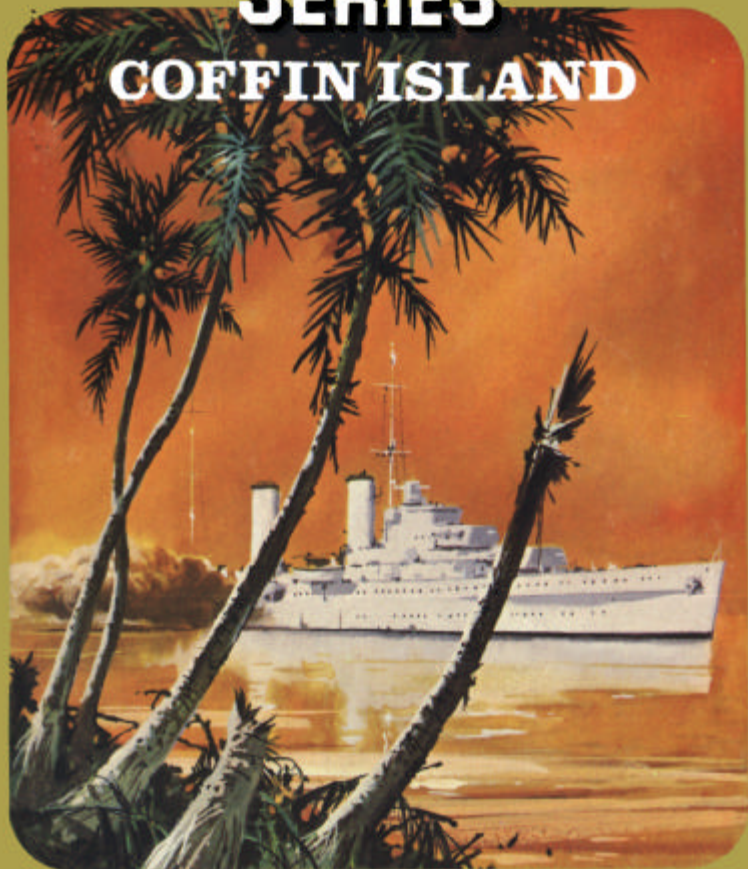


#12

J.E. MACDONNELL

COLLECTOR'S SERIES

COFFIN ISLAND



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COFFIN ISLAND

J.E. Macdonnell

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CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTMAS DAY IN KURE that year dawned hard and clear and very cold. Above the vast spread of the naval dockyards hung a cloud-piled sky, sullen with the threat of snow. In front of the long piers, with their cranes nodding over ships in for repair and refit, waited the protected waters of Lyo Bay—lead-coloured, calm, unapproachable to enemy warships; blocked in by Shikoku Island on the south, and Kyushu on the west.

Kure lies near the western tip, and on the southern side of Honshu, Japan's main island. Behind the water-lapped naval installations reared a spine of mountains; through them, disappearing into a big tunnel-mouth, ran the road to Hiroshima, 20 miles away to the northwest.

A small fleet of fishing boats was anchored a few miles off-shore, riding safely in the easy wash of the protected bay. Each boat had a square stern and high pointed prow, so light that they breasted the waves like a flock of gulls.

Each boat rated one man, standing in the stern, line-fishing—bare-legged, owning only a thin cotton jacket to halt the knives of the bitter wind. There was little clothing to be had in the land of Nippon—all the wool and cotton were needed for the uniforms of the Emperor's fighting forces.

Now and again, as he waited for his line to twitch, each fisherman would turn his brown, hard face and stare at the shape clasped to the long pier by big berthing wires—a gigantic shape, almost completed, the greatest battleship in the world. Then, into each expressionless face came a look of vicious pride. It would not be long now before the giant *Satsuma* steamed to sea. When she did, the ships of the enemy yapping and biting at the sea-perimeter of the sacred islands would be scattered like a shoal of fish before the onslaught of a shark; and once again a fisherman could buy clothes and food to warm his body and fill his belly.

As with fishermen, Christmas Day meant nothing to the workers in the dockyard. They flowed in through the gates in thick, black streams, and most of them ended their walk aboard the cavernous reaches of the *Satsuma*. They began work immediately.

Already the bombers with the white five-pointed star on wings and belly had been over Tokio. They represented a small, token force, and they must have come from an aircraft-carrier. But they *had* come and they could be followed by more, and the vast spread of the naval base offered a natural and juicy target when they did come. Fortunately, the foreign swine knew nothing of what was happening there.

No foreign Government knew anything about the *Satsuma*—not even Germany. They would probably have decried the information even if they had received it—a battleship weighing 50,000 tons, almost a thousand feet long, mounting nine 18-inch monster guns? There would be tolerant smiles in the Embassies to which such information usually filtered. The Japs were copyists, no original creators. Admittedly they had produced the Zero fighter, the best of its kind, but a fifty-thousand-ton battleship! Even if they were capable of building such a monster—which they weren't—it would turn turtle as soon as it slid from the slips and fell into the water.

But the *Satsuma* did not turn turtle. She had forged into the waters of Kure Bay, dragging her tonnage of chains and weights behind her, and she had come to rest, floating solidly, immovable under the urge of the wind, a vast cliff of steel towering above the workshops and cranes and other ships. They had towed her to the fitting-out wharf, and there the workmen swarmed aboard her, filled with pride in their achievement and with hope of what she could do let her loose with her great guns in the Pacific. For two hard years they had toiled to get her ready; billions of yen had been poured into her guns and radar and boilers and armour-plating.

Now, she was almost completed; a massive, unsinkable monument to their work and hopes.

The battleship's captain walked through the gates. He walked steadily and deliberately past the destroyers and cruisers berthed under their cranes. Once, when his sidelong glance saw what enemy bombs had done to a cruiser's upper-works, his thin mouth curled down at each corner. The gesture could have been hateful, or vengeful.

He slowed his pace when he came abreast his own gangway, and finally he halted, his head craned back, staring up at the control-

towers and bridges ranging in steely symmetry high above the deck.

Warned in his office of the captain's presence, the dockyard manager came hurrying along the pier. He eased alongside the uniformed figure, his face respectful—to be given command of this great brute of a ship, the captain must be both a first-class seaman, and looked upon fondly by the naval hierarchy.

“Good morning, Captain Yamato,” the manager said, “she is coming along nicely.”

Captain Yamato remained looking at his ship for five seconds. Then he turned his head and looked down at the manager. On each side of his nose a fold or furrow lanced from nostril to jaw, so that a sneer seemed to be cut into his face. He was not (as is the popular conception) short and bow-legged; he was close to six feet tall, and built sideways in proportion. Nor did he hiss and bow (an even more erroneous conception); his voice when he answered was hard and clear.

“Not nearly fast enough, Tosa. She must be at sea within a month!”

“A month, captain? But...”

Yamato silenced him with a brief movement of his right hand. Then he continued the gesture to take in the pier to their left.

“There is a cruiser. She has been bombed. You have men working on her. Which is more important? To get a damaged ship to sea, or to finish the *Satsuma*?”

“I know, captain, the urgency, but...”

“American bombers have already been over Tokio,” the cold voice spoke above him. “They will be back. If one reconnaissance aircraft sees what we have down here they will consider no risk too great to bomb her.”

“They will not sink her!” The manager said fiercely.

“They will not sink her,” Yamato agreed coldly. “But they could damage her. One heavy bomb on her superstructure will delay her sailing a month.” The hard, oblique eyes glanced down at him. “You are not a seaman, Tosa. Yet even you should realise how helpless even such a ship as ours is when tied up at a pier.” He paused, and the manager licked his lips, looking anywhere but up at the captain's eyes.

“I am surprised that I should have to point these things out,”

Yamato went on, and Tosa wriggled at the tone. "Perhaps Naval Headquarters have overestimated your zeal."

Fear chased the apprehension across Tosa's brown face.

"No, captain, no! You know that is not so! There is no one—excepting your illustrious self—who desires more than I to get the ship to sea!"

"Then the men on the cruiser will be sent here?"

"At once! They will begin work at once!" Yamato permitted himself a slight smile. "That is wise of you, Tosa. When the Americans find out about my ship, I want it to be in the open ocean, with their convoys going down in flames." The smile hardened. "See to it now!"

Tosa nodded, three swift jerks of his head. Then he almost ran towards the cruiser. Yamato watched him go, and then his eyes swung back to the towering steel above him. His face hard and expressionless, he walked deliberately up the gangway.

Christmas Day outside Sydney that year dawned, as it usually did, fine and hot and clear. Four thousand miles south of Kure the sun lifted above the eastern horizon and showered that southern world with brilliant light. The sky was brushed clear by a light wind, and the sea was a miracle of azure, broken into a million sparkling facets under the gentle suasion of the breeze.

Westward, the sun shone on the coastal mountains of New South Wales, rolling like the chest muscles of a giant; closer, it warmed the grey sides and superstructure of H.M.A. destroyer *Wind Rode*, despatched north from Sydney the night before on her lawful occasions—to seek out and destroy the enemy wherever he could be found.

Wind Rode was alone on this sparkling sea; neither smoke nor mast broke the even weld of sea and sky. She was a new ship, but she was not, at this particular moment, a happy one. Last night, when she had sailed, there had been uttered things about the Commonwealth Naval Board which would have made the senior officers who comprised that august body reach for keel-hauling ropes if they had heard them.

But *Wind Rode's* complaints had been uttered in the privacy of

mess-decks and hammocks. “Their’s not to reason why” had no application here—they reasoned loudly and logically, and the general tenor of their reasoning took this line—the ship, brand-new, had been lying alongside Garden Island for months while she had been fitted-out with all her aids to destruction—radar, guns, depth-charges, big torpedoes. Now, the night before Christmas Day, the congenital idiots in whose palsied and unprintable hands ships’ movements lay had sent her to sea. Not a week before, which they would have understood, nor yet a day after Christmas Day, which they would have understood and been thankful for; but the night before, so that they were a hundred miles north of their home port when Christmas Day dawned.

It looked almost deliberate. It was not, of course. The senior officers who had decided *Wind Rode*’s sailing time had spent many Christmases at sea themselves, and their ordered time of sailing had been governed by only one factor—was the ship ready to sail? She was, and so she went. The closeness of Christmas was purely coincidental, and had no bearing whatever on the matter. There were several hundred Allied warships who would eat their Christmas dinner at sea that year—if they had time in between submarine and air-attacks to eat at all—and it was inconceivable that a new and heavily-gunned destroyer should be kept out of the action area a minute longer than was necessary.

So *Wind Rode* sailed.

A hairy-chested able-seaman swung out of his hammock on that Christmas morning, just missed planting his big foot on the face of the man sleeping on the mess-table below him, scratched his belly, looked round at the petulant complainers dressing themselves, and summed it all up through the age-old scapegoat.

“What are you whingein’ about? You know the bloody Navy. Nelson went to sea on Christmas Day—so we go to sea!” Summary delivered, he picked up his towel and forced through the swaying hammocks to the bathroom.

Wind Rode’s bridge was a scene of quiet efficiency—you were an officer, so you suppressed your complaints inside your disciplined mind. First-lieutenant Bob Randall, as is usual in destroyers, had the morning watch, from four a.m. till eight. Though there was no need of navigation here—the well-known coast to port was more than

sufficient for competent pilotage—he had taken star sights just before dawn, to get his hand in. Randall’s banana-fingered hand had been mixed up in everything but navigation and seamanship for months past, and he needed the practice. He admitted this ruefully to himself when he noticed that he had taken almost an hour to work out sights which normally employed him for half that time. He also noticed that his star-sight position put him ten miles further to the east than the actual point he got from his coast bearings. As the latter were accurate, he put his other deficiency down to the unsteadiness of his shore-side hand while holding the sextant...

A step sounded on the bridge ladder behind him.

He turned, expecting it. He had already put his cap on, so that he was able to salute his captain, as is traditional, on sighting for the first time of the day.

“Good morning, sir,” he greeted cheerfully, “on-course, no ships in sight, weather calm and clear.”

“Good morning, Bob,” Lieutenant-commander Bentley answered, and automatically looked round the horizon. Randall waited while the captain quartered the guiltless sky overhead, then he said:

“Happy Christmas.”

“Huh,” Bentley grunted, and then remembered the signalman and the bosun’s mate. “Thanks, Bob,” a little more cheerfully, “same to you.”

“Usual issue?” Randall grinned, correctly interpreting Bentley’s change of attitude.

“Yes. I mean no,” Bentley rubbed his unshaven chin. “Make it two bottles a man. It might take some of the sourness out of ‘em.” He looked up at Randall quickly. “But tell ‘em they’re to drink it right away.”

Randall nodded. At the moment they were just north of Sydney—safe country. If some of the crew kept their two free-issue bottles of beer for a later date, they could be drunk a few minutes before a gunlayer or radar operator required all his faculties at razor sharpness.

“The Old Man been up yet?” Bentley asked in a low voice. Randall shook his head.

“I’d say this is the first time he’s been carried as a passenger, and he’s making the most of it.”

Bentley grinned, so that the disciplined hardness of his burned face broke up.

“Don’t you believe it. He’s been all over the ship already. The only reason he’s not up here is because he’s down in the paint-locker somewhere.”

Bentley’s grin tightened on his cigarette. The two young officers were somewhat unfair to their passenger, who was known by the name of Captain Sainsbury, V.C., and known for an auntyish exterior which hid a terrier-like propensity for fighting—he had, one day, sunk five U-boats in the Atlantic. Captain Sainsbury, while in command of destroyer *Scimitar*, had taught both Bentley and Randall most of what they knew, and both men (in the secrecy of their own minds) idolised him. Now he was in command of the Tenth Destroyer Flotilla, of which *Wind Rode* formed the newest component. Sainsbury had flown down to Melbourne to attend an important conference on naval policy, leaving his own ship in Port Moresby. He could, of course, have flown back to her—but he would as soon miss the chance of sailing back in a brand-new ship commanded by his protege as he would deliberately throw himself overboard into a sea infested with sharks.

And he was not, at this moment, down in the paint-locker, or poking around in some other of *Wind Rode*’s nether compartments: he was mounting, in his quiet, deliberate way, the bridge ladder.

“It beats me,” Randall was saying. He unslung his binoculars and hitched them over the soft-iron sphere on the magnetic compass. “He could have flown back in a fast aircraft, had Christmas Day at home, and what does he do? Deliberately passes that up so he can chug along in a blasted destroyer. Maybe he’s getting old, eh? I know what I would have done!”

A thin, high-pitched cough sounded behind them.

The two men wheeled round.

They stared into a thin, high-bridged face with a pursed mouth and gimlet eyes, whose piercing glance seemed to reach out and stick them, so that they wriggled like grubs on a pin.

“Oh ... ah ...” said Randall expressively, and rubbed his hand across his mouth like a schoolboy caught pinching chalk.

“Good morning, Bentley, good morning, Randall,” said the thin,

penetrating voice. "Happy Christmas to you both. I'm not," he went on, overriding their replies, "getting old. Nor do I require my head read, as you seemed to imply."

Randall's eyes studied the rivets in the deck as if they were nuggets of gold. "I elected to return to my ship via this one for the good and simple reason that I doubt if you two experienced old sea-dogs can handle her without my help."

They knew they were forgiven then—Randall for speaking as he had, Bentley for listening. Bentley said—and he was only half-joking—"It's nice to have your help around, sir."

"I hope it does not need to be exercised, Bentley," the thin voice decided, and the vinegary face twitched in the closest it ever got to a smile.

"No, sir," Bentley agreed, and he meant it. All three of these officers had had what could be called a gluttonous share of the war at sea, and, being normal men, and not copybook heroes, were quite content for *Wind Rode's* passage up to Moresby to be completely free of untoward incident. After that... but they did not think of what would certainly be waiting for them in the torn waters of the Pacific, with the Allied offensive against Japan mounting in weight and savage intensity.

Bentley looked at Sainsbury, and his mind reverted to a favourite subject—one he had been toying with ever since he had learned that they would have a distinguished passenger on the way north. *Wind Rode* was a new ship, and some of her officers were in the same category. It would amount almost to a dereliction of his captainly duty if he did not persuade Sainsbury to give at least one lecture to the wardroom—for Bentley was quite definite in his own mind that there was no other man, in any Navy, who was more fitted to talk on the offensive character of destroyers in wartime. Captain Sainsbury had not got the letters after his name through his good looks...

"I was thinking, sir," Bentley began, and put a thoughtful frown on his good-looking, piratical face.

"I know," the thin voice said, and the vulturine head nodded. "You were thinking that I should be roped in for a lecture."

"Yes, sir," Bentley grinned, not surprised, for he had hinted at the matter before.

“The lecture can wait,” Sainsbury decided flatly. “Today is Christmas Day, and neither the lecturer nor the audience would be interested.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What I would like to do,” Sainsbury’s lips drew together in the purse-string variation of a smile, “would be to walk round the ship to see what they do in the matter of decorations. It has been my experience that destroyermen are somewhat versatile and—ah—unconventional in the matter of Christmas decorations. And even though this craft you command is more like a young battleship than a destroyer, most of its men learned their knots and splices in the boats. Could that be arranged?”

“Of course, sir. I’m just sweeping down the upper-deck after breakfast, then I’ll...” Bentley broke off, realising that the routine he was about to outline had been learned under the very man he was explaining it to. “I’ll let you know when the messdecks are ready, sir,” he finished lamely.

“Thank you.” Captain Sainsbury turned his head and his eyes roved along the length of the horizon. He was still searching when he said, “I’ll get my breakfast and get out of your way.”

Bentley nodded. He took no exception to that sweeping search, even though it was initiated from a bridge where, Sainsbury’s senior rank notwithstanding, Bentley was undisputed master. He knew that a man of Sainsbury’s experience would have been simply incapable of coming on to any bridge in wartime and not instantly and automatically searching the sea.

The spare, gaunt figure walked slowly down the ladder. Randall had offered his cabin, but Sainsbury had declined it at once. “Any spare bunk will do me,” he said. That was one reason why no officer objected to his presence on board, even if they hadn’t held him in the most profound respect. He was a destroyerman—he *knew*. Randall would need all the sleep he could get, and he needed it in the comfort of his own familiar cabin. Sainsbury was a supercargo in this trip; he could sleep all day if he wanted to. So he bunked in a spare cabin down aft, though he ate with Bentley in the captain’s sea-cabin under the bridge.

They watched his sparsely-covered head drop below deck-level,

and Randall growled:

“I hope those coots down below aren’t so sore at sailing that they won’t put up any decoration at all.”

“Don’t worry,” Bentley smiled, “they’ll do it if only to prove they don’t give a damn for the Navy Board anyhow. Besides,” he ended, himself looking round the empty horizon, “they couldn’t pass it up today—it’s Christmas Day, remember?”

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOCKYARD WORKERS IN Kure naval base might be toiling bee-like under the whips of compulsion and national pride, but aboard destroyer *Wind Rode*, a tithe of the size of the *Satsuma*, things were different. It was Christmas Day.

On that one day each year, for twenty-four glorious hours, anything goes aboard the warships of the Fleet. After the solemnity of church on the quarterdeck the bosun's pipes shrill the "Secure" and things start to happen.

Ronald Hopwood's fleet-known poem declares that:

*Now these are the laws of the Navy,
Unwritten and varied they be,
And he will do well to observe them,
Going down in his ship to the sea.*

And it is an unwritten law, made rigid by hoary ages of tradition, that on Christmas Day the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Therefore, a standing practice is to have the captain up as a defaulter before the shortest man in the ship—a variation of how the mighty have fallen. There is no malice, of course, and "Shorty", dressed in the captain's voluminous uniform, complete with telescope under his arm, barks at the captain, rigged in bell-bottoms and a sailor's cap sitting on his head like a pimple on a bull's bilges:

"Not smart enough! When I say double, I mean double! Turn about and double up to the table again!"

Beside the perspiring defaulter stands a miserable-looking specimen—the master-at-arms, or ship's chief of police. The M.A.A. looks as though he has had a plateful of strawberry jam pushed in his face—probably because he has.

The captain receives a verbal blistering, a faithful reproduction of his own style, and the M.A.A. is sentenced to one hour on cells for attending defaulters unwashed and for wearing his cap on straight.

Far from bases in this wide-flung war, normal Christmas fare of turkey, ham, roast spuds, etc., was extremely scarce. So the trading in New Guinea of a young wild pig for a tin of bullamacow was

considered by a certain corvette the acme of business acumen. That ship waged war all on her own against the blandishments, entreaties and intrigues of her flotilla mates.

Displaying shrewd insight into human nature, every night they locked their precious pig in the four-inch magazine. Then, calamity! One rough day at sea the Christmas dinner was airing itself on the upper-deck. The ship rolled; the pig slipped; and as she gave another lurch the squealing porker shot with a great splash over the side.

Imagine the scene. Seven corvettes which a moment before had been strung out in an exemplary line now wheeled and milled over the sea in frantic effort to avoid a motorboat whose crew, oblivious of the pandemonium, were dragging, gasping but triumphant, their Christmas dinner back from a watery grave.

The captain and officers' mess shout each of the ship's company a bottle of beer each, and, with a crew of several hundreds, this is no small order. Then it is that ordinary-seamen, teetotal lads of 17, are discovered in possession of qualities which endear them strongly, if temporarily, to the old three-badgemen.

On Christmas Day gold braid offers about the same degree of protection against jokers as paper would to a six-inch shell. One august captain was benignly watching his lads at play after dinner. Beside him stood his first-lieutenant.

The object of their attention was a fuddled stoker petty-officer in his best suit, trying hopelessly to dodge a forcible jet from a fire hose. The first-lieutenant, noting certain signs, tapped his superior surreptitiously on the arm.

"Don't you think, sir," he whispered, "you'd better come aft on to the quarter-deck?"

The august officer guffawed loudly. "Good heavens, no, Number One! My men would never turn that thing on me!"

Man proposes and stokers swing fire-hoses. An instant later a heavy splash and slather of spray swept past them as if a pailful of melted lead had been flung against the superstructure. The stream bore left and played full on the captain's resplendent figure. Forgetting himself, the first-lieutenant howled with laughter until the hose caught him in the face, when he howled with rage.

But nothing could be done. It was Christmas Day...

Wind Rode's Christmas escapades—luckily for her commanding-officer—were restricted somewhat. She was not in harbour, and enemy submarines were markedly unsympathetic towards carelessly operated asdic sets. But the messdecks were, as Bentley had prophesied, amply decorated. He collected Sainsbury, and leaving Randall in charge on the bridge made the rounds.

The men by now had got over their grouch. They were at sea, they could do nothing about it, and—what was always a saving grace in the Navy—the skipper was in the same boat as they were. As Bentley walked slowly through the messdecks behind Sainsbury he noted the faces of his men. They were amused and respectful, anxious to see whether their efforts pleased: not here now was there any of the boiling hate and repression which had made them surge to the brink of mutiny with the relieving captain. (*See “Mutiny!” in this series.*)

Deliberately, Bentley put the thought from his mind. That shameful episode was past now—he had to forget it, and judge these men by what he himself knew of them—loyal fighters, proven seamen who would follow wherever he led. He lifted his eyes and inspected their efforts.

Each messdeck looked like nothing more than an Eastern bazaar—as in effect it was. The White Ensign hung draped beside a Siamese flag pinched from a hotel in Singapore, an exquisitely hand-carved brass rose bowl from India sported a crop of celery tops: bonbons, paper caps, Chinese lanterns, mementoes of hectic nights ashore in half the ports of the nine seas depended from the deck-head, side by side with a Papuan head-dress and a Hawaiian grass skirt.

The stokers' messdeck, like a Bond Street store window, was decorated simply and effectively. The main motif strung in artistic loops from side to side, was toilet-paper: across the entrance to their living-quarters was hung a row of contraceptives. In the centre depended a large white piece of cardboard, and on it was printed the legend: BOOM DEFENCE.

Captain Sainsbury lowered his skinny frame into a big armchair in the sea-cabin. He crossed one bony knee over the other and laid the extended fingers of his hands together, like a child's church steeple.

“Trust the stokers to come up with something original,” he smiled. His fingers twiddled a little. “All clear up top, Peter. I shouldn’t think a little spot would hurt us—considering the day?”

“A good suggestion, sir,” Bentley grinned, and pressed the buzzer.

They sipped their whisky when it came, not talking, sitting there in perfect contentment. Sainsbury was glad he had come. Glad because he was freed from responsibility (a welcome change), and because he was with a man he had helped rise from lieutenant to his own command; a man he looked upon as a son, in whose successes he took a fierce and possessive pride—though he would cut his throat sooner than admit to it.

Bentley was happy to have his old mentor with him for several reasons. Firstly, he was company. Though Randall was his best friend, Randall was also the first-lieutenant—he had work enough to do, and in any case he could hardly spend his time yarning in the captain’s cabin; even with the closest of friends, the line of demarcation must be drawn when on board. Then, too, though Bentley could not look upon Sainsbury as a father—his own father was a captain with the British Home Fleet—he knew that if he were in trouble, immediate trouble, he would take his worries to the gaunt faced man opposite him without reservation. Finally, they had much to talk about.

Bentley looked at his friend as he leaned sideways to get his tobacco pouch from his trouser pocket. He saw the pinched, lined face, carved by years of fighting and responsibility; he knew that Captain Sainsbury had no family whatever, that the only thing he knew and was known by was the sea; and he understood, with sudden and definite intuition, that the old man was lonely, and that was the real reason why he had elected to travel north in the ship commanded by the man he had tutored and guided.

Bentley spoke, very quietly: “I’m glad you came with me.”

Sainsbury’s eyes lifted and for a flash of time their glances locked. Then he lowered his eyes to the table, while he tugged at the recalcitrant pouch. His face was set in its lines, but his eyes, for a brief space, blinked rapidly. Then he said, as he pulled the pouch out and began to stuff his old pipe:

“If you think I’m going to stand a watch on your precious ship you can think again, young feller.”

His voice was rough, and the moment of sweet intimacy was broken. But the moment had been there, warm and promising between them, and understood.

"I wouldn't trust you with her," Bentley grinned. "We don't carry sails."

Sainsbury developed his smoke screen to his satisfaction, then leaned back in aromatic satisfaction.

"I'll wipe that grin from your face," he promised. "I suppose you know who the admiral is in charge of your area up there?"

Bentley was not surprised that such an august officer was to be discussed. Sainsbury's reception of Randall's remarks on the bridge, and several earlier indications, had shown Bentley that the old relationship between them had subtly changed. Sainsbury was still senior, but now they were both commanding-officers, and his relaxed attitude was a measure of how far he knew Bentley had come along the way to experienced maturity.

Bentley put down his glass and smiled.

"I'd be a bit of a clot if I didn't know who he is. James Rupert Coulter—D.S.O. and Bar."

"You're a clot, then, on your own admission," Sainsbury told him round the pipe-stem. "Coulter was burned badly by a suicide bomber which exploded on the bridge. Last week."

Bentley leaned forward quickly.

"I didn't know that. The ship?"

"Nobody knows it down here, yet. The story hasn't been released. The ship's all right. She'll be repaired at Manus."

