for she sank back on almost a level keel. Slowly, not under control, and from where the invisible bow and stern were they could see the spouts of water as the pressured sea forced in and urged the life-giving air out.

Wind Rode's speed had slowed. She circled the patch of disturbed water, and Randall cared nothing for the scum of fuel-oil which was lapping against his clean grey sides. It would be a pleasant task to wash it off. She had almost completed the circle when asdic reported:

"Breaking-up sounds."

"Quite definite?" Bentley asked, in a pleasant tone.

"Yes, sir. Loud and clear. She's finished."

He glanced at Randall, and controlled his own grin - in face of the wide and exultant smile splitting the tough burned face. It had been a text-book attack, carried out successfully in a minimum of time and with an economical expenditure of ammunition. The oil fouling the surface might not be conclusive - a cunning commander could have discharged it deliberately - but those breaking-up noises were. The submarine would now be at several hundred feet. The pressure of water at that depth would be enormous. And that pressure was inside the hull, ripping at her fittings, smashing and flattening them. No commander could duplicate those pleasant sounds... Ferris called:

"From *Scimitar*, sir: 'Close me."'

"Continue asdic sweep," Bentley ordered; that depth-charging would have been audible for miles, and the late-departed Jap could have friends. "Port twenty. Take her over, Pilot."

Randall said in a low voice:

"This should've pleased him. And no strain." Bentley answered with a curt nod. Low tone or not, he did not want Sainsbury discussed on the bridge. Randall moved from the platform to give Pilot room and Bentley's thoughts moved on: It should have pleased him. *And* no strain. This might help to bolster the old chap. Maybe if he returned to a more rational state, then he could consider more soberly and sympathetically the suggestion that he should take a rest. Obviously Sainsbury wanted to talk to him by loud-hailer. He would soon know if the successful action had affected him favourably.

Scimitar was now quite close and Bentley took over. She was moving fast, he noticed. Sainsbury, also, was aware of the possibility of other submarines in the sea.

He brought her in carefully, a hundred yards clear. Then, with both ships thrashing along side by side, he took up the microphone of the loud-hailer. His voice was friendly.

"Did you hear those breaking-up noises, sir? We had them loud and clear. A good deal of oil as well. A definite kill, sir."

"More than one kill, Commander Bentley," the tart reply came back.

"I beg your parden, sir?",

"More than one kill. At least three men died under your pom-pom."

Bentley was so astonished that he turned to stare at Randall. He got no help from that puzzled face. He turned back to *Scimitar's* bridge.

"That is so, sir," still not sure if he were being castigated. "I thought the pom-pom was handled well. It was accurate shooting at that range."

"You seem to miss my point, Commander Bentley. There was no need to kill those men. They were obviously heading for the water."

Be damned! Bentley almost snarled into the microphone. He said:

"They could have been heading for her four-inch gun, sir."

"Rubbish! A gun-crew would have emerged from the gun-hatch in rear of the gun. Those men were trying to escape. If your pom-pom's crew had acted in a more controlled manner we would have had three valuable prisoners on board!"

Bentley was not concerned about his public admonishing. His mind was concentrated on the recognition, at least this time, the old fellow was right. Correct in every detail of his judgment. He himself had been so flushed with his victory that the pom-pom's opening fire had seemed to be a natural finishing of the main task performed by the depth-charges.

"Yes, sir," he said, quietly.

"I suggest a little more thought before action in future. Take station one mile my port beam. We will continue asdic search to the east-ward. Over."

"Roger, sir," Bentley answered, and handed the microphone to Ferris . He walked back to the binnacle. There were six other men on the bridge, and every pair of eyes was averted from the discomfiture in his face.

"Port twenty," Bentley ordered in a tight voice, "two-five-oh revolutions."

She heeled away like a swallow and at her superior speed took station a mile to port. Then she eased to *Scimitar's* revolutions. Both ships moved on across the white-flashed blue, asdic sets searching. Bentley remained on the bridge. His thoughts were not pleasant.

Cocky, Sainsbury had called him. Be damned to that! Couldn't a man enjoy his success? He had killed an enemy submarine: *he* had killed it! And three men had died on a submarine's bridge. Which was the greater - the success or the error?

Was it possible that Sainsbury could be jealous? Of course not, that was ridiculous! He had sent him in to the attack, had himself given the junior officer the chance of the kill. In any case, jealousy would be as foreign to Sainsbury's nature as incest. He was exhausted, yes, ready for a long rest, but his nature had not changed.

But... He had sent the junior ship in. That, now Bentley came to consider it, was unusual. Not impractical, nor impossible; unusual. Normally, the senior officer carried out an attack of that nature. He was supposed to be the more skilful. Normally a senior officer grabbed the chance to increase his tally of submarine kills, especially when, as in this case, the outcome was so close to certainty.

Why? Had Sainsbury felt that the added concentration of handling an attacking ship would adversely affect him? Had he feared that in his state he might have failed? and that the junior ship would have had to take over and clinch the kill?

Slowly, Bentley nodded to himself. He did not see Pilot watching him covertly and curiously from beside the chart table. That was it. It must be the answer. And the solution was not pleasant. But at least it brought him surcease from his concern over Sainsbury's charge of cockiness. That charge had been made by a man not in full command of his faculties of judgment and analysis. His thoughts returned full circle. Cocky? If a man was cocky because he got a hell of a kick out of finding and tracking and destroying an enemy submarine on its way to reconnoitre an important Allied naval base, then, damn it all, he was cocky!

"Sea-cabin, Pilot," he called.

"Aye, aye, sir."

On his way to the ladder he automatically listened to the ping of the asdic speaker. The sound pulse was regular - and unaccompanied. He was sure in his own mind that the Jap submarine had been alone. Maybe Sainsbury would waste no more than another hour on this pointless search. His feet clattered down the ladder and Pilot had the ship.

Three hours later, with the sun lowering behind them, Bentley was back on the bridge and Sainsbury was still on the search. In that time they had altered to the north, they had turned to the south, always side by side, sweeping a path three miles wide. And they had found nothing.

There had been no signals from *Scimitar*. So far as Bentley knew the pointless search would go on all night. He swayed to the ship's movement behind the binnacle and he tried to reason dispassionately on what was exercising Sainsbury's mind to make him continue. Certainly their destroying the submarine had been important - its intention had been obvious. Just as certainly, he might have had friends in company, also with the same spying object. It was a commander's plain duty to ensure that no other subsurface spies were about in the eastern approaches to the base.

Up to that point he had no quarrel with his leader's tactics. But they had been searching for close on four hours now. They had covered miles of sea. They were way behind in the schedule of their patrol. While they mucked about here other objects of their search might be steaming undetected further to the east. He thought of signalling *Scimitar*, suggesting that the search for submarines, having proved fruitless, might be called off. Normally he would have done this. Now he dismissed the thought and his eyes caught Randall's, who was officer of the watch. The lieutenant came over.

"Happy in the Service?" Randall grinned slightly.

