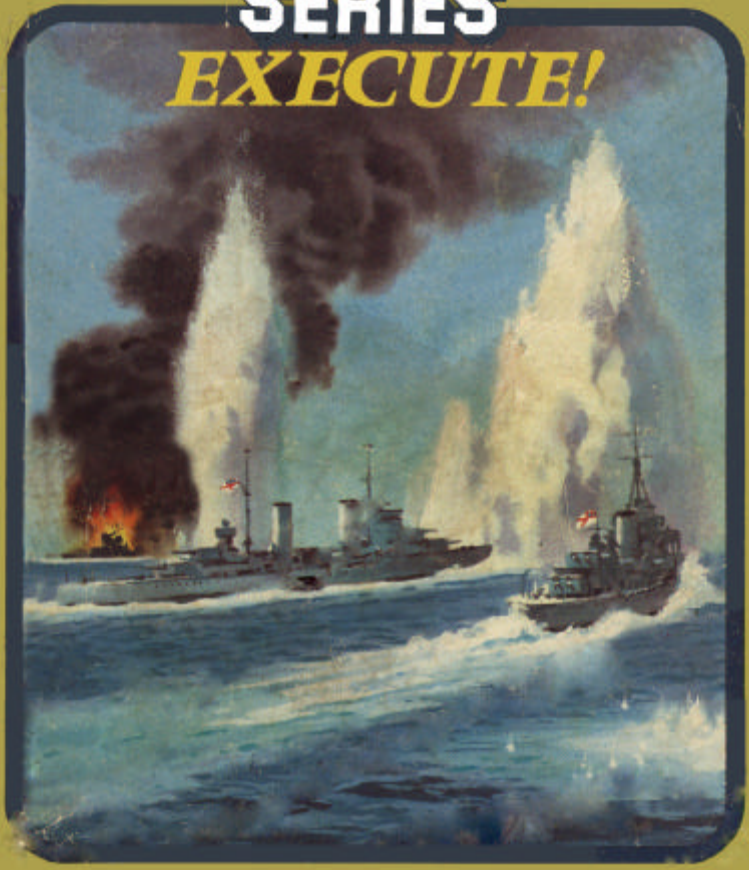
J. E. MACDONNELL #96

COLLECTOR'S SERIES

EXECUTE!



The Return Of Captain Sainsbury

Bruce Thornton Sainsbury, veteran of many of the early stories written by J.E. Macdonnell, here returns in league with Peter Bentley on a mission to run interference for an American task force.

To cover a planned invasion, these two men lead the men and their ships into the dangerous seas between the enemy and the American armada.

Their job: To report the approach of enemy ships: to delay and confuse: to engage if necessary: to destroy if possible: to succeed at any cost.

But heroic missions can sometimes fail,
just as heroic men sometimes die.

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

THE COLLECTOR'S SERIES MAKES A COMPLETE NUMBERED PAPERBACK LIBRARY SET OF J.E. MACDONNELL'S CLASSIC BEST SELLING NAVAL ADVENTURE NOVELS

ISBN 0 7255 1756 1

Index

Chapter One **6**

Chapter Two **20**

Chapter Three **29**

Chapter Four **39**

Chapter Five **55**

Chapter Six **61**

Chapter Seven **96**

Chapter Eight **115**

Characters: 191472
Words: 39959
Sentences: 3464
Paragraphs: 1534

Excute!

J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

Distributed by: Cap_One Productions © August 2002 (Ver1.0)
Find me on Undernet in channels: 0-day-warez
Bringing Australian Authors to the world.
Programs Used: Adobe PageMaker 7, Acrobat Writer, ABBYY FineReader, Adobe Photoshop 7.
This is a pre-release: the only checking has been by FineReader & PageMaker on any spelling errors, when there is time I will be read the book again and check it against the original

Typeset by Cap_One, Australia.
Published in Australia by Adobe PageMaker 7, Printed by Adobe Acrobat
Distributed by #bookz and other undernet ebook channels

Distributed by Horwitz Grahame Books Pty Ltd,
506 Millet Street, Cammeray, 2062and
Gordon & Gotch Limited.
114 William Street, Melbourne, 3000, Australia

Classic Edition 1978
Collectors Edition 1984

National Library of Australia Card No.
and ISBN 0 7255 1758 1

Printed in Australia by
The Dominion Press-Hedges & Bell
Victoria

*Recommended price only

CHAPTER ONE

MOON over Mindanao. A fat yellow moon sailing slowly down to its rest in the west. A lovely moon, like you see in the travel posters, luring you up into the tropics. Still diffusing plenty of light, making of the sea a glinting silvery field. Making the destroyer's grey upperworks frosted silver. Plain as hell.

"Blast that bloody moon," muttered Lieutenant-Commander Benson.

In its light he could clearly see the mountainous edge of Mindanao's eastern seaboard, and unpleasantly in his mind was the awareness that while he could see, he could be seen.

"Repeat, sir?" said the navigating officer quickly.

Benson moved one hand slightly in denial. Pilot relaxed —insofar as a navigating officer could with his ship hunting a submarine. Pilot kept his eyes occasionally on the compass and his ears constantly on the asdic speaker.

Benson moved to the chart table and laid his forearms across its top. There are some captains who are detested by their men. This type of officer is either naturally bitchy, or else unsure of himself. Sailors can with great accuracy detect both faults. Benson was one of the most universally liked captains in the Service.

He was rather a chubby fellow—liking food and eschewing all forms of exercise other than that unavoidably inflicted upon him by a destroyer's lively movements in a seaway. As for his face, it was most pleasant and genial. You liked him at once, and first impressions were proven correct.

He was a casual sort of fellow; not in dress, like a somewhat careless captain presently based and restfully asleep far away in Darwin, but in his attitude to worry and danger. Perhaps unflappable would describe him more correctly. He also happened to know his job. But then his ship Witch, a modern Fleet destroyer of almost 2000 tons, was a unit of Captain Peter Bentley's flotilla, and that should be enough to indicate Benson's professional competence.

He was young by normal standards, twenty-eight, but abnormally aged and matured by responsibility, experience and the harsh game in which he had been engaged for the past four years. Right now, at

three in the morning, he was feeling tired. Stiff, too, from hours of sitting on the damned stool in the corner, whose top was made of bare hard wood. He left the chart table and wandered over to the binnacle.

Sure of himself, Benson yawned in company, and then he said:

"What d'you think, old boy?"

Professionally, Pilot was stamped from that same mould which had produced so many of his kind, but one aspect of his character had not, and never would, change. He was aged twenty-five, and he had the lugubriousness of an arthritic man of seventy.

"Dunno, sir."

Benson's mouth twisted. The day you got Pilot's real feelings with your first question would be an occasion for wonder, or else he was direly ill. With nothing better to do, Benson persisted.

"Oh, come on. Surely to God you've been thinking of other things than your damned courses and soundings and reefs?"

"Well, as a matter of fact..."

Benson waited. The signal yeoman, with nothing at all to do, waited. Pilot looked at the compass, then raised his gaunt face and looked into the heavens.

"The suspense is killing me," said Benson.

"Sorry, sir, I was just thinking ..."

"What, for the love of Mike?"

"That we're wasting our time."

Benson had come to this conclusion half an hour ago. He said:

"What makes you think that?"

"Three things."

After a moment's silence Benson said, "Let's have 'em, then, in order of preference."

"Yes, sir. First, we were the only ship in the flotilla to gain a contact. Second, it was a weak, fuzzy contact.

Third," Pilot said, shaking his head despondently, "I don't think it was a submarine at all."

All without a pause ... Benson looked at him admiringly before saying:

"By George, Pilot, I believe you're right."

"Thank you, sir,", said Pilot mournfully.

Benson rubbed his hands together. “Right. What’s the flotilla’s estimated position?”

On this subject Benson expected, and got, a quick answer.