"Hell," Bentley said slowly. "That's a blow." He meant it. Rear-admiral Coulter was a widely-liked leader—an old destroyerman who had fought in the Mediterranean, been elevated to flag-rank and a heavy cruiser, and then given command of the naval forces in a huge slice of the Pacific. Bentley looked shrewdly at his companion, who was looking back at him with his eyebrows raised.

"There's only one name which could wipe the grin from my dial," he said. "The name's Palesy, nicknamed Bollardhead, and he's safely in Perth."

Sainsbury tapped his pipe gently on the edge of the ashtray. Still leaning forward, he looked up at Bentley.

“The name’s Palesy, the nickname’s Bollardhead, and he’s safely in Port Moresby.”

“Hell!” Bentley said softly. “Now I am in strife. I’ve crossed swords with him before.”

“Haven’t we all?” asked Sainsbury drily. “The whole flotilla’s living on its nerves.”

“Bollardhead Palesy,” Bentley repeated, and drew the tip of his cigarette red. He tapped it savagely in the ashtray. “What’s up with the coot? The old story—insecure in his new job?”

But there was a limit to senior-officer discussion beyond which the older man would not go.

“Make sure you know *your* job,” he advised. He looked at his watch. “I think we might risk one more, eh? Then I’d like to have a look at this new torpedo-control system of yours.”

Bentley climbed up to the bridge shortly before the ship was due to go to her precautionary night action-station. During this procedure all guns were tested, with communications, and the score of details necessary to ensure that the new destroyer’s complicated fighting mechanism was ready for anything which might come upon them in the dark night.

He stood beside his tall wooden-legged stool in the fore end of the bridge and looked about him. The sea lapped her low length in long, glistening swells, and to port the sun moved downwards towards the bare stone teeth of a range of mountains.

It was a lovely evening, with nothing on the sea to worry them. The smear of smoke astern was from a convoy they had passed two hours before. Ahead lay Brisbane, and beyond that there should be nothing to unduly concern a large ship like *Wind Rode*—she was built to look after herself. Bentley should have been feeling light-hearted, especially as he would be in Brisbane tomorrow. Yet his face was troubled as he stared out over the swooping bow. Rear-admiral Palesy was a thousand miles away, yet his memory was so strong in Bentley’s mind he might have been standing on the bridge beside him—a pear-shaped man of medium height, his face also with a pear-shaped aspect, compounded of broad jowls bracketing a congenially aggrieved mouth. A nasty face.

Bentley remembered the first time he had fallen foul of him;

before the war, Bentley a lieutenant, Palesy a commander.

As officer of the watch, Bentley had failed to get the motorboat alongside at the precise moment Palesy had ordered it—the boat was fully half a minute late. Palesy had growled his displeasure, and though the incident had been trivial, it had served to bring the young lieutenant to his superior's notice.

From then on the commander, essentially a bully, had supervised Bentley's officer of the watch duties with a sour and bellicose eye, so that towards the end of that commission the youngster had dreaded the heavy step shaking the bridge ladder.

But that was years ago, he told himself.

Palesy would have enough on his hands now without worrying about a junior he had once hounded.

But that was just it, his worrying mind told him—Palesy, now given command of a fleet he could never have hoped to lead if Coulter had not been incapacitated, would indulge his bullying nature to the full. And here, coming to join him, was a brand-new destroyer, one whose every move would be watched with a waiting, eagle eye.

"The bollard-headed oaf!" Bentley muttered to himself, "he'll find me a bit older now!" Then he dismissed Palesy from his thoughts. "Sound action stations," he ordered curtly.

The run through the night had been uneventful. With an hour to go before she threaded through the convolutions of Moreton Bay passage, Randall stood beside his captain on the gently rolling bridge. Above them the morning sun's rays fell steeply from a cobalt sky, and the white tower of Moreton lighthouse stood like a bleached bone on the lip of the cliff to port.

Randall filled his capacious chest with ozone and then slapped his open palms against it.

"What time do we go ashore?" His suggestive grin compounded all a sailor's evils—drink, women, more drink.

Bentley pulled at his chin with his fingers. He had been expecting this, and he did not want to hurt his friend's feelings. Brisbane would be the first time they had gone ashore together since Bentley had left the hospital in Sydney.

"I'm afraid I can't make it, Bob," he said, and scratched his head, as if the movement would take any sting of offence from the words.

"I'll be tied up ashore today."

Randall looked at him quickly, and his mouth opened in protest. Then he shut it, and that gesture told Bentley plainer than any words how his decision had affected him. They stared together out over the bow, then Randall said:

"I didn't know you had ship's business ashore. I thought we might take the old boy off and get a few rums into him."

"Normally, yes," Bentley replied, knowing quite well that Randall didn't believe his business concerned the ship. "But there's a lass I've got to look up ashore."

"You've got a girl in Brisbane?" Randall was incredulous. "That's news to me, brother."

"It shouldn't be," Bentley grinned. "You met her. Anne Peters. Remember? She's a reporter on the *Courier-Mail*."

Randall plucked at the loose skin of his throat.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, "I remember her." He remembered her clearly now—he had met her when he had hauled Bentley out of a picture theatre, that sweetly remembered night when he and Hooky Walker, the chief bosun's mate, had landed in Brisbane to join Bentley's first command, the old *Wind Rode*. And it had been Sainsbury who had sent the two of them up to join him, sensing his need of them in the slackly run old ship. Yes, he remembered her—nice girl, brown curls, boyish-looking, smart chick, on the ball.

"But that was a hell of a long time ago," he expostulated, "she could have three or four kids by now. Unless you've been writing to her," he ended, suspiciously.

Bentley laughed. "No, no correspondence."

"Then how the hell do you know she'll want to see you?"

"She will."

"You're taking a risk, chum," Randall said brutally. "Brisbane's a big place, and it's full of Yanks. And you've been gone a long time, brother—a long time." He leaned forward, his burned face confidential. "Listen. Forget about her. She's had a shoal of blokes since you. Remember? The old feller sent me and Hooky up here to join you. What better place to take him ashore in and whip a few into him. He might even laugh! Now that'd be something to see! How about it, eh?"

"You tempt me," Bentley grinned. "I'm pretty sure he'd be in it, too."

"Well, then...?"

Bentley shook his head. "Anne would never forgive me if I didn't see her the first night in port."

"Hell!" Randal! groaned.

"I can see her now," the captain said fondly, and his eyes were dreamy as he fixed them on the clouds of smog which was Brisbane over the bay ahead. "Being on a newspaper she'll have news of our arrival as soon as we're sighted. I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't come down to the pier."

"——!" Randall exploded with unofficer like emphasis. He stared out to sea, his big face disgusted. If Bentley loved the girl, he could understand his passing up a chance of a run ashore, even though it would be their last in civilised country. But he knew Bentley's objective well enough, and to his mind it fell a hell of a long way short of the bliss to be attained by stepping ashore with him and Sainsbury. You could get the other thing anywhere...

"Look," he said, and swung round to face his friend. "Say she's out when you get to the flat. Say she's on duty and can't get off. Say she's out on a job somewhere up near Cloncurry. Yeah," he added hopefully. "Then what? You'll be stuck. I'll wait for you in the pub."

"Thanks for the thought, Bob, but she'll be home. Even if she's on duty she'll manage a relief somehow. You don't know Anne."

Randall just looked at him. Then he released his breath in an explosion of disgust.

"I'll see to the berthing wires," he growled. And, as he made to step on to the ladder leading to the fo'c'sle, "If your heart-throb does happen to be in Cloncurry, I'll be in Lennons."

"I wouldn't rely on it, Bob," Bentley called, his face wreathed in a superior smile that sent his first-lieutenant rattling down the ladder.

Bentley went ashore before Randall. There was little to be done to the ship—a few stores topped-up, her oil-tanks filled—and the first-lieutenant would see to those before he stepped off. Bentley walked quickly along the dockyards towards the tree-lined road outside, where he could see the red gleam of a public phone-box. *Wind Rode* was berthed under the shadow of the Story Bridge, and

only that she was on the opposite side of the river he could have walked with ease to Anne's flat in New Farm.

He eased his bulk into the box and called the newspaper office.

"I'm sorry, sir," the girl on the switch put him right, "she doesn't work here any more. What's that? Yes, I believe she's still in the same place. In New Farm, I think."

"I have the address, thank you. Goodbye." Bentley stepped out into the hot sunshine of Brisbane's afternoon and looked for a taxi. An oncoming driver mistook him for a Yank, and he got in. It took only a few minutes across the bridge, then they turned right down the one-way street at its city end and shortly pulled up outside the tree-shaded block of flats in Merthyr Road.

He got out and paid the driver, and as the gears whined in descending cadence down the road he stood looking at the flats, remembering that it was inside the living-room in that downstairs flat he had confessed to Anne his doubts and fears of his new, and first, command. To get him out of his despondent mood she had suggested the pictures—and it was in that theatre that he had been sent for by Randall and Hooky Walker; and had his fears evaporate as soon as he knew that they would be with him.

Much had happened since that night, in the Mediterranean and the Pacific. But he could still remember Anne's frankness, her warmth and her virginal love-making: remembered it with a familiar tightening in his stomach and an excited urge to see her. Confidently, he swung open the little gate and strode up the path.

He should have known when the man opened the door to his knock, fumbling with the baby in his arm as his other hand drew the door open. He should have been absolutely convinced when the man said, grinning:

"Sorry I took so long to get here, Mac, but this dodblasted little guy here gets lumpier every damn day. Mighty little guy, ain't he?"

"Yes, he certainly is," Bentley stammered, and he looked down and saw that the man was dressed in trousers and shirt, and that the trousers were unmistakably an issue of the United States Army.

"What can I do for you, Mac?" the man said, eyeing his visitor curiously. "You just in from a Navy ship?"

"Yes," Bentley said uncomfortably. He had to go on with it now.

"I was looking for a girl, actually. Her name is Anne Peters. I suppose she must have moved from here."

"Only down to the delicatessen," the man grinned. "You're at the right place. Only her name now is Mrs. Robert G. Koeckler. You're—er—welcome to wait."

"Hell, no!" Bentley ejaculated. Then he recovered his composure, if not his complexion. "I just came ashore for an hour or so. You see Anne—Mrs. Koeckler—well, a long time ago we went to the pictures one night. You know, the movies? But that was a long time back. I thought I'd just pop in and see..."

"Sure, Mac, sure," Mr. Koeckler grinned. "I know how it is. This happens every week."

"Does it?" Bentley gulped.

"Yeah, sure. I'm thinking of getting a sign put up. 'Miss Peters discharged from service.' She sure is some gal, eh?"

"She sure is," Bentley agreed. And added hurriedly:

"Of course, I don't remember her very well. It was a long time ago."

"Yeah, sure, like you said. Well, if you don't want to wait..."

Bentley was at the foot of the steps. "No, thanks, I'll get back. Nice to have met you."

Mr. Koeckler nodded, his look shrewd, but still pleasant.

"Better luck next time, Mac. Here—you want an address or two?"

"No, thanks," Bentley smiled forcedly from the gate. "Well, cheers."

"Cheers," grinned Mr. Koeckler, and closed the door.

Bentley cast about him, but the taxi had disappeared. He walked quickly down the tree-shaded road towards the tramline. What was that pub Randall mentioned? Lennons. He would have to put up with the big fellow's jeers. But he needed that drink!

Bentley was already on the fringe of the city on his way to the hotel when Randall walked into its dim coolness from the violence of sunshine outside. He was feeling morose. Sainsbury had declined his invitation, pleading his age and inability to keep up with a healthy young fellow ten years his junior. Randall had not been sorry—it might have been heavy-going with the old boy, without Bentley, his

pride and joy, along to help out. Thinking of Bentley made Randall realise just how much he missed his company on what could have been a humdinger run ashore. Now he could look forward to a few lonely drinks in this jam-packed joint, his aloneness emphasised by the hard-drinking, feverishly gay crowd of girls and Servicemen.

It was not a happy lieutenant who pushed his way to the bar and ordered a beer. Nor was his mood made joyous by the obvious lack of interest the barman showed in his locally-made uniform.

“All right, bud,” Randall snarled, “just imagine I hail from Oklahoma, eh? Then let’s have a beer.”

The barman—big enough himself—had a retort ready on his ready tongue. He looked again at the size and mood of what confronted him, and contented himself with a scowl. He pulled the beer.

Randall flung down the correct change, took up the glass and turned his back to the bar. He stood there with his legs braced, not worried that he would be pushed to right or left. He was staring morosely at the happy throng in front of him, packing the tables, so that he saw the red-haired girl’s escort excuse himself with a knowing leer and head for the men’s room. Neither the colour of her hair nor the fact that her escort probably did hail from Oklahoma increased Randall’s minor interest in the girl—but he was interested enough in the man who at that moment came into the room from the foyer outside.

He was big, as big as Randall, and he was dressed—inconspicuously in this starred-and-striped company—in American Army uniform. He also looked slightly drunk. That in itself would not have attracted Randall’s attention: what did, was the way in which the big man shouldered his way through the room, heading obviously for the table of the red-haired girl. She had just finished laying another carmine overlay on the red wound of her mouth—an operation rendered a little difficult by the rhythmic mastication of her gum-filled jaws—when the big man reached her.

Randall drained his glass and laid it on the bar behind him without taking his eyes from the big man. The glowering look on his face promised an interesting *divertissement*. The promise was fulfilled. He said, without preliminary, and from an obvious prior acquaintance with the redhead:

“So I caught up with ya at last, baby! Ya don’t two time me, babe! Come on, we’re leavin’!”

The redhead looked up at him in alarm, and then quickly at the closed door of the men’s room. She was spirited.

“Take your big paw offa me, you slob! I don’t belong to no man. You or nobody else. Now beat it outta here!”

The Woolloomooloo slang mixed picturesquely with the acquired Bronx. The big man was not in the mood to appreciate picturesque speech. The red in his bloodshot eyes darkened.

“I said ya comin’ with me!”

He let go of the table on which he was leaning, reached for the redhead’s wrist, and yanked her to her feet.

It was his bad luck that he had tangled with a girl from Woolloomooloo. Bronx maidens are kittens in comparison.

She let the big man have the heel of her disengaged hand in a jolting uppercut that snapped his head back and would have upset him right off balance but for the press of tables behind him.

The big man’s face flushed with fury. He waved his arms in the struggle to regain his balance, and when he did so he came at the girl like a bull.

He stood in front of her and grabbed her arm in the punishing grip of his huge hand.

Then he shoved it behind her and up her back so that she whimpered with pain.

The sound was plainly audible even in that talk-filled room, people swung in their chairs to see what was happening, and one or two men rose from their chairs with the hesitancy of strangers who felt they should interfere but were held back by the thought of making a spectacle of themselves in something that might not concern them.

The redhead was left on her own.

The savage grip knocked most of the fight out of the girl. The big man still held her with one hand as her knees weakened under the shock and she began to sag.

A woman at the next table glared with contempt at the shocked faces of the men with her and got up. She forced her way towards the couple, her intentions obscure but courageous. She never had to interfere.

It was the big man's bad luck that Randall had his back to the bar, and so had seen what had happened.

Randall's path by the shortest route from where he stood left a broad wake of disturbed drinkers and displaced tables, but it got him there quickly—so quickly that the big man knew about it only when Randall nearly broke the arm that gripped the redhead as he spun the big man round.

The butchering wasn't pretty to see.

Randall had not been trained to the niceties of judgment and timing that Bentley had learned in his semi-professional training as a ring-fighter; he had learned to fight in the Queensland outback, from which he had joined the Navy. His further life in most of the ports of the world had not left him rusty.

He wanted to cut the big man up as much as possible, partly because he had been angered to the core by the brutal treatment of the girl, and partly because he felt like a fight anyway.

He brushed the big man's hands aside and he hit at his face with both balled fists as fast as he could move his arms, hooking from the sides so that his knuckles would do the maximum damage without laying his victim out too quickly. Even then, four or five cutting blows were all that the big man took before he sagged back against the table.

Randall set him up again with a left hook and dropped him to the floor with a tremendous smash on the mouth. The whole thing took only ten seconds. The big man would never look the same.

Randall rubbed his knuckles, and the red-haired girl looked at him with dawning interest. A tense voice behind him said:

"What the hell's going on here? Come on—out!"

Randall grinned at the girl, his moroseness vanished under the heat of the fight and the recognition of that voice. He picked up his cap from the floor, and dusted it against his leg as he followed Bentley out into the street.

"Well, now," he grinned, when they were clear of the buzzing they left behind them, "this is a pleasant surprise."

"I'm not surprised," Bentley growled. "You're worse than an ordinary-seaman. I can't leave you alone for five minutes."

"Not guilty, sir," the big lieutenant grinned back at him. "A

woman's honour was at stake."

"Her what?" Bentley grunted.

"Well ... her hide, then. She really took a lacing."

"You mean that oaf hit her?"

"That oaf hit her. I hit the oaf. That's about it."

Bentley looked sideways at him. "I see," he said slowly.

"You thought I was trying to pinch his girl?"

"That's right—knowing you."

"Shame on you."

"It would've been shame on the girl."

"You flatter me. What happened to your girl?"

"Nothing. Except she's married."

"What?"

"What am I? A blasted parrot?"

"You could have fooled me."

"I'm laughing to death! Come on—this one'll do. I need a drink."

"I won't knock one back."

Agreement was reached.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DAY AFTER THE Western world's Christmas Day, Captain Yamato lifted his bulk from the bolted down chair in his cabin and reached for his cap. That cap was the same as worn by his British counterpart, except that it lacked the gold embroidery of a Royal Navy captain's; and the band, instead of gold oakleaves, bore a small anchor surrounded by cherry leaves and blossom. On the sleeves of his dark-blue uniform he wore four gold stripes, the top one curled, identical with the British insignia.

As he stepped from his huge cabin in the *Satsuma's* stern, he carried a thick, vellum-bound volume in his hand. These were the plans of his new command, and he had been studying them assiduously. He had commanded battleships before, but never one like this. It would take him a month of almost continuous inspection to become familiar with her vast innards—learning by actual sighting what he had absorbed mentally from the plans. Now he was on his way to the dockside, to orientate himself from the outside with the position of guns and compartments.

He returned the salute of the rigid sentry, and stood on the dock near her stern. Ahead of him the length of the great vessel reached in a long steely curve to meet the sharp bow—a solid wall of enormous strength and weight. He knew from the constructor's plans that the *Satsuma* was provided with an improved distribution of deck and side armour, a more elaborate subdivision of watertight compartments than earlier battleships, and an improved system of underwater protection.

The weight of her armour-plate was a little over twenty thousand tons, and in parts—around her magazines and on the waterline—it was almost two feet thick. He could look down and see it, where the bulge of the specially-hardened armour-plate tapered in and merged with her wall-like side above the greasy water.

His brown face expressionless, he thought with prideful satisfaction that no shell, even an armour-piercing projectile, from an American or British battleship could punch in through that thick solidity of hardened steel. Paradoxically, the only craft who might open her up would be a destroyer. Torpedoes. But even then she

would have to hit with a full salvo of ten, a maximum hitting effect which had never yet happened in naval warfare. Captain Yamato allowed his lips to ease in a hard smile as he thought of what he would do to any destroyer who forced in close enough to ensure all her torpedoes hitting. With the brief smile he dismissed the possibility of a destroyer's strike against him.

He walked slowly down her length, passing the engine-rooms. From these massive compartments sprang the four forged shafts connected to her four propellers, turned by an output of 150,000 shaft horsepower—enough to thrust her bulk through the sea at 32 knots—not much slower than a destroyer! To handle this vast tonnage at high speed she mounted steering gear of novel design, with a rudder that could be swung hard-over in thirty seconds at full speed. Captain Yamato did not know, nor would he have cared if he did, that this steering system was a faithful copy of that incorporated in the British battleships *King George V* and *Duke of York*. All that concerned him was that he had it.

He stopped abreast the cliff of steel which was the bridge. But his interest did not lie there—though inordinately massive, it was still only a bridge, the only unfamiliar thing about it its size. What captured his attention was B-turret, which squatted its bulk directly below the bridge. Here, protruding from the armoured face of the turret like three rigid pythons in their camouflaged paint, was the main purpose of all the armour-plate and engines, the towering bridges and the nine hundred feet stretch of her deck—the 16-inch guns. She mounted four triple turrets, 12 monster guns in all, each one of them weighing one hundred and twenty tons, firing a shell weighing a ton and a half, bursting it from the muzzle at a velocity of three thousand feet per second. Flung by half a ton of cordite, there was no armour afloat which could withstand the shock of receiving such a shell. If only half of the *Satsuma's* broadside of twelve projectiles were to hit, they would burst the object of their high-velocity flight open to the sea.

Captain Yamato felt a sudden and fierce impatience to get this impregnable vessel to sea to pit her against anything the enemy could put before her. His impatience grew when he thought of the sea-trials ahead of her, but he quietened it by remembrance of their necessity.

Yet his face was inscrutable when he walked further on and came to a stop directly under her bow. Captain Yamato had been trained since his boyhood in one single thing—the art of destruction. He had practised it with conspicuous success in his manhood. Yet even his agate soul was moved by the sheer beauty of the shape in front of him. The battleship's bow rose from a knife-edge, at the water's edge, in a graceful and perfectly symmetrical flare to meet her upper-deck guard-rails: a symphony in steel.

He dragged his gaze from her bow and looked aft along the bulging belly. And he saw one thing in all this strength that worried him. The heavy armour-plate covered her vulnerable belly, thickly and impenetrably. He would have liked the armour to extend its protection to her bow and propelled stern, but there were considerations of speed and manoeuvrability and stability, as well as the lack of suitable steel. The workshops of the embattled country had been scoured for special steel to build this monster, and only the appeal to national pride in her completion rode over the objections of other war-material manufacturers.

Even so, he thought grimly, in her comparatively un-armoured sections she was still stronger than any other vessel of her class. Of her class? She was in a class by herself.

“Good morning, Tai-sa,” a respectful voice said beside him.

Yamato recognised the voice of Tosa, the dockyard manager. He ignored the familiar rendering of “captain,” recognising that though Tosa would jump when he commanded, it was foolish to deliberately and needlessly antagonise the little man who was responsible more than any other for the *Satsuma's* completion. Even so, he kept his gaze on the ship for several more seconds before he answered:

“Good morning, Tosa. You are up to schedule?”

“No, Tai-sa,” the soft voice answered him.

Yamato swung upon him, his weatherbeaten face hard and savage. Tosa recognised the symptoms, and he added hurriedly:

“We are a day ahead of schedule, sir.”

Yamato noticed the return to formality, and he smiled inwardly. His face and manner were still grim when he said:

“That is good, Tosa. You will keep it that way.”

Yamato swung about and strode down the pier towards the

gangway. Deprived of the congratulations he had expected, Tosa stared after him, his lips twitching.

“Bushido pig!” he snarled softly. “You fool—this is *my ship!*” He walked quickly to his office, to vent his feelings on juniors who would absorb them.

About him as he went the huge dockyard was filled with clamour—the chattering cacophony of pneumatic riveters, the clang of hammers, the whining of electric cranes. And most of the noise came from the vast waiting bulk of the new battleship. But Tosa did not notice the *Satsuma’s* birth-sounds. He was used to them.

Wind Rode was making good time at her economical cruising speed. At five o’clock, when Randall took his running sun-sight, she was put down on the chart as being fifty miles south-east of Saumarez Reef, which itself lay just outside the Great Barrier, off MacKay. The destroyer had come up outside the Reef—she had no need to put in at any coastwise port, she liked plenty of open space to hunt in, and the twists and turns of the inner passage were not made any healthier by the extinction of all leading-lights.

Randall came over and told Bentley the ship’s position, and then left him to continue his conversation with Captain Sainsbury.

The older man was not, like Bentley, a gunnery specialist. He had of course a working knowledge of everything his ship carried in the way of offensive armament, but his main forte was seamanship: his flotilla-leader carried specialist officers to ensure the correct functioning of her aids to survival.

That afternoon Bentley had been talking of the electronic wonders of his new ship. Sainsbury could not hope to understand the technical jargon with which the younger man tried to explain the navigational and gunnery-control radar whose weirdly-shaped antennae cluttered the aluminium latticework mast above their heads. There were few destroyer commanders who could have, and Bentley’s superior knowledge was due mainly to the special course he had taken at the radar school on South Head.

Nor could Sainsbury be expected to be au fait with the uncanny omniscience of the asdic sets which automatically controlled the firing of the triple-barrelled “squid” on the quarter-deck. But he could

understand the enthusiasm of the younger man for the scientific aids which made of this destroyer a fantastically deadly young cruiser in comparison with the cockle-shells in which Sainsbury had learned his ship-handling.

So that the nods of his gaunt and sparsely-haired head were not of technical understanding, but of thankfulness that the Navy still bred men who loved their craft and their weapons. With that he was content.

As is well known to travellers of the Grey Funnel Line, their naval life is composed mainly of unrelieved monotony, climaxed by a few swift minutes of action. So that the incidents which followed one another in startling succession on the destroyer's bridge just before dusk that night fitted naturally into the pattern of naval life.

Bentley and Sainsbury were still yarning on the bridge after action-stations had fallen out, enjoying the cool quietness of dusk. Now and again each man's eyes sought out the darkening sea ahead, unconsciously, automatically, noting the long, smooth swells growing from out of the northward, gliding with a quiet presage of menace to meet the ship. Each knew what those swells meant, each had estimated the strength of the blow which would follow, and each had not the slightest alarm in his mind as to what it and the sea could do to this modern, well-found greyhound.

Sainsbury smiled at his thoughts and said:

"Your precious radar won't be able to do anything about this, Peter."

Bentley, nodding, remembered a new Admiralty publication he'd been reading on tracking the paths of cyclones—not that this promised to rate anything as high as that. He eased himself from his stool.

"I'll jump below and get it for you. You'll be interested—a lot of new ideas."

He walked to the top of the almost vertical bridge ladder. In the dim light the bosun's mate was just ahead of him, about to start his rounds of piping "Hands to supper." The seaman, fumbling for his bosun's call, found he'd left it on the chart-table. He turned at the head of the ladder. Bentley's big body cannoned abruptly into him. The bosun's mate fell headlong, almost without touching a rung, to the steel deck fifteen feet below.

When the surgeon got to him he found him unconscious and

breathing with a startling sort of rattling sound, interposed with wheezings. It needed a less-skilled diagnosis than the doctor's to realise what had happened—the shock of his body striking that unresistant deck had broken two of his ribs and forced them like puncturing swords into his lungs.

The surgeon ordered him carried carefully down to the little sick-bay and then ran up the bridge ladder.

Bentley was waiting for him, his face worried.

“No go, sir,” the surgeon shook his head. “Ribs have punctured his lungs. It would be a major job to open the chest cavity. In any case, I couldn't operate—I'd need an intra-tracheal anaesthetic, a tube right down his throat and into his lungs. Once I exposed the lungs they would collapse—he couldn't breathe then. So it must be an intra-tracheal. And I haven't anything like that equipment on board.”

“Can you manage him till we get to the mainland?” came Sainsbury's quiet voice.

“Yes, sir. He's not in any real danger unless I incise into the chest cavity.”

“Right!” Bentley decided briskly. “Mackay is the nearest port. We'll alter in through the Reef now. All right, *Doc*,” he nodded dismissal, “we'll get him there.”

