



Chapter 9 Gibraltar

Lane arrived at the Rock of Gibraltar in October 1940. Because the proprietors were sensitive to any interference by outsiders, he was listed as a temporarily inactive airman sent for recuperation. He would not be allowed to fly, and would not offer any criticism of existing facilities or policies. He would serve in whatever capacity to which it was convenient to assign him, and when he completed his recovery he would return to England to rejoin his unit. In short, he was represented as exactly what he was: a disabled airman who needed to be parked somewhere away from his unit until he was able to resume full activity. That way he could not interfere with the efficiency of his unit, or endanger his fellow airmen by being too eager to get back into the air.

The fact that Gibraltar was right next to Spain was officially irrelevant. No one here knew Lane's personal motive for being here. No one except Bader, who would not tell. Lane smiled, thinking of that. Bader had done him an enormous favor, and earned his lifetime loyalty thereby. But Bader had also succeeded in making him take the inactive time required, willingly. Bader had put it all together. That was his genius.

Gibraltar was impressive from the air. It was geologically a "bill," or projection from land, the opposite of a fjord or inlet. Lane, unused to being a passenger instead of a pilot, nevertheless appreciated the chance to gaze at it with his whole attention. The thing was like a sleeping two-humped camel, its head down out of sight. The higher hump was to the north, to his surprise; he had somehow thought the rock rose to its southernmost extremity, then plunged into the sea. That was far from the case; the rise was nearly vertical at the north, just below the isthmus that connected it to the mainland, and tapered down to the sea at the south. The east side was too steep for use, but the west had roads and buildings all along its gentler slope. Several great moles reached out from the west to enclose the harbor. They served as the port for Force H, the British naval group consisting of the battle cruiser Hood, the battleships Resolution and Valiant, the aircraft carrier Ark Royal, several other cruisers, and fleet destroyers. The Eighth Submarine Flotilla was also here. The fighter planes served to protect these assorted ships. Lane had reviewed it all, and now was seeing it come to life.

Had he likened the peninsula to a sleeping camel? No, as the angle of approach shifted he saw the sharp ridges at its top, and the slanted water catchments on the eastern slope. The ridge was after all highest at the southern part, before commencing its slant. The Rock was more like a great ship, a monstrous three-mile-long battleship, no, a carrier ship, with its superstructure off to one side to make space for the landing decks. And that was what it was, essentially: a mighty dreadnought neither battleship nor carrier, but a colossal attack ship docked for the moment at the continent, about to set off for some unimaginable voyage. If he had to be out of his airplane and on a ship, this was the ship to be on.

Historically, he had learned, Gibraltar had been reckoned as one of the Pillars of Hercules, the great rocks guarding the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. The other Pillar was the Spanish Ceuta on the North African coast. The ancient Phoenician mariners were said to have crowned the rocks with silver columns to mark the limits of safe navigation. In the eighth century A.D. the Moslems had fortified Gibraltar after invading Spain. In the fourteenth century it was captured by the Castilians, but soon regained by the Moors, who held it for more than another century. It finally passed into the hands of the British early in the eighteenth century, who had held it against all comers. Now they had deepened the harbor and built a new airfield on it, making it more formidable than ever. Spain had wanted possession of the Rock for centuries, but was unlikely to get it.



So today the British held Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus, and effectively controlled the Mediterranean Sea from end to end. The center of British strategy was Malta, but Gibraltar was a staging area for the convoys to that island, and its carrier-based Hurricanes protected those convoys. Oh, to be in one of those Hurricanes! But if Gibraltar were ever wrested from the British, the others would follow, and the Axis would control the region. That was why it was so important to defend the Rock; the ultimate security of the region might well depend on it.

They circled around and came down on the landing strip on the northern isthmus. It looked pitifully short; he would recommend that it be lengthened if they want to do any serious flying from it.

They drove into the town on the west slope, where Lane reported to the residence of the governor. "Here you are, sir," the driver said, pulling up at the south edge of town. "The Convent."

"There must be some misunderstanding," Lane said. "I can't go to a convent!"

The man laughed. "That's the Government House! It's always been called the Convent, because that's what it was when it started."

So it turned out to be. Lane found the necessary office within, registered, and was then taken to a temporary residence elsewhere in town.