“Bearing southeast of us, sir, seventy-five miles.”

Benson checked his watch. Almost three hours on the hunt—it was easy to make up his mind.

“Let’s get back to Big Brother. Starb’d thirty, put her on-course to rejoin, increase to ...”

Two things interrupted Benson’s orders. One was much louder than the other, yet it was the softer sound which claimed his attention more tightly; just then, at least.

“Captain, sir!” yelled the yeoman abruptly, and the asdic speaker gave forth its metallic peep of contact.

“Belay those orders!” Benson said, “steady as you go. What’s the strife, yeoman?”

“There was a bright yellow flash on the port beam, sir. I think it was ...”

Now the yeoman was interrupted. There came the tearing hiss of parted air and involuntarily they all ducked and from the sea a hundred yards to starboard a single column rose tall and white in the moonlight.

Sighting shot, Benson thought, then his mind became a moil of more important thoughts. The ping-peep of the asdic set was clear. They had a submarine and there was no doubt they had her definitely. Just as definite was the fact that a Jap shore gun, if not a battery, had them.

He should alter course to confuse the next salvo, but if he swung the ship violently then he might lose that all-important asdic contact. There was a submarine, and that meant it had in all probability sighted

the flotilla, and that meant it could surface and put a squadron of bombers on to Bentley’s ships shortly after first light. There was one way to nullify that nastiness—providing a magazine, and the ship, wasn’t blown to pieces in the process. Benson compromised.

“Starb’d fifteen,” he ordered. “Sound action.”

Already at a fair clip, Witch started to swing almost at once to the right. This would take her over toward that first fall of shot, and thus away from the downward correction of the gunners ashore.

"Warn the asdic team we're under fire from ashore. I'm taking avoiding action but I don't want that contact lost."

Ladders rattled. Feet in heavy boots thumped urgently along the decks. Orders were shouted. Her three twin 4.7inch mountings swung toward the dark and distant line of shore. It winked at them a bright yellow eye. One eye.

A less unflappable captain would have cursed that blasted gun which had joined the game at the worst possible moment. Benson simply listened to his asdic set and waited for the fall of shot. He said:

"Have you got a bearing on the gun, Pilot?"

No procrastination now. "Yessir! It's emplaced on Pusan Point, range six miles."

"Very well. Log that position when you get a chance."

This time they barely heard the shell's rush. Plainly they heard its crumping burst about fifty yards to port, between Witch and the shore. The course alteration had thrown the Japs off. Benson had decided to maintain his present course, a move which the enemy should not be expecting, when quick feet halted beside him and a quick voice said:

"What's the target, sir?"

Mr. Lasenby, Gunner, was Bentley's gunnery-control officer, but then Lasenby was the flotilla gunner, a position of considerable eminence for a one-stripper, and thus he had been given the vital job of controlling Wind Rode's shooting from the director. Witch carried only a torpedo-gunner, and her director officer was a young lieutenant.

"Shore gun, Donovan," Benson said, "on Pusan Point, just abaft the port beam. Maybe it's a battery. Range six miles. I want it smothered."

"Aye aye, sir!"

Donovan went like a monkey up the ladder to the director. Before he got inside the controlling steel box Benson's conjecture was proved right. No one on the bridge could count the flashes, they were too close together, but every man saw the four ugly, beautifully symmetrical columns jet skyward from the port quarter.

"Port ten," ordered Benson, keeping his ear on the asdic speaker, and another voice said:

"Ship closed-up for action, sir."

"Very well, Number One."

That wasn't bad, Benson thought—two thirds of the ship's company asleep and she had closed-up in double-quick time. Down below men would have heard the thump of those explosions transmitted through her thin skin...

Then the night seemed to explode in a flare of yellow light and the ship jerked as her six big guns bellowed their challenge. Across the sea toward Mindanao fled a diminishing whine. The sound of despatch faded and was replaced a few seconds later by the red splashes of arrival.

Before the shore battery could fire again Witch's main armament loosed another broadside. That was good, but Benson was not surprised. His guns were quick-firing semiautomatics, and power-rammed, and trained and elevated by hydraulic pumps; it was unlikely the shore battery had anything like those refinements, and certainly no artillery had the muzzle velocity of naval guns. Just the same, it did not take high velocity for any shell to penetrate Witch's quarter-inch thin side...

Benson put that nasty reflection aside and concentrated on his main job. It was not only the most important of his ship's two tasks, but once he finished it he could put on rudder and speed and get to hell clear of the shore guns.

The shore spat yellow at them and a second later Witch showed her own teeth. But most of Benson's attention was on the glittering sea to starboard whence came the sound-reflecting bearing of his main enemy, and on the swing of his bow toward that point.

He heard the whoof of explosions, and someone call, "Only three spouts, sir, we must've knocked out one of their guns," and in the next second he heard another voice which stiffened him.

"Torpedo approaching, bearing three-five-five!" Almost due north. "Hard-a-starb'd!"

The coxswain acknowledged, then the bridge was silent. Waiting. The two mountings on the forepart loaded with clanging thuds and fired, but the bridge was silent. The bow was past north heading for west, the gyro compass clicking fast, the lubber's line which was the ship's head swinging with smooth urgency beneath the unmoving

figures and letters on the compass card. Then the yeoman croaked:

"Torpedo track in sight, fine on the port bow, drawing aft."

It was the last two words which held the real significance. Witch was moving ahead across the torpedo's line of advance at the same time as she was heaving her stern clear. Even before the torpedo drew level Benson knew they were safe.

Safe from that torpedo. The Jap might try another shot, right down her throat. Benson could see the smooth track plainly in the moonlight. The submarine was almost dead ahead. Obviously she knew her hunter was under separate attack—either from a periscope sighting of those flashes ashore or because her hydrophones had picked up the sounds of exploding shells. It seemed almost certain she would try another torpedo shot. "Midships, steer north."

Instinct urged Benson to pile on more speed: to get on top of his enemy more quickly, to swing faster from what she might loose. Experience kept him from giving the order; he had to have unimpeded operation of the asdic set, and the frictional rush of high speed would deny him that Experience paid off.

"Contact bearing right ahead, moving left to right, range 1800 yards." "Classification?"

"Classified submarine." ,..

Benson's tone was a little tighter than usual when he said:

"Stand-by depth charge attack." Moments passed. The first tense moments of an attack which keep men on a taut pitch of alertness. The guns were firing, the sea was spouting, but apart from the first lieutenant, who was the gunnery officer, the bridge team was not interested. They had seen the evidence of their enemy, they knew he was somewhere beneath them less than a mile distant, and all the time the asdic speaker was giving triumphant tongue.

Its voice was a mewl of sound compared to the guns' bellowing, but still its message came strong and clear. Benson's face was cast in its normal mould of half-quizzical composure, but his guts were rioting with exultation. He should get this Jap.

Benson gave his orders to the depth-charge crews.

A few more seconds of waiting and then the destroyer shook. The sea astern climbed to the sky in a multiple mound.

The submarine was wholly surrounded by water. Her line of

advance on a turn was shorter than a surface ship's, she could turn much more quickly. And, as well, she could rise or sink to further confuse the attacker's aim.

The mound flung itself apart in shooting sprays of white and every eye on Witch's bridge glared back to sight the black hull breaking surface.

They sighted nothing but frothing foam. The destroyer's discharged fury was spectacular, and barren of result. Benson listened, and heard only the regular ping of transmission. He knew he had missed her.

"Starb'd thirty," he snapped, and brought her round.

He swung to the right. The submarine coming toward him had done the same. Hunter and hunted were diverging away from each other at a combined speed of almost 25 knots.

Perhaps because he was fighting two enemies at once, the fates were kind to Benson that night. A salvo from ashore landed so close off his box that the whole ship shivered with the underwater punch.

"The bastards have the range," Pilot muttered, and his worried tone found echo in all their minds.