"No," his captain answered shortly. The signal-man and bosun's mate were talking quietly on the far side of the bridge. Randall said:

"What's he up to? We'd have a better chance of a contact near the South Pole."

"Damned if I know. Unless he's got some private information that there are other subs about. If he has, he hasn't passed it on to me."

"Which means he hasn't any extra dope. Ah - how d'you feel about that public rocket?"

"He was right. We should have taken those prisoners.

Now that took some admitting, Randall thought. He said:

"Maybe he's right to keep on with the search?" Bentley turned to face him. His voice was low and vehement.

"Look, Bob, just because he turns out right in some minor detail doesn't mean that I throw all my judgment and opinions over the side! That Jap had no friends. There's nothing here. I know it, you know it. We've quartered half the ruddy Pacific! We should be patrolling a hundred miles further east by now. That's what I think. But don't for God's sake ask me what he's thinking!"

Randall turned from that hard face and stared out over the bow.

"Don't let it get you down," he muttered. "We know what's wrong with him. But if you let it worry you like this in half a dog-watch you be the same way. There's enough to contend with without bashing your brains out on something you can't do a thing about. Take it easy, Peter, slow down."

Bentley took two slow breaths. His fingers tapped softly at the compass ring.

"You're right, of course. I felt damned nasty about that drill order this morning. A feeling like that could be passed on to the ship's company." His fingers ended their tapping with a sharp thump. "But this thing's got to be ended one way or the other. And bloody soon!"

CHAPTER NINE

THE SEARCH, If not Bentley's problem, was ended an hour later.

He had closed-up the ship for dusk action-stations, and while he listened to the familiar reports coming in he came to the conclusion that Sainsbury's maintaining of the asdic sweep was due to his abnormal sense of caution. It was the only reason he could advance. In reaching his decision, which gave him no relief of mind, he forgot that he himself had once searched for a submarine for many hours longer than this. Even if the memory had occurred to him, he would have justified his earlier actions by the fact that then he had suspected the presence of a U-boat. And he had found it.

But here, patently, the sea was guiltless. He was about to fall-out action-stations when the signal flashed across.

"Negative asdic search. Take station two cables astern. Course 180, speed fifteen knots."

Thank the Lord for that, Bentley thought, and gave his orders.

In line astern, one behind the other in cruising formation, both destroyers moved off to the south, and into the darkening night. All through the starlit blackness they steamed, with nothing to disturb the rest of men off watch. Dawn came, stealing light-footed over a quiet grey sea, and by the time they went below to breakfast *Wind Rode* was running for base in a straight line, under a blue sky and upon the plain of a blue sea.

Still one behind the other, both ships sailed into the harbour they had left two days and one submarine ago. The harbour looked the same, yet there was a subtle difference in the atmosphere. The great ships no longer looked at peace - lighters lay alongside the battleships and carriers, and no awnings sheltered their decks. All over the harbour small craft scurried, some with stores, others wearing the red flag of ammunition carriers. The signal was sent which informed the Admiral that a Jap submarine had been detected and sunk one hundred and twenty miles from his doorstep, but it returned nothing but a formal acknowledgement.

"Something's up," Randall muttered as the cable-party secured the cable on the foc's'le. "Something bloody big!"

Bentley's silence was his agreement. He looked out over the mass of ships, and everywhere to a seaman's eye was apparent the fact that the Fleet would shortly be sailing. And there, came their own oil-lighter.

"Tell the engineer," he ordered, nodding at the lighter. "And tell him to smack it about."

He went down to his cabin to shower and change into fresh khaki. There was little for him to do - the provisioning and oiling were in the proper, efficient hands. He was buttoning up his shirt when Ferris knocked and came in.

"From *Scimitar*, sir," the yeoman said, and handed the signal to him.

Frowning a little, Bentley took the message. His frown deepened. Captain Sainsbury required his presence on board at the earliest convenience; which meant at once.

He was expected this time. The officer of the day, the quartermaster, the bosun's mate waited for him, and as he returned their salutes he noted the curious looks directed at him from men standing to attention. He recognised the reason. It was not a visiting captain they were interested in, one who had sunk a submarine, but one who in their hearing had been handed a large-size rocket by their own quite proficient sub-killer.

Understanding of this did not anger him. He had no idea why he was required here, but if it meant further reprimand he had made up his mind to take it calmly and without rancour. Randall's advice had sunk home. They were dealing with a sick man. He did not intend to forget that.

Nor was he fooled when a very healthy-looking captain rose from behind his desk and bade him a formal good-morning. The first prolonged strain would reduce Sainsbury to his former state. Bentley remembered how he had looked, and for a brief moment he wondered how he could have felt angered at a rebuke from a man deserving only of pity and understanding.

He returned a respectful "Good morning, sir," and sat down. Sainsbury wasted no time. His voice and his expression were normally starchy.

"We have only a couple of hours, commander. Your fuelling and

ammunitioning is under way, I presume?"

"Yes, sir. We're sailing."

"That is so. I sent for you because I believe this patrol will be of somewhat more significance than the last. You may have noticed certain signs amongst the Fleet? I have no actual knowledge, but *I* understand that the admiral believes the enemy is out in force. He is anxious to meet him. There will be other patrols out, of course, also air reconnaissance. We will patrol to the west, new territory for us. As usual, we will be on our own. Time of departure is noon. I wish to be two hundred miles to the westward by dusk."

It was a simple calculation and Bentley made it automatically. The old boy was in a hurry - they would be at close to thirty knots. He nodded understanding.

"There is one other thing," Sainsbury said quietly. His bony fingers were held before his face with the tips resting together, and over this small steeple his eyes laid their line of sight straight into Bentley's face. *Don't,* Bentley prayed, *don't bring it up again! I made my suggestion, you knocked it back. For God's sake let it rest.*

"I am referring to the matter of the killing of three possible prisoners," Sainsbury said. Bentley held his breath. It was as if the shrewd eyes had seen into his thoughts. Yet there was another surprise to come.

"I spoke somewhat hastily - a habit which is not common with me." Bentley's eyes crinkled in astonishment. "Understand me clearly," Sainsbury went on, "my admonition was well deserved. It is the public manner of its delivery for which I am apologising. In future," he finished without the trace of a smile, "my reprimands will be delivered more privately." He stood up. "Now, commander, you will have a good deal to do on board."

On the way back in the motorboat Bentley's thoughts were full. The pedantry and precision of speech, the prim, almost puritannical expression, the general look of the man were so normally Sainsbury, that he wondered, if only fractionally, whether he could be wrong. Then in flooded the vivid memory of how he had found Sainsbury a week before. This present attitude was an act. Of course it was! What else did he expect? It was the natural acting of a man determined not to let his weakness rise to the surface again. The only doubt about

this reasoning was whether Sainsbury could succeed in his intention. Deeply, firmly in his mind Bentley believed that he could not.

At the gangway he told Randall to prepare the ship for sea. The first-lieutenant gave his orders while Bentley waited. Then they walked forward together. Bentley put him in the picture.