When the surgeon had gone below Sainsbury crossed to the chart with Bentley. They bent in together. Bentley's forefinger whispered across the parchment.

“Through here. Fitzroy Passage, where Swain Reef comes out to meet the Barrier.” He looked sideways at his companion. “It won't upset your schedule, sir. I'll crack on a bit tomorrow and make it up.”

Sainsbury did not answer. He withdrew his skinny body from inside the canvas weather-dodger and looked forward over the fo'c'sle, to the white patch of B turret, livid in the dying light's gleam; the fence of grey guardrail stanchions marching on ghostly legs to converge at the bullring; the flat blackness of the fo'c'sle itself, all swooping swiftly over the rising sea, invisible now save where the arrow-headed bow was flanked occasionally by barbs of fleeting white, and a slight exploding of spray as she buried her snout.

Impatiently Bentley glanced at him. All he saw was a narrow-gutted reef passage through which he had to con his ship ahead of the approaching weather. For the first time, but only very vaguely, he began to regret Sainsbury's presence on board. Undoubtedly Bentley was captain of the ship, but undoubtedly Sainsbury was his flotilla-leader: there was a moral obligation to hear his comments on the decision.

Come on, Bentley urged mentally, for Pete's sake say something!

Sainsbury turned his head, his dark-burned face edged sharply in the grey of hair and eyebrows.

"I am not concerned with my schedule, Peter. You're taking Fitzroy Passage?"

Oh, hell, here it was! The thing every commander dreaded—divided command. "Yes, sir. It's the quickest route in."

Captain Sainsbury did not comment, verbally, on his lack of right to intrude. His question to a young lieutenant-commander indicated the appreciation of his own position. He looked up at the rangy length of the other.

"You won't have much to go on in this sea. I remember the reef is just about awash either side?"

Bentley curbed himself. He was impatient to give the course-alteration order and to get on with the job. He could not understand Sainsbury's hesitancy. It was a case of simple navigation. And hadn't he spent all the afternoon telling him about their radar equipment?

"Radar will pick it up all right, sir. There's no danger."

Bentley felt the older man stiffen at the word. He pulled his pipe from his mouth and grunted:

"All right. Peter, she's your ship."

Bentley almost answered "Yes, sir." She *was* his ship, the decisions were his, and if anything went wrong there was only one boy to take the can—him! Then his unaccustomed heat brought him up with a round turn. What the hell was wrong with him? Touchy because this was the first out of the ordinary job he'd handled in his new command? You'd make a bloody good Bollard-head Palesy if they ever give you an admiral's stripes, he grinned to himself.

He answered "Aye, aye, sir," to Sainsbury, and sent the new bosun's mate for the navigation chart.

“Well, that’s her, Pilot,” said Bentley. He backed out from the chart-table. On the whiteness of the chart, virgin where they were now, speckled as though thistles had been flung on to an iced cake where they were heading, a straight black pencil line ran, till it passed through a quarter-inch gap between two thistles. The black line was their new course; the thistles were reefs; and the quarter-inch gap was a couple of hundred yards’ distance between two of them—hopefully named Fitzroy Passage.

Back at the binnacle, Bentley straightened up after passing the course alteration down to the wheelhouse. He felt the ship stagger as a wave belted her flare, and saw the water erupt over the fo’c’sle in a cloud of flung white. He felt, also, the judging presence of the elder man huddled on his wooden chair ahead of him and to his right. Bentley found himself wishing he would go below. He’d like to see him run her in through that gap without radar. But as *Wind Rode’s* up-to-the minute radar was a closed book to him, what was the point in his staying up here? Easy, boy, easy, he told himself.

But that didn’t help much, either—for he was irritated by the knowledge that it was only Sainsbury’s judging presence on the bridge which required him to hold himself in. On the other hand, it might be a good thing he was there to see how, in some cases at least, science could triumph over seamanship.

The thought of radar prompted action. He crossed to the radar-office voice-pipe, an unworthy feeling of superiority filling him as he spoke down its resonant throat.

“Two-seven-five?”

“Sir?”

“Start operating.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Almost at once a reflector like half a cheese began revolving above the bridge, its searching electronic fingers fanning out over the bow in an embracing arc of sensitivity, which not even the wind, now a rising snarl in the rigging, could divert.

“Bridge?” The disembodied voice sprang from the voice-pipe.

“Bridge.”

“Nothing on the two-seven-five, sir.”

“Very well. Keep sweeping. You should pick up land echoes—right ahead.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

The matter-of-fact tone of the operator, as though picking up a wave-washed reef in a black night was as much everyday work as echoing off North Head, calmed Bentley’s momentary concern. They were, of course, too far off yet.

An hour later, with the sea battering over the stem in gouts of spray, and the reef—by dead reckoning—only fifteen miles ahead, there was still nothing on the two-seven-five. Nothing, in fact, anywhere, but a wilderness of darkness and ridged waves; a howling wind that slapped your face with invisible hands reaching over the useless windbreak; a growing worry in your brain; and a calm old man sitting perfectly still in his chair, taking the storm’s buffets heedlessly in his weathered old face.

At the binnacle, a dozen feet away, Bentley was surprised at the clearness with which he heard Sainsbury’s voice. But then he remembered it had been trained to clarity in a thousand gales.

“Peter! Anything on that gadget of yours yet?”

Bentley handled himself across the lifting bridge.

“No, sir,” he bellowed. “Can’t make it out. Should be echoing strongly. Unless...”

Abruptly, the thought struck him speechless. He stared out over the streaming fo’c’sle, glistening in the moon-filtered light. He had never been through this passage—prior experience was not necessary, with the chart as his reliable eye. Normally. But, he realised with a sudden chill sense of inadequacy, though the chart gave, well enough, the *depths* of water round the reef, it did not give you the *height* of the coral above it.

That was what the Old Man was thinking of when he had mentioned that he seemed to remember the reef was almost awash either side ... He knew little enough of *Wind Rode’s* new and complicated sets, but he’d had some experience of radar, by hell!

Bentley staggered back to the radar voice-pipe.

“Anything yet?” he bellowed.

“No, sir,” the answer came up, unmoved, secure in the faith the operator far below had in his bridge officers—and his set. “Only grass, sir.”

Grass! The jumbled reflection on the radar-scope from those

marching mountains of water ahead and around them. Water which, if the reef were low enough—and the two-seven-five obviously said it was—would pour over their guiding land in a continuous, smothering cascade.

Bentley reached back to the binnacle. Sainsbury had risen quietly and was now standing beside the compass, hanging on to the wheelhouse voice-pipe, the light from the compass-card playing on the hard, wet edges of his face.

“What is wrong, lad?”

Bentley said, “Grass,” unsurprised at the form of address. His old mentor had called him that often enough before. Sainsbury looked into his face, both of them swaying beside the binnacle like a couple of drunks.

“Your radar, then, I gather, is inoperative for our passage through?”

“Yes, sir. It looks like it.”

“You are still going to attempt the passage?”

Bentley wiped the salt from his mouth.

“If I don’t, we might not make the northern entrance either before the sea gets really up. And we’ve got to get in somewhere...”

It was some time before the older man spoke. When he did, his voice was almost gentle.

“You know that regulations prevent my taking command of your ship—even were I qualified to do so.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You also know that I have no intention of doing so, regulations regardless.” They bent their heads as a lather of spray swept the bridge.

“But,” Sainsbury went on in his penetratingly resolute voice, “I think you will be willing to accept a little advice.”

Bentley looked sideways into the craggy face. The tight mouth was twisted in a little smile.

“I have complete faith in your ability to fight this vessel, Peter. I would say that you are one of the most successful younger captains in the Service. But ... I have some knowledge of ship-handling in these waters.” Suddenly, and completely, Bentley wanted his advice. The advice of an old seadog who was weathering storms bigger than

this before Bentley was in short pants. He felt no diminution of his own ability or power of command in wanting Sainsbury's help: it would not be the first time he had used it. On the other hand, he would be an inexcusably stubborn idiot if he refused it.

"I'd be glad of your help, sir," he said. If he expected the flotilla-leader to change instantly into a flotilla-leader, he was mistaken. Sainsbury gave his advice calmly, explaining the need for it (for future reference), the reasons behind it, letting Bentley implement it.

He brought her head round, punching her to the northward, so that she could run down with the seas, then turn in; instead of driving straight for the gap, and in all probability being battered to leeward, to where an unbroken chain of cruel coral snags awaited her.

Sainsbury stayed at the compass while Bentley checked the chart.

"Distance?" he asked when the younger man clambered back.

"I make it little more than a mile ahead."

"Better get the searchlight crew closed-up."

Bentley swallowed.

"We don't carry a searchlight aboard, sir. Radar..."

Sainsbury smiled openly as the other's voice trailed off. It was the first time Bentley had seen the apparatus at full extension.

"Then it's our glasses against the reef, eh? Right! Bring her round. Easy now, while I take a look."

Gradually Bentley eased her head round, till she was pointing on-course for the gap. If their—the old man's—calculations were right, they should be almost directly opposite it. Just far enough north to be driven down by the wind and sea in a slanting line to meet the opening. If they weren't...

Sainsbury stood rigid behind the binnacle, glasses up, staring with single-minded concentration over the bow.

He snapped: "Switch off compass lights!"

Bentley did so and came upright beside him. Through his glasses he could see only blackness, relieved by brief splashes of toppling white. Then, with a shock, he saw the reef—or the wave-smothered, boiling white indication of it. To his eyes it seemed to stretch in an unbroken line ahead of them to right and left as far as he could see.

Sainsbury gave no indication of what *he* could see. From under

his glasses he began his helm-orders. Bentley, straightening each time from the wheelhouse voice-pipe, strained to see a break in the leaping white mass. It was then he realised, through his own comparative impotence, that this was the test: this the crucial height of one man's struggle against the sea.

They were almost on the white breaking line before Bentley saw, right ahead through straining eyes, a slightly lower level of white; white which was rolling more than breaking, in vicious gouts of upflung spray. Waves, yes, but waves rolling through the gap. The gap which the old man had seen with the inward, judging eye of remembered experience rather than with the visual concept of his binoculars.

A final, sky-wiping roll of her masts and they were through, the ship easier almost at once. Sainsbury lowered his glasses. His voice was strained.

"I think I'll go below, Peter. You've got all the light beacons you want from now on—beautiful radar echoes! And," he turned from the edge of the grating round the binnacle and grinned into Bentley's salty face, "you know exactly where you are."

Looking back a month later, when the nightmare commission was over, Bentley wondered if his run of misfortune had not started when he temporarily relinquished command of his vessel. This thought did not occur to him at the time, or shortly afterwards, for his bad luck had not begun then, and he was quite satisfied in his own meticulous mind that letting Sainsbury bring her through was not only the sensible thing to do, it was his duty. What had been at stake was not his feeling, but the survival of the ship. In accepting the older man's help he had acted wisely, and correctly.

Still... All blue-water seamen—perhaps by virtue of the vast and mysterious power they constantly combat—are in greater or lesser degree, superstitious. The servitude of the sea is austere, and the sea will soon find the weakness in any man who sails on its powerful bosom. Bentley certainly was no weakling; young as he was, he had been toughened and experienced by years of battling against men and the sea; and so when his bad luck began, and over the weeks continued, he accepted the fact that the sea had been indulgent long

enough, and was now whittling him down to size before allowing his earlier success to manifest itself again.

It is well known to seamen that big waves come in threes. It seemed more than coincidence that Bentley's troubles rushed upon him in the same sequence.

It started with his bringing the ship alongside to get the injured bosun's mate ashore. It was a lovely morning, with the expiring breath of the storm sending flotillas of white clouds scudding inland from the sea. Everything was ready. Bentley had sent a signal as soon as he was safely inside the Reef, and on the pier they could see the ambulance waiting, behind a fairly large crowd, interested in this unusual visit of a powerful warship to their port. The injured man had been brought up and lay on a stretcher near the torpedo tubes, ready to be carried ashore as soon as she was berthed alongside and the gangway run out. He was drugged with a sedative.

The whole ship was in its normal efficient state. Randall was at the side of the bridge as the pier loomed closer, ready to give orders from his vantage point to either fo'c'sle or quarter-deck—warp her in here, ease out your wires there. The crews were standing-by their wires and fenders, and Hooky Walker, the giant chief bosun's mate, was up on the fo'c'sle—it was from there the first heaving-line would fling out as soon as the captain got her bow in close enough.

Unaccountably, the captain was experiencing difficulty in doing just that. Admittedly, there was some wind, and there was a current setting against him. But Bentley had been handling destroyers for years now, and he had something like fifty-thousand horse-power to help him against the machinations of wind and current.

It could have been that he was new to this brand-new ship; it could have been anything. What was certain was that he put his bow in towards the pier correctly enough, and the seamen stirred around their heavy wires. Then, much too far from the pier, he put her engines astern to pull her up. She pulled up, all right, shuddering with the power he gave her, twice the distance from the pier over which a heaving-line could be thrown. Turbines spun by super-heated steam do not run down like a car's engine when the foot is lifted from the accelerator—they take time. *Wind Rode* stopped, then began moving astern—and kept moving that way.

To stop her going out too far, Bentley put his engines half-ahead. The big screws gripped and thrashed, and a miniature maelstrom frothed up around her stern, the water discoloured brown from the stirred mud of the shallow harbour bed. She slid quickly ahead.

That was the start of the see-saw. *Wind Rode's* worried and sympathetic men had seen it happen often enough in a high-powered craft like a destroyer, but never with this captain. Surreptitiously, Hooky turned his head up to the bridge, thinking that perhaps Bentley had given the ship to Randall, for exercise in coming alongside. But there was no doubt that the officer with the calm, hard face standing behind the binnacle had the ship. Quietly, Hooky took the heaving-line himself. He could throw further than any other man in the ship.

Bentley was forcedly calm. He saw the faces turn up to him from the fo'c'sle, and he was conscious of the silent, watching faces on the pier. He strove to dismiss the audience, and what they must be thinking, from his consciousness. And the fact that his own bridge team were so obviously avoiding his eye. Their sympathy welled round him like tangible smoke.

His brown face set hard, he stopped her in one of her backward gyrations. Deliberately he calmed himself, and looked up at the sky, then down at the roiled water. There was wind, certainly, and there was current. But he had brought the old *Wind Rode* alongside hundreds of times in circumstances less propitious than these. What was wrong, then? It wasn't the ship—she handled beautifully, and his orders were executed promptly and correctly in the engine-room. The ship was giving him everything he asked for. It could, then, be only him. His orders must be incorrect.

But he knew they were not. He wasn't a green sub-lieutenant on his first flotilla exercises. He had once managed to ram an enemy submarine, at night, with half his bow blown off and his engines sick nearly to death. Now he had a perfectly normal ship—and he was driving her like a ham-handed amateur.

He turned to Sainsbury, standing quietly at the rear of the bridge behind him, and his exasperation crept into his voice.

"I'm damned if I know!" he expostulated.

The old man was feeling keenly Bentley's discomfiture. But this was a time when he could, under no circumstances, interfere. There

was little actual danger to the ship—she was manoeuvring too slowly for that—but there would be immense and damaging danger to Bentley's prestige if he had to relinquish command to have his craft brought alongside.

Something else was worrying Sainsbury. He had watched his protégé's wheel and engine-orders carefully, if outwardly casually, and—give a point here and there—he would have ordered the same movements of wheel and power. The ship was answering helm and engines promptly and efficiently, but they were no nearer the pier.

He shook his head in mystification, knowing that the bridge team were watching him.

"I can't help you, Peter," he said, and was glad he spoke the truth. "She seems cantankerous, that's all."

With the ship stopped, though drifting a little to seaward, Bentley stared at the pier. He knew he was glad that his orders had received the tacit approval of the flotilla-leader, and he was glad that now his bridge team also knew that. And he was quite sure that his apparent incompetence was not due to Sainsbury's presence on the bridge behind him. He was too sure of his own proved ability for another's watching presence to worry him. All right, then, you mule—in we go again.

She went in beautifully. Easily, safely, accurately. He was coming in at an angle, which you can do with destroyers, and at exactly the right moment he swung her, so that she slipped neatly alongside. Hooky drew back his muscled arm and threw. The heaving-line shot out like a striking snake, and was grabbed by a waterman on the pier. The big berthing wire followed quickly. Eager to get her secured, for the exhibition reflected as much on themselves as it did on the captain, the three men handling the berthing wire on the fo'c'sle swiftly took their turns around the bollards. Then, anxious to stop her forward movement, they hung on.

She was still moving ahead with the impetus of her approach, and normally she would have been halted with a touch of engines astern. But now she was being dragged to a stop by the wire. It was a strong rope, made of strands of steel, but it was not meant to stop nearly three thousand moving tons. Bentley was leaning to the voice-pipe to order the engines astern, and he did not see what was

happening on the fo'c'sle. Randall did. He leaned over the windbreak and opened his mouth to bellow.

Before he could order them to slack off, the wire came up as taut as an iron bar. It quivered as the whole weight of the moving ship came on it. Then it snapped, and the end came coiling inboard like the lash of a giant whip.

Luckily the whipping coils slashed over the heads of the fo'c'sle party before they clumped down on the steel deck. Hooky at once picked up a spare heaving-line and heaved. And a derisive voice came clearly from the watching crowd.

“Why don't yer get a tug, mate!”

It was the crowning, insult to a destroyer captain, a seaman who would as soon use a tug to get his ship alongside as he would if he were in a skiff. Bentley heard the call as he came upright from the voice-pipe and a little ridge of muscles knotted along the line of his jaw. Deliberately he left the binnacle and walked to the edge of the bridge, hanging over it and looking down at the edge of the pier, showing himself clearly to the mob in a perverse sense of anger. Behind him Pilot at once stepped up beside the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

“Stop both engines,” Bentley rapped over his shoulder.

Pilot passed the order, and the quiet shaking of the ship ceased. She came to rest alongside the wooden pier, and her lines went out.

Bentley came back and looked at Randall.

“What a bloody fiasco!” he said bitterly.

Maybe that's why, Bentley thought wily to himself, they call ships “she”. After her earlier termagant display she had come away from the wharf as nicely and daintily as he could wish—no tantrums, obedient, eager to fulfil his every command. Until, he concluded his thought as he conned her into the open blue sea, the next time. There was one consolation—Rear-Admiral Palesy had not been watching the performance of his newest ship and captain.

They swung to port and coursed up through the waters inside the Reef, as calm as a tarnished silver plate. They would turn out through Cook Passage, and then strike straight up for Port Moresby through open water.

The coming-alongside incident was soon forgotten. Sailors are

an equable breed, and in any case they knew well enough what their commander could do—the great majority of them had joined this ship straight from the earlier *Wind Rode*. Bentley himself realised this, and the memory of his fiasco dimmed, smoothed over in the friction less running of the ship's routine.

Even in bright sunshine the inner Reef passage is tricky, and he waited till they had swept through Cook Passage, Lizard Island rearing rockily on their starb'd hand, before he approached Sainsbury again. He found him leaning in the warm sunshine against the forward bank of five torpedo-tubes. Bentley saluted and said, grinning:

"You must be bored stiff, sir. Nothing to do..."

Sainsbury knew what was coming.

"Like hell I am!" he disagreed. "I've never been so contented in my life. Er—these brutes here are controlled by a new system, I believe?" He slapped his hand on the quiet grey tube. Inside it, and in the other nine, a long steel shape lay, the explosive-packed warhead filling the mouth of each tube like a swollen red tongue.

"Yes, sir. There's not much chance of a miss now. Ah—speaking of torpedo attacks..."

"We weren't, you know."

"No, sir. But we are now. I thought this might be a good chance to give the chaps..."

"All right, all right," Sainsbury groaned. He shoved his skinny length upright. "I'll get no peace until I fill their heads with a lot of rubbish. When?"

"Right now, sir, if you're agreeable."

"I'm not, but I'm trapped. What do you want me to talk about?"

"I think a destroyer torpedo-attack would be appropriate."

"Do you, now? How many torpedo-attacks do you think I've carried out?"

"Heaven knows! But I remember one against an armed-raider down near the South Pole somewhere. I also seem to remember it came off."

"So it did, so it did," Captain Sainsbury said softly. "And I still get nightmares thinking of what would have happened if it hadn't! No," he said, pursing his lips, "I won't tell 'em about that. I'll talk on a torpedo-attack that took place not so far from here. It was much

more dangerous and foolhardy. It might make 'em think twice before they rush in to get mixed up in a torpedo-attack. Y'know, young fellow," and he looked up at the muscled length of the officer before him, "I can't think of a more efficient method of committing suicide than a torpedo-attack against a bigger opponent."

"No, sir," said Bentley dutifully, and he felt a stirring of interest in him. If the old boy's story was to cap what had happened against the raider, it must be a gem.

"I mean it!" Sainsbury said. Then he shook his gaunt head slowly. "But you need to be my age before my lesson would hit home. Come on, then, where are they?"

There was only one officer missing from the wardroom when they got down there, and he was Pilot, the officer of the watch. Even the surgeon and the engineer-officer were there. They rose at once as Sainsbury stepped in, and his eyes narrowed a little in surprise as he saw how many of them there were.

"Who do they think I am?" he said in a low voice to Bentley, turning his head, "Laurence Olivier?"

"Better," Bentley grinned, "you don't fight on celluloid."

The mess seated themselves, and Bentley stood in front of them. His introduction was brief. Nothing else was needed for a man who wore among the ribbons on his thin chest the small, maroon rectangle of the Victoria Cross.

"Captain Sainsbury has consented," he said, "to give us a talk on a torpedo-attack he carried out not far from here. It's not often a destroyer carries out this manoeuvre, and less often that we are privileged to hear about one. We should learn a lot."

He smiled at the captain, and walked across and sat down in the armchair left for him. They looked at Sainsbury.

The skinny figure leaned back against the table, half-resting his hip on it. They were grouped before him in a rough half-circle. Their faces were intent and expectant.

"Captain Sainsbury has not consented to talk to you," he began, "he was dragooned into it. Mainly on the strength of old acquaintance."

They smiled. But it was a shrewd opening. It would not hurt Bentley for the new members of his officer-team to know that he

was an old shipmate of the flotilla-leader. Which proves that Old Auntie Sainsbury hadn't much to learn about the psychological handling of fighting men.

"But you will learn something," he promised, "if it's only that the civilian gentleman who invented torpedoes should have experienced an attack with his brain-children before he let them loose in the Fleet. It is not a pleasant experience."

He settled himself more comfortably, his hands resting quietly in his lap and his right leg swinging out gently an inch above the deck. They had lit their pipes and cigarettes, and now they were all his.

"The attack of which I'm speaking took place not so far from here—in the Louisiade Archipelago. It was last January, I remember, a year all but a month from today. My ship was attached to the Fourth Flotilla..."

The thin voice, quiet and penetrant, talked on. Bentley's eyes were fixed on his face, and gradually, as his imagination swung into gear with what he was listening to, the walls of the wardroom seemed to open out on to a wide blue sea and he was part of the imaginative picture. His experience of the officer talking filled in the gaps, and his intense interest produced the effect of watching a film unreeling on the screen of his mind.

Sainsbury's destroyer cruised up and down outside the loading port, waiting for her convoy. Soon they came lumbering through, three large, fat merchantmen, their bellies dragged down by heavy loads of munitions and supplies. Sainsbury had come south for these ships, and half an hour with the Naval Officer in charge ashore had convinced him of the urgent need of their supplies back in the Louisiades. It was imperative they should arrive and be unloaded quickly and safely.

From the bridge he looked down at B-gun's crew as they cleared away the twin guns, aft along both waists, noting the boats lashed with seamanlike thoroughness, then at the depth-charge throwers and rails, loaded, and turned to his torpedo-control officer, Lieutenant Murray.

"What you have put into the ship in training, Murray, she will give again—no more, no less."

Murray, a stolid young man, replied: "Yes, sir." His captain often

mused aloud. Half the time he didn't understand him, but he was a damned good seaman, and that, to Lieutenant Murray, was all that concerned him.

The trip north and across was uneventful. Steadily the merchantmen snored through towards the south-east tip of New Guinea, the destroyer steaming across ahead in her "zig-zag for convoys in waters where danger from submarines is presumed to exist."

Dawn on the third day found the jungly coast rising above the far rim of blue, and soon the three ships were alongside improvised jetties, soldiers swarming around the open holds. Two miles away, just outside the harbour mouth, and across it, lay the destroyer.

Extra lookouts were posted, radar and asdic sets were manned continuously. A short distance away to starb'd small, heavily-treed islands afforded the refuge to which the destroyer escorted her partially unloaded charges at nightfall. The enemy knew which island was occupied by Allied forces, and it was too risky to leave the merchantmen all night alongside the jetties.

Tonight, against Sainsbury's better judgment, one ship was to carry on unloading, while the destroyer took the others out. They would be safe behind the uninhabited island. Sainsbury wanted all ships out; but military H.Q. ashore wanted those supplies, medical stuff mostly, urgently, and so that was that.

Nightfall found two half-empty ships anchored close inshore, with the destroyer a low-lying blur to seaward. Sainsbury had ordered the cruising watch closed-up, which gave him half the armament and tubes manned. He himself was on the bridge, and would sleep there. He leaned both arms on the compass binnacle and stared out into the star-studded night.

As usual, his mind was busy with a tactical problem. Assuming the asdic picked up a submarine, it would be safer to leave the ships stationary where they were. His cable was buoyed, ready for slipping, and in a matter of minutes he could jump the enemy.

First thing to do was to let the Jap know he had an escort ship to deal with, which knowledge should extinguish all desire to investigate the possibilities of the harbour further. It was more important to get the supplies unloaded than to reduce the enemy Navy; a case of prevention superseding cure.

He listened a moment to the talk floating up from B-gun. They were talking, as usual, about leave. Leave! He'd forgotten the meaning of the word.

The port lookout's voice, tensed, brought him upright in one swift contraction. "Bearing green two-oh. Looks like a ship, sir. Coming towards."

Sainsbury lifted his glasses. He searched the sharp line of horizon for a second, then suddenly there bulked into focus in the powerful lenses the dark shape of a big ship, travelling fast. At her bow a plume of white showed clearly against the black. Even without the unmistakable superstructure and trunked funnels he knew her for a Jap—a Mogami-class, probably: eight-inch guns and a secondary armament equal to his 4.7s.

Before he reached the alarm buzzer his plan of action was formulated. If he opened fire at her now, she still had time to turn out to sea, stand off, burn her searchlight, and get in some good night practice at the two merchantmen and puny destroyer. She could leave the harbour till last.

As it was now, the Jap was heading straight in through the reef, guns trained on that cluster of lights on the pier, and the ship alongside. He would realise how urgent must be the need for unloading if they burned lights at night—and would act accordingly.

The cruiser was right ahead now, passing swiftly. Sainsbury thought of wirelessing H.Q. of the danger; he realised at once that he would succeed only in giving his own position away, with his two consorts. In any case, nothing could save the third merchantman now.

He weighed anchor quietly, positioned his ship behind the island point past which the Jap cruiser had just slid, then swung her broadside on to his line of withdrawal.

The ten torpedo tubes in her waist trained smoothly outboard, their mouths yawning hungrily over the black water.