"Midships," Benson ordered, "port thirty."

This would take his ship in toward the coast, but it should also take her in under the enemy's next salvo. And it happened to take her in toward something else. "Number One," Benson said, "Are the guns in rapid broadsides?"

A question like that was needless, it served to indicate his mental tension. But the first lieutenant was feeling anything but composed himself, and he answered with literal formality:

"Yes, sir. They've been in rapid broadsides after the first sighting rounds."

"Then..."

The six guns belched, drowning Benson's voice. Their thunder shivered to silence.

Then tell them to try and step up the loading rate. I want that bloody battery smooth..."

Again he was interrupted, if not smothered. The returning peep was higher in pitch than the transmitting ping, a short sharp metallic note that cut across Benson's voice like a knife. His eyes swung to

the bearing repeat, and in instant decision his voice ordered:

"Port twenty! Stand-by depth charge attack!"

The order was passed. Shadows moved about the throwers on the quarterdeck. Benson's attention remained on the bearing repeat, and he saw from the needle that Witch was nosing directly down the bearing of the target.

"Midships! Steady as you go!"

A minute passed. Two. In that time the guns fired again and again, but Benson barely heard their roar and deliberately he ignored the returning salvoes. Like a dive-bomber pilot, he was committed to his run, regardless of what was coming his way in return.

Now the echoing peep came more quickly, as the excitement rose in Benson's guts.

"Port thrower, starb'd thrower, rails!"

This ship was an escort destroyer. She was specifically designed to track and find and kill submarines. Now her quarterdeck showed what it was fitted for.

The whoofs of exploding cordite charges were musical and flat, not loud. And the canisters they flung entered the water on either side of her wake with only small splashes. But the size of the depth charges was out of all proportion to their disruptive capabilities. They sank down, and the ship moved on. Benson waited, unconsciously tense. He had waited like this many times before, but now his feeling was excitement and anticipation, not apprehension. It was a grisly game, but this time he felt he had played it perfectly.

He had ordered a deeper setting, so that he was not surprised when the sea merely heaved up in a wide, swelling mound which did not break into spray. But there was no doubt of the force of the eruptions so far down. The ship displaced nearly two thousand tons, and every inch of her shook under the blast.

She shook, too, under another blast, but Benson was uninterested in his own gunfire. He was staring astern... and there on the creaming white of the moonlit sea he saw it. Black and ominous as hell was

that surfacing scum, rising from the deep water to spread darkly befouling across the sea's shining face.

The very enclosure of the sea which before had saved the submarine in its quick turn away, now had ruptured her open in the

crushing clench of a giant fist.

A voice trying to be calm, not quite succeeding, came from the asdic cabinet.

"Breaking up noises, sir, loud and clear."

"No doubt?"

"None whatever, sir."

"You're right, Ping," said Benson, his own tone false. "We have a beautiful tide of oil up here. Good work. House the dome."

"Aye aye, sir."

Benson turned to the first lieutenant and the navigator. To one he said, "Take her parallel to the coast, go on to thirty knots," and to the other, "All right, Number One, there are two shore guns still in action.

You have five minutes."

It took less than that. Now Witch was on a steady course, which not only helped her aim but also her loading—men were not cursing and slipping on heeling decks. Together, all six guns in rapid broadsides, they were delivering just under a hundred 50-lb. armour-piercing shells every minute.

No doubt the Japanese guns were properly emplaced, but Witch's projectiles left her with a muzzle energy of 2800 foot-tons, and arrived with not much less. That is a smashing force. Presently from the dark mass of the shore there gushed a brilliant spew of yellow flame. It showed only briefly, which told the bridge that the energising food was shells or cordite. Either was enough. There would be no men left alive near such a rupture.

Even so, Benson let his guns fire two more broadsides. From the range of six miles Pusan Point returned nothing but twinkles of red.

"Cease firing."

"Check, check, check," Donovan sent to the guns.

When the ship had stopped its berserk bellowing and there was only the stink of their own cordite to bite at the back of their mouths, Benson said:

"Well now, Pilot, what do you think?"

"I think," answered Pilot, "we should get to hell out of here. And just as fast as she'll take us."

Benson's quizzical grin trained round the bridge.

"Any arguments?"

Unprintable words, but in respectful tones, answered him. It was that sort of bridge.

"Carried unanimously," said Benson. "Let's go."

She swung, and she went.

Guns were not sponged out—it was a bit difficult to open fire with a great bristly brush halfway up the barrel, and that currying treatment could wait till morning, when visibility was enlarged, and thus safety. The guns were trained fore and aft, and left a quick-loading angle of ten degrees.

Action stations fell out. Guardrails were hauled upright again and the stanchion pins inserted. Base clips were replaced on ready-use cordite and the lockers clipped shut. Gun captains took a final checking look, then dismissed their crews.

They went below, but not to turn in. Dawn was shortly after four o'clock and it was not worth undressing, for dawn meant action stations, and this dawn was no different to any other, regardless of the fact that all her main armament and depth charge equipment had been so recently in use. You never knew; some minor, vital part of the communications gear might have been affected, or even the tension on a breech-mechanism lever, and the checking-through at dawn action stations would find this out. Only in this way, in waters like these, could a ship hope to stay afloat. Eternal vigilance, the philosopher said, is the price of liberty; for these men it was also the price of life.

They had fought and they had won, yet amongst her men in the humid heat of between-decks there was no triumph—none, anyway, that was expressed. There was some chiacking, but that was simply the safety valve of a great relief. That torpedo could have ripped the bow off her, and then the Jap guns ashore would have done the rest. They were lucky it wasn't them a thousand fathoms down instead of the submarine crew.

This, they thought, though they knew it was not luck at all. Yet no man praised the asdic officer's detection of the torpedo and the captain's swift avoidance of it. Not verbally. If challenged on this, they would have simply answered that that was what Ping and the Old Man were up there for. Just the same, to some further degree, the captain's hold on his crew's loyalty and respect was tightened.

This is the sort of thing that makes a captain, and thus his ship, successful. There is discipline, of course, but in the Navy discipline is everywhere—by itself it cannot make a ship competent; certainly it cannot make a ship happy.

Witch was a happy ship. And aboard her that lovely, recently violent night, there were many men who privately thanked God that they were in such a ship, for about one point there is no doubt whatever, and the point is this—to be happy, holding as she does hundreds of aware, experienced and disciplined men, a ship is efficient. You can't fool sailors for a quarter of the time. Familiar, back-slapping, suckholing officers do not make them happy; on the contrary, the effect of such fools is moroseness and suspicion. Witch's men were contented because they knew they were well led.

Evidence of this was given them after breakfast the following day.

The ceremony called captain's requestmen and defaulters was held once a week, if demand required it. Today the demand was small. There was one requestman asking for his allotment to his wife to be increased, and one defaulter. "Request granted," said Benson with sober face.

"Request granted," repeated the coxswain, "about turn, double march!"

"Now there," smiled Benson, "goes a happily married man."

"Or else a henpecked one," amended a voice.

All officers not on watch were required to attend the captain's table, but no one had to look round to identify the owner of that melancholy voice.

"Look on the bright side, Pilot," said Benson, and then made his own amendment: "I might as well ask the Chief to give me fifty knots. Right, Swain, what's next?"

"Able-seaman Rohan, sir. Absent over leave in Port Moresby."

"Hmmm." Benson wrote in the request book his decision about the allotment, but his mind was busy elsewhere. Rohan had done a good job during the shoot against the shore battery, and he was a good seaman.

"Right."

"Able-seaman Rohan," snapped the coxswain.

A big, fit, handsome man of about twenty-five doubled into the chartroom and stood to attention before the captain.

"Off caps!" Predictably, Rohan wore only one cap, but with coxswains and masters-at-arms the plural was always used, Lord knows why. "Able-seaman Rohan, sir. Was absent over leave in Port Moresby from midnight..."