"You could have bowled me over with a breath." Bentley said. "The last thing I expected was an apology. Mind you, he made it clear that he still thought I was wrong!"

"But he apologised," smiled Randall. The fact seemed to afford him some relief. "He must still have a sense of proportion."

"Now, yes," Bentley replied worriedly. His tone hardened. "But we can't worry about all that. This could be the big show. If it is, we'll have our time cut out looking after ourselves. I want the director lined-up now."

"Aye, aye, sir," Randall answered that tone. He strode off.

They slipped out unobtrusively, unnoticed by the great Fleet. An hour later the low hills of the island had dropped from sight, and their course lay to the westward, to clear the Hermit Islands a few miles to the south.

There was no sign of any weather. The west wind blew softly in their faces, but unfelt in the thirty knot stream of their passage. The parallel wakes stretched behind them as straight as a pencil line on a chart, and apart from those insignificant scars, the face of the sea smiled bluely and emptily in a vast circle all about them.

Bentley took up the microphone of the S.R.E.

"This is the captain. Once again, we are out on patrol. But this time could be different. It is suspected that the Japanese Fleet is out. I also suspect - much more strongly - that our own Fleet will be sailing shortly. We are only one prong of an intensive reconnaissance. If we find something big, we can rest assured that something just as big will be handy to back us up. What is required now is alertness. Lookouts, radar operators must remain on their toes. If we do our job properly, and if luck is with us, we could help to carve off a large slice of this war in a hurry. From now on the crow's nest will be manned during daylight hours. That's all."

The long slim hulls moved on, masterfully powered and

purposeful; patches of foam tossed past their sides; the blue water raced to meet their stems and struck upwards in curving white arches; deep down the turbines whined and the shafts spun so that they seemed immobile and solid silver. And in the wheel-houses, at this speed, the helmsman steered with care.

On the bridge, on the chart, the gunner and then the first-lieutenant marked off her progress hourly, noting with appreciation as they did so the distance between the small pencilled circles with their dots in the centre. Whatever they might be heading into, they were approaching it fast.

Thze sun in its descending path lowered towards the horizon. The bow was aimed directly for the glaring ball, and the glittering path of light ahead and the flashing track of white astern met, with the ship in the centre, to form an unbroken and flat sword from horizon to horizon.

Scimitar had been silent all day, but now her bridge blinked an authoritative eye at them. It was a little less than two hours to dusk, and in obedience to the signal *Wind Rode* leaned and opened out the distance to the southward. Sainsbury wanted to know over just how large an area the sea was empty before both ships closed-up on each other for the run through the night.

In a few minutes *Scimitar* was hull-down, then mast-down, to starb'd. She was out of visual and radar range, but the fact caused no concern - Bentley knew her course and her speed. He was on the bridge now and he would remain there for the rest of the afternoon and the greater part of the night.

Radar was operating perfectly, but there is not much reflecting area on the trucks of distant masts. The crow's nest sighted them first, at that range a minute forest of thin pencils poking above the horizon.

The report electrified the bridge. There was no large Allied force in that area on that bearing. His mind racing and his face composed, Bentley thought for a moment. He could at once alter to starb'd to close *Scimitar* with his vital information, or he could continue on and gather a more accurate knowledge of the enemy force.

He made his decision. He made it in the face of his flotilla-leader's reiterated warning to exercise caution. He also made the worst mistake of his Service life.

"We will maintain course and speed," he said to Randall, his eyes squinting at the sun. "We know who they are. I want to know how many."

Randall's stomach was churning. But his face too was composed. He said, his voice even:

"I agree. There's not much light left. And before they sight us we can get a good idea of their size and course. This," he grinned suddenly and tightly, "is a turn up for the books!"

Bentley nodded. Involuntarily his eyes flicked to starb'd, over to where the invisible *Scimitar* was steaming in ignorance of this heavy and vital find. He was right in his decision, he told himself. And even though he felt a sudden irritation at this self-justification he persisted in his mental argument. It was no good running over to Sainsbury now, with no definite information regarding the size and formation and course of the enemy force. Sainsbury himself would have to close the Jap Fleet to gain those vital statistics. The only result would be a waste of precious time. They were out here, they had been specifically sent on this mission, to gain precisely the information he was about to learn. In his book, to run north now would be a dereliction of duty. Caution regardless...

Satisfied, he lifted his binoculars.

Not yet, not from the bridge, were those enemy mast-trucks visible. But the crow's nest had them in plain and enlarging view. Too far to determine battleship from heavy-cruiser, and to sight destroyers, but enough to know that the enemy force was large.

Bentley drove her on. He was young in years, but wise in experience. And not really cocky. Cockiness presupposes an *unthinking* conceit and belief in one's superiority. Yet he did feel superior. It was a subconscious assessment, engendered by the mental effect of an unbroken string of successes. He was no fool, and he knew well enough that his success had come mainly from hard fighting and meticulous attention to discipline and training. But an older man - like Sainsbury - would have analysed that sense of superiority and would have cautioned himself not to rely on its infallibility. Bentley was young, and adventurous. He was over-confident.

His mistake lay in the fact that in his eagerness to determine the

precise strength and formation of the enemy Fleet, he completely forgot to reason that, if he could see those distant mast-trucks, then a Jap lookout in his even more elevated position could see him. He was about to be given the first part of a bitter lesson.

Wind Rode's crow's next lookout was Able-seaman Newton, a reliable man with good eyesight and a sound knowledge of enemy ship-identification. And it was easy to identify classes of Japanese ships - their funnels and bridge structures were peculiar in design, unlike any other nation's. His report went down to the bridge: three Nagato-class battleships, at least two Asigara-class cruisers mounting ten 8-inch guns. There were more ships, but so far he could not identify them; they were astern of the main force, their mast-trucks marching up over the horizon.

But Bentley had all he needed. An ordinary-seaman would have known the ancillary craft escorting a force of three battleships - certainly heavy-cruisers and destroyers, possibly a carrier or two. He had made up his mind to give the course-alteration to close *Scimitar* when the noise started in the sky.

The maximum range of 8-inch guns is in the vicinity of thirty-two thousand yards - sixteen sea miles. *Wind Rode* was closer in than that. Newton had missed the multiple flashes from the two cruisers because his glasses had been on the mast-trucks astern, his eyes straining to identify the ships which bore them. Knowing he could not, his sight trained back to the main force. He saw plainly enough the second sparkle of light, and his urgent voice sprang from the bridge voice-pipe. But the bridge already knew what was happening.

The sound in the sky was now a malignant and shrill screech. Bentley leaped for the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

"Hard-a-starb'd! Full power both engines!"

There was no need to warn Rennie, the coxswain, of the need for hurry. Both those orders were emergency directions. The engine-room bells clanged and the wheel spokes spun in his hands. Above him on the compass-platform they waited.

They did not have to wait long. High-velocity naval shells travel at three thousand feet per second. And these were beautifully aimed. Their range and elevation settings were no more a product of luck

than were the equations which took one of *Bismarck's* monsters across miles of tumbling sea and directed it into *Hood's* magazine.