On the enemy ship's bridge the captain watched the bustle ashore through his glasses. He had plenty of room to manoeuvre in. Then he gave an order to the wheelhouse. The big ship heeled over on the turn, until her eight barrels pointed directly at the pier. The thick barrels elevated, hesitated, then steadied. The range was about 4000

yards—point-blank. The Jap was quite safe; the lights blinded the soldiers from a view to seaward, and they were working too urgently to think about lookout duties.

An officer in the director above the bridge spoke an order into his headphones. There came a roar and tongues of flame from the guns. The pier erupted into a mane of bursting flame and smoke. The next broadside caught the ship amidships. Sides gouged open, she listed heavily to port, streamers of fire licking along her entire length. There is tremendous heat in bursting high-explosive.

Again and again the big guns roared, until the pier and ship and stacked supplies had resolved into burning rubble. Beneath the pall of dust and smoke, soldiers who had been unloading her lay writhing, or still, on the ground. The rest had fled with impotent curses into the jungle. Two anti-tank guns had opened fire, but their small projectiles barely scratched the cruiser's armoured sides. It had taken perhaps five minutes' rapid fire.

More than satisfied, the Japanese captain headed his ship for the opening in the reef.

All was quiet on the destroyer's bridge as she waited. They had heard clearly the booming broadsides, they could see in their mind's eye what was happening, and they knew that when the cannonading ceased he was coming out.

Then the gunfire stopped.

No one on the bridge had spoken a word while it was on—as though in impotent sympathy with the men in that hell ashore. Now orders were passed, quietly and efficiently. The destroyer eased closer into the point, the tubes training a little left as the bearing altered.

Behind his pronged torpedo-sight Murray crouched, his back braced against the flag-locker, the centre prong dead on the point. There were ten pairs of binoculars also on that point—and six long grey barrels.

Then Sainsbury said: "Here he is."

The Jap sped out from behind the island at 25 knots, eager to regain the security of the open sea. Eight hundred yards away on his starb'd beam the destroyer leaped to meet him. Down in the engine-rooms the indicators were steadied on "Full ahead". The throttles were jammed hard against the stops; the crankshafts pounded at

increasing speed till they were a single flash of spinning silver; and the engine-room was filled with the sound of a mighty whining roar.

Sainsbury watched his bearings carefully. Without altering his crouch over the gyro-compass he snapped: "Stand-by to fire!" A faint echo came from the tube communication-number down in the waist.

"Starb'd twenty!"

He watched Murray as the ship careered round. The torpedo-officer watched the Jap's stern, then after-turret, then mainmast slide by his sight.

"Swing faster, sir!" he shouted.

Sainsbury bent, "Hard-a-starb'd!" Almost at once, so fast was she racing, the heel became more acute; her whole hull was shuddering with the pressure against the hard-over rudder. Round knifed the bow till both ships were travelling on parallel courses. The cruiser was now clearly visible to port, a bulking shape against the line of the sky.

Murray shouted again: "Sights coming on, sir!" His sight traversed the funnel, then bridge. Now! His right hand flicked a row of switches, one after the other in swift succession. From her low waist came a great whoosh of compressed air; ten mouths flamed redly; then the torpedoes, propellers already spinning, hit the water in darts of spray and started their under water run to the target.

At that instant the Jap saw the stabs of flame. Astern, the surface of the sea was transformed suddenly into a silvery fairyland, then the searchlight trained left and bore its staring eye full on the speeding destroyer. Half-blinded by the glare, revealed in a light as bright as day, they waited for the broadside which at this range would lift them from the water.

It never came. Fiercer than the searchlight's glare, from the cruiser there leaped a solid sheet of flame. The light-beam shot abruptly into the sky, then went out; from her side a forest of water towered up, higher than her masts. Then came the roar.

Sainsbury's face was grim as he walked back to the voice-pipe. Relief would come later.

"Thank you, Murray," he said. "Ease to 090 revolution. Steer 240. We won't linger for survivors."

The throbbing eased, the whine of the engine-room blowers died down to a muted hum, and the destroyer steadied on her new course.

Captain Sainsbury eased his hips from the edge of the table. The wardroom stirred, and they lit cigarettes they had forgotten about during the recital. Sainsbury's eyes roved over them, picking them up one by one.

"A ship will give you back what you have put into her in training," he ended. He stood on his feet, and then he felt how cramped he was. He realised with an inward deprecatory grin that he had himself been carried away by his memories.

"I think I've earned a cup of tea, Peter," he smiled.

In his sea-cabin Bentley pushed the sugar across and then sat back in his chair, resting his right ankle on his left knee.

"That was a damned good story," he said, "you really had them all the way."

"Filled their minds with thoughts of glory, no doubt," Sainsbury grunted, and sugared his tea. He sipped appreciatively. "What I didn't dwell on was what was going on in my guts while we waited for the Jap to open fire."

Bentley was silent. He knew what his friend meant well enough. That was when fear seemed to melt your guts. Every man, unless he were a clod with no sensitivity whatever, would feel it. That was natural. It was how you came out of it that mattered: whether you gave in to it and gibbered uncontrollably or fought it down and carried on with your job.

"Yes," he said at last—it was not quite a sigh. Then he added, with a vehemence he had not meant to escape him, "By hell, I'll be glad when this is over!"

It was the older man's turn to understand. He was slightly surprised, and a little pleased, to learn that this young hulk of a fellow had had his gutful. He himself had lost his illusions on the glamour of war about a week after it started, when his ship had picked up the sun-blackened remains of men in a lifeboat from a merchant ship sunk by a raider in the Indian Ocean. He said:

"We've all had enough, Peter. Don't imagine you're alone in that. The thing is not to let the troops realise it. There's a hell of a long road to Tokio ahead of us."

Then—because of the futility of war, it was futile to discuss—they changed the subject.

“I’ll be seeing my old shipmate tomorrow.” Bentley grinned. “I hope he doesn’t remember me.”

Sainsbury laid down his cup on the low table and looked up at him. His vinegary face was serious.

“I think he might, my lad.”

“Oh, no, I shouldn’t think so,” Bentley smiled. “It was a long time back.”

“Quite so,” Sainsbury agreed. “But during that time you’ve made quite a name for yourself. The Jap cruiser in Sabang, taking on the Jap cruiser squadron off Java, your E-boat fracas in the Med., and the latest effort ramming that Nip submarine. You are rapidly laying claim to that odious title of an ‘ace’ destroyer-driver.” He smiled thinly.

“God forbid!” Bentley grinned back at him. But because, though inherently modest, he was still sensible enough to see the force of Sainsbury’s argument—that midget-submarine business had brought him wide and deliberate publicity—he realised at once that Rear-Admiral Palesy might remember him much more clearly than he would have wished. Sainsbury said quietly:

“He’s the sort of man who might resent your success, you know.”

The warning delivered, and as an indication that he did not wish to enlarge on his senior officer, Sainsbury got up and with a short nod walked out of the cabin. It was a warning, Bentley realised as he poured himself a fresh cup of tea. Normally, if he had not served with the admiral before, he would have dismissed him from his mind, retaining only the determination to keep his nose clean while in his sight. But Palesy he knew to be an incompetent, vindictive bully, the sort of fellow who would remember the young lieutenant if only because his dealings with him had constituted, to him, a perverted sort of pleasure. And now, as Sainsbury had sagely decided—the name of Lieutenant-Commander Bentley was more than well enough known to an officer whose duty it was in any case to be familiar with the careers of the captains under his command.

Bentley sipped his tea thoughtfully. Perhaps, with the increased responsibility of Fleet command, Palesy had changed. Sometimes

command did that to a man.

But Rear-Admiral Palesy had not changed. Bentley was to have clear indication if this the next day.

CHAPTER FOUR

WIND RODE CAME IN through the reef-opening at ten o'clock of a morning made blustery by the fresh south-east Trades. From the bridge they could look down upon the gap in the binding coral and watch the white foam flashing amongst the amber of it, and all the blue, reef-piercing sea beyond laced across with trailing nets of spume. To the left of the big harbour there was the switchy sway of palms yielding in soft compliance to the suasion of the wind, but to their right the sun glinting iron roofs of the town crawled halfway up a bare brown hill, utilitarian and ugly.

Then, with an instant switch at the pit of his stomach, Bentley saw the long grey shape of a heavy cruiser anchored off the jetty; at the truck of her tall foremast whipped the white, red-crossed flag of the rear-admiral, its two red balls showing plainly near the halliard.

They had barely begun to shape up for their mooring when a bright yellow eye started winking from the flagship's bridge. He's not wasting any time, Bentley thought morosely, believing that the admiral already had a job for him, and these were his orders. So that he waited impatiently for the signal-yeoman to read the message, while Pilot kept him informed of their position relative to the anchoring point.

Then the yeoman came across to him and handed him a sheet of paper. His burned face was impassive. "From the Flag, sir," he said non-committally. Bentley took it and read. A shade of deep red infused itself slowly into the mahogany colour of his face.

"Your time of arrival," the signal said tartly, "was signalled as ten-thirty. In the ships under my command signalled schedules will be strictly adhered to R.G. Palesy, flag-officer commanding." Bentley's immediate reaction was that he had read the message wrongly. A flash of reflection served to convince him otherwise—there was no ambiguity in its terse sentences. He stood there behind the binnacle, his binoculars slung round his neck, and the knuckles of his hand where he gripped the compass ring were showing whitely against the brown skin. He *had* signalled his time of arrival at ten-thirty, but nobody but an imbecile would expect him to hang around outside in hostile waters when a fortuitous current had set him half

an hour ahead of schedule. Or, Bentley decided grimly, a man who chose this way of quickly asserting his superior authority over a new arrival.

It was this last thought which set Bentley's mind swiftly forming the phrases of his reply. He would point out to the weak-minded idiot that he considered it more important to get his ship inside the reef than to loiter outside and risk a million-pounds worth of ship against a snap-fired torpedo. Then he felt a pair of quiet grey eyes watching him, and he half-turned his head to look at Sainsbury. Bentley took hold of his temper with both hands.

"Make to the Flag," he ordered the waiting yeoman, "Yours of so-and-so acknowledged. Will adhere to schedules in future."

"Aye, aye, sir," the signalman answered in the same flat voice, and went back to his flashing lamp.

"Coming on the bearing, sir," Pilot called, and Bentley turned himself to the business of anchoring.

Coming to anchor in a harbour the size of Port Moresby was a matter of elementary seamanship. Normally he would have swung her around so that she faced into the wind, and could thus come up into it, like an aircraft landing. But the admiral's signal had delayed his attention, and he was now almost on the anchor-bearing. He decided to let go, and then let the ship drift round on the end of her cable herself until she pointed into the wind.

"On, sir," Pilot said, crouched over his bearing sight.

Bentley nodded, and Randall called from the edge of the bridge: "Let go!"

On the fo'c'sle a seaman bent, a hammer swung, the big cable-slip fell clear, and with a metallic roar the anchor slid its shank down through the hawse-pipe and dropped with a great splash into the blue water. The cable hammered after it with a din like trip-hammers.

Bentley let her go ahead a little more to lay the cable out on the harbour bed—it was the friction of its heavy length in the mud, more than the anchor, which would hold her—then he took the way off her. Before *Wind Rode* had swung her sharp nose round and become wind-rod—riding into the wind instead of the tide—the expected signal came in dots and dashes from the flagship.

"The b——'s watching us from the quarterdeck,"

Bentley growled to Randall beside him. "See him there? I'd like to give him the old gesture with my thumb."

"That would be delightful," grinned the first-lieutenant. "As it is—here comes his gesture."

The yeoman passed the message sheet across.

"It is customary," Palesy told him, "when conditions permit, that a ship shall be brought to her anchor head to wind. Conditions permit in this harbour. Ends."

Bentley was thinking that he would like to see Palesy handling that brute of a cruiser—he didn't have to worry, the mongrel; he had a captain to do the dirty work for him. Aloud, he ordered briefly:

"Acknowledge." Then he turned to Sainsbury, keeping his voice matter-of-fact: "Would you like a boat now, sir?"

"Yes, please." His eyes drew Bentley to the ladder with him, and he walked down behind the captain. Sainsbury said in the privacy of the upper-deck.

"You should feel flattered. You are well remembered, I see."

"I'm feeling, all right, sir—but not flattered."

"So I thought," the thin voice told him. "It is a feeling you cannot afford to indulge."

"No, sir."

"However," Sainsbury went on, his prim face serious, "as from now you come under my command in the flotilla. You can expect some relief from direct censure—all complaints will be diverted through me."

"That relieves my mind, sir," Bentley said drily.

Sainsbury halted. He had to look up into Bentley's face, but that fact did not in the least detract from the authority of the man—that was seasoned and sure; it was carved in lines into his face, and was in the steady stare of his grey eyes.

"Now listen to me, Peter. You've come a long way in a short time. You would be one of the youngest of our destroyer captains. You have been given command of a ship which will be the envy of the flotilla."

Bentley looked at him, surprised by the vehement sincerity in his friend's voice.

"You can also be cast down at a word—a word from your

admiral.” Sainsbury plucked at the skin of his throat in the old worrying gesture Bentley knew so well. “Remember that, Peter. All you’ve worked for thrown away by a moment of anger. I think you know what I mean. Your intended answer to that first signal would have done it. If you are at fault at any time, I know you will accept your reprimand. If you are not at fault...” The old man hesitated. He was speaking of his own superior as well as Bentley’s. His affection for the young commander before him won. “If you are not at fault,” he continued slowly, “you must still keep your mouth shut. Unjust recriminations from a superior officer are deplorable. Insubordination from a junior is inexcusable.”

The thin voice stopped, but the eyes still held Bentley’s from either side of the thin beak of a nose.

“Yes, sir,” Bentley said quietly. “I’ll watch it.”

The splutter of the motorboat’s engine came from below them. The boat curved in a white arc towards the gangway. Sainsbury moved off.

“I wonder if *my* team will welcome me back,” he said suddenly, and smiled until his teeth showed. With him that loosening of his lips corresponded to a guffaw in any other man.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about there,” Bentley grinned back, and meant it.

“Perhaps so,” Sainsbury murmured. He stopped at the gangway and turned his head slightly, so that only Bentley could hear him. “Perhaps men like Palesy have their uses, after all,” he murmured. “A pattern not to follow.”

Then before Bentley could answer, his skinny legs were running down the gangway and he jumped into the boat.

“Thanks for the ride,” he called up, and then the boat took him away. The piercing cadence of the bosun’s pipe followed it across the harbour. Bentley watched the boat for a moment, heading towards the long, low length of destroyer *Scimitar*, the leader of the flotilla. Then he turned forward towards his cabin, not relishing the thought of the paper work ahead of him there. He was quickly diverted, though not along more pleasant channels.

He took the signal from the yeoman abreast the funnel, and his first thought was for the sender. It was the chief-of-staff. “The flag-

officer-commanding," he was told, "will inspect H.M.A.S. *Wind Rode* at eleven hundred tomorrow morning, January first."

Bentley stared at the signal. An admiral's inspection, on New Year's Day!

"Ask the first-lieutenant to speak to me," he said to the signalman, and continued his way to his cabin.

"Bad news," Randall decided as he stepped into the cabin and looked at his captain's face.

"Don't worry, friend, you're in it," Bentley told him morosely. "You may not have heard of an admiral's inspection in the fighting zone, but you have now." He handed him the signal.

"I'll be... !" Randall said crudely. At moments of emotional stress his veneer of naval-officer training was cracked by his outback upbringing. "On New Year's Day!"

"There's nothing to worry about," Bentley said, and drew the flame of his lighter to his cigarette end. "The ship's spotless—she damned well ought to be. He probably just wants to take a dekko at our new equipment."

"Fat lot he'll learn!" said Randall disloyally and with certainty. "He'd still be on his fat sucker in the Navy Office only for Coulter copping one."

"Maybe," Bentley grinned. "What we've got to worry about is that he'll be aboard us tomorrow. Get the hands on to it, Bob. Pass the word that we may be required to close-up for action at a moment's notice. Tell Lasenby to make sure his guns and equipment are on top line—for inspection and any questions."

"Right!"

"In the circus, Bob, and while we've got a spare moment, I'd like to dine in the wardroom tonight."

"Bring your own grog," Randall grinned.

He shut the cabin door a fraction of time before a heavy volume of Tide Tables shut it for him. Lieutenant-Commander Bentley did not dine in his own wardroom that night. At four o'clock he received, to his disgust—and greater surprise—an invitation to dine with the admiral aboard the flagship. He put out cautious feelers, and discovered that he was not singly distinguished—it was New Year's Eve (the main reason for Bentley's decision to join his own officers),

and the admiral had magnanimously decided to wine and dine the commanding-officers of his destroyer flotilla.

Remembering Sainsbury's parting advice, and accepting the soundness of it, Bentley showered and dressed himself carefully. Full mess-dress had been waived for the duration, but Bentley looked distinctive enough in his white drills, the coat buttoning right up to the throat with gold buttons, his shoulder-straps gleaming golden against the white, and the variegated colours of his medals vivid on his wide chest.

Bentley ran the comb through his brown hair and placed the comb on the wash-basin. He put his cap on carefully, patted the white cap-cover down at the back, eased a few showings of hair up inside the cap-band, picked up his cigarette case, and as he stowed it neatly inside his breast-pocket so that it would not bulge, took a final checking look.

The mirror showed a lean, darkly brown face, which would have been austere in its hardness but for the relieving piratical impression about it—it needed only a dark forked beard to complete the likeness to a seaman, not of a modern destroyer, but of a four-masted galleon. The white uniform and cap, with its long, gold-badged peak, matched the hawk face well. Satisfied with his sartorial appearance, *Wind Rode's* commander stepped out into the passage.

Randall, waiting at the gangway, murmured: "Pipe."

The bosun's mate took a deep breath and his ship's respect for her captain shrilled out across the dusk-veiled harbour in a long piercing blast. Bentley saluted meticulously, as a gunnery man should, heard Randall's *sotto* "Have a sweet time," and ran down the wooden ladder into the waiting boat.

"Flagship," he ordered briefly.

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the coxswain briskly.

This would be the most important trip of the day. They were not only carrying their captain, they were heading alongside the flagship, where eyes would be staring down at them. A ship is known by her boats... As well, surging from the other destroyers of the flotilla, came other boats, all on the same mission. The coxswain determined he would get his captain there first.

"Bear off forrard!" he rapped. The boat pushed away from *Wind*

Rode's grey side, then surged ahead as the coxswain blew two sharp blasts on the whistle dangling round his neck. He would have been surprised if he had known that his captain interpreted his intention—normally you gave four whistles, and eased the boat ahead before giving her the throttle. Bentley sat back on the cushioned seat, savouring his interpretation. It was a tiny thing, the coxswain's object—but it was little insignificant things like that which told a captain how he stood with his crew; and, perhaps even more important, how they felt about the prestige of their ship.

Bentley smiled. The incident served to sweeten the sourness engendered by Palesy's invitation, which was in reality a command. His feeling of well-being was shortly spoiled.

It was no great distance to the flagship. Because there would be at least half a dozen captains coming on board, the cruiser's quarter-deck was populated with curious officers. It was not often you had the chance of seeing at close quarters the men you fought with—usually they were indistinguishable figures on swaying bridges across a mile or more of sea. The destroyers' boats were converging towards the starb'd gangway, that one reserved for the cruiser's captain and visiting hierarchy. But there should be no danger—rules of the road at sea are rigidly observed. As ashore, you give way to the craft on your starb'd bow.

Or should. *Wind Rode's* boat was a trifle behind another, identified by her number as being from the next senior ship in the flotilla to Sainsbury's. *Wind Rode's* boat was steered by a leading-seaman named Cocky Frew. Naval nicknames are usually apt, and Cocky was precisely like his name. He should have held back, if only because the officer in the other boat's sternsheets was senior to his own captain. Instead, he gave his craft an extra burst of speed and headed in a rush for the gangway. Bentley did not see these manoeuvres, for the other craft was slightly ahead of his line of vision. But he felt and heard the bump; and then a splintering crash as *Wind Rode's* heavy boat cannoned off her adversary and into the glittering, white-scrubbed gangway.

When he staggered to his feet in the rocking boat he saw that she was stopped, and abreast the gangway platform—the collision had pulled her up more efficiently than her engines. He also saw the line

of shocked faces staring down from the guard-rail above him. Bentley swung his head and saw the other boat a few yards away, her torn rope fender bearing witness to what had happened. He realised at once that his own boat had been in the wrong, and he correctly guessed why. It was that knowledge which made it difficult for him to snap:

“Put yourself in the first-lieutenant’s report when you get back!”

“Yes, sir,” the coxswain answered miserably. He was feeling the position acutely. “I’m sorry, sir. I just wanted...”

“That’s enough! Get back to the ship!”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Bentley jumped on to the platform and climbed the ladder. He saluted the quarter-deck staff drawn up to receive him, and waited for the twittering pipes to die away. Then he ignored the curious stares and looked round for the cruiser’s executive officer. He saw him standing beneath the barrels of Y-turret’s big guns—a large, hefty man with a telescope gripped under his left armpit. Bentley crossed to him at once.

“Good evening, sir. Bentley, *Wind Rode*.” He shook the proffered hand. “I’m damned sorry about the gangway.”

“Your boat came off worst.” The voice was deep, and the brown face hard. Then he turned his body so that his back was to the after end of the quarter-deck. His grin split his sternness into lines of humour.

“It happens often,” he explained. “Whenever a coxswain comes near the flagship he loses his nerve and judgment. Don’t worry about it.”

“Thank you, sir. Though it was completely my chap’s fault.”

“That’s all right. I saw what happened.” He paused, and looked into Bentley’s face with a quizzical, sympathetic sort of smile. “Unfortunately, so did the admiral. He’s standing at the end of the deck there.”

“Hell,” said Bentley.

“Exactly. But don’t let it spoil your dinner. It won’t be mentioned.”

He was right, Bentley knew. It was inconceivable for the admiral to reprimand him under these conditions, among his fellow-captains, and on board under invitation. He would not speak about it, but that

wouldn't stop him thinking. A ship is known by her boats...

The pipes were shrilling almost continuously as the other commanding-officers came on board. Above their cadence the executive-officer said: "I've heard a lot about you, Bentley. Hogging things a bit, aren't you?"

He was still smiling. There was no offence in his tone.

"Too much," Bentley agreed at once, glad that the gangway fiasco had been taken so well. "I'll unload on to anyone, without charge. Shining a chair in Navy Office would suit me fine for the duration."

"I bet," said the commander disbelievingly. "I'd like to have a yarn with you sometime." He was looking over Bentley's shoulder. "Here comes your boss."

He stiffened his big body and saluted, for though the executive officer was a commander with three rings, Sainsbury was a captain with four.

"Good evening, sir."

"Hello, Armstrong. Peter. In case I'm incapable later—Happy New Year."

They smiled dutifully. Auntie Sainsbury would have starved a gag-writer, but he had four rings... He spoke again to the commander, and Bentley glanced round the big quarter-deck. He noticed several of the other destroyer captains looking their way, and suddenly he knew why Sainsbury, the flotilla-leader, had come across to speak to him. They would all have seen *Wind Rode's* boat collect the gangway, and Bentley was too sensible not to feel glad that his chief had plainly shown the incident was insignificant.

Someone said, "The admiral," and automatically they all faced aft and stiffened to attention. He came slowly towards them, walking with the cruiser's captain and followed by his flag lieutenant. Bentley looked at him with covert interest. Palesy had not improved with his long spell of shore-time, and he had not been long enough at sea for the wind and sun and salt air to have had any visible effect. His pear-shaped body looked almost gross beside the spartan leanness of the cruiser captain, and Bentley thought that only a shortage of senior officers, spread thinly because of the Navy's world-wide commitments, could have placed this caricature of a Fleet commander in his present position of power and responsibility.

He was almost up to the group of them now, and Bentley could see that the lower lids of his eyes hung down, and that they were red, like a bloodhound's. His pale blue eyes flicked over his captains. Their stare rested a moment on Bentley, then without apparent recognition it passed on to Sainsbury beside him. The admiral nodded generally and stepped over the coaming of the quarter-deck hatch. The cruiser captain murmured, "Come below, please, gentlemen," and followed his chief.

As he walked with the others to the hatch Bentley thought how differently Collins or Farncomb, the other rear-admirals, would have handled it. Collins would have been in among them like a schoolboy at a party, and Farncomb was known throughout the Fleet, even by midshipmen, as the ideal host. Ah, well, different ships, different cap-tallies, he grinned to himself, and hoped he would be placed at the end of the table furthest from *this* host.

He was, but the placing did not please him. The admiral's dinner table was long and rectangular, so that Bentley found himself directly facing his host. Sainsbury, as befitted his seniority and command of the flotilla, was at Palesy's right hand. He felt sorry for Sainsbury, until he remembered that the vinegary old fellow was more than capable of looking after himself.

The dinner was no feast for an epicure, as was to be expected under the circumstances. It began with tinned tomato soup, served gratifyingly cold, with ice-cubes floating in it. It could have been a brilliant affair—the scene was inductive enough. The long table was of richly polished mahogany, its gleaming face reflecting the white uniforms of the diners and the silverware and cut-glass. The indirect lighting on the white ship's side glowed softly and picked out the gold shoulder rings of rank. Behind the table the white-coated stewards moved with trained smoothness.

There was not a man at that table whose experiences would not have filled a book—they were destroyermen, and destroyers are of all the breed the ones most partial to scrapping. As well, they were coming together in this huge cabin for the first time since the flotilla had been formed—their continuous activities had precluded an earlier get-together. They had everything in common, and enough to talk about to last them a week of such dinners.

Yet, with all this, the talk about the table was constrained. It was quiet and polite, and the tenor of it was not caused by the august company in which they found themselves. These officers were not merely commanders and lieutenant-commanders—they were, every man of them, commanding-officers, arbiters almost of the life and death in their own commands, men used to respect and instant obedience. So they were not awed by Rear-Admiral Palesy's official position among them—he did merely, in a wider degree, what for years they had been used to doing. It was not Palesy's position which constrained them—it was their knowledge of what the *man* was.

Thinking all this, and coming to this conclusion, Bentley lifted his eyes from his soup to look at the object of his thoughts. Palesy was looking at him, the bloodhound eyes ironical, and Bentley knew with complete certainty that Palesy recognised him and remembered.

“Ha—hmm!” The admiral cleared his throat, and the talk fell down to silence—it had not far to fall. Eight faces turned to him along the edges of the table. He leaned his bulk back in his chair and laid his hands, the fingers spread out, on the table before him. Bentley could see the black hairs on the backs of his fingers.

“This will not be a speech, gentlemen,” Palesy said. “I called you over here to enjoy yourselves.” He waited, and one or two of his audience got as far as smiles. “However, I think the occasion should be utilised to welcome amongst us our newest commanding-officer and our newest destroyer. I refer, of course, to Lieutenant-Commander Bentley.”

It was natural that their heads should turn to him—politeness required that recognition, if nothing else. And though Bentley would have derided this if anyone had broached it to him, there was no doubt that the successful actions he had fought with the old *Wind Rode* had made his name almost a byword in the Fleet. He grinned embarrassedly at their looks, and, understanding, they turned their heads back to Palesy.