Benson listened to the charge with his eyes on the defaulters' book on the table. When it was completed he flicked up his eyes and held Rohan's—he would continue doing this until the trial was over.

Rohan was surprised; not at the captain's looking at him, but at the way he did. He had never been up before Benson as a defaulter before, and this was a different face altogether to the genial one he was accustomed to seeing.

"You admit the charge?"

"Yes, sir."

What else could he say, with all other hands on board before midnight and the quartermaster and the duty petty-officer waiting up for the lone absentee?

"Any excuse?"

"No, sir."

"You mean you deliberately overstayed your leave?"

Rohan swallowed. "No, sir, it wasn't that."

Damn those eyes. They were like gimlets. A man couldn't think.

"Ah..."

"You were warned leave was up at midnight, that the ship was under sailing orders? You know the significance of a warning like that?"

God. Looked like he was in, boots and all. It sounded like he'd committed murder, the way the Old Man said it.

"Well, man? I asked you a question."

"Answer the captain!"

"Yes, sir. I heard the warning."

"Yet you overstayed your leave. Why?"

"It was this... this..."

"This what?" demanded the inexorable voice.

"This girl, sir," blurted Rohan. He'd never see her again, that was for sure, the bloody nymphomaniac, and anyway he couldn't lie

to those damned eyes, even if he wanted to.

"A girl, in Moresby?" wondered Benson, while even Pilot's lugubriousness was replaced momentarily by surprise. "There must be at least six girls in Moresby, amongst thousands of Americans. How is it you managed to land such a prize?" asked Benson, looking at the handsome tanned face, knowing the answer.

Rohan was used to having no trouble at all in landing such a prize in Moresby or anywhere else, and his interpretation of the captain's wonderment was that he did not believe him.

"I did have a girl, sir!"

"Watch your tongue," rapped the coxswain.

But Benson had seen the big fellow's flush, and he understood.

"No one is doubting your word," he said quietly. "What I'm after is an explanation."

"Oh... Well, sir, this girl... she sort of made me forget the time, sir."

"What? How?"

Eyes that were suddenly as steady as Benson's said, respectfully but definitely, No. His mouth remained closed. "Answer the captain!"

"All right, Swain. Able-seaman Rohan, what is your action station?"

It was this quick and deliberate change of tack that made Rohan feel ashamed he had let this captain down by overstaying his leave. Later, it was to clinch his respect and liking for Benson. Little things, but on such apparent trifles a captain's position is solidly based.

"I'm breech worker of the right gun of A-mounting, sir."

Benson knew this. "That's a fairly unimportant job in action?"

Rohan knew what was coming. His head went up a little, but in acceptance of his fate, not defiance.

"No, sir, it's an important job."

"You're damned right it is! Especially when our guns have to take on a shore battery! If you hadn't come back aboard just before the ship sailed, A-mounting would have lost half its effectiveness. A loading-number is no replacement for a trained breechworker."

"No, sir. Sir..."

"Well?"

"It won't happen again!"

Benson's sharpness of tone glissaded down to a more deadly softness.

"No. Able-seaman Rohan, it won't happen again." His eyes and his pause added, Or else. His tone became crisp again. "Seven days Number Eleven."

The coxswain was very nearly caught. He recovered quickly and rapped:

"Seven days Number Eleven! On caps, about turn, double march!"

The big fellow darted out into the passage, and away.

"Now there," mimicked the first lieutenant, "goes a happily bedded man, if you'll excuse the brilliant variation on a word."

"I won't," grunted Benson, "not your envy, neither. All right, Swain. Gentlemen."

They saluted. Benson returned to the bridge—the flotilla should be in sight any minute, for Witch was close to her full 36 knots.

It was stand-easy. Men were at coffee in the mess-decks. Rohan stepped into his mess. An oerlikon gunner about half his size said eagerly: "What'd you cop, Tiny?"

"Seven days Number Eleven."

They were surprised, and then they understood. Stoppage of leave was the usual punishment for overstaying it. Out here at sea that meant nothing. But Number Eleven meant working through the dog-watches, when all other hands had packed up for the day. That was something.

So the Old Man had all his marbles about him, they thought while they commiserated dutifully with the victim. And as regards duty, they knew that Rohan had deserved all he'd got; on a gun the breechworker was just as important as the layer or trainer—in fact, he was senior hand of his gun crew.

Oh yes, they thought, the Old Man's a bloody nice bloke—but he knows when to dish it out.

Paradoxically, perhaps, this contented and assured them. Sailors were jealous of their rights, which were few enough. But if you dipped your wick and blotted your copybook, as Rohan had done, then you took the can.

They said, What a bastard, cobs, and stiff crap, Tiny, and Seven days ain't all that long; and secretly they were off a strip.

CHAPTER TWO

CAPTAIN PETER BENTLEY, Senior Officer, Fifth Destroyer Flotilla, was feeling less than amiable. In fact, he was worried.

Where the hell was he? Benson knew his job, all right, but the most competent destroyer driver couldn't do much about a squadron of Zeros or cruisers, or even a trio of destroyers. Yet surely he would have got off a signal if he'd been under attack? Providing the first bomb or shell hadn't found one of his magazines...

For the umpteenth time Bentley checked his watch, then checked himself from asking if there was anything on radar astern. The whole flotilla knew how long Witch had been absent. Even a bloody shark's fin back there would be reported!

A heavily-built young lieutenant-commander brought his rugged-carved and darkly-tanned face over to stand beside Bentley; and, like him, to stare astern.

"Y'know, Peter," said Randall in a low voice, "I've been thinking."

"So? What little unpleasantry have you come up with? Bombs or shells?"

"Torpedoes."

"Yes, that's possible," Bentley surprised him—but then this happened often between a first lieutenant who was a practical-minded fighter and a captain who was also that, but a needle-witted forecaster of events as well. "If that was a genuine sub contact, Benson might have been drawn on into a pack of the mongrels."

'But he would have made a signal," Randall protested his earlier belief.

"When you have a tin fish racing for your belly," Bentley said grimly, "you don't think about signals. After that, it's too late."

Randall shook his head worriedly. "Poor devil," he growled, "he was a nice bloke. Had a bloody good ship, too."

"For God's sake!" Bentley exploded with tense lowness, "we don't know for sure he's had the chop. Pack up laughing, will you?"

"Sorry." Randall raised his binoculars and lowered them. He had quartered the northern horizon only seconds before. "What do we do now? Go back and take a look?"

Instead of answering him directly Bentley turned his head a little and called:

"Pilot!"

Wind Rode's navigating officer was by nature the antithesis of Witch's. He had been known to front with cheerful face the chill force of an Arctic gale. But as he turned at the captain's call his face was unsmiling.

"Sir?"

"Position, please."

"Nanoesa Islands bearing west-sou'-west, sir, thirty miles. On our present course we'll clear them by twenty miles."

"Very well. Come down to fifteen knots. We'll give her half an hour then return at thirty knots and see what's happened."

See what's left of her, Randall thought, while Pilot spoke to the yeoman. Up went the G for George speed flag with its numerals one and five. The restless hawk eyes of Nutty Ferris, chief yeoman of signals, watched for the answering pendants of the three destroyers astern. The white and red triangles of bunting were broken out smartly, for this was an experienced, war-trained flotilla, and when all were fluttering at the yardarms Ferris made his report to Pilot.

Wind Rode's signal came down, followed by the pendants astern; her quartermaster in the wheelhouse got his orders, and via a revolution counter the artificers on the throttles got theirs. Destroyers lose speed quickly, like they pick it up. In not much more than a minute after formation—line-astern from the Leader and distance between ships—remained precisely the same as it had been. All captains were on their bridges, expecting some change of plan from Bentley.

That drop in speed proved to be the only change.