The screeching ended in a concussive blast close on her port beam. The sea lifted itself in a wall of dirty water and splinters whined viciously across her decks. The bridge of *Wind Rode* was composed of thin copper, so that the magnetic compass would remain unaffected. Its sole protection was against wind and spray. The signalman, Ferris's offsider, had his face turned to a mess of red pulp. Elsewhere along her decks those splinters took their toll. But it was on the bridge that they gained the most important prize.

Bentley was flung sideways from the platform round the binnacle. His body fell heavily to the deck. Shocked, Randall stared at him. Across the captain's forehead reached a wide and bleeding welt. In a moment his still face was reddened ominously with blood.

Training and compulsive urgency replaced Randall's shock.

"First-aid party on the bridge," he roared, and without hesitation he jumped to the binnacle. There was nothing he himself could do to help Bentley. He was in command, and his attention was required by the ship. There was nothing he could do there, either. She was well on the turn, at her full power: All he could do was straighten her and run for his life back to *Scimitar*. Unfortunately, other forces had different ideas about the escape of this surprise-destroying midget.

Wind Rode was turning fast enough, but her speed was so great that the line of advance was still taking her, slipping sideways through the water, towards the Jap ships. A well-trained crew can reload and fire an 8-inch gun in about ten seconds. Even a destroyer cannot travel very far in ten seconds.

Abruptly projected into command in the face of an overwhelming enemy, Randall was thinking furiously. But through the racing of his mind he knew that there was nothing he could do yet - Bentley's course and speed alteration had been correct, and it had not yet been fully implemented. He would simply wait to straighten her.

But there was something which would brook no waiting.

"Yeoman!" he snapped, "make to the Flag..." He spoke rapidly, giving the strength of the enemy Fleet, and Ferris scrawled on his signal pad. Then he ran to the wireless-office voice-pipe.

Randall heard urgent feet clattering on the ladder and saw a sick-

bay attendant running towards Bentley. Then he heard something else.

Most of the second broadside landed close, but clear, on her port side. The Jap gunnery-control officer had allowed for her rapid closing speed, and his shells landed short, his aim spoiled by her quick turn. The remaining two shells of that full broadside were aimed relatively badly - from the cruiser's point of view.

From the target's viewpoint they landed with paralysing accuracy. It happened swiftly, and the reports came almost as swift. A plunge of discoloured water lifted from beside her stern and she shuddered horribly. A phone shrilled and Pilot plucked it out. He listened, then he said:

"Port screw badly damaged. They're shutting down on the port engine!"

And, from Rennie on the wheel:

"Ship steering with difficulty, sir! I can't handle her at this speed!"

Randall's training was long and thorough. A thousand times, through a hundred actions, he had mentally decided on what his orders should be in a certain situation. Now he was plunged squarely into such a situation. He reacted instantly.

"Half-ahead starb'd engine!" The port engine was already stopped. "Try and hold her due north, cox'n!" Then he came upright from the voice-pipe and waited. Ten seconds can be a minuscule passage of time, or it can be an eternity. Those were long seconds. The only thing which saved them was the fact that a gunnery-control officer has to forecast the future position of his target. He can have as many as three broadsides in the air at one time at long range. The Jap officer high in his director did not know that *Wind Rode's* speed had been drastically reduced. He planned accordingly.

The screech, not so intimate this time, and the jetting columns of water fell clear to port. Short. Randall, gunnery-officer himself, knew that the cruiser's director would have sighted those tall spouts between it and the target and would know they were falling short. In a British ship the answer was simple: "Up ladder, shoot." The range and the elevation would be increased by predetermined stages until once again the shells were straddling. And there was little he could do to throw-off that malignant aim.

Ten seconds. He cast a quick glance back at Bentley. But the S.B.A. was bending over him, hiding his face. Five seconds. The ship was still doing about eight knots. He might be able to swing her a fraction.

"Starb'd twenty, cox'n. Do what you can."

Zero seconds. A brief slowing down of drill, perhaps. From Ferris:

"Message passed to Flag, sir."

Thank God for that! Not much time left of light, but the Admiral would be rushing his aircraft out. For all Randall knew, the whole Fleet might be just back there below the horizon to the eastward. A fat lot of good that would do them now! Their lives were to be measured in seconds, not miles at sea.

Zero minus five seconds. Fifteen seconds since the last broadside. That couldn't be bad drill. Not when the excellence of it had already been conclusively demonstrated. The next moment he knew why the cruisers were leaving them alone.

"Bridge?" came Newton's urgent voice. "Destroyers closing at high speed!"

"What's the main Fleet doing?" Randall asked.

"They've altered a little to the north, sir. On about 060."

"Very well. How many destroyers?"

"Four, sir."

There it was. The Battle Fleet on about east-north-east, either thinking about breaking-off from their objective since they had lost surprise, or else planning to come down on Manus from the north. And sending down four destroyers to finish off the cause of this plan alteration. He could see them now, four bow-waves backed by grey bridges. He took up the S.R.E. microphone.

"This is the first-lieutenant." No mention of the captain, no point in telling them he was out of action, if not dead. Randall was later to marvel privately at his professional detachment from the searing thought of his friend's death. "We have been badly damaged. One screw gone, rudder mainly inoperative. The Jap Fleet has decided to leave us alone. They're sending down four destroyers to do their dirty work. But we still have our guns, and somewhere to the east is the American Fleet. The admiral has received our warning message." He paused, feeling he should not say it. Yet he went on:

"If we can hold those four bastards off, maybe we've got a chance. We *have* got six guns. We'll use 'em. That's all."

It occurred to his tautened mind as he replaced the microphone that he had spoken as the captain, and that they would recognise that. It was too late now. It could be only a matter of time before they were all like dear old Bentley...

As though the thought were father to the words, a voice spoke behind him.

"I'll get you below now, sir," it said, in the middle of a lifting grunt.

"Like hell you will!" the S.B.A. was answered. Randall swung about as though someone had punched him on one shoulder. His eyes were glaring with a mixture of astonishment and relief. He saw the S.B.A. pushed aside, and a bloodied, bandaged head lift up. "Work for you elsewhere. Jump to it!"

The S.B.A. jumped, and Bentley handled himself towards Randall. The big fellow leaped down and held out his ham of a hand. Bentley did not shake it off - he accepted it gratefully.

"My God...!" Randall muttered, "how are you?" He knew the words were banal.

Bentley answered: "Worst hangover ever I hope not to have. What's happening?"

Randall enlightened him rapidly - this was no time for thankfulness.

"The Fleet's altered to about east-north-east. Port screw done, rudder damaged. We're doing about eight knots, steering with difficulty. Four destroyers coming in for us."

"Are they, the bastards!"

Bentley lifted his binoculars. There they were, much closer now, stems spurning under the thrust of their utmost power - eager stems, malignant and vengeful. Not at all beautiful in the symmetry of their bow-waves.

Bentley lowered the glasses. He swayed against the binnacle. The young bosun's mate was watching him, his eyes wide and concerned. Not frightened, yet.