He gazed out toward the west. The water of the bay was dark, but there were lights along the moles and along the mainland farther away. There were also small craft moving about with searchlights playing across the water. It was pretty, but he was sure they weren't doing it for fun. What were they looking for?

Then he heard muffled explosions, as if fireworks were being detonated under the water. This merely increased the mystery. They were definitely up to something.

In the morning he returned to the Convent to inquire about his assignment. He assumed that he would be put on a work detail or something similar; it might not be fun, but it would be useful. He had no special illusions about the fate of a grounded airman, and expected to be treated as something of an outcast. He had in effect asked for it, by transferring away from his home unit.

All he got was a bland assurance that something would be found; he would be notified in due course. As the days passed and no notification came, he realized that he was in bureaucratic limbo.

"What's going on here?" he asked a bunkmate. "Don't tell me there are no junk details on Gibraltar!"

"The minds of administrative officials are inscrutable in their stupidity," the man said. "But my guess is that they're distracted by the chariots."

"The what?"

"It's an Italian horror. We didn't even know what was going on, until one of them washed up on the beach. A chariot is a torpedo ridden by two men in diving suits. It's got a large explosive warhead that they can detach and fix to the target ship. Then the crew rides the torpedo away before the timer blows it. Nobody's supposed to know they've been there, until it's too late. Except that one of them got stuck in silt under the harbor; it blew, and we knew something was up, and got on it and captured the



men and learned all about it."

Lane did not have to inquire why the Italians had given the information. Geneva conventions were honored by both sides in word rather than deed. What was called torture when the enemy did it was called interrogation when the home team did it. It was better simply to answer the questions and come away with one's health.

"So that's why the night motor launches, and searchlights, and the small explosions," Lane said. "To get rid of the chariots. Those small charges are just enough to kill any personnel that might be down there."

"You got it. They're laying barbed wire on the bottom, too, and adding torpedo nets. It's hell down there."

Lane believed it. The appearance of the nocturnal bay was lovely, but the reality was ugly. The war was being fought here out of sight, but was as serious as it was elsewhere.

He settled in to the routine. There was nothing for him to do, so he applied for a passport to visit Spain and meanwhile explored the Rock. Could it really hold out against a real attack?

The defenses were even more formidable than he had thought. The walls of the Rock were hollowed out, forming galleries at various levels. In those embrasures were heavy cannon and anti-aircraft guns. Any frontal assault would be tremendously costly, if it succeeded at all.

On the second day Lane walked the road that circled the peninsula, searching for any possible weakness in the defenses. He had already concluded that there was none, but he had the foolish notion that he might make himself useful by spotting something that had so far been missed. He enjoyed traversing the tunnels that took over when the slope was too steep to support the road.

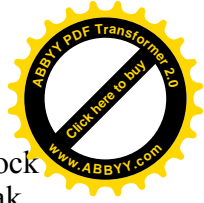
One morning there was a solid fog, making everything clammy. "What is this, England?" Lane demanded humorously.

"It's the Levanter Cloud," one of the workers told him.

"The what?"

"The east wind, called the Levanter, prevails. It sweeps across the warm Mediterranean. The warm air strikes the rock and rises up the east face to maybe fifteen hundred feet, where it cools and forms a cloud. It's worst in summer, up to September, but it can happen anytime. Sometimes it shrouds us and spreads right across to the mainland. When it's really heavy it's like living in a Turkish bath. We say the rock is wearing its hat. Sometimes it generates gusting winds, and we get little waterspouts."

Lane's irritation with the fog was replaced by intrigue. This was a more interesting place than he had thought. This was just as well, because without a regular job to do, and without many of the amenities of civilian life, boredom was a more immediate threat than the Axis. There were no women to speak of here; they had been moved out because of concern that the rock would come under siege. The men from the naval vessels that constantly stopped here were loud in their objection to this aspect. They expected to avail themselves of the pleasures of the female flesh, as they routinely did in every port, and could not. That meant considerable discontent, which found its own expression. Fights were frequent, and drinking and gambling were heavy.



Lane climbed the heights. It wasn't as if he could fancy himself the first man there, because Rock Gun was the name of the highest point, with its gun emplacement: twin 9.2 inchers. On the other peak were the ruins of the old Moorish castle, surely no match for that artillery. So there had been plenty of action at these heights. Still, it gave him a certain feeling of freedom and accomplishment, and the view was good.