Radar is a most efficient instrument for use at sea under normal conditions, with an unobstructed field of view. These were not only normal, but excellent conditions; slight swell on the sea, a few clouds in the sky.

But radar has two advantages, one major and the other not so important. Like light waves, radar transmissions cannot be bent, so that its surface range extends no further than the horizon, when the electronic particles shoot off into space; and radar, especially at long

range, needs something fairly large and solid from which to echo.

The topmast of a destroyer does not fit into the latter category. And so it was the instrument of Nelson's time, and of the Phoenicians long before him, which was to put Bentley's worries at rest.

This belonged to a young seaman perched high up the mast in the crow's nest; in more correct nomenclature, he was the masthead lookout. He was up there not simply because he was young—the older Ferris had better sight, and Bentley's was twenty-twenty, along with Randall's— but because he was a trained action-station lookout, and he did have excellent vision.

His name was Craven. The one good-conduct badge he was entitled to wear on the left upper sleeve of his serge uniform denoted only three years' service, but two of those years had been spent in Wind Rode, and a good deal of that time as a lookout.

Secure up there so high, able to look down on the whole of the ship's length and to see several miles further than any eye on the bridge could, Craven wore nothing but shorts and sandals. The ship was only five degrees, 300 miles, above the equator. This did not worry Craven's body, which was burned to a wind- and sun-tanned hue no amount of lazing on a beach could produce, but the heat made his forehead sweat, so that he was careful not to press his eyes too closely into the binocular sockets, otherwise the lenses would mist over.

For his age he was a laconic young man, matured and to some extent assured by responsibility—he was the eyes not only of Wind Rode, but of the flotilla. Craven was very conscious of this last fact. He took pride in his being a crew member of the Leader, and he wanted badly to sight Witch before any of the other three lookouts whom he had no doubt were also placed at their respective mastheads.

Because of this eagerness he was tempted to report at once that tiny sliver of something or other which he thought he had glimpsed in the high-power lenses. But training overcame eagerness. He took his eyes away instead, wiped them with a khaki handkerchief and applied them again to their task.

This time he did not withdraw his eyes, but glanced down at the brass pointer on the bearing ring below the binoculars. And only then did his thumb reach forward, find the buzzer and press it.

The bridge was very quiet. The sound of the buzzer pitched across it with shrill vehemence. Bentley only just stopped himself from leaping off his stool to answer it. A captain may have fear wincing in his guts or joy exulting in his brain, but he is not supposed to reveal these common sensations. Nearest, Pilot answered the masthead voice pipe.

Direction always came first. It was more important to know where than what.

"Bearing green one-seven-five," said Craven with the deliberate distinctness he had been trained to use, so that his report could be heard through the crash of gunfire. "A topmast."

That was all. He had reported what he could see, just a thin black pencil above the horizon almost right astern. Fact. Conjecture was not for him, unless he were asked for it. He was.

"What does it look like?" said Pilot, while the bridge team waited. Battleships and cruisers carried topmasts.

Now Craven could impose intuition, experience and judgement upon fact.

"It's pretty thin, sir. Looks like a destroyer. I have the upper yard now, not very long."

"Very well."

There was no need to order Craven to report any further identifying features as they hove in sight, but there was need of something else. Though the whole bridge had heard of lookout's voice, made tinny by its travel down the brass tube, Pilot could not assume that this was so, and with the ship in action it would not have been so, thus he was required to repeat the report. But to it he added his own judgement.

"Masthead's sighted a topmast almost right astern, sir. I think it's Witch."

So did Bentley. If they could see, they could be seen. Having sighted the masts of an enemy flotilla, a Jap destroyer would hardly keep coming on.

"Very well," he said, crisply to cover his relief, and the yeoman reported that the next ship in line was signalling.

Ferris read the swift blinks of light more easily than you're reading this. The message came so fast that as he called out each word they

made a normal conversational sentence.

"Bearing one-seven-five, topmast, coming towards, believed destroyer."

That signal came from Dalziel, the flotilla's sardonic- faced and iron-disciplined second-in-command. He was not liked as Benson was, but certainly his men respected him, for he ran a very taut ship, and tautness meant safety and the continuance of life.

Bentley was pleased that his lookout had made the first sighting, but while Cartwright or Gilmore might have mentioned this, the Leader could not. Dempsey or Marciano don't boast about their superiority...

"Acknowledge," Bentley ordered simply, and Ferris flashed back the symbol.

In succession as the distant ship rode up over the earth's curve Craven got her gunnery director, the bridge, the two forward mountings, and he made his definite identification. And then it was the turn of electronics.

"Radar-office, bridge. Bearing green one-seven-oh, ship, coming towards. We're plotting the speed."

No one smiled, not even when Bentley gave his conventional, deadpan "Very well." Enemy or friendly, that ship had been known about for several minutes before radar got its fingers on the echoing bridge structure, but that was not the operator's fault, and if you chiacked those troglodytes down there in front of their fluorescent screens, then they might subconsciously take the attitude that if those bloody flatfoot seaman up top were so hot then there was no great need for vigilance down below. An attitude like that, if exacerbated and allowed to fester, could mean disaster; at night or in bad visibility by day it was a different story altogether, for then radar came into its own, and a dozen Cravens at the masthead might as well have been in their hammocks.

So with no admonition in his tone Bentley added:

"Your contact astern is Witch. Stop the plot and resume all-round sweep."

And back came the acknowledgement, respectfully crisp:

"Aye aye, sir."

Bentley crossed over to his stool. No challenge was flashed to

the approaching ship. Japanese destroyers were quite distinctive with their high, upward-sloping bows, and most of them rated two funnels, while their visitor had only one. In any case, they knew her silhouette like their own faces; Lord knows they'd seen it for long enough, on days and days of convoy duty when there had been little else to look at.

"I wonder what kept her," Randall said. "Surely she couldn't have been searching all that time."

Bentley had been wondering precisely the same. The answer seemed obvious enough, but he had learned long ago that at sea you can be certain of nothing; not the weather, not even the charts, and most definitely not your enemy's intentions. Yet it seemed safe to assume one fact—whatever Benson had found, if he had found anything, then it had not managed to get off a signal to its friends. The sun was high, the day was clear, and bombers would have been over long before this.

"One way to find out," Bentley said. "Yeoman, order Witch alongside my starb'd side."

She was close now, shaping up to take her normal, junior position at the rear of the line, so that Ferris used the shorter range Aldis lamp. A few of the bridge team wondered why the captain wanted her alongside—the range of their radiotelephone, or talk-between-ships equipment, was limited, and safe to use with nothing in sight anywhere. Randall and Pilot knew.

With the flotilla steaming southward and Witch on practically the same course, coming alongside the leading ship was a simple manoeuvre—or seemed so. The coxswain, even the quartermaster, could have managed it. But the job was more than just a matter of steering. The Leader was at fifteen knots, while Witch was coming up much faster than that. And she was required not only to come close alongside,

but to end up with her bridge level with Wind Rode's, and her hull at precisely the same speed. Unfortunately you cannot brake two thousand tons of steel like you would a car.

Already men were lining the Leader's rails, for this close approach was a break in the monotony of a patrol which for them, at least, had proved boringly uneventful. It would be a bad thing if Benson shot

ahead of his mark, then had to go astern, and then ahead again; backing and filling, men would grinningly say, like a virgin outside the door of a matelot's flat.

Of all the hundreds of men watching, Benson himself was most conscious of this. But there was more than geniality beneath his casual exterior, and not even his concentration was allowed to show. This took some effort, but experience helped, aided by the memory that he had done this sort of thing before.

So that as far as his bridge crew were concerned he might have been alone on the Molucca Sea when he gave his wheel and engine orders with apparent negligence, and Witch slowed and edged in

towards her bow-waving sister. And all the time, though not looking at it, Benson was conscious of that cap over there with the "scrambled eggs" edging its peak.