“We are fortunate in having—shall I say—this modern Hornblower among us,” Palesy said, and though there was nothing in his tone to which exception could be taken, Bentley thought he recognised what was behind the praise—the sneer, and the memory of those earlier clashes he had had with this young destroyer captain.

When he saw Sainsbury flick his eyes towards him in brief warning he knew he was right.

All right, you pompous b——, he thought, keeping his face polite and interested, you try and belittle me and all you'll do is put your own flat feet into the trap. The camaraderie of the boats is firm, Bentley reassured himself.

"I would like to hear the personal story of your doings, Bentley," the admiral went on—by implication stating his belief that Bentley was the sort of man who would be glad to talk about them. "Unfortunately, the rigidity of naval hierarchy has put you at the bottom of the table." One or two officers near Bentley looked at him quickly—this was getting a bit close to the bone of indelicacy. He felt their glances, but he kept his eyes on Palesy.

"Perhaps we should get you promoted," the rasping voice told him, coming out from behind a false smile. "Yes," he addled, rippling his thick fingers on the table, "that might be an excellent idea. The extra pay might help in getting my gangway repaired."

Afterwards, Bentley was to remember with a gratification that helped ease his anger, the sense of shock around that table. It would have been indelicate for any of his fellow-captains to mention the gangway incident; for their host to talk of it was a crass violation of all the rules of good conduct. But for the *admiral* to sneer about it—and his voice had uncontrollably tightened to a sneer—was monstrous. He could with justification send for the offending captain and tear a strip off him in his cabin, berating him for the incompetence of his coxswain, even though such a course would be unusual. But to talk as he had in front of Bentley's fellow-captains was something quite beyond even their disciplined experience.

Bentley stared back into the red-rimmed eyes and he thought: Sainsbury was right. The mongrel hates my guts because I've been in and out of more action than he has; because I've been given command of the latest destroyer in his Fleet. In his anger he did not consciously think these things in any coherent sequence—the belief flashed through his mind, more a subconscious acknowledgment that Sainsbury was right in his diagnosis than a deliberate assessment of Palesy's reasons.

Somewhere in his raging mind a voice was calling, easy, take it

easy, you can't win here: he was conscious of this, as he was aware of Sainsbury's stare, open and deliberate and warning. He ignored the voice and the stare, but his own voice was icy calm when he said:

"Thank you very much for your offer of promotion, sir. I won't pretend that I don't welcome it. I suppose you could call it a sort of promotion in the field, Army type. As such I'm at a loss as to how to go about it. Should I forward my request for my commander's ring through your staff, sir?"

Sainsbury had to admit, even through the worry in his mind at the edge on that voice, that it was well done. If the admiral chose to take him seriously, the only charge against Bentley would be one of insufficient penetration to see a joke; and if he were charged with insolence, Bentley could return to the attack with the protestation that, of course, he was only continuing the line of the admiral's own joke. He glanced down the line of faces, and all he saw there was grim appreciation.

Sainsbury looked in a quick flick of his eyes at the admiral. Palesy's lower lip was thrust upward so that the line of his heavy mouth was a downward curve of anger. He rasped:

"You can put in your request, Bentley, and there's no doubt what I'll do with it!"

His pale eyes flared down the line of faces, now cautious because with his words the gloves had been taken off. Then he waved his hand peremptorily to the steward.

"Serve dinner!" he growled.

Bentley could not remember a more horrible hour in all his life. Because of what he had said, because he had thrown Palesy's own sneer right back in his fleshy face, he could not face the admiral's eyes again unless he were directly spoken to. He could not look at him with interest—that would be hypocrisy. Nor could he give him back look for look—that would be insolence. He did not know either captain on his right and left, but he strove to keep conversation going between them. Though there wasn't a man not on Bentley's side, they were still actuated by that most powerful of all instincts, self-preservation. This prevented them, under the baleful eye of the admiral, from appearing too friendly with an officer who was so blatantly the object of his displeasure.

Sainsbury did his best to engage the admiral in conversation, and his thin voice penetrated down the table. Palesy answered him in gruff monosyllables. The dinner was more than a failure—it was an obvious failure. And Bentley, waiting for an outright explosion, knew that Palesy was under no illusions as to the cause of it.

His relief when the admiral pushed his chair back from the table was so great it was almost weakening—he was faced here with something he did not dare fight against further, and he felt as weak, in consequence, as if he were actually fighting a man while injured.

They rose with Palesy, and the steward pulled their chairs back. The admiral said:

“Thank you for your company, gentlemen. Now if you will excuse me, I have work to do. The commander will take you to the wardroom.”

He gestured with his head to his flag-lieutenant, and after a final comprehensive nod stepped through the door in the end of the room into his private cabin. Now that the ordeal was at last over, Bentley’s irrelevant reaction was to think of what a hell of a job that flag-lieutenant had!

Of course his fellow-diners made no comment about his brush with Palesy when they had their drinks in the spacious wardroom. To do so would be to admit that they thought he was due for the axe the first time he stepped out of line. But one tall, lean commander with a nose like an eagle and a jutting jaw stopped for a moment on his way to meet a friend among the cruiser’s officers. Bentley recognised his face—he had been in the boat *Wind Rode*’s coxswain had crashed into, and therefore he was Sainsbury’s second-in-command.

“My brother,” the lean officer said in a pleasant voice, “manages an insurance company. Let me know if you’re thinking about doubling your policies.” Then his hand came out and Bentley felt the sinewy grip of his fingers on his biceps. “Nice to have you with us,” he smiled, and then walked across the room.

“That was Jarvis,” Sainsbury’s voice said quietly beside him. Bentley turned. His smile was rueful.

“Nice bloke,” he said.

“A very nice bloke,” Sainsbury agreed. “He’ll get the flotilla when I go.”

“When you go!” Bentley took a glass from a steward’s tray. “The only time you’ll leave your blessed boats is when they carry you ashore on a stretcher.” He grinned affectionately at his senior.

“Perhaps,” Sainsbury said primly, and sipped at his beer. “A destroyer is a young man’s weapon, my boy. I won’t be sorry to pick out my chair in Navy Office, sending impossible signals to you bluewater fellows.”

Bentley laughed. “I wish I was as sure about getting back to Sydney as I am that you’ll still be in *Scimitar* when I do.”

“M’mmm,” said Sainsbury. The subject was purely an academic one. “Speaking of *Scimitar* ... I don’t think I should be missed in what promises to be a riotous gathering.”

Bentley jumped instantly and eagerly at the hope of escape. “I’m damned certain they wouldn’t miss us,” he grinned, and emptied his glass in one long swallow.

“Us?”

“Why, of course, sir! The flotilla-leader couldn’t possibly leave the flagship unescorted.”

“The flotilla-leader is still capable of climbing up and down ladders by himself.”

“Of course he is! But I’m thinking of the prestige. No, you can’t possibly leave alone, sir.”

“You’re thinking of my prestige, are you? You’re thinking of a drunken New Year’s Eve party in your own degenerate wardroom.”

“How did you guess?” Sainsbury found himself answering inwardly that wide grin on his young friend’s face. *Wind Rode*’s wardroom would certainly be different to the dining-room they had just left. “Now listen,” Bentley went on, his face suddenly eager. “It mightn’t be a bad idea if you joined us!”

A destroyerman is used to snap decisions—and Captain Sainsbury was a very good destroyerman.

“Let’s go,” he said, and Bentley tried to keep the pleasure he felt from making him grin like an idiot.

CHAPTER FIVE

TO THE BUSHIDO FAITH of Captain Yamato, of His Imperial Majesty's Navy, the New Year's Eve festivities of the effete Western Powers meant less than nothing. Captain Yamato had in reality only one faith—in himself and his ability to destroy the enemies threatening the Sacred Islands. And his sole object on this bitter winter's night in Kure was to forge the implement of his faith into a seagoing weapon of enormous destruction as quickly as he possibly could.

While the bulkhead lights in destroyer *Wind Rode's* wardroom shone upon a convivial scene of relaxation and pleasure, the shaded arc-lights aboard the battleship *Satsuma* glared down on scenes of urgent, almost desperate, toil. Yamato stood on his vast reach of quarterdeck and looked with humourless, speculative eyes along her decks.

She was almost finished structurally now. All the giant guns were in and bedded down on their roller bearings; the magazines, in one of which a small destroyer could almost have fitted, were complete with their bins for the man-high shells and racks for the great bags of cordite; the machinery for hoisting these weights up through the turret trunks to the breeches of the guns was fitted and had been tested.

Even now, as he looked, a radar aerial above the bridge was turning slowly as the technicians tested its training arc and the bearing indicators. Those radar sets, he knew, would fasten his teeth on to an enemy ship and hold them there until she was riven and sunk. The engines, because of the mass of material which had to be fitted above them on the upper-deck, had gone in as soon as she had slid down the slipways a year before and had been towed to this fitting-out wharf. Now they rested, quiet and huge and powerful, squatting in the vast, dim cavern of the engine-rooms, waiting for the energising thrust of superheated steam.

Captain Yamato turned from his vision and walked slowly to the end of the quarter-deck. The dark mass of the water was twenty-five feet below him, but he did not look down—his eyes were on the bay, and the point where he knew the open sea began beyond Shikoku Island—where; further south, the battleships of the British and American Navies were flaunting their strength, hurling broadside

after broadside on to the beaches and fox-holes of the Japanese-held islands, preparatory to signalling the waves of assault-craft in.

He put his hands out slowly and gripped the cold wire of the top guardrail. Billions of yen and the driven toil of thousands of Japanese workmen had gone into the building of the colossus beneath his feet. She was the embodiment, and the actuality, of the homeland's challenge to those battle-fleets pressing further north, closer to the Sacred Islands. And with her he would smash them back! The German *Bismarck* had taken on three British battleships before they had driven her under; with him on her bridge. *Satsuma* would challenge a whole enemy Fleet. It would be the Navy which would hurl back these snapping dogs, and that would be in the correct order of things, because it was only by their Navy that the foreign pigs could hope to reach their ultimate objective.

But they had to be met and crushed well south, clear of threat to the home islands. And to do that he had to get this monster to sea quickly, before the insidious advance of the enemy reached much further north. He had not the slightest doubt about what his new ship could do once let loose among the enemy fleets—his faith in her was based not merely on her gigantic size but on his years of fighting experience which told him that every detail of her, though enlarged beyond the normal, was structurally sound in theory and practice. He simply believed her to be invincible. There was reason enough for justification of his faith.

But time was of the essence. He turned from his view of the distant cold sea and walked to the gangway.

"Send the dockyard manager to me," he ordered the seaman on duty.

New Year's Day was usually one of the hottest of the year in Port Moresby, and the weather saw no reason to change its thermal normalcy because of aching heads aboard a certain Fleet destroyer. Bentley awoke, and even so early felt the mugginess pressing upon him through the sun-heated wails of his cabin. He sat up in his bunk and the pain smashed him; his mouth tasted as if it were lined with postage stamps, and his eyes seemed to be glued over. He laboriously opened them and stumbled out of his bunk to the bathroom.

It had been a humdinger of a party, and he had a humdinger of a hangover.

He felt a little better when he came back into the cabin and saw his steward laying out a freshly-ironed pair of shorts and shirt on the bunk.

“What do you think this is, Banks?” he asked, squinting at him. “The Waldorf Astoria? I’ll use yesterday’s shorts—they’re clean.”

“Yes, sir,” Banks answered him, and tried to keep the compassion out of his voice—Bentley looked ghastly. “But you should have a clean outfit on today, sir.”

“Should I now? And why the hell why?”

“Because, sir,” and Banks almost winced at what he was doing to his captain, “today we have an inspection by the admiral.”

“Oh, hell,” Bentley groaned, and slumped down on the bed. Bentley was luckier than he deserved—his jinx seemed to have let up a little. The admiral came aboard with his retinue to inspect the new destroyer about which they’d heard so much, and almost his first words to the captain, drawn up stiffly to attention at the gangway to greet him, were:

“I won’t stay long, Bentley. We are sailing at noon.” Both his voice and his walk forrard along the upper-deck were abrupt. Magically, Bentley’s aching head seemed to ease with the disloyal thought that he would have to entertain his superior a fraction of the time he had allowed for—only Palesy’s determination to see this new ship and, if possible, to find fault with it, could have induced him not to cancel the inspection to a more favourable time. With the Fleet sailing on what must be almost a crash run to sea, the admiral’s inclinations would keep him on the flagship. And he would get back there as soon as he could.

Smiling, Bentley quickened his pace a little and said: “These are the torpedo tubes, sir...”

“I didn’t think they were lifeboats,” Palesy answered sourly.

“No, sir, but they’re handled by a new method of control. It makes a miss most unlikely if the correct settings are applied.”

“Really? Have they been proved in action?”

“Er—no, sir. Not yet.”

Palesy walked on. He stopped in front of the ranks of iron-deckmen,

whose job it was to look after the ship between the fo'c'sle and the quarterdeck. Some senior officers are big enough men to acknowledge that the dress and bearing of the men they are inspecting could be well-nigh perfect. These seamen were fresh from their leave in Sydney, their clothes were smart and newly ironed, their hair was cut and they looked what they were: first-class sailors, experienced in seamanship and in fighting.

But Palesy found cause for complaint.

"That man there," he said, using the peculiarly irritating form of impersonal address hated by self-respecting seamen. "Inform him that the bow of the cap-tally is to be worn over the left ear, not like a high school girl's bow over the left eye."

"Aye, aye, sir!" said the officer of division smartly and dutifully, and he glared at the hapless sailor in question.

Palesy saw the look. "The fault is yours," he corrected him acidly, and strode on. The action, Bentley thought, was typical of the man. He had antagonised the men, and he had belittled their officer in front of them. The seaman picked out expected, and knew the reason for, the glare he had received—he wouldn't expect his divisional officer to pat him on the back. It was all in the game—you copped a bottle yourself, and you passed it on to the next unfortunate below you. It was not so much that they resented Palesy's sharp remark to their officer—what they would bridle against was the revelation that this admiral didn't know the game, and the way it was played. He was, therefore, incompetent and humourless.

"What compartment is this?" Palesy asked, and Bentley ceased his musings. He hid his surprise at the question—the admiral was obviously serious, even though it was just as obvious what the compartment was.

"This is the laundry and drying-room, sir," Bentley said.

"Good grief! In a destroyer?" He stared in thinly-veiled disgust at the washing-machine and steam-pipes for drying. "If the rest of the ship's anything like this they might as well have sent me a Chinese scow for all the use you'll be."

Easy, boy, easy... Bentley said, respectfully: "It's no picnic in a destroyer, sir. I don't think the men will be any softer for a few amenities."

“As I have noticed before, Bentley, our opinions differ.” He had no dining-table audience holding him back now—there was only the necessarily sycophantic flag-lieutenant waiting outside the door. “The provision of a laundry in a fighting ship this size is a fatuous waste of space—a completely unnecessary coddling of seamen. I have seen some evidence of that coddling already.”

Bentley knew what he meant—his arrival ahead of time, the incident of the motorboat. He was about to ask if he should seal the laundry up—and was restrained by the knowledge that Palesy was quite capable of ordering just that.

“Yes, sir,” he contented himself with.

They came to the transmitting-room, the nerve-centre of all *Wind Rode’s* complicated gunnery and radar control. Here all the information from radar ranging was fed in and then conveyed in simple elements of elevation and training for the guns to hit their target, even though it were fourteen miles away at night or in thick fog.

Randall had come in with them, being the ship’s gunnery-officer, and he stood silent and waiting for any questions just inside the door. Not that Bentley couldn’t handle that side of Palesy’s inspection—he was qualified at gunnery himself. Then Randall’s eyes closed a little in surprise—Bentley was proving it in answer to a question of the admiral’s, but proving it in a strange way. Randall made as if to speak, and then he shut his mouth. Bentley should know what he was doing.

Apparently he did, for Palesy made no comment on what he had told him in answer to a question about a new radar set. Instead, he looked importantly round the mass of equipment, with such a knowing look on his pear-face that very nearly had Randall grinning. There was no officer in Moresby apart from *Wind Rode’s* who understood that transmitting-station. It would have meant no reflection on Palesy to claim ignorance.

He looked over the bridge, pointed out an insignificant piece of metal with a junction-box numeral on it which had been accidentally painted over, then intimated that the inspection was finished. On the way down to the gangway Bentley realised how lucky he was to get away with it so lightly—only Palesy’s shallowly-hid concern with

the coming operation had prevented a thorough going-over.

Bentley was in no case to refuse small mercies, and he respectfully and rigidly saluted his admiral as he stepped over the side and into his big boat. As soon as the shrilling pipes had died away and the boat was well on its way, Bentley turned to Randall and said crisply:

“All right, Number One, prepare for sea. The cruisers sail at noon—we can expect to get under way before that.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Randall answered formally, and he walked a few paces along the deck with his captain. When they were clear, he said:

“What the hell was the idea of all that guff you told him about the spotting radar-set? You weren’t sharing a joke—with him? If it did all the things you said it could the Japs could fold their tents and crawl away. Eh?”

Bentley rubbed his mouth, his fingers and thumb making a fork for his curved nose. When he took his hand away there was a slightly bitter smile on his lips.

“I took a risk,” he said, “and it came off. I wanted to see just what he knew—and I found out the coot hasn’t even an elementary knowledge of gunnery-radar.”

“I saw that, too.” Randall’s voice was still worried. “But what if he asks somebody over there who can put him right? He’ll know then you fed him a lot of bull.”

“And if he does? He can’t do anything about it without broadcasting that he knew damn-all. And that, friend Palesy will never do. Quick as you can with the securing. I can’t afford to have a slip-up on the way out.”

“Anyway, his captain knows a thing or two,” Randall solaced himself. “Any idea of what’s doing?”

“Not a clue. A big show, by the look of it. Send Lasenby to me.”

“Right.” Randall walked quickly back aft and Bentley more slowly to his cabin. The first lieutenant, who was responsible for securing the ship for sea, sent the bosun’s mate with messages to various chief petty-officers, each of whom had a definite and clearly defined part to play in preparing *Wind Rode* for what might lie ahead of her. The coxswain checked that every man was on board, reported this to Randall, and then checked on his special seadutymen. Smales,

the coxswain, the senior man on the lower-deck, would take the wheel and steer her out; the rest of his team comprised the engine-room telegraphmen, and the two seamen who would man her chains either side of the fo’c’sle deck with their long, knotted lead-lines. *Wind Rode* had plenty of aids to ascertain the depth of any water under her hull, but when entering or leaving harbour, or any confined waters, you had seamen in the chains, electronic age regardless.

The main job of readying her fell on Hooky Walker, chief bosun’s mate and next to Smales in seniority. Through his captains of tops, petty-officers in charge of the three parts into which the upper-deck was divided, Hooky was responsible for a multitude of things, including hoisting and turning inboard of all boats, closing of watertight doors and scuttles, checking all guardrails were tight, all wires oiled and reeled-up, and finally the hoisting of the anchor.

This operation was under the immediate supervision of the captain of the fo’c’sle, Petty-officer Gellaty, who cleared away ready for heaving-in. Then, with the appearance of the cable officer, the heavy anchor chain would be hauled in until the first shackle was on the waterline. It would then take only a few turns of the cable-holder to break anchor clear of the coral sand and *Wind Rode* would be under way.

Almost identical procedure was being implemented in every ship of the Fleet—the eight destroyers and three cruisers. Only one of these last was Australian—the other two were British. Bentley was looking at them through his porthole, watching, with the familiar tensing in his guts, the big ships test their guns’ training and elevation, the barrels weaving up and down, to right and left, and then shrugging to a stop in the fore and aft position. It looked like a big job. A knock sounded on the door.

Bentley pulled away from the scuttle, and at once his steward came from the bathroom and swung the heavy glass shut. Bentley called “Come in,” and was sitting at his desk when Mr. Lasenby, the commissioned-gunner, opened the door and stepped in and over the coaming. Lasenby was tall and lean and fair-headed, and, like most men who had pulled themselves up from the lower-deck, as keen as salt.

“Yes, sir?”

“Sit down, Guns,” Bentley smiled, and offered him a cigarette. This officer was up in the director when *Wind Rode* bared her claws, and on him more than any other man except the captain depended the safety of the ship. Lasenby controlled her main-armament firing.

Bentley lit his cigarette from the gunner’s lighter and leaned back, hitching one leg up to rest an arm on his knee.

“It looks like something big, Guns.” Bentley paused, then took a stab at it—a captain had always to be thinking of things like this: if he were wrong, it wouldn’t matter much, but if he were proved right in his assumption his stocks would go up just that much towards building a figure in whom every man of the crew had implicit faith. “I want direct-action shell ready to be sent up—plenty of it.”

Lasenby was watching with interest.

“Bombardment, sir?”

Bentley barely hesitated. He had worked it out—if there were some action going on out there, and this Fleet’s help was required, they would be scuttling out to sea as fast as their anchors would let them. But it was a job in which there was time to organise and yet a job big enough to require every ship available. And that, to him, meant a bombardment, softening-up an island for the assault forces.

“Yes,” he said. “There have been no signals yet, but I want the ship prepared for bombardment. Give the control team a quick run-through on the drill.”

He nodded, and the gunner stood up. He looked out through the glass of the porthole, to where the harbour was dancing and shimmering in the sun.

“Looks like clouds over the Rising Sun,” he muttered.

“I hope so,” Bentley grunted, and turned to his desk.

The destroyer flotilla was outside, sniffing like hungry otters in a pool of fish for any sneaking subsurface hull which might be tempted by this juicy array. On the bridge Bentley looked back to the harbour. The big cruisers were coming out now, tall-masted, heavily gunned, speedy. Each ship mounted eight 8-inch guns, each gun capable of firing seven 256-lb. shells a minute—that meant something like 20 tons of steel and explosive flung at a beach every minute, with the three ships firing in controlled broadsides. And that estimate did not

include the hefty tonnage the eight destroyers could put down with their 4.7-inch quick-firers.

The cruisers came out slowly and majestically through the wave-washed gap in the reef. Thrown out well ahead in a spear-shaped V, the destroyers led the way, each ship's asdic beam arc just overlapping the one abeam. The formation was fast, compact and purposeful. Almost a dozen ships welded together into a disciplined fighting unit of proved efficiency.

The day was beautiful and the sea smooth. The Fleet moved calmly and steadily on to the westward—some of them descendants of the ships that long ago defeated the Great Armada, some of them bearing the same names. Suddenly Bentley felt very much easier about the war. This mainly-British force had such a glorious tradition of victory. And it had dealt with much bigger and more experienced foes than this one snarling at it today.

They steamed on, and still they did not know their destination. That was bad, Bentley knew—it was important that every man who was going to fight should know as soon as possible what he was attacking, and where. It killed rumour, and it crystallised his efforts.

It was nearly two o'clock before the general signal flashed from the flagship. This was it! Bentley and Randall were on the bridge with Lasenby officer of the watch. They waited with concealed impatience while the yeoman read the fast-flashing signal. His face impassive as usual, he brought it over. Randall could not wait for his captain to finish—he read it beside him. The signal was a long one, and told them that they were to bombard one of the Aru Islands, about 500 miles off the west New Guinea coast in the Banda Sea. That was all right; the signal was concise, terse. But then, at the end, it flowered.

“Our job,” Rear-Admiral Palesy informed this experienced Fleet, “is to kill, kill—kill the Jap!”

Bentley flicked his eyes sideways to Randall, but he did not speak. Lasenby took the signal and read it quickly. Now how the hell did he know we were going to bombard? he thought, and he handed the signal back to Bentley with respect in his look. Bentley said to the yeoman:

“Have this copied and put up on all notice-boards.” He hesitated

only a moment—the yeoman was a petty-officer, a staid hand. “Delete the bit about killing Japs,” he ended.

The yeoman said, “Aye, aye, sir,” his face unchanged. But when he got to the chart-table, and was scoring out the fervid and unnecessary words, this man who could receive, without batting an eyelid, a signal that there was a shoal of torpedoes heading for them, allowed himself the briefest of smiles.

“So it’s the Arus,” Randall mused. “I didn’t even know the Nips had landed.”

“Don’t you read the newspapers?” Bentley grinned. The advice of editorial experts on how the war should be handled was a standing joke among the men who were fighting it. He said, seriously:

“I’d say the Arus are meant to be a stepping-off place for an attack on the Celebes, or the Halmaheras, further west. The Japs will know that, and they’ll react accordingly.”

“It could be a hot old time, Randall grinned.

“It could be.” He turned to the gunner. “Pipe main-armament control parties to close-up,” he ordered.

America had recovered from the savage blow to her complacency and national pride at Pearl Harbour; Uncle Sam had girded his loins and flexed his industrial muscles, and now the results were pouring westward across the Pacific in growing streams—Liberty ships with supplies and ammunition, transports packed to the rails with men, assault craft to land them, warships like locusts and aircraft to sweep the skies above the invasion beaches clear.

They came up with the invasion force shortly after dawn on the third day—long lines of transports marching over the curve of the sea, three abreast, shepherded by destroyers and cruisers, but all these wearing the stars and stripes of the U.S. Navy. The British Fleet dropped their guardrails down. This simple operation gave a peculiar look of speed, and efficiency, and readiness to the ships; that look of “cleared for action”.

The British mass swept on beside, and then ahead, of the slower convoy. There was no point now in attempting to conceal this great Armada, even if they could have. The Japs would know soon enough what was coming for them. But to try and confuse the enemy the American full admiral in charge of the overall operation had decided

to land part of his forces on the southern side of the island, using the British ships as escort, and then to strike with his full weight on the northern beaches.

If the southern attack were not repulsed, those men could work north and join their comrades; if it were aborted, it would at least have the effect of draining off men and guns which could have been used against the main force. The plan was, like all sound ideas, simple. Its success called for accurate and saturation pounding of the enemy-held beaches before the assault groups waved in.

The invasion force moved on, slow and ponderous and purposeful, while the sun arched across the cobalt sky and quenched its fire below the far rim of even blue. They would attack at dawn.

It was a lovely night, that pre-invasion evening. There was little cloud in the sky, and above the mastheads the stars hung countless in a thin cloud of luminous dust. *Wind Rode's* blackout was complete, and not a vestige of light showed in the shadow of the quiet night that lay upon the ship.

Everyone on board had been getting quietly ready for the coming dawn. They wore an odd assortment of clothes, from greys and long khaki trousers to clean overalls, but all covering arms and legs from the green-hot flashes from guns, shells and bombs. They steamed on.

At 4.30 in the cool morning the ship closed quickly and quietly up at action stations. They stood there round their guns, waiting for the dawn. From the bridge Bentley could see the long barrels of oerlikons and pom-poms pointing at the sky, a shadow moving restlessly behind the armoured shields as the layers shifted position. Now and again the twin barrels of A and B guns below the bridge swept round with a whirr of machinery, as the trainers eased the strain on the hydraulic pumps.

Then it was light, and the shapes of the consort ships gradually formed from the dimness of the sea; the rakish beauty of the destroyers and the harsh strength of the cruisers.

Bentley saw the flagship racing in towards the yellow strip of beach, the opening-fire flag streaming stiff as a board from her foremast. Her two consorts maintained rigid distances behind her, and in perfect line. Station-keeping now would be almost as important as accurate gunnery—for it would be a concentration shoot, all ships

the platforms for the guns, and all ships firing together at a wireless signal from the flag.