The Greeks had believed that this was the end of the world. At least that was the implication of Homer's description in the *Iliad*: "Styx in her glorious house, roofed over with long rocks, propped up to heaven all around with silver pillars." St. Michael's Cave, here, contained a large underground freshwater lake, ice cold and black, surrounded by stalactites and stalagmites. Water dripped from the rocks of the Rock, freshened by its passage through the stone. Surely word of this had reached the Greeks, perhaps by way of the Phoenicians, and it had become part of their lore. Today that internally dripping water was less romantic; aluminum Nissen huts and other prefabricated shelters were erected inside the tunnels and caverns so that the occupants did not get "rained" on.

The history of the Rock extended farther back than that, however. The first Neanderthal skull was discovered on Gibraltar. It was female, and as the luck of the gender would have it, was dismissed as not a serious find. They assumed that it was merely a deformed modern skull. Nine years later there was another discovery of the species at Neander in the Rhine Valley near Dusseldorf, in Germany, and so it was named for this. Thus Gibraltar Woman missed her opportunity for fame. With the women gone from the Rock now, it was easy to suppose that it was because of that neglect: the first woman was annoyed.

The first woman. Actually the Neanderthals were not necessarily the ancestors of modern man; they might more properly be considered close cousins. But the thought of a woman, even a grotesque Neanderthal one (but who could say for sure? Maybe she was cute) reminded him of his private reason for being here. It was because of a woman.

Where was Quality Smith now? Her letters had stopped, and that surely meant trouble. She would have written to him if it were humanly possible. He had to find out what had happened to her.

But it was evident that the Spanish government was not rushing to issue him a passport. He had been warned that the bureaucracy of such nations was horrendous. It might take months, or it might be never. So what was he going to do?

He asked around, unofficially, and found out. It was possible to visit the mainland. Twice a week knowledgeable and nifty and desperate seamen bought rides with a local smuggler named Jorge. Their interest was the brothels of La Linea, but the trader hardly cared what they did as long as they paid him well enough.

Jorge was a Spanish given name, a common one, the equivalent of the English George but pronounced more like Hor-hee. Lane went to meet the man, understanding that news of any of this must never reach the British officers. The officers surely knew all about it, but did not interfere as long as things were handled discreetly. Fortunately Jorge spoke enough English so that they could communicate.

They bargained, and finally agreed on a price. It was of course exorbitant, and it would leave his wallet thin, but considering the value of such a trip, it was worth it. He would pay half to take him safely out, and half to bring him safely back. The trader's greed would keep him honest; this was a good additional business for him.



He was ready on Jorge's next trading night, dressed in Spanish peasant clothing. "More dirt," Jorge said, rubbing some in. "You are the lowliest of workers, paid as little as I can get away with."

They approached the boat. "I will get out and take my money and empty boxes to my friend," Jorge said. He meant his contact in the smuggling trade. "You will be my assistant. You will carry for me. Then I will send you back to watch the boat, but in the dark you will go where you wish, and I will speak to you as I leave for my own house, as if you are there. In four days I will be here again, and call to you to stay with the boat; then you will go to it. But if you do not come, I will not wait; I will pretend you are there, so no one suspects. This is all I can do."

"If I am not there, it will be my own fault," Lane agreed.

"Now the money."

"Now half the money." Lane gave the man the sheaf of bills. "My companion will meet us when we return in three days, and he will have the other half. If I am not with you, he will not pay you." Lane was of course not going to carry the money with him; it had to be secure against betrayal.

The man nodded. It was fair.

They got into the craft, which was a stand-up rowboat. Jorge showed Lane how to do it, and they took turns rowing. There was a dim lantern hung on the bow, so that no one would mistake the craft for anything else. This excursion might be unofficial, but it was not secret; the guns of the British were not kind to secrets near their shore.

"Now be properly servile," he said as they approached the Spanish shore. "They must not suspect otherwise."

Then, as Lane rowed diligently, the trader started exclaiming. "No, no, dolt, *that way!* Keep it moving! Must I do everything myself? Have you never rowed a boat before?"

Lane smiled in the dark. He would have been angry, were he anything other than a servant--or a spy. It was the perfect camouflage.

They came to land, and a dark figure hauled them in. "You bring a friend, this time, Jorge," he remarked.