Suddenly there came a nasty moment. He realised he was going too fast. He was going to overshoot that other bridge. Luckily he was not yet level with it, and realisation came in time. A snapped order went to the engine-room. Not to go astern—that would thrashingly reveal even to unskilled eyes that he had misjudged his speed. Instead, Witch slowed her revs. The great four-bladed screws eased their thrust.

Two thousand tons of friction-beset metal did the rest. When Benson gave the order for a few more revolutions, thus overcoming before it was too late her tendency to drop back too far, his bridge was level with Wind Rode's and his hull was barely fifty feet away.

The brain beneath that gold-peaked cap knew precisely what fears and remedial actions had exercised Benson's brain—God knows he had experienced them often enough himself, before being given the post where all other ships had to keep station on his. Bentley's mouth twitched a little as he took up the microphone of the electric loud-hailer.

"Good morning. I said come alongside, not inboard."

But the tone was drily chiding, not acrimonious. Before he replied Benson used a mopping handkerchief on his face—he could do this safely, for the morning was very hot.

"Sorry, sir. I'll take her out a bit."

"Belay that."

The words negated Bentley's earlier statement about closeness. They looked at each other across the white-flashed gap, smiling, understanding. Benson knew that the Leader would have come in even closer. Yet there was something he did not know. Of all his captains, Witch's was the youngest and most junior, yet Bentley like him best. This feeling was personal, not professional, based on Benson's nature. He was the sort of fellow you liked to have in your mess. Dalziel, for instance, was a far more experienced and mature commander, a very solid fellow to have beside you in a fight—but Dalziel's sardonic and ever-watchful nature was the sort that soaked up the jollity in a mess like a sponge.

Bentley's smile drew in and his tone changed.

"What kept you back there so long?"

Now it was master and servant. Benson answered with required brevity.

"Just before breaking off the search we got a firm contact, sir. It took some time—the guns hampered us a bit—but we finally got him. A definite kill, sir, and no signals made."

"I see. What do you mean, the guns hampered you?"

"There was a shore battery on Pusan Point, sir. Four guns, about five-inch from the size of the splashes."

"Let me get this straight," said Bentley, who already had it perfectly straight—he also knew the rails of both ships were lined with listening men. "You mean you hunted and sank a submarine while under fire from a shore battery?"

Benson was less perceptive, or perhaps more naive, than his master. He interpreted the question literally, as a genuine demand for information.

"Yes, sir. It was a bit dicey at first, but we managed to knock out one gun, and then after the sub business was finished we concentrated on the battery and were lucky enough to find its ammunition supply.

There was quite a blast. I imagine it will be some time before the point is fortified again."

"Well done," said Bentley, "very nice work indeed. Your gun and depth charge crews earned their pay last night."

The term loud-hailer means precisely what is says. Bentley's voice carried clearly above the whine of engine-room blowers and the hiss

of bow-waves. And now the whole of Wind Rode's bridge team understood why he had called Witch close alongside.

"Thank you, sir." And now Benson became more perceptive. "I'll pass your comments on to the crew," he grinned.

Bentley would never have praised Dalziel like that, even privately, but then Dalziel was older. However, enough was enough.

"Resume station in the line," he ordered curtly. "Smack it about. That battery might have had a transmitter. It's still a long way to Manus."

"Aye aye, sir!"

An order to the coxswain sent Witch wheeling away to the right. Clear, she straightened up and waited while the line steamed past. Here and there a hand waved from the other ships, casually, as you would gesture to your neighbour. They were glad to see her back, of course, but they did not know what she had done back there in the night. Even if they'd been told, their comments would have been ribald more than commendatory. Their ships, too, had sunk submarines and bombarded the shore-though not at the same time—and Witch had merely done what she'd been detached to do. A lot of dirty work came the way of destroyers. Witch was no exception.

So thought the rest of the flotilla. Right now Witch's men believed themselves to be most exceptional. There was justification for this feeling. Often, being junior ship, they had been detached on some job or other, even to deliver mail to a major unit like a battleship or carrier. Messenger work. When they did fight, it was always with the flotilla, side by side with a sister ship, under superior orders. They had been no more distinguished in that sort of mayhem than one forward is from another in a scrum.

Until last night.

Yet it wasn't so much the knowledge of what they'd done alone off Pusan Point as it was the Leader's comments which made them feel so good. They liked Bentley for his praise; they admired and deeply respected their own captain for being its cause.

Both Benson and his men were to need the bolstering effect of this feeling. But not just yet.

CHAPTER THREE

IT was Craven again.

The time was late in the afternoon of the following day. Their position was north of Biak in New Guinea, but many miles clear of the coast, while the course was roughly south-east, heading for Manus in the Admiralty group.

Next to breakfast—with action stations fallen-out after the young sun had revealed nothing hostile—late afternoon was the best time of day for Bentley. Randall had the dog watches from four till eight, a first-lieutenant's privilege. This meant that the talk would revolve endlessly and almost exclusively around his wife, who happened to be Bentley's sister. However, listening to a recital of sublime qualities which Bentley never suspected his sister possessed was better than sitting alone in his heated cabin and worrying about what might lie over the horizon, or if at the bottom end of a glass eye poked a few inches above the surface some slant-eyed bastard was hissing orders to a torpedo fire-control instrument.

Much of the heat had gone out of the sun, and over the open bridge the 25-knot breeze of their progress flowed deliciously cooling. Work had finished for the day. Men talked idly in groups on the forepart, getting the most of the wind, while from his stool their captain noticed, also idly, that no man leaned against the guardrails. This prohibition was standing orders, but self-preservation also ensured its obedience. A guard-rail slip could conceivably open with weight pressed against it, or a stanchion with the pin left out at its base might suddenly collapse sideways, and then the careless leaner was in the water ahead of four spinning blades, and shortly after that he was uncaring altogether. See a ship with men lounging against the guard-rails and you see a slack ship. Apart from the danger, it simply looks bad, like ropes and fenders hanging over the side, or washing hung on a line without all the towels being together...

Suddenly, but not to Bentley's surprise—he had been barely listening to Randall's anticipatory recital of what he and Gwen would do on his next long leave—Randall changed tack and said:

"We should make Manus round about lunch. You'll give shore leave?"

Before Bentley could reply a voice said, “Speaking of Manus,” and Pilot appeared beside them.

This was all right. Pilot was the senior lieutenant on board, and even apart from that privileged eminence he and the captain enjoyed a naturally close relationship. Bentley might say where and when and at what speed they would go, but Pilot had to ensure they got there safely.

Bentley was still feeling happy about Witch’s return to the fold—he had lost two ships and their captains, Armstrong and Taber—and so he grunted amiably:

“What about Manus?”

“I’ve been reading it up in the Pilot,” said Pilot.

Perhaps it should be explained that this Pilot was not a man, but a book. There are scores of them put out by the British Admiralty, blue-covered volumes embracing just about every section of the watery world. They are packed full of knowledge useful to a navigator, from the depths off a pier in a harbour and the lack of depths off reefs outside it, to places where tides run fast or slow, where survival huts have been set up for shipwrecked mariners, where streams are fresh or foul, where sand is white and clean and good for holystoning decks, and even out-of-the-way places where the inhabitants are friendly or hostile.

“So?” said Randall. “I thought you’d know the place by now. We’ve been in and out of Seeadler Harbour a dozen times in the past few weeks.”

“Ah,” said Pilot, “the harbour, yes. But I speak of the island, which is called Manus.”

“Is it now?” wondered Randall with his usual light-as-lead humour. “Fancy that.”

“Manus,” went on Pilot ignoringly, “is administered by Australia under mandate—even if the Yanks have made a bloody great naval base of it.”

“We know that,” sneered Randall.

“I wish I knew something,” said Bentley, in a reflective tone.

“What’s that, sir?” queried Pilot.

“That the Yanks would stay there, and kept it as a great naval base after the war.”