"Right, lad," Bentley said crisply, "get me a brandy. Sea-cabin."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"You might have made that two," Randall grunted from under his glasses. "What's the drill? Divided control?"

"Yes. A and B mountings in director control at the two right-hand ships. Three broadsides on one target, then shift to the next. X-mounting in local against the remaining two, same sort of fire. We'll give 'em all a taste. If one of 'em gets in torpedo range we're finished."

The orders were given briskly from the bloodied face and neither man attached any real hope to their possible results. Even a full-powered ship against four destroyers was in an almost hopeless position - with one screw and little rudder it was simply a matter of time.

"Screws, rudder... His mind went back through the ache in his head to a time, years ago it seemed, when he had caught himself wanting to pat the blade of the screw which time and time again had kept him and his men alive. Now that screw, and that rudder about which he had mused so sentimentally, were to be the cause of their almost certain death. His thoughts were not sentimental now.

He looked again at the approaching destroyers and then he smelled the wind. No. At their reduced speed a smoke-screen would be a waste of fuel. The Japs would simply circle round it. Torpedoes in the same category of uselessness. They would slip them effortlessly. He had left only his guns.

Only his guns... Many times he had had only his guns, and they had pulled him through. He was gunnery, gunnery to the core of him. They would go, this time, but before they did they would leave some marks on those eager bastards out there! The savage feeling rose in him, flooding through his veins, strengthening his body and his will. He grabbed at the microphone.

"D'you hear there! This is the captain." He did not pause, he did not know the effect his words were having throughout the waiting ship: he did not know he was "dead." "This looks nasty - bloody nasty. Which means it's right up our alley! They're four to one. They've been four to one before." His voice was savagely ugly. He scorned restraint. "They're also Japs. We're Australians. Now you remember that, you whingeing matloe bastards! Australians! We might go, but we'll take some of those yellow —s with us!"

Randall stared at him, but without shock. His own face mirrored in its twisted-mouthed hardness the toughness of his captain's words.

"D you hear that? We'll take some of 'em with us! You've been with me a long time, a hell of a long time. You're the finest bunch of bastards a captain could ever hope for. Now you listen to me. We're going to fight those destroyers and we're going to give 'em such a fight they'll never forget. D'you hear that! A fight they'll remember! Now get those guns loaded, and thank you... and God help you all."

His face was compressed with emotion. He dropped the microphone so that it clattered against the wind-break on its cord. There came a complementary sound to that small clatter. Not a full-throated cheer, not a shout of faith and determination. A non-human sound, metallic, definite: the streaking slam from B-gun below as the first shells rammed into the breech.

The enemy destroyers opened fire together.

Bentley had regained control of his feelings. He was still weak, but calm, insofar as his professional mind was working smoothly over the churning in his guts. He had just noticed that the main Fleet was dwindling to the north-east, crossing his bow hull-down on its way to Manus, when Ferris told them that their action had commenced. Bentley's eyes and his attention swung back to the prime task.

The Japs were in close formation, judging with acceptable accuracy that their task would take neither much time nor effort. They fired again, *Wind Rode's* bridge sighting the spaced sparkles of yellow light a second before the first broadside burst all about them.

It was good shooting, even though *Wind Rode* was practically a sitting duck. Splinters whined over their heads and the ship shook, but it seemed she was not hurt. A second later she gave tongue herself, and the stench of cordite blew back over the bridge. Her shells had not fallen when from the foc's'le a vivid sheet of flame spewed upward. The blast of the explosion drowned the noise of three more shells coming inboard down aft.

Bentley heard the vast breath from forward and saw the flames from the corner of his eye. He knew instantly what it was - there was nothing below decks to cause flames like that. But plenty around A-

mounting - scores of ready-use cordite cartridges. He knew also that now he had four guns left, and probably not a man left alive at A-gun.

He kept his glasses on the enemy.

The Japs were closing at top speed and Lasenby's first broadside landed over, six ghostly white pillars with only their tops visible past the four spurning hulls.

"Fire aft near the tubes?" Randall shouted above the uproar.

"Get rid of them!" Bentley snapped. "Fire the lot. It might break their formation!"

A few seconds later *Wind Rode* emptied her tubes of their ten missiles. One after the other they speared out and, badly-aimed because of her lack of manoeuvrability, reached out in the general direction of the four destroyers. Those Japs were well-handled. As though on flotilla manoeuvres the whole formation altered course to starb'd, and the ten smooth streaks of water slipped passed harmlessly on their port sides.

Wind Rode fired again, a reduced bellow of challenge. The shock of discharge was followed immediately by the shudder of receipt. Down aft again, smoke now mixed with hissing white steam. Though he could do nothing - Monty McGuire was in charge down there - Bentley leaned over and stared aft, his face tight and desperation in his mind. He could see the steam billowing from a jagged hole above the engine-room. A burst pipe, which would reduce his speed even further. He heard the shrill ringing of the engine-room phone and he let Randall answer it. Three knots, the lieutenant told him. Three knots... They might as well be at anchor.

The next few minutes were a confusion and bemusement of violence and ear-drumming uproar, with only three guns now answering the 24-gun pounding of the Japs. Weakened by his wound, his brain battered by noise and still compelled to retain control of his almost-crippled ship, Bentley wondered confusedly at the speed with which he was being smashed to uselessness. He had thought it would be quick with four destroyers against one, but not this vicious rapidity of demolition.

"X-gun out of action, six men killed," Randall reported huskily, and Bentley still by his binnacle, wondered not at the reduction in

his offensive potential but at the fact that even in that holocaust down aft men could yet count and get their reports through to the central control.

Training, he thought, training and discipline, and grabbed instinctively for a hold as the ship leaped. Yet what good were all his meticulous programmes of drill in the face of this unbearable weight of opposition? He saw the enemy ships, still in precise formation, spit flame and smoke and automatically he croaked:

"Hard a starb'd."

It would do no good, for she could barely move. But training died hard...

Rennie repeated the order, as he had done hundreds of times before and Bentley waited with squinted eyes and aching mind for the bow to swing. He was still waiting when an eye-searing flash erupted from the foc's'le and the ship jerked and he saw through the smoke the ragged-edged hole between the cables.

Any time now. They had the range, she was practically stopped. Any time now for a shell to get into the boiler room, or a magazine. Just one shell through her thin and valiant sides. He had seen that happen often enough. Now he would know what it felt like. But he wouldn't know. Not with a magazine, or a boiler-room still under superheated pressure. Nothing-ness. Oblivion. *Finis.*

Gropingly, his mouth filled with a horrid taste of burning cordite and explosive and paint, he turned to find Randall. Smoke was blowing back over the bridge, but he picked out Randall's big form holding on to the wheelhouse voice-pipe. His shirt was stained red near the left shoulder.

"Bob...

Randall looked up, his face twisted. He smiled, a macabre malformation of his tight mouth.

"Yes, Peter."

It was not an acknowledgement of Bentley's word, it was a statement of full understanding. Bentley's hand came up, and even then, with death all about them, Randall knew his old friend too fully to offer his own hand. Gently, Bentley punched him in the ribs.