"No, I bring a British spy!" Jorge retorted. "What do you think?"

The man laughed. "Well, don't let him steal my treasures!"

Jorge loaded Lane with boxes and led him to the house. The light inside was dim. He set them down on the table. Now Jorge would settle with his supplier for the value of the goods he had moved, and make a deal for more for the next trip. "Go back and watch the boat," Jorge snapped at Lane. "I will call you when I want you."

Meekly, Lane obeyed. He left the house and walked toward the shore. No one went with him; it was all a pose in case any Spanish authorities were near. When he was reasonably sure he was unobserved, he strode away from the boat and lost himself among the bushes near the shore.



He waited, and in due course the trader emerged from the house. He walked to the boat. "Push on, idiot!" he cried. "Do you think we have all night?" And it did seem as if there was a separate figure there with him. Jorge's voice continued as the boat moved away, giving insulting instructions to his assistant. The man had done his job--if he hadn't secretly betrayed Lane to the Spanish.

No one came out searching. It seemed to be all right. Lane moved out cautiously. When he found a more secure place, he opened the pack he had carried in the form of a large belly and took out the Spanish civilian worker's suit. Spain was still suffering from the ravages of its civil war; there were many men looking for work. He would be just one more of them.

First he had to rent a car. Jorge had told him where to go for black market business of any type. He went there, and got a battered but sound car. He familiarized himself with its controls, and set off. With luck he might make Barcelona in a day, and with further luck be able to run down the address of the Quaker center there. Then if he could find someone who spoke English, who knew Quality--

He closed his minds to all the luck he might need. He simply had to find out. Quality was his fiancée!

But it was a hellish drive, because of the delays. Why couldn't the Spaniards keep up their roads better! He kept having to reverse and backtrack to avoid untenable routes. Meanwhile the night was passing.

Then it got worse: on one of his backtracks, he saw another car parked sideways across the road, blocking it. Someone was after him! But who could know he was here? Even Jorge the Smuggler hadn't known where he was going. So it was more likely some kind of highway robber, hoping to clean him out.

Lane came to a stop, turned out his lights, drew his pistol, checked it, and tucked it under his jacket where it wouldn't show. He did not want to have to use it, but he had no intention of being robbed or killed. Had something like this happened to Quality? She had been doing a lot of driving, her letters said.

He got out and approached the figure standing by the other car. The man saw him in the early light and called out a query in Spanish.

"I don't speak Spanish," Lane responded in English. He put his hand inside his shirt, grasping the pistol. If there were any threatening gesture--

"Lane!" the man exclaimed. Lane was astounded. He knew that voice. It was Ernst Best!

Amazed, they embraced. Then they talked, getting things straight. As it turned out, this was a stroke of luck for each of them, because Ernst needed to make a report to his superiors on the defenses of Gibraltar, and Lane needed someone he could trust to check on Quality. So they made a deal of sorts, and separated friends. Lane was relieved. Quality and Ernst had not gotten along well together, but Ernst did know her, and would do his best for her.

When Jorge set off again, Lane was there. He got on the boat without event, and helped row the boat back.



They were met at the other landing. Jorge was paid the other half of his fare, and was well satisfied.

Time passed. Lane's passport never did come through, though that no longer mattered. Neither did his transfer back to England. Apparently his orders had gotten lost in the shuffle of the war, and so he remained where he was. Finally he went to the Convent on his own and asked to be assigned to something useful for the duration.

"It shall be taken under advisement," the clerk informed him. And of course nothing happened. Lane had to be content with doing a lot of reading at the library. He also gave the newspapers thorough perusal. He learned a tremendous amount about the history of Gibraltar and the current progress of the war, as well as getting quite sharp on the daily crossword puzzles.

In January 1941 the German 10th Air Corps was transferred from Norway to Sicily. Lane knew that meant trouble for Malta, because it was close to Sicily and the German pilots were highly experienced in naval warfare. They were going to try to take out that island stronghold, and stood a fair chance of doing it. Lane had a lot of respect for air power, but wasn't sure the British forces of the Mediterranean theater had enough respect for it, yet. They thought they could just shoot down any plane that came over. They were apt to receive a hard education.