"Why?" Randall frowned. "With the Japs licked, what use is it?"

"History repeats itself, they say. This is the war to end all wars. They said that about the Kaiser's war. What if we're into it again, say ten or twenty years from now? Look what happened to Singapore. Who expected the Japs to reach Milne Bay, and damn near Port Moresby? If the world does go crazy again, God forbid, then a major naval base at Manus run by a friendly power would be something very handy to have around."

Bentley smiled suddenly, chasing his frown away. "However, you can bet a bee to a bull's foot the politicians down south won't see it my way," he said with unknowing prescience. "But I disgress. What else did you learn, you bloody chart-spoiler?"

"Oh." Pilot had been interested in his captain's reflections; they had been delivered soberly and with conviction. You didn't normally hear a subject like that discussed on the bridge, and politics never. He thought Bentley had made some damned sound points. But the subject was closed.

"Well, now. Manus has been owned by three nations. It was discovered by the Dutch way back in 1616, then ..."

"They were real navigators," jibed Randall.

"Then the Germans took possession in 1885. After that we came along."

"When ?" asked Bentley.

"Australian troops occupied Manus Island—the whole Admiralty group, actually—in September, 1914."

"The month, yet," Randall grinned, "You learned all that lot by heart. Go to the top of the mast, teacher's pet. Now tell me something that really matters. Precisely when do we get there? How many Yank ships in port? Is there any beer available? Most important of all, can we expect mail?"

"You bloody Philistine," Pilot growled. "A man tries to broaden your education and all he gets is questions about beer..."

"Philistine, am I? You'll be asking questions if I can't get the wardroom liquor supply stocked up!"

Bentley listened to their amiable bickering and not for the first time he thought that even war has its compensations. They were a damned good bunch, it was good to be with them. Some were not so

good as others, both personally and professionally, but they were men after all, you had to expect differences, and taken in the main he couldn't wish for a better crew, officers or ratings. Old Hooky Walker down there by A-mountings, listening as usual, Saunders the little gunner's mate, doing the talking as usual, Jack Rennie the cox'n, Petty-officer Gellatly, that freckled-faced rascal Billson... Pleasantly Bentley's musings idled along, and then Able-seaman Craven put the lid on that.

Again the buzzer pitched sharply. Bentley frowned. This time he had all his flock with him. So far as he knew no other allied ships were in the vicinity. Behind the facade of his composed expression the tension began to coil.

Randall had shut up abruptly. Officer of the watch, he answered the voice pipe, plugging it with one side of his face so that Bentley did not hear the masthead report. Pilot was crossing back to the binnacle.

In action, or at the threat of it, he went there as naturally as a gunlayer to his wheel.

Randall's face came up again. It showed no concern, but eagerness. Even as he waited Bentley noted this. Randall was never really happy unless he were stoushing. Though no fool—he'd seen more than his share of death and maiming—he was a fighter born. He never knew when to run. This was why, in Bentley's private opinion, he made a first-class deputy, but would not last long in command.

Now his voice cracked across the silent bridge.

"Masthead reports a set of three topmasts off the port quarter, sir. Probably destroyers, estimated course south-east."

"Very well."

Bentley's mind started its mesh of calculations. South-east was almost parallel to their own course. But with only topmasts in sight, the estimation would be a very rough one. Yet it could be right—Manus lay to the southeast, and Manus these days always held valuable prizes. But three destroyers would hardly attempt to snatch them. Unless they were backed up by a heavier force still out of sight...

"Something wrong, sir?" asked Randall curiously, beside him

again.

Bentley cleared his frown away. “Not yet, Bob. They might be American. Let’s take a look.”

He caught Pilot’s eye, which was hardly difficult. The navigator was bent sideways with his mouth at the wheel-house voice pipe, while like an eager hound dog’s his eyes were fixed on the captain.

“Port thirty,” Bentley ordered. “Go on to 270 revolutions. Warn the engine-room to stand by for high-speed manoeuvring.”

The first and last orders were obeyed at once. But Wind Rode was not alone, and Ferris had to help in implementing the middle order. This was done swiftly. The flags hauled up, were answered, and before the Leader had half completed her turn on to an intercepting course five engine-rooms were filled with the rising whine of turbines.

Each ship turned in the wake of the next ahead, maintaining the formation of line-astern from the Leader. Bentley kept it that way. The strange flotilla was to the north of him, while his own course was now east. If Craven had been right, then the projected lines of advance of both groups formed an angle of 45 degrees. Thus the formation of line-astern would allow every gun of all his ships to bear.

If the flotilla were enemy, he could engage it with 30 guns. This meant a total of close on 500 rounds per minute. Assuming the Jap destroyers were fairly modern, they could answer that lot with no more than 18 guns, probably 15.

Bentley was not too sanguine about his superiority in firepower; nothing was certain, and conceivably two lucky shells could make the odds even. As well, there was the other thing puzzling him, but he kept that to himself. He had more to do now than speculate, for Craven reported:

“Masthead, bridge. Identification certain, sir. Three Jap destroyers, course south-east, heading to cross our bows. I think...”

Bentley was at the voice pipe himself. He knew Craven, and he wanted to catch even the nuances of his tone.

“No, sir, I’m sure. They’re Sigure-class. Speed about twenty knots.”

The tone was definite. Bentley believed him.

"Good work, lad. Keep an eye on 'em, but cover to the northward as well. They might have big friends astern."

"Aye aye, sir!" said Craven, liking that "lad" bit. His binoculars trained slowly left, and carefully he searched.

Bentley returned to stand on the binnacle beside Pilot.

"Looks like we're not sighted yet, sir."

Bentley nodded. In this area the Japs would be alert, but perhaps their masthead lookout positions were not quite so high as Wind Rode's. This would account for their easy twenty knots.

Neither of the three officers thought to check the identification book in the chart-table draw, nor did they comment on their enemy's potential. They were professionals. They knew what the Japs carried, as aficionados know the horsepower and speed and torque of the monsters hurtling round Le Mans.

Just the same, though silent, Bentley was thinking of what he was up against. Sigure-class meant 1400 tons, smaller than Wind Rode, and five 5-inch guns, slightly larger than her 4.7s. The disparity would be more than equalled by a greater number of guns, 30 to 15, and by a faster rate of fire. In speed, too, he had the legs of the Jap. He had 40,000 horsepower and 36 knots, as against 37,000 and 34.

This was comforting, but far from self-deluding. Against Bismarck there had been two great ships, Hood and Prince of Wales. And against Hood... one shell.

Then, almost simultaneously, Craven reported that the enemy was increasing speed, and radar reported it was in contact.

"Number One," Bentley said formally, "close-up for action, please."

"Aye aye, sir."

Neither man was conscious of the formality. They would have been of its absence. You don't go into action all buddy-buddy and old pals together. Now Wind Rode was a fighting machine, a single unit of 200 men, and of these one man was absolute lord. He acted, and was treated, accordingly.

Bentley could order those Jap destroyers rammed, or run away from or a score of other things, and in all he would be instantly and unquestionably obeyed. The power of a captain might seem to be frightening. Perhaps it is. But then such power is not lightly bestowed.

Its recipient is always carefully, and in most cases wisely, chosen.

There is another vital and distinguishing feature about a captain, or even an admiral. In the Army and Air Force your generals and air-marshals are miles behind the fighting. Not so in the Navy. There was a man named John Tovey. His rank was Admiral of the Fleet and his post was Commander-in-Chief, British Home Fleet. Yet this man, equal in rank to a field-marshal of the Army, faced, in the gale-driven Atlantic, with precisely the same degree of danger as his lowliest ordinary-seaman second-class, the 15-inch guns of one of the mightiest battleships ever built... Bismarck.

This is not meant, of course, to disparage the top brass of other Services. A general is required to plan, not pull triggers. Nevertheless, a Navy chief is right in there fighting.