They made a magnificent picture—grey hulls streaked with swift flashes of white as the bow-waves whipped past. But they were not in firing array yet, and Bentley took his eyes from them and quartered the lightening sky.

It was possible, but not likely, that they had brought all these ships so close to the island without being sighted. The obvious answer to their threat was aircraft—and those men in the cruisers had had ample acquaintance with what the Jap could do from the air: they had seen the old flagship take a nasty one in her guts.

“Looking for birds?” Randall asked beside him.

“Yes. With red balls. What do you reckon?”

Randall looked idly up at the swinging radar aerial before he answered. Then he said:

“This new secret weapon they’ve got—the Kamikaze Kids. They could be nasty.”

“They could indeed,” Bentley agreed, “though I doubt if they’ll have any so far west.”

“They could be called up pretty quickly,” his friend demurred. Then he asked: “What does it mean—Kamikaze? Queer name for suicide bombers.”

“Not when you know the answer,” Bentley said grimly. “The Kamikaze was a divine wind—so-called—which came along just at the right moment hundreds of years ago and wiped out the whole Chinese fleet invading the Japanese islands from across the Sea of Japan. That’s why they’ve given the same name to these modern saviours of the nation. The sailors have another name for ‘em—zombies. That’s appropriate, too. They act like zombies—just do as they’re told and nothing can alter their intention.”

“Then it wouldn’t be much good trying to shoot the aircraft down,” Randall said slowly, and he was not smiling now. “So long as she’ll fly, she’ll keep on coming.”

“That’s right. The only chance you’ve got is to kill the pilot. Or try and swing the ship out from under him.”

“Flag signalling, sir,” the yeoman said abruptly, and whipped his telescope to his eye.

Their orders came in quick dots and dashes:

“*Wind Rode* take position ten miles to westward and warn of approaching enemy forces.”

“That’s us,” Randall grinned wryly when they had read the message. “Ever the favourite. Now we won’t see a bloody thing!”

He was wrong. Bentley had hardly straightened from giving his engine-room orders to get them out on the seaward wing when Pilot called:

“Cruisers altering to make their firing run, sir.”

Bentley swung his head. There they were, all right, the flagship leaning well over as she heeled under full rudder. As they watched, the two other ships altered course at the exact spot where the leader had turned, so that now they were racing along, still one astern of the other, but now broadside on to the beach for which, earlier, they had been aimed. From *Wind Rode* they could see the four big turrets on each cruiser swing, round further, until every gun was sniffing at the beach.

“Hold on to your hat,” Randall growled. His voice was gruff to hide the excitement the sight surged in him. The three bombarding ships were in such rigid line that the multiple wakes stretched out astern of the last ship as straight as a pencil line on the chart. They were doing thirty knots, and the three bow-waves spurted up from their knifing stems almost as high as the upper-deck, white spuming arcs vivid against the blue of the sea. At each mainmast the White Ensign snapped and whipped in the wind, indicating clearly the origin of what the Japs were about to receive.

Then the cruisers’ sides broke into flame and smoke.

Before that opening broadside had landed, the big guns were loaded again; tiny electric sparks transformed the cordite behind the shells into gaseous giants that roared, and flung the projectiles at three thousand feet per second at the beach, and jerked the great breeches back three feet in recoil. The 24 shells of the second broadside were in the air when the first landed smack on the beach in gouts of flung sand and coral. The flying sand was still airborne when the second salvo plunged to earth and exploded. Across the blue sea to *Wind Rode*’s ears there pulsed a vast drumming roar.

For ten minutes it went on, the cruisers turning at the end of their

run and speeding back on the opposite course—but always their hot muzzles laid on the riven beach, spitting long tongues of flame, recoiling, and spitting again. Before *Wind Rode* was anywhere near her ordered position the fire had been lifted, and they could see the twenty tons per minute exploding among the coconut palms and jungle mass. Now and then, from out of that smoky hell ashore, they could see a small, brief flash spitting back at the smoke-wreathed ships, indicating that the defence was armed only with small-calibre guns, and not many of them. It looked like a walkover, with the troops landing here and pushing quickly northwards to join their companions, who even now would be watching an even heavier pounding of their own selected beach.

“We won’t get a chance to fire a round.” Randall grumbled. “It’ll be all over by the time we’re recalled.”

He stared back to where a brown smoke pall hung heavy over the sea from the cruisers’ firing, to watch the destroyer flotilla edging in for their turn.

“You big bronzed hero b———,” Pilot grinned at him, “this’ll do me fine out here.”

Bentley listened to the chaff without taking any part. He knew that this bombardment would have been a good chance to test, in action conditions, guns which so far had been fired only for exercise. He also knew that their distant position was due entirely to himself. He was the youngest captain in the flotilla, and thus the junior; but to that reason he was sure was added Palesy’s dislike of him. It would please him to shoot Bentley and his ship miles off to seaward, too far even for him to get a clear view of what was going on.

Bentley need not have worried—his guns were to get more than enough firing, so much that the paint would blister on their new barrels like tennis balls. He should have learned by now that in the Navy you are thankful for small mercies...

He turned back from checking their distance on the cruiser line, which was still firing rapid broadsides, and a voice sprang from a voice-pipe on the far side of the bridge. Randall was over there in three leaps.

“Bridge!” he answered, and bent so that they could hear nothing past the plug of his head. He straightened up, and there was a

disbelieving frown on his face when he said to Bentley:

“Radar office reports large formation of aircraft heading our way.”

“Range?” Bentley snapped.

“Eighty-four miles,” Randall answered, and his lips drew down at one corner to show what he thought of the report.

“Eighty-four miles?” Bentley’s voice was also incredulous. He walked quickly to the voice-pipe and called the operator.

“Captain speaking. Are you sure of that range?”

“Quite sure, sir.” There was something in the radar man’s voice which indicated that he had expected this unbelief, and was prepared to defend his and his set’s integrity. “I know it’s overlong, sir, but this is a damned good set, and temperature inversion could give us that range.” That word “damned” to his captain was the key to his feelings, and it was that word which decided Bentley. To him it indicated that the operator had made absolutely sure before he had passed up this incredible report to the bridge.

“Very well, Jackson,” he said quietly, and came upright from the pipe. He walked to the other side of the bridge and looked back at the distant island, now little more than a green hump on the horizon. They might make contact with their 10-inch signalling lamp, but it was a long way, and he knew where most of those distant bridge teams would be looking—certainly not out towards the lone destroyer almost hull down on the horizon.

There was wireless. But wireless messages suffered from the disadvantage that an enemy could receive them just as effectively as a friend—and could alter his plans of attack accordingly. There was only one thing to do—close in and signal by light.

“Full ahead together,” Bentley ordered crisply. “Starb’d twenty!”

The clang of the engine-room bells had died away and she was heeling on the turn when Randall ventured:

“You’re going in? You believe that report?”

Bentley nodded. “That’s right.”

“Look, Peter...” Randall rubbed his nose with the knuckle of his forefinger. “That’s a hell of a long way to pick-up aircraft. No one’s ever ranged that far before.”

“No one’s had our sets before,” Bentley said, and took a bearing of the island. “Steer oh-eight-five,” he ordered down the pipe.

"All right, they're new and classy. It's still a hell of a long way. Palesy sent you out here. How d'you think he'll feel if our echo turns out a flock of seagulls or something and we've scooted off from our post?" A sudden memory came to Bentley. He grinned at his worried friend and remarked:

"If I *were* a Hornblower I'd have you keelhauled for questioning my decision."

"Eh?"

"Skip it. Joke. Get the gunnery radar set on to that echo and see if they can reach it."

"That's an idea!" Randall said quickly. He picked up the phone to Lasenby in the director above their heads.

Randall was relieved to find himself wrong and Bentley right—half a minute after the director had swung round on to a stern bearing Lasenby reported:

"Large formation aircraft coming in astern. Range eighty miles." And added: "I don't guarantee the range, sir. It's a long echo."

"They're aircraft, all right," Randall told him. "Keep sweeping aft."

He juggled the phone back into its clips.

"Those boys are moving!"

"They've got something to move for," Bentley replied grimly. "There'll be a massacre if they're suicide-bombers."

"Hell, they can't be! The Moluccas must be a thousand miles to the west."

"Ever heard of aircraft carriers?" Bentley said, and raised his binoculars. In the twin circles he could see the cruisers turning outwards from a firing run, and then saw the destroyer line under Sainsbury heading in. At least the cruisers would be disengaged when the bomber threat arrived. It would also arrive, if the headlong pace continued, just when the assault craft were making their run to the beach.

Bentley swung round. The yeoman was waiting, standing on the signal-lamp platform.

"Make to the Flag. 'Large formation aircraft approaching from westward. Range seventy—repeat seventy—miles.'"

"Aye, aye, sir!" The yeoman had his lamp burning. He worked

the lever and the latticed cover flicked open and shut rapidly, clattering in the quiet of the tense bridge.

He had been signalling some time before he reported, a touch of exasperation in his normally colourless voice:

“Flag’s not answering, sir.”

Pilot said: “Yes she is!” and pointed.

“That’s not the flagship,” Bentley growled, his glasses up. “It’s *Scimitar*.” Mixed with annoyance at the flagship’s failure to keep a competent lookout was pride in his old friend’s ship—a craft which, while leading her eight consorts into a bombardment, was so well trained that she still had watchful eye for other things.

“I might have known,” Randall muttered, and summed up the bridge team’s feelings. The yeoman had his eyes on Bentley. The captain nodded. The warning yellow eye opened at the flotilla-leader.

Wind Rode was much closer now, pulsing through at more than thirty knots. Bentley saw clearly another lamp begin signalling from *Scimitar*’s bridge—Sainsbury was passing on his message to the flagship even before he had fully received it. A tight smile grew under Bentley’s glasses. It faded when Lasenby reported: “Range sixty miles.”

With his warning delivered Bentley eased her down, swung her around and prepared to fight. With luck he could break up the bomber formations before they reached the Fleet. He knew that Palesy should by now be despatching at least one more destroyer towards him to help in that aim—but he doubted if he would receive any help. He received instead a signal, terse and angry.

“To *Wind Rode* from Flag. Impossible you should range on aircraft at seventy miles. Return to ordered position.”

Bentley laid hold of his anger with both hands. The Fleet should be hauling off from the beach now, making a gain to seaward for manoeuvring room, closing-up their anti-aircraft armament in preparation for the attack. The beach had been pulverised—the whole effort would be wasted if there were no transports and assault craft left to land their men on it. He ordered the yeoman, his voice reined in:

“Make to Flag. Aircraft contact definitely made on search and gunnery sets. Range now 55 miles. Repeat, contact made.”

Then he disregarded the return to position order and weaved his ship slowly across the line of advance of the aircraft.

They had not long to wait. The incoming bombers, small silver specks when they first sighted them visually, seemed to be climbing up the arc of the sky—remote and deadly. Then they heard the sound—fitfully at first with the vagaries of the wind, and then swelling into a deep, pulsing drone. In a few seconds it had grown to a massed thunder, a noise that set your blood on fire.

Bentley had thought about this eventuality—whether the aircraft, who could certainly see the northern invasion force, would attack them or his own convoy. He had come to the conclusion that from that height their own force would look much the same size as the other, and, as the British ships were closer they would be privileged with the first vengeful attacks.

He was right. Even without Lasenby's radar report, they could see the formation altering course slightly so as to come down upon them. Bentley picked up the director phone and said:

“Open fire when in range.” They waited, and throughout the entire ship there was hardly a word spoken. Most of her was gunnery, and this was no time for talking—it was a time for listening, for that first order through the transmitting-station phones, “Commence, commence, commence!”

On each of her four twin mountings the young phone-numbers crouched in their seats, their phones pressed against their ears, their whole attention concentrated on that next, decisive order. The ship's fuse-setting machines were automatic, and in front of each one, beside the waiting breeches, a loading number stood ready to jam his shell nose in and have the correct fuse set before he stepped to one side and laid it on the loading tray.

Down by the tubes the torpedomen, useless in what was ahead of them, stared skyward, noting the formation grow from anonymous specks into recognisable aircraft—mainly twin-engined bombers. Bettys. Fast and heavily loaded.

The asdic team was closed-up and could see nothing. But their sets operated, for other things beside aircraft could have been sooled on to this massed target. In the engine-room and boiler-rooms they waited, a full head of steam in the big boilers, knowing that when

the order came for increased speed it would be only a moment before the guns crashed or the bombs fell.

In the armoured director Lasenby was staring through his large monocular sight; he had the leading aircraft resting on his cross-wires like a fly in a spider's web. Outside, the spiny radar aerial had its electronic fingers laid on the same target, un-impassioned, efficient.

Subconsciously, Lasenby felt the ship begin to shudder as she increased speed to gain manoeuvrability—she might need to whip round like a cat. He glanced at a range dial, returned his eye to his sight, and said quietly: "Shoot."

"Shoot!" repeated the phone-number down to the transmitting station, and the phone-number there pressed a brass button and spoke into his headpiece.

At all mountings the fire-buzzers hooted twice and the waiting phone-numbers bellowed: "Commence, commence, commence!" On the bridge Bentley heard the hooter and heard the shouts—he snatched a quick look astern, and saw with relief that the cruisers were racing away from the beach, thrusting to seaward, and that the destroyer flotilla was already well out. Sainsbury must have acted at once on Bentley's signal and forgone his bombardment runs. It was a pity the admiral had not as much gumption, Bentley thought savagely.

The roar of the forrard guns opening fire washed back over the bridge in almost solid waves of sound.

With a well-drilled crew *Wind Rode's* dual-purpose guns could get away sixteen rounds a minute each. They were well drilled. They worked their guns in a smoothly-running cycle of top-rate efficiency, loading, firing, loading again, keeping always clear of the hot recoiling breeches. Salvo after salvo crashed out, with the hot cordite fumes catching their throats, the blast of each broadside setting their heads ringing, the ammunition numbers slipping and sliding on the hot cylinders.

So fast did they slam them in that two or three salvos were in the air on the way up before the first one burst. It ended its run and its purpose in six black flowers of smoke, each one lit in the centre by a vicious flick of flame. They burst a little ahead of the leading

aircraft. Watching, the gunner's lips tightened in appreciation—and hope. The next salvo exploded directly in front of the aircraft, and the next flowered and shut her from sight.

All that came out from the leading edge of those smoke balls were pieces of silver, glinting in the sun as they fell and turned and twisted. And something else. One crew-member managed to jump. They saw his parachute burgeon, brilliantly white against the canopy of blue. He released it too soon. As he fell he dragged it down past the burning fuselage. The silk caught and flared like a struck match. The black body, trailing now only thin strips of black and shredding wisps of smoke, plummeted straight down and met the waiting sea in a brief splash.

Lasenby shifted target and went on controlling his shoot. But he was thinking—this is fantastic gunnery! Anti-aircraft fire is not as accurate as surface shooting because of the magnitude of the problem which has to be solved. The target is travelling at 300 knots or upwards, is at both an angle and a height from the firing ship, and can turn and alter course much more swiftly than an enemy ship. Shells take some seconds to get up to twenty-thousand feet, and you have to predict the aircraft's future position for the time when they do get up there. Correct fuse-setting is of paramount importance, and if the loading-number, once the fuse is set on the shell, takes two seconds too long to get his projectile into the gun and fired—a 400-knot aircraft can go a long way in two seconds.

So *Wind Rode's* initial success was a combination of superb equipment and immaculate drill. And it would have been seen by the Fleet, out of range itself but still in sight of the lone ship's fight against her swarming enemy.

For a few minutes the disciplined bomber formation ignored her apparently lucky shot; it was much more important that they remain compact than that they should blast a single destroyer. But when *Wind Rode's* guns, firing under ideal conditions—flat calm sea and a massed, steady-course target—continued to burst their messengers amongst them in tearing slivers of white-hot steel, sending another bomber down in a long, graceful curve of smoke, an order went out to the fighter protection.

Bentley had expected this, and it was the main thing which had

been worrying him. The massed fire-power of the Fleet seemed suddenly very desirable. No matter what the accuracy of his guns, he could not hope to stand up against a concentrated attack on his own. But two fighters... they would see.

“Fighters breaking off,” Randall reported from under his glasses. Bentley did not answer, but picked up the little black microphone. His voice reached throughout the ship.

“We have shot down two bombers. They have detached two fighters to attack us. Main armament will remain in action with the bomber formation. Stand-by oerlikons and pom-poms. I want both fighters engaged at once. Open fire when in range.”

The crisp voice clicked off.

With this new threat heading for them, the ship seemed strangely quiet, even though the ship shook every few seconds with the angry blast of her big guns. Her engaging of the formation was long-range, remote—what was heading for them was ferociously intimate.

“Kanga” Johnson—so-called because he had been a kangaroo-shooter in Queensland before signing up to have a shot at Tojo—was sitting on the layer’s seat of the Bofors gun. Kanga’s mouth was tight and dry—not with fear, but with knowledge of the responsibility now reposing on him. The oerlikons were not much use against armoured fighters; the pom-pom was more efficient, with its four fast-firing barrels and two-pound shells; but his coughing Bofors, firing a much bigger shell, would be the fighters’ deadliest threat. His mounting was radar-controlled, fitted with a set which, once on, “locked-on” to the target and dragged the gun round with it, as though it were attached to the enemy fighter with invisible wires. Kanga, who had not quite sold his gunnery soul to this new-fangled idea of electronic aid, hoped it was working all right.

It was. The fighters came in at them from different sides to divide their fire. But *Wind Rode*’s men had not joined yesterday—their drill allowed for this, and the big pom-pom trained round to starb’d, while Kanga lined-up his sights on the port threat and then felt the mounting jerk as radar took over. All he had to do at the right time was press his firing pedal. According to the drill-book, radar would do the rest.

It did. It was, in fact, ludicrously easy. Perhaps the fighter pilot

was eager to regain his formation, for the bigger game ahead; perhaps, because *Wind Rode* looked smart from her height, he expected little more than target practice with his wing-cannon. He bore in at right-angles to her course, coming very fast, and the oerlikon opened. The fleeing red tracer arched beneath him—the layer had not allowed enough elevation for the target's speed.

Kanga saw this through his own sight. He waited. One shell out there at this range would not do much harm—he wanted to see his fighter close in, with fifty or sixty shells. The pilot should have been swerving, taking evasive action, but his reception from the oerlikons emboldened him to get in and finish the job. He came on straight as a die—and before he could turn and avoid it was hit abruptly with a viciously-exploding steel flail from the Bofors.

The aluminium fuselage was lacerated. The perspex cockpit cover smashed before the pilot's eyes and his face turned instantly into reddened pulp. Even as he died his hands jerked convulsively on the control-wheel. The fighter whooshed over *Wind Rode's* funnel and dipped towards the sea the other side. It hit, and bounced, and headed briefly skyward again, a flame-streaming torch. Then it lost impetus and stalled. The tall plume of water marking its grave lifted from the sea a little in front of the second fighter spearing in.

The pom-pom opened fire.

A machine-gun's bullets do not “stick”, as in popular fiction. They fling out in a cone of fire. *Wind Rode's* pom-pom had four barrels, and so there burst all about that aircraft four interlocking cones of exploding shells. It was like ramming through a brick wall, for the explosive force of 120 shells a minute from four barrels is considerable. Certainly enough to fling the fighter sideways in a steep bank of white in the blue. At that speed the water had the frictional effect of concrete. The aircraft swung right round and the next second had buried its snout in the sea. There was neither time nor thought for a possible survivor.

With the fighter threat eliminated, Kanga had time to look and listen. It was only then, so tensed had he been, that he realised the big guns had ceased firing. He lifted his head and saw that *Wind Rode's* object had been achieved. The bombing formation was almost over the Fleet now, but it had been broken into small units, and

thinning bursts of black smoke amongst them gave the reason.

Kanga leaned backwards and supervised the reloading of his hot gun.

With the bombers past him, Bentley turned his ship and headed at top speed for the Fleet. The bridge team stared in appreciation at what was happening five miles ahead. Either Rear-Admiral Palesy was proving a doughtier fighter than they thought him, or he had been sensible enough to take the advice of his battle-wise captain. The fleet was in its earlier rigid formation, the cruisers inside the screen of destroyers. All ships were firing to a concerted plan, the cruisers' sides almost solid sheets of flame—they were putting up a tremendous barrage. Bentley made a quick calculation, and decided that there were just under 70 large-calibre guns firing at that bomber mass: guns larger than those fighting the Battle of Britain.

Where before *Wind Rode* had put six bursts at spaced intervals among the aircraft, now the whole sky around them was dirty, like a smoked ceiling. The Fleet was protected by an umbrella of bursting steel. From this aerial hell a flaming shape would drop, and from about the speeding arrowhead of ships great columns of dirty water would leap abruptly from the sea. The sound of gunfire and exploding bombs beat against their ear-drums with almost physical violence.

There was no question that it would be a damned sigh healthier to remain where they were, in calm, unruffled water. Bentley nodded brief agreement when Randall growled to this effect, and kept *Wind Rode*'s swooping bow aimed at the destroyer screen. They got through unscathed, but only just. She was heeling on the turn to place herself in position at the rear of the right-hand V of the screen when the whole ship seemed to heave bodily from the water. They felt the blast slam against her plates and they felt the sharp sting of spray flung by the bomb into their faces. Then she came upright and they were in position.

It lasted for a further ten boiling minutes. Forcedly calm in the holocaust of burning planes and bursting bombs, Bentley realised worriedly that at this tremendous rate of fire the Fleet would empty its magazines in another ten minutes. He realised also why the bombers were ignoring the transports and assault craft and concentrating vengefully on the Fleet. Taking advantage of the

bombers' initial concentration on the warships, the commodore in charge of the landing had sent his assault boats waving into the beach, and before the Jap bomber-leader had woken up to what was happening the great majority of troops had reached, and flung themselves across, the shell-torn sand. There was now no point in sinking empty transports—the warships were a much more valuable prize.

They got the destroyer immediately ahead of *Wind Rode*. One second she was an ordered ship, tight and compact and firing fast and accurately: the next under the destructive impulse of a stick of bombs, she had resolved into nothing more concrete than a towering, boiling tombstone of smoke. The blast of her magazines exploding beat into their faces with the effect of a thunderclap. Unable to alter course in time, *Wind Rode* ploughed through the acrid smoke and falling debris. But there was nothing alive she could have hurt.

The signal yeoman, eyes everywhere as usual, was the first to see the cease-fire signal flying from the flagship. He bellowed, and Bentley looked, then leaned forward and pressed a brass button hard. The shrill clangour of the bells beat through the ship. Reluctantly, the guns fell silent.

The din of that barrage had been so great that it was some minutes before the normal sounds returned to their consciousness—the whine of the wind in the rigging, the soft slither of waves down her sides, the creak of her ribs as she leaned, the distant throbbing of the engines.

After that their first reaction was to look about them. So far as could be seen, the Fleet was intact except for what was under the black smoke pall thinning out astern, and a destroyer up near the flotilla-leader which was burning aft, but still steaming in position. Sainsbury's ship, Bentley noted with relief, seemed unhurt.

He turned his head back and made to speak to Randall. What happened then was so startling that it killed the words in his mind. The T.B.S. (talk-between-ships) radio-telephone speaker on the bridge was switched on, in case the admiral wanted quick order passed that way. As Bentley opened his mouth to speak the loud-speaker cleared its throat and a sharp staccato command issued from it. Every head on the bridge turned as if activated by the one wire—the commanding voice was Japanese.

Instantly Bentley jerked his head skyward. But the thwarted aircraft formation was heading back to its carriers, dwindling in size almost with every second he looked at it. Randall grinned and said:

“We must be on their intercom wavelength. That sounded like some Nip Johnny getting hauled over the coals.”

Bentley relaxed and agreed with him.

It was Lasenby, still alert and ranged on the departing aircraft, who disabused their relieving minds. His voice came through the director phone, crisp and terse.

“Bridge? One bomber has detached from the formation and is heading back. Range ten miles, speed three-fifty.”

Without trying to sight the aircraft, Bentley spoke into the microphone. The tired gun-crews, their faces black with sweat and cordite fumes, closed-up at the guns.

It was not long before they could see the aircraft plainly, and realised that his intentions were hostile. Twin-engined, thick-bellied, the plane flew an undeviating course for the last cruiser in the line. Surprising though his return might be, the pilot’s choice was understandable—the ends of the destroyer V did not extend back to cover the third cruiser.

The big ships had opened fire, not in barrage but using time-fused shell, and their shells were bursting behind the oncoming plane. As he watched him, refraining from firing himself because his ammunition was half gone, and the cruisers should be able to handle the lone attacker, Bentley found himself struggling with a memory. The aircraft was coming in too straight; it was making no attempt at evasion whatever, when a sudden change of course or height could have thrown the British gunners off, if only temporarily. The memory kindled at the back of his intent mind, and then it burst through to the forefront of his consciousness in blinding revelation.

He was sure now. The aircraft was a suicide-bomber!

He did not wait to wonder why it had not attacked during the height of the fight—perhaps its crew had entertained no suicidal tendencies when they had first taken off from their carrier; perhaps that staccato voice they had heard from the speaker had been the leader’s request for a suicide mission, some gesture to ease the ignominy of being beaten off by the enemy fire with only one small

ship sunk. Whatever the reason, here was the fact—surrounded by shell-bursts, boring in with malignant intent at the desperately-firing cruiser.

Bentley grabbed the director phone.

Ready, *Wind Rode* opened fire almost as soon as the order was passed. She was too late. The aircraft was in so close that its range was altering by hundreds of feet every second; only the pom-pom or Bofors could have got her, and she was too far off for them. Fascinated by the terrible courage of the pilot, helpless to avert its effects, they watched the plane bore in.

It happened in a flash. The heavy bomber smashed itself into the cruiser's foremast and slewed across the bridge, trailing a curtain of high-octane petrol. Its bombs exploded the lot in a searing wrap of flame which killed the captain, navigator, four officers and a score of men. Still blazing, the wreckage of the bomber fell on top of B-turret and then bounced into the sea.

Bentley did not wait for orders. He swung *Wind Rode* in a fast circle and headed back to the burning cruiser—and received Sainsbury's orders to do just that as he was straightening her up to come alongside. He was not sure what he might have to do, but the obvious help was ready—the fire-hoses had been run out before the engagement commenced, and now fearnought-suited men were standing-by them.

But there is not much to burn on a warship's copper sided bridge. The flames of the ignited petrol had been fierce, but by the time *Wind Rode* was surging alongside fifty yards clear, the fire had exhausted its fuel. Coils of oily smoke rose from the blackened superstructure, and a capless head poked over the edge of the bridge to stare at them. Bentley took up the microphone of the loud-hailer. His magnified voice rang across the whitened gap of sea between the ships.

“Can I help?”

“Yes, get to hell out of here!” the head called back in a rough voice. And added: “Thanks for coming. We're all right.”

Grinning with relief—there was no humour in the scorched something they could see half-draped over the windbreak—Bentley gave his orders and *Wind Rode* swooped light as a gull away from

the high side above her. Looking back, he saw a light begin to flicker from the burned bridge, and answered from the flagship. The cruiser, it seemed, was half-roasted, but not nearly done.