In the gesture was farewell, and manly love, and appreciation of years of friendship and knowledge of a man's nature he knew as

well as his own. Staggering as the ship lurched, Bentley turned back to the binnacle.

Not even the sun would help them. Its great yellow eye was watching, still several degrees above the horizon. But it allowed him to see something which gave him the sole satisfaction of that dreadful action. A spurt of red lashed out from the right-hand Jap and smoke poured in many tongues from her funnel.

"Good boy, good boy," he muttered unheard to Lasenby.

Then Ferris spoke to him.

It was in keeping with the unnatural savagery of the punishment she was taking that Ferris should be guilty of the unnatural omission of not keeping an all-round lookout. It was understandable that his eyes, too, should be rivetted on the origin of their torment. And he would not have seen what he had just sighted if, through the violence which slammed at his ears and his senses, the thought had not come to him. He was the signal yeoman, his life was to do with flags, and there was one piece of bunting which his doomed ship was not wearing. Her White Ensign flew at the gaff, torn but still fluttering its defiance above the thunder, yet it was not enough. *Battle ensign, battle ensign,* the words repeated themselves in Ferris's numbed mind. The biggest, proudest flag the ship carried. It should be hoisted right at the truck of her foremast, it should be the last emblem the Japs would see before she went under. Now it was in its locker.

He had stumbled across the reeking bridge and his hands were fumbling to secure the great flag to the halliards. He braced himself and he began to haul. Ferris did not need to watch what his expert hands were doing. His eyes were staring out to sea, over to starb'd, the side opposite the enemy.

He saw it. He stared in disbelief, striving to understand how one of those belching destroyers could have got round on to that side. Then understanding came. And then he turned and spoke to Bentley.

"Scimitar," Ferris said.

CHAPTER TEN

SHE CAME UP.

She came up roaring under every punching pound of her 40,000 horse-power. She came with a bow-wave surfing up higher then her guard-rails, with clouds of brown smoke billowing, and shredding in the gale of her urgency, with four stabs of red flame lancing briefly and brightly in the middle of the smoke. She came fighting.

Past *Wind Rode's* smoking stern. No signals from her bridge, all the signals from her perfectly manned guns. Past the stern and straight in an undeviating; wake-tossed line for the Japanese flotilla. The Japs saw her coming, they felt the blast of her shells against the bridge of the left-hand ship. They altered course violently to starb'd, heeling the lee gunnels into the creaming sea, away from their victim, away from her rescuer. But still in line-abreast formation. And still, alone, belching, *Scimitar* bored in.

"My God!" Randall jerked hoarsely, *"he's going straight through the line!"*

Straight through he was. Directly between the two inner ships of the enemy formation, leaving not more than two hundred yards between him and two destroyers.

"Mad!" ejaculated Randall, "he's gone mad. He's broken!"

Mad? Bentley thought. As mad as Nelson, who originated the manoeuvre one hundred and forty years before. *Mad?* He saw clearly the skinny figure in its khaki shorts and shirt bend to the voice-pipe, and saw the hosing bow alter its direction a little. Then he could not see, and automatically he wiped his dirty hand across his eyes, and he knew with no surprise whatever that he could not see because his eyes were wet with tears.

He shook his head, thrusting down on the lump choking in his throat. He knew that if he did not succeed in mastering this intensity of emotion *he* would break.

He did not break. Nor did that calculating, tigerish madman in his driving destroyer. It was well that Commander Peter Bentley managed to choke down on his emotion, fortunate indeed that he could see. For he was witnessing the most furious and brilliantly fought action he had ever been privileged to watch, handled with

calm ferocity by an absolute master of his trade. He was, as well, receiving the second part of his lesson.

Scimitar's bow was almost level with the sterns of the two Japanese destroyers in the middle of the formation. The Japs were so astonished by the apparent insanity of this new arrival that they had ceased fire. Bentley knew, as surely as though he had been inside Sainsbury's mind, that the V.C. holder had counted on that.

Sainsbury had the advantage of knowing precisely what he was doing. One of his quintuple banks of torpedo tubes was trained to port, the other to starb'd. He emptied them. The range was close, but his depth-setting was shallow. Not aimed like *Wind Rode's*, those ten silver missiles. Aimed from a fully manoeuvrable ship, by an icy and meticulous judgment.

The range was so close *Scimitar's* guns were at zero elevation. Now was evidenced the value of seeing to the greasing of those simple little pins which allowed the guardrail stanchions to be dropped flat. A and B mounting engaging to port, X-mounting to starb'd, she bored up level. The Japs had lost speed on their turn, and *Scimitar* was outpacing them by ten knots. But for about thirty seconds the three ships were level with each other.

Nelson's strategy at Trafalgar. Go down between the enemy lines. They are loth to fire for fear of hitting their own ship on the other side. The range is so close that you cannot miss. And where the enemy has only one target, and can fire a broadside from only one side, you have two targets, and can fire from both sides.

Thirty seconds. In that time *Scimitar's* six big guns belched a total of more than thirty shells. And every one hit. The bridge of the right-hand destroyer crumpled into a mess of spilled metal and the midships portion of her second target was a flame-shot wall of black smoke. Only a few close-range weapons had fired upon her in return, so numbing had been the effect of Sainsbury's incredible manoeuvre.

The burning ship, with her bridge and control still intact, was heeling away to port. She took only one of the five torpedoes aimed for her, but she took it in her stern. She would alter course no more. The other destroyer had taken no avoiding action. It was impossible to determine how many torpedoes ran against her bilges, for they exploded almost simultaneously, and they covered her with a pall of

dirty water. The upflung opacity hid, for several seconds, the fact that her port side had been savaged widely open. When the water returned to its element it fell down on her horizontal starb'd side. Three minutes later she had disappeared.

Scimitar burst out from the temporary shelter of her two targets and Sainsbury drove her straight at the left-hand, undamaged ship. On this course he had only his four forward guns, but he had also the Jap's whole starb'd side for target. The range was still suicidally close and his shells bit at her with spaced and vicious accuracy.

The remaining Jap had recovered his wits. He was astern of *Scimitar*, but still close to *Wind Rode*, so triumphantly had the flotilla pushed home its attack. Now that Jap destroyer swung his bow to port to come up behind the busy *Scimitar*. Bentley grabbed at the director phone. He had one mounting left him. "Lasenby! Take that right-hand destroyer! Rapid broadsides!"

For the first time in his life Lasenby failed to repeat an order. He had been one with the rest of the ship's company in his awed wonder at *Scimitar's* spunky and incredible action. But though he did not answer Bentley his director swung on to the bearing. A few seconds later the twin barrels of B-mounting joined the uproar.

They were lucky, in several respects. The Jap was intent on overhauling *Scimitar*, and had all his guns trained on her. They still had their transmitting-station undamaged. And they had the tremendous upsurge of will and spirit which *Scimitar's* arrival had granted them. Lasenby and his control-team and his gunners fired like men possessed - as they were.