In February, before the German airmen were fully established in Sicily, Force H left Gibraltar. It looked like another convoy operation, but Lane hoped it was going to make a pre-emptive attack on the Sicilian installations. Instead it avoided the Italian battle fleet, which tried to intercept it, and attacked the north Italian city of Genoa. The battleship bombarded the city with fifteen inch shells. It blasted aircraft factories, marshaling yards, and port installations, while the carrier *Ark Royal* loosed its aircraft along the shore, and mined the entrances to several ports. The operation was a huge success, and there was a tremendous ovation as Force H returned to Gibraltar.

Almost immediately after that, Force H moved out again, this time into the Atlantic to harass the German fleet. Then it settled down to work to keep the supply convoys coming. Lane wished he could have a fighter plane aboard the carrier, but he remained grounded and ignored.

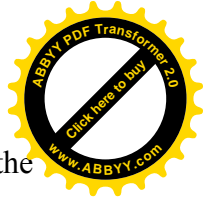
The battle of Malta commenced. A hundred and fifty German bombers attempted to blast the island into rubble, while force H struggled to keep the defenders supplied. Now they had respect for air power! German bombers and Italian torpedo planes came at it, but the *Ark Royal's* fighters broke up the attack formations in much the way Bader's fighters had done in England.

On April 6, Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece. Suddenly it was getting even hotter in the Mediterranean. But Force H fought its way through, and the supplies were delivered. Malta survived.

On May 14 General The Viscount Gort assumed the Governorship of Gibraltar. He had been the commander of the British Expeditionary Forces in France, and he stressed the need for full wartime preparedness.

Lane seized his chance. He reported to the Convent again, demanding one minute with the General. "I served in France," he said. "I saw what lack of preparation cost us. Then I served in England, with Bader. I have experience! If I can't fly, at least let me do something useful."

Gort nodded. "We can use you, Airman." The interview was over.



This time there was follow-through. Lane was assigned to the group studying the situation of the northern runway. "This thing is way too short," he said. "Sure, your planes can use it now. But it's a different matter when they have to scramble in a hurry. You need more parking space to the sides, and efficient access, so that you can get full squadrons up without delay. The Germans can come without much warning, and then every second will count. The fighters have to get out fast!"

They agreed, and General Gort was advised. At last Lane was feeling useful again. He had told Ernst that the Rock was virtually impregnable, but this was one of its chief weaknesses: inadequate facilities for fast scrambling. Now he was doing something about it.

Meanwhile, the war continued. Force H went out again, to the Atlantic, and took on the great German battleship *Bismarck*. A torpedo from one of the carrier's planes finally jammed the German ship's steering gear, crippling it so that it could be dispatched May 26.

In June Germany invaded Russia. Lane and the others were amazed. It had seemed that the thrust was to be against England. Germany had signed a pact with the Communists! Why was it taking on a new enemy when it didn't have to? Adolf Hitler seemed to have shot himself in the foot!

In October General Gort received authorization to extend and pave the runway. The project turned out to be far more extensive than Lane had hoped. They extended the runway out west into the bay. This required a tremendous amount of fill material. Some of it came from rock tunneled from the interior, but most of it was taken from the slopes of the North Face. There was quarry blasting, and powerful hoses were used to bring down the sand, gravel and rock.

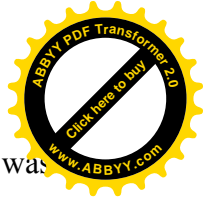
The work continued for a year, and the runway kept lengthening. Finally it was just over fifteen hundred yards long, and a hundred and fifty feet wide, with extensive parking areas on either side. Lane had urged better space for aircraft, but this was phenomenal. What was the general up to?

Meanwhile the German aircraft disappeared from the Mediterranean theater. There was no mystery here: they were being used in the invasion of Russia. Force H no longer had any difficulty reinforcing and supplying Malta. But when winter stalled the offensive in Russia, the German planes and submarines returned to the Mediterranean. This time the siege was to be worse than before.

The German General Rommel was moving in Africa, driving for the Suez Canal in Egypt. It seemed that Hitler was determined to destroy British power in the Mediterranean, so that Rommel could complete his mission without British harassment. Now the fury of a competent campaign manifested, in contrast to the Italians' somewhat fumbling efforts. On November 13 a German submarine sank the *Ark Royal* as Force H was returning to Gibraltar from a patrol. Suddenly the folk of the Rock felt the full consequence of war.