Wind Rode regained her station in the screen. All through the tired Fleet empty cartridge cylinders were being cleared away and stacked below—they would be refilled at the ammunition factories. While this was in train the flagship made a signal. In obedience, the whole mass altered course and steamed back to the transports. Another hour and the invasion force, its mission completed, was under way, heading, not south as *Wind Rode*'s men expected, but north-west.

"Now what d'you make of that?" Randall queried when it was clear they were on a settled course. "Maybe we'll have a look in on the northern invasion," Pilot hazarded a guess.

"I doubt it," Bentley said, and unslung his binoculars. The others followed suit. With dusk approaching, their danger from air attack was over. "These transports didn't come from Moresby, that we know. My guess is Manus—to restock for the next push."

Half an hour later his prescience was proved correct. The signal from the Flag told them their destination was Manus, that they would fuel immediately on arrival and top-up with ammunition, and that there would be no leave given.

"Which means," Randall said sourly as he read the signal, "we'll be at sea again pronto."

"Genius," grinned Bentley, and nodded to the navigator. "Seacabin, Pilot."

CHAPTER SIX

IT TOOK ALMOST A week for the convoy to round the northern tip of New Guinea and beat down to Manus in the Admiralties. By which time the chief constructors of the battleship *Satsuma* were ready to present their reports to the driving Captain Yamato.

In a British shipyard the naval captain of a vessel is, by intent, on good terms with the senior men constructing his vessel. Much in the way of amenities can be incorporated through gin-lubricated friendliness. But in this Japanese dockyard the supervisors worked because, with Yamato, they feared not to. They, like Tosa, knew how he stood with headquarters in Tokio. Now they stood as he entered the big cabin aft in the ship, and remained in that inferior posture until he had seated himself at the head of the table.

“Begin,” he ordered curtly.

Yamato listened intently as each expert got to his feet and told his story. He knew already most of what was told him, and he was really interested only in the end of each man’s report; and in each case it was the same—the giant ship was ready in all respects for her sea-trials.

Tosa was last, as befitted his overall control. He rose, and licked his lips, fingering the sheaf of papers he had brought. He had thought of making some light-hearted comment on how the workmen had toiled, and how their toil was shortly to bear fruit. He looked into Yamato’s steady, bleak eyes, and he said:

“My report is brief, excellency. The ship is ready. She is yours.” He sat down.

Yamato did not rise. He did not even move from his attitude of alert interest. His voice was flat and raspy in the enclosed quiet of the cabin. “You have done well. My men and I will do honour to your work. I shall inform naval headquarters that the ship is ready to sail. That is all.”

He was still sitting there, unmoving, when they filed out through the fireproof door.

The next morning Captain Yamato emerged from the guarded portals of naval headquarters in Tokio and stepped into the car which was waiting to take him to the airport. He sat back as the car moved

off, and the only time he showed any interest in his surroundings was when the car passed a bombed building—one of those battered down by the bombs of American aircraft catapulted from a carrier two months before. Then his mouth drew down at the corners, so that a look of hatred seemed to be carved into his face.

The car swept on, and Captain Yamato's face was again inscrutable. But inside there surged a feeling of exultation. He had got everything he had asked for at headquarters. The admirals had wished to give him a heavy escort down to the Bonin Islands, where he was taking the battleship for her trials and gunnery practices. Yamato had vetoed this suggestion, respectfully but with determination. In the first place, the ship was so impregnable, he could do without an escort of ships so badly needed elsewhere; secondly, a mass of ships could attract enemy air reconnaissance. His final point decided them—if the *Satsuma* needed to be escorted wherever she went, then they had succeeded in building only another battleship—instead of the mightiest vessel of war ever launched upon the seas.

What was there to hurt her? Aircraft? No bombs carried by carrier-based aircraft would do more than scratch her hide. Battleships, cruisers? There would be none so far north, anywhere near the Bonins. Destroyers? The same argument applied there. And in any case, a whole flotilla of destroyers could not hope to harm her. They would be smashed to wreckage by the giant's nests of weapons before they could hope to get in close enough to deliver a torpedo attack. And even if they did, it would need a full broadside of ten torpedoes to open her sides—and, as the experienced gentlemen already knew, no destroyer had yet succeeded in having all her torpedoes hit the target.

Yamato had his way. *Satsuma* would sail unescorted and carry out her working-up exercises off the Bonin Islands, returning to the reef-protected harbour there each night.

The Jap captain was not being foolish or unduly optimistic in refusing an escort. He knew what this colossus of a ship could handle, and he wanted to be on his own while he hammered her crew into the shape he wanted: in his own way, and in his own quick time. The car pulled to a stop, and in a few minutes Captain Yamato was aboard

the aircraft waiting for him. The course was south, towards Kure.

Randall stood beside Bentley in the warm sunshine of after-breakfast and watched idly the stokers connecting *Wind Rode's* fuel-pipes to the tanker alongside. A greasy hand waved, pumps began to throb, and in a moment the destroyer was drinking thirstily. Randall pitched his cigarette over the side and said musingly.

"You didn't get a thank-you signal from the admiral for saving his bacon, did you?"

"I did not," Bentley answered definitely. "Nor did I expect one. We did what we were there for, didn't we?"

"Yeah. Except that we overdid it. We warned him of the Japs. He was wrong, we were right. In the eyes of the whole shebang. I can imagine him thinking lovely thoughts of us."

"M'mm," Bentley grunted. This was not the first time he had thought about Palesy and his probable feelings. It was an unpleasant subject. He changed it.

"Things are certainly moving in these parts. The whole Fleet's oiling. I wonder where...?"

Randall snorted. "You should know by now—anywhere from the Solomons up through the Marshalls to Iwo Jima. Anywhere but Sydney, that is." He stopped as a petty-officer came towards them. The approaching seaman was tall and muscled—he had once sparred four rounds with Bentley, and as Bentley was the Fleet's heavyweight title-holder, it followed that the petty-officer could use 'em.

"Yes, Gellatly?" Randall smiled—both officers liked the tall man. "What's the strife?"

"No complaints, sir," Gellatly grinned back. He saluted smartly, as became a gunnery man, and went on: "The gunner's stuck down in the forrard magazine. He asked me to tell you that he's got his full outfit of ammunition on board now."

Bentley remained silent. This was Randall's affair.

"Good," the first-lieutenant nodded. "That was nice shooting with the pom-pom, by the way."

"Thank you, sir."

They liked that, too. Gellatly had accepted the just praise with no mock modesty, or false decrying of his shooting ability. Randall

nodded again and the petty-officer walked off.

“He’ll make a good officer,” Randall commented. “It’s about time his recommend for the commission came through.”

“Yes,” Bentley agreed. He turned at a voice behind him.

“Signal from Flag, sir.”

“Thank you.” Bentley read the message quickly. It required all ships of the British Fleet to report to the admiral as soon as they were ready in all respects for sea. The Fleet would sail at two o’clock that afternoon.

“That’s the ruddy Navy,” Randall grumbled to Bentley at one side of the bridge. He looked over at the cruisers, steaming in their cruising position, in line astern and flanked by the destroyer screen. “One hell of a panic to get to sea, and then this.”

The first-lieutenant was referring to Palesy’s information order, just signalled. The Fleet was out on patrol—no definite objective, just trailing their mailed coat round to the westward of the Jap-held Carolines and Marianas, swooping round Ulithi and Guam and Saipan; names which were to become famous in naval history, but which at that time were garrisoned, but not strongly protected from the sea, the main body of the enemy being in the Solomons and west in the Philippines and Borneo.

Bentley grinned. “You whinge when I take you into an air-attack and you whinge when I take you on a pleasant patrol. You’d whinge if someone...” He did not finish the classic Navy remark, but walked over to the chart-table. He pushed his wide shoulders in and leaned his elbow on the chart Pilot had provided as soon as they had known their patrol area.

Bentley examined it with interest, but his prescience as he saw names like Eniwetok, Saipan, Iwo Jima could not tell him anything of the bloody battles which were to be fought for those specks of black on the chart. His eyes roved further north, right up to the southern tip of Japan itself. Idly he noted names like Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Kure, Kobe, names he remembered as a schoolboy—and now names fixed indelibly and inflexibly in the planning minds of MacArthur and his admirals. As he made to draw back from the chart, having automatically noted Pilot’s course-lines, his eyes fell

on a group of islands southeast of Japan, and not so far north of the limit of their patrol. He saw they were called the Bonin Islands, and that four of them had names ending in “Shima”. Maybe the word was Japanese for “island”, he thought idly. Then he saw that the southernmost island in the group was named Coffin Island. He wondered briefly what tragedy or mystery of the sea had given that name to the small peanut-shaped mark on the chart, and then he pulled out and crossed back to the binnacle. There was no chance of his even seeing Coffin Island, let alone solving its name’s mystery.

Which goes to show that Lieutenant-commander Bentley had, in his temporary surcease from trouble, forgotten that big waves come in threes...

The fourth day out the Fleet was a little south of, and to the west, of Saipan. On all that hostile sea they had sighted absolutely nothing, except, that morning, a small fleet of Polynesian fishermen. The destroyers had cruised slowly round the flagship while she had lowered a boat and brought two or three of the fishermen on board.

“What’s old blood-and-guts up to now?” Randall had wondered, watching the natives climb nimbly up a rope-ladder. “Going to shoot the lot in case they own a high-power transmitter and blow the gaff about us in Tokio?”

“He’s probably after a bit of fresh fish for dinner tonight,” Bentley answered equably—he had had no contact with Rear-Admiral Palesy for many days now, and was feeling tolerantly disposed towards him. He would have been more than surprised if he had known that he was at that moment the subject of the admiral’s thoughts and conversation.

Palesy stood to one side of the bridge, his feet straddled and his hands behind his back, and his fleshy face scowled thoughtfully at the three loin-clothed natives. The fisherman were not abashed—their whole interest was in the great ship about them. Palesy swung his head to include the cruiser captain in his stare.

“It’s probably a cock and bull story,” he growled, “but I’ll have to investigate. If only to encourage more information at a later date, perhaps.” He paused, and looked over to the destroyer screen, moving slowly around the cruisers in a slow, alert circle. “I won’t waste a good man on this job,” Palesy muttered. “Who’s the junior destroyer commander?”

The cruiser captain was not in the least deceived at Palesy's apparent ignorance. More than once he had felt certain feelings about this new chief wished upon him, and he had crushed them instantly. He said, going along with the pretence, and quite aware of the reason behind it:

"Bentley is junior, sir."

Palesy rubbed his bulging jaw. "Yes, of course. He can go."

"Very well, sir. Shall I signal him alongside? He'll need to be told personally."

"I realise that. No," Palesy said, rather too hastily. "I can't hang around here stopped any longer. Get Sainsbury on the radio-telephone and tell him the story. Bentley can swing across to him in a bosun's chair. We've wasted enough time here as it is. See to it now, Jensen."

"Aye, aye, sir," the captain said, and turned to the signal-yeoman.

The natives had returned to their boats, and the Fleet had been under way five minutes, when a light began flashing from the flotilla-leader ahead.

"*Scimitar* calling, sir," *Wind Rode's* yeoman reported, and flashed back that he was ready to receive. When he read the signal from Sainsbury, ordering him alongside so that he could repair aboard the flotilla-leader, Bentley thought quickly. He knew that he was being ordered to carry out some independent mission, that was obvious. And it did not take his quick mind more than a second or two to connect the mission with the fishermen lately on board the flagship; he also realised, with a return of his earlier bitterness, that he was being sent alongside *Scimitar* so that the admiral would not have to bear his presence on his own ship. It was an insult which might have deeply hurt a man less battle-matured than Bentley. But he knew perfectly well the reason for Palesy's reluctance to meet him, and his anger was directed at the admiral's insufficiency. Palesy's action reflected only on himself.

"Increase to two-five-oh revolutions," Bentley ordered, "stand-by to go alongside the flotilla-leader."

The manoeuvre was carried out without fault. With the two ships a few yards apart in the calm sea Bentley swung over in a bosun's chair and a minute later was with Sainsbury in his sea-cabin. The older man wasted no time.

"It's almost certainly a wild-geese chase," he started, and lit the other's cigarette. "You saw those natives go aboard? They were not just picked up—they waved for the flagship to stop. That's the only thing which makes me give slight credence to the story—they knew well enough which was the important ship." He leaned forward and looked up at Bentley. He had been speaking quickly, and Bentley knew why—Sainsbury wanted to spare the younger man's feelings at this method of giving him his orders. He went on in the same quick voice.

"A brother of one of those natives came down yesterday from the Bonin Islands." A faint memory, nothing decisive, stirred in Bentley's alert mind. "He came down," Sainsbury smiled his vinegary grin, "with a story of a giant Japanese battleship anchored in the harbour of Coffin Island."

He stopped as he saw the look on his listener's face. Bentley's face was hard as agate when he said:

"I'm to be sent up there on a report like that? My ship sent up alone on the say-so of an illiterate native? Has that fool lost his wits altogether?"

"Take it easy," Sainsbury calmed him. "I don't believe it any more than you do—or he does. But there could be something in it. Not a giant battleship, of course. But a heavy cruiser would be thought 'giant' by those fishermen. If there is a cruiser skulking in there, we could get him. Your job will be to raise the island at night and poke around. If there's nothing in the harbour, you've gained a pleasant trip. If there is, the Japs are down one cruiser. We don't know what those natives really told Palesy, you know. He might have additional information. In any case, he has to send one ship to investigate. Just in case there is something there worth getting on to." He raised his skinny length from the chair slowly, and his thin mouth twitched a little:

"If you do find our super-battleship, the admiral's orders are that you do not attack it, but get out of it and report to us."

"Considerate of him. That's one order of his with which I fully concur."

"I imagine so, yes. By the way, nice work off the Arus. You realise your radar possibly saved the Fleet?"

“Yes.” Bentley tried to keep the bitterness from his voice. “This is the reward of its efficiency.”

Sainsbury did not answer him. He could not argue when he knew Bentley was right. He said:

“You know the Fleet’s movements. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Yes, sir.” Under Sainsbury’s calmness Bentley felt a little like a disgruntled schoolboy. He smiled suddenly. “I’ll bring you back one giant battleship.”

“Do that small thing,” Sainsbury murmured, and shook his hand.

Captain Yamato had had almost a fortnight at Coffin Island. Every day and every night he had drilled his three thousand men, until now they were red-eyed from sleepless nights and concentration on their duties. Yamato had insisted that every man sent to him should have come from a battleship—this helped enormously in his task of welding them into a compact team of automatic efficiency.

Now he was satisfied. A shrewd commander, he knew that his hard-driven crew could not take much more drill and still absorb its benefit. The leisurely trip back to Kure would allow them to settle down, with a few boat-drills and fire-fighting exercises to keep them occupied. Then, after a week of putting right the few teething troubles the exercise period had revealed, he would be ready to take her south into the battle area.

He looked at his watch. It was ten o’clock on a warm, still night. His own inclination was to sail now; but his men could do with a few hours’ uninterrupted sleep. He would leave Coffin Island before dawn, which would put him well clear before daylight—not that there was anything he had to fear.

He pressed a buzzer, and when his chief-of-staff came into the big cabin he ordered brusquely:

“The ship will sail at three in the morning.”

That was all, but it was enough. The staff-commander saluted and withdrew.

There was every doubt in the minds of the officers on *Wind Rode’s* bridge that they were wasting their time and their fuel: there was no doubt whatever that they were poking their lonely nose into dangerous

waters. Certainly most of the Japanese Fleet was much further south, with plenty to do around the East Indies, the Philippines, and the islands captured in the South Pacific. But it would be foolhardy to suppose that they had left their home islands completely unguarded.

Silent, darkened, all the electronic aids in alert operation, she crept on through the dark night. Worshipping at the greatly-glowing shrine of the bridge radar viewing-screen, Bentley and Randall watched the white line representing the coast of Coffin Island gradually shift itself across the concentric range-rings towards the centre of the convex screen. Closer she swept, the long white pointer which was the radar aerial, swinging round and round the face of the screen with methodical, unimpassioned efficiency.

Now and then Bentley straightened his back and stared through the shadow of the night at the darker bulk of the island ahead. He neither saw, nor expected to see, any lights. He knew from the chart that the entrance to the deep, long harbour was comparatively narrow, and curved to the left inside, so that any lights from village or town would be hidden from seaward.

A few minutes later they were so close that radar could be dispensed with—the ocean swell beat against the cliffs and beaches of the island in flashes of curling white, and the unbroken mouth of the entrance was dimly visible. Bentley looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock.

He said in a low voice to Randall beside him:

“How the hell are we going to find out what’s in there? I’m certainly not taking the ship in.”

“Simple,” Randall grinned, and his teeth showed white against his brown face. “It’s a lovely night for a swim.”

“You?”

“Me. We aren’t all champ leather-pushers, but some of us aren’t totally useless in the realm of sport.”

That was true enough, Bentley reflected. Randall was a bright light in the inter-Services water-polo team—which accounted in part for the bulk of his shoulders—and he was used to keeping afloat for long periods. The more he thought of the idea the more he liked it—it would have to be an officer, one capable of assessing the advantages, or dangers, of the harbour and what it held; it would not

be a long swim, for the ship could nose in quite close to the shore; and, determining his decision, he could see no better way of finding out what was inside.

“All right,” he said, “get ready. What’ll you take?”

“I don’t expect trouble,” Randall answered, “and a revolver would only bring it on me. But, just in case—I think a bayonet in a scabbard. It can trail from my waist in the water.”

Bentley nodded. He bent to the voice-pipe and Randall moved swiftly down the ladder towards his cabin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THOUGH IT WAS UNLIKELY, so far north, the harbour entrance might be guarded by a motor boat patrol.

Randall lifted his head from the warm water, spotted the edges of the white-edged reef on either side of the entrance, then put his head down and swam quickly across towards the trees slightly left of the reef.

He reached them and rested there a moment, his mouth open to soften his breathing. His nostrils were filled with the strong stench of harsh decay and the odour from the slimy mud where mangrove roots coiled.

Carefully his ears identified each small sound—the slap of the water against the roots, the almost weird murmurings of palms in the wind, the scurry of some tiny jungle creature. He was straining his muscles to pull himself on to the bank when a discordant shriek echoed above his head.

He shrank back, certain he had not been seen.

The shriek sounded again, and this time ended in a muted muttering. Something moved in the tree tops. Then silence descended again on the jungle.

A parrot or monkey, Randall decided, and was a little surprised to feel how tensed he was.

He lay in the water a moment more, then carefully pulled himself upwards and out.

He moved forward into the undergrowth, and heard his sandshoes squelch. He pulled them off, drained the water out, and replaced them on his feet, tying the laces tightly. Then he eased the bayonet in its scabbard further round on his hip and crept into the jungle.

He moved very quietly. It was not the first time he had crept through tangled scrub—lantana scrub—though before he had been armed with a rifle and was after nothing more lethal than a kangaroo or wallaby.

He knew he had not far to go to his right to come out on the harbour's edge, and as he crept he looked out to sea.

The night was moonless, and it took him several seconds before he made out the low, dark shape of the destroyer. Reassured, he moved on.

He reached the water's edge and lay flat on his belly. Then he parted a screen of small canes and peered out.

To his right he could see the reef-entrance; opposite him was a shore the replica of his own; to his left the water reached until the turn in the harbour configuration shut it from view.

On all that expanse of still black water nothing moved, nor showed.

He quelled the feeling of slight disappointment and crawled carefully off towards the bend.

It was likely that a ship would have been anchored as near to the entrance as possible; it was just as probable that she would go further in, especially with no suspicion of danger so far north.

There was only one way to find out, and he had, he thought, plenty of time.

It was nervous work.

The jungle was so thick that he could come upon a clearing unexpectedly, and he could not be sure that the Japs would have no sentries patrolling: it was extremely likely that they would.

This conviction grew upon him the nearer he crept to where he could expect the town to be. So that when his head poked through a wall of lawyer vines, and he saw a clearing directly before him, with a group of huts edging the water, and heard distant voices, he shrunk back and had no eyes for anything but the owners of those voices. He picked them out quickly—two soldiers, obviously sentries on the huts, talking together at the meeting point of their beats.

He was so relieved that he had not stumbled out into the clearing that he had no thoughts for the water, but kept his eyes on his visible enemies.

Only when he realised that they had probably just met, and would talk for a few minutes more before parting on their rounds, did he think of the mission which had brought him there.

He turned his head and looked over the harbour.

He remembered afterwards that what he saw was so huge, so much bigger than anything he had expected, that he believed he was looking at the side of a hill.

A dark looming hill on which the lights of houses or huts were shining. It was only when his trained sea-man's mind saw something

familiar in the way those lights ran in straight, parallel lines from one end of the black shape to the other that his mind could grasp the significance of what he was staring at.

The lights came from portholes, and they were on a ship!

But a ship such as he had never seen before in all his experience.

Now that his mind was conditioned to the belief that the native fishermen had been right, he had no difficulty in picking out salient points.

The four huge turrets, as big as a house, with their guns projecting from their armoured faces like telegraph poles; the rearing rampart of the bridge structure, topped with its aerial-cluttered foremast; the two streamlined funnels, each broader than the mouth of a railway tunnel; and, most impressive and shocking of all, the enormous effect of her whole overall length.

Randall sank back on his haunches and wet his lips.

He did not think of what money and labour had gone into the monster's building; nor of what havoc she could wreak if allowed south among the Allied Fleets; nor even of what she was doing skulking in this harbour.

His whole thought was concentrated on time! Time to get back to *Wind Rode*, time to race at full power south to make rendezvous with the British Fleet, time to bring up Allied battleships to try and trap this colossus before she could get clear.

With these thoughts urgently in his mind, he turned quickly to make his way back to the mangroves.

The bayonet scabbard swung and rattled against the thick lawyer vines. The voices of the sentries ceased abruptly.

Crouched, breathing widely and shallowly through his gaping mouth, noiseless, Randall slid his left hand back and eased the scabbard clear.

His eyes were on the sentries in an unblinking stare. For ten seconds he crouched there, absolutely still, and then one of the soldiers laughed, and they both relaxed.

Randall's first reaction was to turn and get to hell out of it.

A moment's reflection served to convince him that if he moved now, with the sentries still possibly alerted, he could not hope to move four yards without being heard in the thick jungle.

Cursing his scabbard and his own carelessness, he waited there while the soldiers parted and resumed their beat. One, he saw with an instant twitch in the pit of his stomach, was coming towards him.

Randall drew his bayonet very carefully, trying not to move the vines with his arm, and crouched there.

He could hear the crunch of the sentry's feet clearly, growing louder as he came closer, and he tautened his muscles in readiness.

It was apparent that the soldier had not actually seen him, just as it was plain that he was not satisfied that an animal had made that rattling noise in the thicket.

He was almost to the edge of the clearing. Randall knew that he should keep his eyes down—their whites could betray him.

Using all his will-power, he looked down at the ground. He heard the footsteps stop, not a yard from his nose. Silence. Not even the sound of breathing.

Not even for his life could Randall forbear to look up, to see what the Jap was doing. He looked into a tense, brown face, the head leaning forward a little on the squat body; and in that moment he saw in the Jap's eyes that he had seen him.

Randall jumped.

He thrust forward as he leaped, with all the strength of his arm. Private Sokuawa, of the garrison force of Coffin Island, died without even a groan.

That disposed of one sentry.

Randall stooped and then he picked up the Jap's rifle and stared down the clearing.

The second sentry was turning to come back.

Randall knew with complete clarity of vision that he had to kill that second sentry.

If he did not, the Jap would discover his companion, the island would be in uproar, either Randall or the destroyer would be discovered, and the battleship would sail at once.

He sloped his rifle and started towards the distant Jap, conscious of, but having no thought of being thankful for, the darkness of the night.

He walked quickly towards the nearest hut, and stopped in the black shadow beside it.

The other sentry, as he approached, could see only the vague bulk of a figure. Then the dark figure stepped forward and brought the rifle butt crashing down.

Randall was now free to pursue his plan of escape. He took a final look at the battleship, and noted she was lying at anchor, bows to seaward.

As he slipped along the edge of the clearing he strove to pick out any details which to his seaman's mind would indicate her intentions.

But apart from the fact that all her boats were hoisted there was nothing to tell him if she were sailing in an hour or next week.

He wasted no more time in marvelling at her size, but plunged straight into the jungle.

Wind Rode was moving slowly up and down, but not crossing the harbour entrance.

From her bridge at least six pairs of binoculars were focused on the distant shoreline. Even so, the first indication they had of Randall's presence—and his superb swimming powers—was when a low voice hailed from the water below the bridge.

Bentley stopped her at once, and in a few minutes Randall climbed dripping on to the bridge.

"She's there, all right," he told them, without preliminary and speaking quickly in between great breaths of air. "The biggest battler I've ever seen. It's something they've kept up their sleeve. Really colossal."

Bentley accepted his first-lieutenant's description without question—that was the reason he had sent an experienced officer.

"Position?" he rapped.

"Bow to sea, just round the turn in the entrance."

"Any boats down?"

Randall did not appreciate till later Bentley's instant grasping of that salient point. He said at once:

"No, all hoisted."

"Then she could be sailing shortly. There's a fair sized town in there. They'd have a canteen. If she was staying in harbour she'd have her boats down to bring back liberty-men."

"I don't know about that," Randall demurred.

He wiped his hand across his salty mouth.

“They mightn’t be giving shore leave. Look, Peter, let’s get out of here! Fast!”

The yeoman said:

“Signal from the wireless office, sir.”

Bentley took the sheet absently. He was looking at Randall, but he did not see him. His mind was racing with the incalculable velocity of urgent thought.

“It’s urgent, sir,” the yeoman prompted.

Bentley held the signal near the binnacle, and read it by the compass light. It was, as expected, from Palesy, and said:

“U.S. Liberty ship *Jacksonville* struck submerged rock 150 miles south-east your present position. Has requested tow. Proceed with despatch and take in tow. Repeat, proceed with despatch. Ends.”

At first, Bentley appreciated and accepted the signal as an order from superior authority—and that was as far as it went.

His mind was too full of his other problem to consider acting on this latest one thrown in his lap.

He turned to question Randall again, and the torpedo-officer said, as if he had been waiting for a chance to speak:

“I think we could hold her in there, sir.”

“How? Sink ourselves as a block-ship?” Randall asked impatiently. The obvious thing to do was clear enough in his mind.

“What do you mean, Torps?” Bentley asked, and forced himself to speak calmly.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about it, sir,” the young lieutenant said. “You know, wondering what we could do if that fisherman’s story was true. A man can dream, can’t...”

“Get on with it!” Bentley snapped. The voice effectively damned the lieutenant’s loquacity. He spoke quickly and to the point, warming to his subject as he went.

“I thought of mining the entrance. I know we don’t carry mines, but what’s wrong with a torpedo warhead? It’s just as big, and the Torpex explosive is a damned sight more powerful. We hoist a spare warhead out of the magazine and tow it to the entrance in the motorboat, or whaler. We sink it there, and connect it to a shore post by insulated wire. Instead of the normal firing pistol, I fit in an electronic detonator. When the Jap comes out—if he does come out

tonight—the bloke ashore pressed his plunger, and she has one bow blown off.”

“Gawd,” Randall said slowly.