But they had to be quick. They had been exhausted a few minutes before, and the drug of this new-found hope would not for long boost their bodies against the drag of their exhaustion. They were quick.

The whole of the Jap's port side was open to B-mounting. She was moving past *Wind' Rode's* bow, and Lasenby knew that his own ship could not turn to keep his guns on the changing bearing. Deliberately, forcing himself to calmness, he aimed at her waterline.

The short range which a few minutes earlier would have ended *Wind Rode's* life was now her salvation. A less-skilled gunner than Lasenby could not have missed. The first two shells took her in the port bow, and six seconds later another pair bit into her belly. Her speed slowed.

She had put her rudder over a few seconds after the arrival of Lasenby's first two messengers. But, while a destroyer is fast, she slows quickly when her power drops: she has not the weight to take her on for a long distance at still-high speed. Now her stern swung towards Lasenby's sight.

He could aim at her screws and rudder, and cripple her. But then, though she was already listing through the shell's entry amidships, she could still bring some of her guns to bear on the crippled *Wind Rode*. His other alternative was to aim at her quarter-deck, and what was packed there.

He had a second to make his decision. He made it. The order went down and the two guns elevated slightly. Then they fired.

One shell, possibly through some minute difference in the rifling wear of its barrel, cleared the quarter-deck and smashed into the funnel, wasted. The remaining projectile made up for its companion's dereliction.

It was luck for *Wind Rode* that the Jap was drawing almost directly away from her. Her quarter-deck was packed with depth-charges. In a fractional instant several charges split open under the shell's blast and then the spilled explosive burned under the short and fierce heat.

Her stern was blown off as though an enormous and blunt knife had slashed down through steel and decks and bulkheads, right through to the backbone of her keel. On *Wind Rode's* bridge they reeled under the blast. The dome of the sky rang to the explosion and the iron plates beneath them vibrated in unison. His ears ringing. Bentley grabbed himself upright and stared at the dissected ship.

A large compartmented merchantman has been known to survive the loss of her stern or bow. But not a destroyer. From a little aft of the bridge she is almost all boiler-rooms and engine-room, and amidships she was already filling through the holes made by Lasenby's shells. Before the ravaged stern part dropped under they could see fuel-oil, like black blood, gushing out and fouling the sea.

The slim bow lifted, sharply. They stared, feeling no exultation, feeling only an awed fascination, and a little sick. The bow rose up until it was vertical with the tonnage of water acting on it. Her foremast lay back a few feet above the waiting sea, unnaturally horizontal, a position it had not assumed since the time it was lifted

from a dockyard and swayed into her keel. Then, with a sharp, distinct crack, the mast broke in two. It fell into the water with a small splash, beating the bow under by a few seconds. For a moment the water boiled, and then the turmoil subsided and the blue sea set about smoothing out the mark of entry.

On *Wind Rode's* bridge no one spoke. After what they had been through, the violence of the past minutes had dazed them. Bentley remembered that not all the enemy had disappeared. He lurched to the opposite side of the bridge and stared out over the sea to the eastward, the direction in which *Scimitar* had been last heading.

He saw two ships at once, and a moment later a third. The first was a large attention-claimer. She was one of the two destroyers *Scimitar* had first engaged, and she was still furiously on fire a mile away. The next ship he saw was *Scimitar*, returning towards him at full speed. He had to use his glasses to sight the third. She, too, was burning, though not as fiercely as her consort, and she was also at high speed - to the south, running with desperate haste into the encroaching night.

He felt someone beside him. The word was husky, short, and implicit with a full understanding and im-measurable relief.

"Well..." said Randall.

Bentley drew his breath in as he nodded, mutely. What else was there to say? Instead, he pointed. *Scimitar* had reached the burning ship. She began to circle her, at close range. A single gun spat at her and the shell sent up its ghostly spout two hundred yards over. *Scimitar's* bow swung away, but she continued on her circling course. Her guns must have been already laid on the Jap. Not at full speed, leisurely it seemed, she steamed round her crippled enemy and with systematic broadsides punched her under. Then she hauled off and steamed for *Wind Rode.*

She came slowly down her starb'd side and the thin voice crackled across the scummy water:

"I'm afraid I had to leave some valuable prisoners, but I want to get you in tow before dark, if possible. In any case, they have their rafts, and I believe a boat or two. Can you be towed?"

Just like that, Bentley thought. But he was past surprise. If his ship had grown wings and deposited her poor wounded body in the

dock in Manus harbour he would have accepted the phenomenon as simply a piece of that insane afternoon.

"Yes," he replied, forcing himself to match the other's practical calmness of tone. He was not surprised at Sainsbury's obvious health, either. He knew he had been wrong, the lesson had been well and hardly learned. He did not know why he had been mistaken, but that could wait. "I'm taking water, and my rudder's not much good. But the forepart should be clear. I'll rig towing gear at once." And then the absurdity, the incongruity of his measured words struck him. He had been taught a lesson which would colour his actions for the rest of his life; he had just witnessed a single-handled action which should go down in the text-books as the classic method of handling a destroyer against overwhelming strength; he was almost out on his feet. And he was talking like this!

"Thank God you came...!" he said, and the low fervency in his voice filtered through even the distortion in the speaker.

The reply, or its tone, gave to this exhausted man the surprise he considered himself incapable of feeling. "What did you expect me to do?" Sainsbury asked, gently. "Engage the main Fleet instead?"

Randall's sudden and unexpected reply beside him was neither gentle nor restrained.

"I wouldn't be bloody well surprised!" the big lieutenant ejaculated.

It was possible that the words reached to *Scimitar's* bridge. If they did, they would have gone to add to the legend of the officer they concerned. But Sainsbury was back to normal.

"Smack it about," he ordered crisply, "there's little enough time, and that lone Jap might have second thoughts. I shall come in stern to bow now."

An hour later, with night all about them, the two destroyers moved slowly off to the eastward. Between stern and bow the 4½-inch steel-wire towing hawser lifted its catenary into a straight, singing line, and then sank back into a weighty curve as *Wind Rode* obeyed her sister's sympathetic tugging.

They had been under way two hours when from out of a clear starlit sky thunder and lightning flashed and roared to the north. The

measure of the enervating tiredness of Bentley and Randall is best indicated by recording that both men simply glanced towards the ugly indications of that northern battle between leviathans, and that the only comment made was Randall's brief:

"I'm glad I'm out of that lot!"

The sea was kind to them. The noise of gunfire had lasted a long time, but gradually they had drawn clear of its ominous message. The sun lifted up its welcoming face and shone in their eyes, and on a glittering sea whose emptiness was more welcome.

But that state did not obtain for long. Bentley was at breakfast when the officer of the watch's call took him running up the ladder to the bridge. There they were, and the forest of masts surged in him the same tension as the afternoon before; until a short time later a great bridge shouldered above the horizon and a demanding light winked at them. It was the challenge, and Ferris wasted no time in affording the correct answer.