On December 11 Germany declared war on the United States of America. Lane had been in this war all along; now he knew that all his countrymen were in it too. He hoped that Quality was not in further trouble because of it; if she had been taken by the Germans, she would now be an enemy prisoner. But he tried not to think about Quality, because there was only pain and emptiness there. It was getting harder to convince himself that she remained alive. Had he not been confined to a place of no women, his constancy might have been tested.

The opening of the Pacific theater was similarly grim. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, inflicting devastating losses and effectively destroying American sea power there. In February 1942 the British lost Singapore, and then Burma. There seemed to be no good news anywhere.



But it was the Second Battle of Malta that concerned the personnel of Gibraltar. General Gort was transferred to the command of Malta. Force H left to escort the force that seized Madagascar in a preventive action so that the Japanese could not establish themselves there. Force W came to the Rock instead, and it included the American carrier USS Wasp, equipped with spitfires. It was like a taste of home, for Lane.

Several convoys fought their way through to Malta during the spring and summer of 1942. That was the appropriate description: fought. The Germans were doing their best to close off that sea, and inflicted heavy losses on the merchant ships and their escorts. In one case, the American tanker Ohio finally made it through--crewed by British sailors, held up by a destroyer lashed to either side, the sole survivor of that convoy.

But now America was mobilizing her considerable resources, and her presence was being increasingly felt. The Allied counteroffensive was developing. The plan was first to attack the soft underbelly of Europe through the Mediterranean. North Africa would be occupied, and used as a springboard to drive Italy out of the war. But before the American forces entered the Mediterranean, they wanted to be sure that Gibraltar, the guardian of the Straits, was secure. That remained the linchpin; had the Germans been able to take out Gibraltar, none of this would have been possible, and the German situation would have been virtually impregnable.

Gibraltar was also to provide air cover for the invasion fleets. Now the reason for the huge expansion of the runway became clear: Gibraltar was to be the base for Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa. It would provide air cover for the troopships, as well as being the major port for the fleets. Nearly four hundred aircraft of various types were crammed into the dispersal areas around the Gibraltar runway. Fighters had been shipped in crates and were assembled on the airfield. One hundred sixty eight American pilots came to be housed in the RAF messes at North Front. Lane felt a curious ambivalence: he was American, but he had flown for the R.A.F., so did not really identify with his countrymen. But he was able to help orient them, because he knew the American slang and could cut through misunderstandings.

Meanwhile it seemed that the Allies were watching Spain somewhat apprehensively. Lane knew why, thanks to his background research done during his extended idleness. Spain was officially neutral, but leaned toward the Axis, and Spain could cut off the Strait at any time. They did not want to give Spain any pretext to enter the war. They knew that the Germans would be urging General Franco to do just that, cutting the Allied line and attacking Gibraltar. Spain had once had a great empire, and Spanish Morocco was the last remnant of it; if Franco thought that was threatened, he might indeed act. So the Allies did several things to discourage this: they made the Americans the major partners in the effort, because America had no territorial ambitions here; they encouraged a more generous flow of food and commodities to Spain through the Allied blockade; they attempted no occupation of Spanish territory; and they proceeded without seeming hesitation with overwhelming force. Lane knew that these were signals General Franco understood, and he did elect to remain neutral. Still, it was nervous business.

But there was one more concern. Intelligence had learned that Hitler did have a plan for marching through Spain, called *Ilona*. If Franco allowed that, then the Nazis themselves would control the Strait, and Gibraltar would be under immediate siege. So they tricked the Nazis by making it seem that the buildup at Gibraltar was for another major effort to relieve Malta. Also, Franco had agreed to enter the war only if Rommel reached the Suez Canal, which would virtually assure the axis victory in the Mediterranean. But Rommel had not reached it, so Spain did not allow the Germans to march through Spanish territory. Since the Germans did not want to invade Spain--why antagonize a friend?--they let it go. That was to make all the difference.



Force H returned. Then in November America's General Eisenhower arrived and took over command of the Rock. On the following days the landing on the Algerian coast proceeded. The counteroffensive had begun, and Gibraltar was its key. Lane, his records seemingly lost in the bureaucratic morass, remained in the war after all.

But what had happened to Quality? Had Ernst found her, and if so, what had he been able to do to help her? This concern almost nullified Lane's satisfaction with the progress of the war.

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