The torpedo-officer was looking at Bentley, his face eager. Bentley turned and walked slowly to the starb’d side of the bridge. No one followed him. They guessed he wanted to think.

He did. He had much to think about. He couldn’t wait here till daylight—that was suicide. But if he put Randall ashore (of course, it would have to be Randall) with the mine, the ship could clear out two hours before daylight, say at four. He could be more than 75 miles away by then, in a safe position to break wireless silence. Randall could stay on the island all day if necessary and catch her the next night if she didn’t come out tonight. This was nothing like Sainsbury’s lecture. He *knew* his cruiser was coming out. Bentley could not afford to wait on that assumption. And there was a hell of a lot of difference between taking on a cruiser with torpedoes and a giant battleship! No, if he was to tackle her at all, he had to cripple her first. Otherwise the odds were too great—suicidally great.

Bentley came back to them. He had not given a second’s thought to Rear-Admiral Palesy’s orders regarding the Liberty ship. Nor did he stop to think of the background to the situation. The forces which had brought a new battleship from Kure and a new destroyer from Sydney more than four thousand miles to meet each other outside a speck of land in the Pacific were as natural as they were inevitable. Sooner or later the *Satsuma* had to meet an enemy ship—that was precisely why she had been built. It looked as though it was merely unfortunate—tragically unfortunate—that the enemy ship had to be *Wind Rode*, a fraction her size.

Bentley said:

“It might work, Torps. Get two warheads up and lower them into the whaler. You can connect them? Right, hop to it! Pilot! Get the whaler lowered and under the torpedo davit. Bosun’s mate—tell the torpedo-gunner’s mate to report to the torpedo-officer. Tell him he’ll want a coil of wire, detonators and a demolition generator.”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

You could feel the excitement on the bridge. It swirled there as tangible almost as fog. Randall said:

“How about this? We don’t know the depth in the entrance. If we drop those mines to the bottom they might be a hell of a long way underneath her—and she’s so big we can’t afford to waste any explosive power. The whaler’s wooden. Right—how about we secure the warheads to her sides, take the plug out of the boat, and let it sink to water level? Then we’ll be almost certain of getting what’ll amount to a direct hit with those warheads. Eh?”

Bentley nodded, three quick jerks of his head. He said:

“You’ll go ashore again? I can’t afford a miss with those things.”

“Of course. But I’ll take some clothes this time.” Randall grinned tightly. “You’ll take a Tommy-gun as well. And some food. Stuff you don’t have to cook. You might be there all day, you know?”

“A year, if we get that big b——!”

Bentley looked at his friend’s big, tough face, thrust forward eagerly in the dim light. But his thoughts were not of affection—that would come later. His mind was too busy with calculations.

“What’ll you do if I cripple her?” Randall asked, with his eyes watching the quick work around the whaler.

“Leave that part of it to me,” Bentley promised grimly. “If we do get her, I won’t be far away. Don’t you start swimming back until I give you a signal.” He thought quickly. “I’ll send you one flash on the signalling light. Our presence should be known by then, anyway,” he ended with a hard grin.

“Have got,” Randall said crisply. “The whaler’s on the way down. I’ll get some clothes.”

Bentley did not watch him go. He turned instead to the voice-pipe and eased his ship in as close as he dared to the harbour entrance, careful always not to cross in front of it. Then he stopped his engines and waited.

“Easy with those oars, blast you!” Randall snarled in a vehement whisper. He turned his head a little. “Bear right a fraction. See the white on the reef? That’s it. Keep her steady on that.”

His stomach curling, Petty-officer Gellatly gripped the tiller with knuckles that showed white under his skin. But his stare was steady, and he kept the whaler headed in a straight line for the nearer end of the reef. It was not easy, for she was dragged against the pull of the

muffled oars by the two heavy warheads which were slung from either gunwale. They bumped their red noses continually, and Gellatly was glad they were not yet armed. There was close on two tons of high explosive nudging the thin planks of the boat.

Another minute and they were inside the entrance. On either side of them, not more than a hundred yards apart, the two jaws of the reef glistened and flashed with catpaws of white water as the ocean swell broke over the jagged ends of coral. That would help drown any noise they might make.

“Hold water!” Randall whispered. “This’ll do fine. Now—let’s get cracking!”

It did not take long. Gellatly pulled the wooden plug out himself. The water welled in and spread over the bottom boards of the boat. Then he lowered the anchor down and made sure it had taken hold in the sandy bottom. While this was going on, Randall had called up the second whaler, which had followed them in, and was busy laying out his waterproof electric wire to the left-hand shore. He allowed plenty of slack, so that the swell would not chafe it against a coral nigger-head, and jumped ashore with the generator. This was a small instrument in a box a foot square, actuated by forcing down on a plunger. He laid his instrument at the foot of a large tree—he would choose his spot later—and quickly connected the wire to its terminals.

“All right, beat it,” he whispered to the whaler’s coxswain. The whaler backed water away from the reef, and pulled over to the warhead-laden boat. The torpedo-officer was the last to leave. He leaned over each warhead, and in the hole where the firing pistol usually fitted he inserted a detonator above the primer. These he packed in very carefully, checked again that all wires were connected to Randall’s wire running ashore, and then clambered into the waiting whaler.

“Right! Back to the ship!” he ordered. The boat pulled on careful oars out into the darkness. The hours passed. Neither Bentley nor Randall were likely to forget them. Both had more than enough time for introspective thought. In the calmer light of slow reflection, Bentley realised that he was basing his whole plan on whether the battleship would come out that night; and that was based again on his belief that she would choose darkness to emerge and begin her

cruise to wherever she was destined.

Also, as the hours dragged by on shackled feet, he began to be troubled about his earlier cursory dismissal of his admiral's orders. It had seemed the natural thing to do then, with the whole bridge hot with excitement at Randall's astonishing discovery. Now, he realised his action for what it was—deliberate ignoring of superior orders. Nelson had put his telescope to his blind eye and ignored orders not to attack—but Nelson had brilliantly won *his* battle.

Bentley swallowed in his dry mouth and looked at his watch. Twenty-five minutes to three. He had decided to leave at four. Perhaps that would be cutting it too fine. He took a turn across the silent, waiting bridge and bumped into the yeoman coming towards him.

“Signal, sir.”

Bentley took the message. He was so worried about the horrible risk to which he was subjecting his ship and her 250 men that he hoped for a moment his delivery from the dilemma lay in this signal. Then he knew that nothing short of a cease-fire order would turn him from his purpose. He took the message to the chart-table and read it.

It was from Rear-Admiral Palesy, and said:

“Ship *Jacksonville* reported sinking. Proceed at your utmost power and pick up survivors. Ends.”

That was explicit enough. Palesy obviously assumed he was by now close to the stricken Liberty ship, whereas he had not moved a yard towards her. He looked at his watch. Two minutes had passed since the last time. He would give it another half-hour, three o'clock, and then he would clear to hell out of it, make his signal, and hand the show over to Palesy.

Randall had found an ideal place for his vigil. He was surrounded on all sides by a brake of cane, thick stuff which would warn him of an approaching enemy. Yet through the stalks he would be plainly able to see the juggernaut battleship if she tried to creep out. He, too, now that the initial rush was over and the hasty plans implemented, had time to think. He looked at his waterproof watch, A quarter to three. If she was going to make any use of darkness, she would have to come out pretty soon.

He sat back, longing for a cigarette. Instead, he went over in his mind for the hundredth time just when he would press his plunger. Let her bow get a little past the warheads, so that her side would take the full force of the explosion. Then he would blow them. What he had to do was simple enough, and barely exercised his excited mind. He fell back on thinking how he would spend tomorrow if she failed to appear tonight. It might not be easy. He knew there were soldiers on the island, and it was quite possible that they...

The thought struck him like a blow from a fist. The sentries! The two men he had killed and left lying in the clearing. The men he had forgotten to tell Bentley about in the haste to improvise a plan to cripple the battleship. He half-rose to his feet in his anger at his remissness and in fear of what could happen. If they were discovered, *Wind Rode* could be crushed like an egg-shell under a hammer. One broadside from those monster guns and she would be burst into a tangle of twisted iron. Even now the Japs might be watching her, signalling back her position to the battleship. And at first light...

He had no torch, he could not signal the ship. He stared at the entrance, half-hoping, half-praying that the big ship would appear. And as his gaze fell on the whaler, wallowing to her gunwales, he realised with a sudden sickness in his guts that their hastily improvised plan had another flaw—the whaler and its cargo would be sighted by the first fishing boat which left the harbour at dawn.

He could do nothing about signalling the ship—if he left his post and swam out to her he might jeopardise the whole operation. It was faintly possible that those Jap sentries might not be relieved for some time—that they had just come on duty when he had killed them.

But he could do something about the whaler. Cautiously he crept from the cane and entered the water on the inside of the reef. It took him only a minute to swim to the boat. As he gingerly hauled himself aboard, and felt the warheads surge against the gunwale, his mind was full of thoughts of detonators. He was gunnery man, but he knew that electric detonators had a thin fuse wire running through fulminate of mercury. That wire would glow and burn when he pressed his plunger, and so fire the detonator. But he was still not sure whether or not a sudden blow could have the same effect. He forced the thought from his mind and made his way carefully to the stern of the

boat, praying that some conscientious seaman had not stripped her of her gear before she was sunk.

He grinned tightly when his groping hand found the boat's bag—a canvas bag containing implements for making temporary repairs to boat and sails. He gripped the big steel marline-spike and then knelt down before the galvanised-iron buoyancy chamber right in the stern. He struck with the point of the spike, and again, knowing the sound of the surf would drown the noise, feeling the water splash up into his face each time he struck. By the time he had done the same to the forrard tank, twisting and forcing the spike to make the holes larger, the stern was appreciably lower in the water. Satisfied, knowing that the weight of the heavy warhead would overcome the buoyancy of the wood, he dropped the spike and slipped over the side.

He was glad to get ashore again—he would remember the knocking of those warheads, armed with their detonators, for a long time. As he crept from the water, he automatically glanced at his watch. The time was two minutes to three.

Back in the cane, the generator beside him, Randall stared out at the water. Where the boat had wallowed, the surface was clear. The depth might reduce the explosive force slightly, but in return he had put right one of their main blunders. As to the other one, only time would...

He tensed, his head turned back towards the inner harbour. He listened with every faculty strained, thinking he had heard a shout. His immediate thought was that the sentries had been found. But surely that would have been followed by more excitement? He had decided his nerves were overstrained, and was about to settle back, when, clearly through the still night, he heard a grinding rumble. The noise rose and fell, now and again sharpening to a metallic clank.

Randall passed his tongue across his parched lips. He had heard that noise too many times to ever mistake it—no matter what the size of the ship.

The battleship was heaving in her anchor cable.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BENTLEY HAD MADE UP his mind. His jinx was still with him, perched malevolently on his shoulder. He had made another mistake. He had wasted most of the night, when by now he could have been well clear, wirelessing for help—battleships and aircraft carriers. The assumption which had kept him here on guard, which had probably negated the punitive action the Fleet could have taken, had been false. The battleship was not coming out tonight.

He walked purposefully from the edge of the bridge, where he had been staring at the dim line of shore, to the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

More from habit than anything, a habit he indulged whenever he made an important order, he looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past three.

He bent down to the mouth of the voice-pipe, but his eyes were looking up, in line with the top edge of the windbreak opposite him. So that he saw the distant orange flash spew from just inside the harbour entrance, throwing flame and white water high into the air. Then the sound of the explosion came, a soft, brushing shock-wave felt on the forehead and cheeks.

“Hell!” said the torpedo-officer.

Bentley shouted “Stand-by torpedo tubes!” and then strained back to the wheelhouse voice-pipe. The engine-room bells were clanging before the torpedo-officer had reached his firing buttons on the side of the bridge.

“What speed, sir?” he shouted back over his shoulder.

“Nil,” Bentley returned, and was surprised to hear his voice so steady.

The other understood at once—if they crashed past the entrance at high speed they would have only a moment to loose their torpedoes, and then they would probably all hit the shore.

The torpedo-officer turned his head back to stare at the waxing flames, and his guts were churning beneath his belt. Bentley was going to fire his messengers with his ship stopped.

As she slid forward, and then stopped, *Wind Rode* was in full view of the battleship’s bow, which seemed to fill the entrance with

the plug of its size.

But no flare of flame spat at her, no shells whistled overhead or smashed with explosive force into her thin sides.

A midget facing a monster she stood there, spunky, magnificent in the audacity of her challenge.

The torpedo-officer pressed his ten buttons.

Someone was still in possession of his senses on the *Satsuma*.

Before the shoal hit, a single gun, probably of Bofors size, opened fire. The tracer curved out towards them from the stationary ship and beat in a vicious tattoo against the bridge.

In that almost unbearable pause while the torpedoes were running, two impressions remained printed on Bentley's memory—the torpedo-officer, the engineer of the *Satsuma's* fate, coughing up floods of blood at his feet, and, quite unrelated to this intimate tragedy, the enormous size of the ship facing him.

Then the eager torpedoes ended their short run against the battleship's side.

She had turned to port a little under the force of the mines' exploding, so that her starb'd bow was exposed to seaward. The torpedo-officer had aimed there, because it was all of her length that he could see. That section of bow was where the armour-plating ceased, the part which had caused Captain Yamato momentary concern on the dockside in Kure. And now it took the full force of a broadside of ten torpedoes.

Satsuma had received the ultimate in destroyer attack—the complete discharge of a complete set of tubes. It would not have mattered, even along her massive length, where they had hit—so long as they all hit together. This they did, for the distance was too short to allow of any spread spoiling their running.

Close on four tons of specially-designed high-explosive burst against a steel side already breached and weakened by the whaler's warheads. The disruptive effect was frightful. Bulkheads which were designed to stand, and would have stood up against salvo after salvo of battleships' shells were flattened under the concentrated blast which lifted her bodily from the water. She was a great ship, and she took in a commensurate tonnage of water. Her vast bow dipped, down until the four giant screws were spinning almost clear of the

water, gripless. With no power to guide or force her, she drifted sideways and came to a grinding stop against the resistant reef.

Bentley glared round and up to the director. The steel box was trained on the enemy, but *Wind Rode's* guns were silent. Even Mr. Lasenby had been jarred out of his customary vigilance by the magnitude of the tragedy unfolded before his magnified eyes. Bentley grabbed the phone from the windbreak and snarled:

“Lasenby! Open fire, damn you! Aim at the starb’d bow!”

He heard the gunner’s startled reply, and let the phone fall on its wire. Then he lifted his glasses again and stared at his enemy. She had taken a frightful punishment, but she was still afloat. The task he had set himself was so huge that nothing but complete success would justify its initiation. Inside those huge spaces which his torpedoes had opened up there should be in-flammables—petrol, perhaps. *Wind Rode's* shells would bounce off her upper-deck armour, but they might find an eager ally in those forward spaces.

They did. The destroyer had hauled off a little after the despatch of her torpedoes, but the range was still short for her guns. And it was one of her shells, a comparatively puny messenger weighing a mere forty-five pounds, which spelled the end of the mighty *Satsuma*. The forward side of her A-turret magazine had been blown inwards by the torpedo blast. Now, fifty feet below the upper-deck, a distance no bomb could have hoped to penetrate, one of *Wind Rode's* shells hurtled in and ended its flight against a case of cordite.

They had felt the explosion of the warheads going up as a soft brush against their faces; the torpedoes bursting had been like a slap; the *Satsuma's* forward magazines igniting unleashed cataclysmic displacement of air that heeled the destroyer over until her guardrails were awash. A wall of solid fire leaped upwards to the resounding heavens and a stunning roar beat against their eardrums. When it was over, inspection showed that the ears of every man on *Wind Rode's* bridge were bleeding from the lash of that explosion.

“Starb’d twenty,” Bentley ordered, “stand-by to pick up the first-lieutenant.”

The order, spoken in a voice which even its owner would not have recognised, a dozen banal, ordinary words, signalled the end of the mission.

The destroyer crept back down the shore until she was sheltered from the red glare in the entrance, and there she waited, men lining her side with ropes and eager hands. They had no trouble in detecting the absentee this time—he came towards them in a driving overarm stroke, the water fluttering up behind his feet. They hauled him gasping on to the deck and they heard the hum of the engine-room blowers rise swiftly to a high-pitched whine.

Before Randall had staggered on to the bridge *Wind Rode* was working, as she should have done earlier under superior orders, up to her utmost power.

The British Fleet made a fine picture, steaming proudly and unchallenged, across the breathing expanse of blue.

Wind Rode came up astern of them, like a naughty puppy who has found, through experience, that the maternal wing is safest after all. But the “mother” (to malign a beautiful word) of this brood was feeling anything but maternal at the return of this truant. *Wind Rode* was no sooner in sight than the signals started flashing.

“I don’t have to read that to know what it is,”—Randall grinned. There was a slight undertone of worry beneath the words.

“Nor I,” agreed Bentley, and he did not smile. He was dressed in his best khakis and his best cap; his shoes shone and his face gleamed, freshly-shaven. He waited for the yeoman to finish receiving, and he wondered again if he had done right in omitting to break wireless silence and inform the admiral of his success. What he had done to the *Satsuma* would be his sole defence, and there was no point, he had decided, in wasting his scanty ammunition. He took the signal.

“Flag to *Wind Rode*.” he read. “Come alongside. Commanding-officer repair on board.”

That was all, but it was enough.

“All right. Bob—nip down and get your little offering.”

Randall grinned, widely this time, and slipped below. He was after something he had handed to Bentley on the bridge as soon as he had returned from his swim. To the captain’s query as to how he came by it, Randall had explained:

“I bumped into him while I was swimming. Pulled me up with a round turn. The poor beggar must have been blown right out of the ship. I thought you’d like this as a souvenir.”

It would be more than a souvenir, Bentley thought grimly as he waited. It might be the thing to save his neck.

Now that his showdown with Palesy was imminent, he felt no qualms or tension. He knew that his jinx had been blown sky-high. His three waves had come at him, and he was still afloat. He brought her in beautifully, and handed over to Randall. For the second time in a few days he found himself chair borne, though this time he was headed for a somewhat more unpleasant interview.

An officer met him on the cruiser's fo'c'sle. Bentley tried to read something into the expression on his face, but the lieutenant-commander's expression was coldly polite. We don't mix with the condemned, Bentley thought wryly, and followed him along the wooden deck.

It was to be a full session, he saw as soon as he stepped into the admiral's cabin. The big room was filled with gold braid. This was a killing he had been waiting for, and the admiral was making sure the example he intended to make would be widely known.

Palesy was seated at a desk brought into the centre of the cabin. His officers stood behind him and at his side. As Bentley stepped in, some of them looked at him with curiosity, some with sympathy, and others showed their prejudging of him by staring at the deck. Palesy put out a fat finger and Bentley halted at its command, a few paces in front of the desk, still standing. "Lieutenant-Commander Bentley," Palesy said, and his voice was raspy. "This is an informal inquiry. I am holding it aboard the flagship because I consider it my duty to ascertain at once the degree of loyalty I command among my captains. Your normal court-martial will come later. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," answered Bentley calmly. One or two of the officers gazed curiously at the brown paper bag he held under his right arm, but most of them were watching his face.

Palesy leaned back a little in his chair. Both his hands were laid on the desk, the spatulate fingers spread out in a fan.

"Lieutenant-Commander Bentley, I sent you two signals, both of which ordered you to proceed with despatch to the assistance of a Liberty ship. You were ordered on that mission because your ship was placed in the most advantageous position to go to that vessel's assistance." He paused. "Did you receive and understand those two signals?"

“Yes, sir.” There was a slight shuffling in the ranks of officers.

“Very well, then. Did you make any attempt to obey the orders in those signals?”

“No, sir.”

Palesy cleared his throat. There was no other sound in the cabin. Now would come the question they all wanted to hear answered—why? But Rear-Admiral Palesy had not nearly finished his role of prosecutor and jury and judge.

“I will tell you what happened because of your failure to obey my orders, Lieutenant-Commander Bentley. The Liberty ship *Jacksonville* has sunk. Your action—or lack of it—left one hundred and eighty men afloat in hostile waters for four hours before a second destroyer I had to despatch reached them. It is probable that if that ship had not got there in time many of those American seamen would have perished. Most of them were held up only by life-jackets. You appreciate the seriousness of your offence? Apart, that is, from the even more serious fact that you deliberately failed to obey my orders?”

The reply came instantly, clearly, and calmly.

“Yes, sir.”

The calmness, the complete absence of contrition in that voice, stung Palesy more than outright defiance could have done. He lifted his pear-shaped head and his reddened bloodhound eyes glared full on Bentley.

The chiselled leanness of cheekbone and jaw of the young commander faced him unwaveringly, and yet with all its hardness there was an almost piratical impression of cynical humour about his face.

The look of him standing there infuriated Palesy. He slammed his open palm down on the desk with the sudden shock of a thunderclap.

“Damn you, man! Do you understand what you’ve done? How dare you stand before me and answer ‘Yes, sir,’ ‘No, sir!’ Hey? How dare you? Command one of my destroyers? You’re not fit to command a Chinese scow! You’ve lost a ship, understand? A fully operative, valuable merchant ship. You’ve lost a ship!” he repeated, and his voice had degenerated to a snarl.

It was enough, Bentley decided. The fool had had his pleasure. He had deliberately postponed hearing his explanations. He had asked for it. Now he would get it.

A crisp, commanding voice cut into Palesy's eardrums.

"Yes, sir," it said, "I have lost a merchant ship. And you have gained a battleship!"

He pulled the contents from his paper bag and threw it on the desk.

Palesy had drawn back a little under the lash in Bentley's voice. He sat there rigidly in his chair, his fingers now on the edge of the desk, staring at what Bentley had thrown down before him. The officers, careless of discipline and courtesy, strained forward and stared with him. They were looking at a salt-stained navel seaman's cap. Its band was still in place, and on it, turning green, but still perfectly legible, were the Japanese characters.

"Translated, sir, it's *Satsuma*" Bentley said.

There percolated into Palesy's sluggish brain some sense of drama, some prescience of irrefutable justification in that wrinkled sailor's cap lying mutely on his desk. His eyes lifted slowly up Bentley's length to his face. He said, his teeth close together, "*Satsuma*? What ship is that?"

It was then Bentley knew he had won. His action in throwing the cap down like that would normally have resulted in instant condemnation—from a normal officer.

"*Satsuma*" he said, and now every eye was riveted on his face, "is the name of Japan's newest battleship. She is—or was—the giant ship mentioned by the fishermen brought aboard this ship. I would estimate her at being something close to sixty-thousand tons. That estimate will be verified by my first-lieutenant, who got a close look at her from the edge of the harbour. She was, as predicted, in the harbour of Coffin Island, and I presume she was there undergoing trials."

He stopped. A voice came from behind Palesy's chair. It was the lean-faced cruiser captain.

"She *was* in Coffin Harbour? You mean... you sank her?"

Bentley waited a brief moment. Palesy did not speak, only kept his eyes on Bentley—waiting, like the others, for his reply.

“Yes, sir,” Bentley answered, and he addressed the captain. “It was due largely to my first-lieutenant, who exploded a couple of spare warheads under her bow as she came out. Then I fired my full salvo of torpedoes. I think they all hit. After that a lucky shell, aimed through the hole, exploded her forrard magazine.”

The room was still silent when he ended. But he could feel the questions quivering on their lips for expression. What in heaven was the first-lieutenant of a destroyer doing ashore on the edge of the harbour? How did he explode *warheads* beneath her bow? How could a destroyer hit with a full salvo?

But Bentley had had enough. He had been sustained for two days now solely on the strength of his nervous will power. Suddenly he felt enormously tired. He leaned forward and took up the cap.

“Do you mind, sir? Memento. I am sorry I had to disobey your orders, sir. I acted on the assumption that a battleship was more important than a Liberty ship.”

Palesy looked at him. “Why,” he said, and his voice was a deep thwarted growl in his throat, “didn’t you reveal this before?”

Bentley’s face was respectful. You could push anything too far...

“If you mean, sir, why didn’t I make my report as soon as the action had occurred, I thought it best not to break wireless silence. I was still in an enemy zone.” The cruiser captain allowed his face to twitch a little. “If you mean why didn’t I reveal it earlier in this cabin, sir, I would not presume to interrupt the course of your investigation.”

He finished, and stuffed the cap back in the bag. The crackle of the paper was loud in the silence. It was broken by a voice.

“With your permission, sir,” the cruiser captain said, and his voice was clear and hard, “I think Lieutenant-Commander Bentley could return to his ship. He looks a little strained, and he will have a full report to prepare.”

Bentley thanked him with his eyes. Then he looked at the admiral. Palesy drummed with his fingers on the desk. He did not look up.

“Very well. You may go, Bentley. And—er—well done.”

Bentley had his cap off. He brought his heels to attention, looking down into Palesy’s unresponsive face. It was the last he was to see of him. Three weeks later Rear-Admiral Coulter returned to his command of the Fleet.

“Thank you, sir,” Bentley murmured, and turned and walked from the room.

It was two days afterwards that the Fleet came to anchor in Manus harbour. Bentley expected, and at once accepted, the invitation to dine that evening aboard the flotilla-leader. He found Sainsbury waiting for him at the gangway, and he found himself hard put to keep up with the old man as he hurried forward to his sea-cabin. Sainsbury barely waited until his guest was seated with a whisky and cigarette before he burst out:

“You’ve still got your ship?”

Bentley looked at him, a smile on his straight lips. He thought of dangling his host along a little, but the old chap’s concern was too deep for that. Bentley’s smile widened, and he said:

“Yes, sir, there’ll be no trouble. I put the Nelsonian telescope on the Nelsonian eye, and it came off. But never again!”

Sainsbury leaned back in a slow expiration of breath. He had had no chance, except through a signal which could have been read by the Fleet, of finding out what had happened.

“All right,” he said, “let’s have it.” It did not take long in the telling, for Sainsbury’s experience could fill in the gaps readily, and vividly, enough.

“So you gave a practical demonstration of my lecture,” he said when Bentley had finished. “Do you think your officers benefited by the experience?”

“And how!” Bentley exclaimed, and grinned at his own vehemence. “They’ll shy away from torpedo attacks as long as they live!”

Sainsbury allowed himself a quarter smile. That was something. He said slowly, over the tips of his joined fingers:

“Coffin Island? It would be interesting to know how the island came by such a macabre name.”

“I don’t know who named it first,” Bentley said, “but it’s certainly Coffin Island now! And that’s something I’ll never forget.”

He shook his head in a gesture that was almost a shudder. Then he held up his whisky glass.

“Have you run out of this stuff?” he grinned, and look suggestively at the steward’s buzzer.

THE END

COFFIN ISLAND

"Cruisers altering to make their firing run, Sir."

Bentley swung his head. There they were, the flagship leaning well over as she heeled under full rudder. As they watched, the two other ships altered course at the exact spot where the leader had turned, so that now they were racing along, still one astern of the other, but now broadside on to the beach. From Wind Rode they could see the four big turrets on each cruiser swing round further until each gun was sniffing at the beach.

"Hold onto your hat," Randall growled, his voice gruff to hide the excitement that surged in him.

Then the cruisers' sides broke into flame and smoke as they hurled their mighty projectiles toward the shore of what would come to be known in the Japanese army as Coffin Island.



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

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

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

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