Bentley forgot his half-eaten breakfast. The American Battle Fleet came on at a fast clip, multiple bow-waves flashing in the sun, a disciplined and orderly formation which at that distance seemed to have suffered no damage. Only later were they to learn the cost of turning back that Japanese threat.

But the three battleships were still alive. They surged on, overtaking the little convoy swiftly and easily, until they drew level a mile away. The flag-ship's signal-lamp flashed again.

A British admiral might, seeing it was a highly public occasion, have considered signalling a comparatively effusive "Well done." The American counterpart was not so meagrely inclined. His message - which the incorrigible Ferris read out aloud - was long and not at all official.

"Well, well," he said to them, rescuer and cripple, "I see my two Down-Under boys still stick together. A damn fine job of reporting you did back there. We won't see that Fleet again. What did you run into?"

The flagship was drawing ahead, and from his position astern Bentley could not read Sainsbury's answer. But later he asked for, and was shown, *Scimitar's* signal-log.

Sainsbury's reply was completely official, and he answered the

admiral's wondering query as a British naval captain should - at least as a captain like Sainsbury should.

"Destroyer force under my command," he replied, was engaged by four enemy destroyers, Asasio-class. Three destroyers were sunk, one broke off the action. Ends."

There was a long pause, while the Fleet drew further ahead. Then the bright eye blinked back at them. "My God! You should get the Victoria Cross for that! "

Bentley was to carry back to his wardroom the story of what he read in that log-book, and it was to surface delighted and appreciative grins.

"Thank you," Sainsbury flashed back, "but I doubt if it would be awarded twice. Ends."

There were no more signals after that, apart from one to the destroyer screen which sent three boats curving over to take station as their escort home.

Scimitar and *Wind Rode* sailed into Manus harbour as they had left it, under a hot sun and a blue sky. Sainsbury steamed to his anchorage, and three tugs took over the sluggish *Wind Rode*. They edged her carefully towards the dock.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I DON'T WANT to talk about it," said Captain Sainsbury, a little worriedly, "but I can see you are determined to. All right, then, out with it and then be finished with it."

The time was just before lunch the next morning, the place was Sainsbury's cabin, and the other occupant was not in the least abashed by his superior's petulant tone. He took a pull of cold beer, and then he started.

"You know damned well I've got to get it off my chest. I was wrong, wrong to hell. But I've got a right to know where I slipped up. Look at it from my point of view." Sainsbury nodded, resignedly. "First, this caution you were always warning me about. That's not like you, not a bit. My God, don't I know that now! Second, the way you looked in here after that air attack. I'd never seen you - anyone - look so damned awful! Do you know something?" Bentley leaned forward. He did not hesitate. Not now. *"You had tears in your eyes!"*

He leaned back, his head nodding, as though in that lachrymose function of his captain's tear ducts lay the complete justification for his own abysmal error of judgment. Sainsbury noted the expression. There were many things he would have liked to say, but he contented himself with a categorical explanation.

"Very well," he said, "your first point. Caution. I trust you have learned your lesson there?" He held up a negating hand. "I have the chair, and by heaven you're going to listen! Caution, now. You realise we could have both escaped unhurt from the Japanese Fleet if you'd not gone further in? I know your answer. But here is mine. The Admiral knew the size of his enemy - he was ignorant solely of his where-abouts. Your second point..."

"Now just a moment," Bentley broke in forcedly. "Answer this one. Where in hell was your caution when you took on four destroyers? Eh?"

Sainsbury shifted himself a little in his chair. He looked at Bentley, his head shaking slightly.

"You miss my meaning, my boy. The exercise of caution might have got us those four destroyers we met just before dark a week or so ago. It would certainly have brought you away from the Jap Fleet

unhurt, remembering your thirty-six knots. But," he said, his tone crisping, "once the enemy is engaged once the balloon had burst, why then you can forget about caution. Now is that clear?"

"Quite clear," Bentley grinned ruefully. "The second point?"

"That is cleared up even more simply. Had I guessed the real reason for your judgment on my - ah - age and general lack of fitness, I should have enlightened you at once, and thus saved us both a good deal of un-pleasantness."

"Then for Pete's sake do so!" Bentley urged him.

"I have noticed it in a number of younger commanders," Sainsbury said reflectively, "a certain lack of restraint, a bullheadedness of approach... However... The reason why I looked so bad when you visited me was that I was suffering what the surgeon was pleased to described as a rather nasty wound in my side."

"What! You didn't mention it!"

"No more than you have mentioned the reason for that slice of sticking plaster adorning your own impetuous and unthinking head. Now, happily, I am well-nigh recovered."

"So that's it," Bentley said wonderingly, "that accounts for the wetness of your optics."

"In part. But not quite."

"What's that?"

"I said 'Not quite.' As I remember it now, you were partly to blame for my unfortunate lapse into lachrymosity. You may recall that you knocked your cap from the table; I have always thought that both you and your first-lieutenant possess the bodies and movements of a bull. I bent down to retrieve said cap. The movement was objected to by the surgeon's stitches. Hence the regrettable but unavoidable tears."

Bentley looked at him for four long seconds.

"My God," he said softly, "and I thought..." He 'recovered himself. "But what about that submarine attack? You sent me in. Surely you don't tell me that's normal practice?"

"I make no such claim. But again the reason is simple. I have... h'mm... enough submarine kills on my tally. It occurred to me that perhaps you would not be adverse to increasing your score. And, after all..." he flicked a finger at the beak of a nose, "it was rather a

sure thing, wasn't it...?'

It was a wiser and very thoughtful destroyer commander who returned to the dock which supported his own wounded ship. He met Randall on the quarter-deck, and right aft, clear of the swarming workmen, he put his friend in the pretty picture.

"Well, I'm damned," Randall growled in the wideness of his relief. And because he accepted privately complete responsibility for his own error of analysis, he added, defensively:

"But damn it all, Peter, we had good reason... And he is old, y'know."

Bentley looked at him, and Randall knew he was fooling no one.

"Yes," Bentley said musingly, "I suppose you could call him old, by our standards. What we should remember is this - steel-wire ropes take a hell of a lot of ageing...!"

They walked forward, their object the wardroom and liquid refreshment. Randall gave in to the pleasure and relief filling him. He rubbed his big hands together.

"Fine, fine," he grinned, "he'll be over tonight? I'll have the greatest pleasure in apologising to the old boy."

"Hell, no!" Bentley ejaculated, "that'd ruin everything. He wants to forget the whole mess. So do I.

And..." He stopped, and smacked one fist into the other palm. "Oh what a clot I am!"

"Eh?"

"I clean forgot to ask him for dinner!"

"You are a clot!" Randall decided forcibly. "Get on to it now."

Bentley got on to it. The signal went off: "R.P.C. (Request Pleasure Company) dinner tonight."

They were in the wardroom when the reply came back. Ferris brought it in and Bentley read it quickly. It was easy to do that. The answer to his invitation was terse, and typical:

"W.M.P."

But it meant "With Much Pleasure."

Bentley looked up. Randall was watching him. Bentley raised his glass, and his smile was low and wide.

THE END

The Lesson

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