Like this one. As a captain Bentley ranked with a colonel; as a Captain (Destroyers), senior-officer of a flotilla, in command of a thousand men and some ten thousand tons of metal, he probably ranked with a brigadier. Neither of these Army gentlemen would normally be expected to be near their guns. Bentley was perhaps ten feet behind the cocked-up twins of B-mounting.

"Looks like they're going to fight," said Randall, grinning tightly.

"I wonder," murmured Bentley.

Randall squinted at him, then across the sea. The range was about thirteen miles, two miles this side of the horizon as visible from the height of a destroyer's bridge. It was still too far for effective shooting, but with sharp clarity Randall could see the whole starboard length of each Jap destroyer, and just as definitely his mind was convinced of three things—the enemy flotilla had increased to full speed, it had not altered course, and it was heading fast to meet them. Not likely to fight...?

"Come again?" said Randall puzzledly.

"Not now, Number One." Bentley's head turned a little. "Enemy speed?"

The radar plot gave him the answer.

"Enemy speed 30 knots, course one-three-five degrees, course and speed steady."

If that's not a bloody fighting speed and course I'll take one step outboard, Randall was thinking, when Bentley spoke again and

puzzled him further.

"Tell the director to open fire on the leading ship as soon as we're in maximum range. Yeoman, pass by light to all ships: 'Leader only to open fire pending further orders'."

Randall opened his mouth, then he shut it and gave up. The ways of God and Bentley often passed understanding.

A few seconds later there happened something poor old Randall was eminently fitted to understand. He was the gunnery officer. Lasenby up in the director said "Shoot," and Randall's six cannon gave tongue. His binoculars came up.

Seeming small at that range, but still whitely visible against the blue, the spouts showed in his lenses short and a little out for line. Still, at such a closing rate and at such speed that wasn't bad shooting.

Randall winced. Cocked up almost to extreme elevation, the snouts of B-mounting's long grey barrels were damn near level with his face, and the gale-force wind of her passage smacked their blast straight into it.

The roar and the brown smoke shredded away and Randall watched for the second fall of shot. This would take some time to show. Before it did, Randall ejaculated:

"Well I'm buggered! What the hell...?"

Then Lasenby also—the old eyeball being quicker than the radar plot—confirmed the reason for Randall's surprise.

"Enemy turning away," Lasenby sent down to the bridge.

This was a normal gunnery report, but they all knew it was more than that happening out there, more than a small alteration to avoid the following broadside.

The Jap destroyers were heeling gunwales awash under the heave of hard-over rudders. They kept turning. The second broadside landed, now even further out for line. Just too late to catch the third broadside, Bentley ordered:

"Cease firing."

The guns fell silent, but at least they were empty. It was a tedious job ramming back shells which had been rammed hard-up against the rifling.

"Cease firing," Lasenby acknowledged. "All guns cleared. Enemy still on the turn away."

And so he was—almost right round now, then straightening up from that violent heel, and then running fast and straight back to the northward. While Wind Rode continued on her easterly course.

Randall waited a few seconds, wondering if Bentley was delaying so that he could check on the last fall of shot. But what the hell did that matter now? The targets were clear to blazes.

Still no order came, and Randall could hold himself no longer.

"They're increasing the range every minute! Why aren't we altering after 'em?" Then, seeing Bentley's quizzical look, Randall said, on a downward inflection of understanding, "Oh."

"That's right," Bentley nodded. "We are pretty low on fuel, Pilot!"

"Sir?"

"Come down to twenty knots. Resume original course." And to Randall: "Secure action stations, Number One."

"Aye aye, sir."

When the bridge was cleared of all officers except himself and Bentley, Randall growled:

"All right, chum. Why?"

Being human as well as captain, Bentley was feeling pleased that his forecast of enemy intentions had turned out accurate. The danger was past, the flotilla was intact, and he could afford to indulge in facetiousness.

"Why what, old shipmate?"

"You know bloody well why what! How come you had only Wind Rode firing?"

"Well, it worked, didn't it?"

"You sound like you knew it would," said Randall curiously.

"Not knew — guessed. It's almost dark, they were calling our bluff. As for only one ship firing, there was no point in wasting ammunition. I didn't expect to hit at that range."

"But you did expect them to turn away. Why did they, so suddenly? The bastards never even opened fire."

"It is rather odd," Bentley murmured, rubbing at his chin.

"No it's not," Randall suddenly answered himself. "Three against five, that's why. What's so odd about that?"

"I was thinking about something else."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure."

"I am," nodded Randall, his expression malicious. "You won't spill it in case you're wrong. That would never do, would it?"

"Roberto, you are so right."

"What sort of answer is that? Come on. What's kicking around in that oversized brain, eh? Damn it all, I'm your sidekick, I have a right to know."

"If I am right, you'll know all in good time. Meanwhile, take a look at the chart and try and work it out for yourself. I'll be in my cabin, Einstein."

As he started to go down the ladder, and glanced back, and saw Randall heading for the chart, Bentley felt a twinge of regret that he'd used that last name. The big fellow mightn't be a mental genius, but there were other qualities required in a sidekick, and of those Randall possessed a full measure.

Bentley entered his cabin, and while he stripped for a shower before dinner he pondered over what had seemed so odd about the position of those destroyers. At dinner he was still thinking about it, but had come to no conclusive answer.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEXT day Bentley realised that while he had no answer, he unexpectedly had the chance to discuss the problem with a mind more experienced and sharper than his own.

Pilot's Pilot had been, excusably, not quite up to date. Not three, but four nations had occupied the island of Manus. But the Japanese had been kicked out by the Americans, and the violence of their brief tenure was indicated by the condition of the real estate on either side of the reef entrance as Wind Rode led her flotilla through it. Once, that reef—it was really a long hook of land enclosing the great harbour—had been lushly covered with tropical vegetation. As the Pilot correctly informed, Manus Island "is mountainous but fertile."

Most of it still was; the hook of land was a desolation. Battleship and cruiser shells falling short from the American pre-invasion bombardment had seen to that. Great holes gutted the ground, and where palm trees had not been smashed into shredded stumps, they were burned black as if by a bushfire. They'd endured worse than that.

Wind Rode's bridge had seen all this before. They weren't interested. Their attention, drawn to it by the yeoman's call to the captain, was for a flag. They'd seen this before, too, but here, amongst the scores of starred and striped ensigns, to their eyes the flag of the Australian Commonwealth stood out like a shout of welcome.

"Well I'm damned," muttered Bentley. "I didn't know the old coot was up this way. Yeoman! Make: 'R.P.C. lunch on board today'."

"Aye aye, sir."

But before the request for the pleasure of the addressee's company aboard Wind Rode could be transmitted, she became the addressee of a signal herself. It could hardly have been more brief. "Repair on board." Three words. Their meaning was explicit. Enlarged, they said: "The instant you have anchored your ship you will present yourself in mine." Perhaps you had been thinking that the lone ship in there wearing the Australian flag amongst that American mass could be none other than one commanded by an old coot named Holland? If so, it is feared that your following of these naval chronicles has taught you much less than it should have. A mere

commander would have sent the "R.P.C." message, not that terse and concise order.

Captain Bentley, V.C., etc., anchored his ship quickly and obeyed the order quickly. And in the motorboat he spoke quickly to Leading-seaman Billson.

"He's already on the quarterdeck. For God's sake don't make a balls of it."

"No, sir," answered Billson, stolidly.

Nor did he. The boat pulled up abreast the gangway, while its stern swung gently in until it touched the bottom platform. Perfect. Phew, breathed Bentley, and he jumped on to the platform. As he walked up the ladder— only commanders and other nonentities run up a ladder this one—he thought he heard something that sounded like a scurrying of feet. But when his head appeared above the gunwale, and the pipes shrilled their captainly respect, he forgot about that odd sound. His ears, instead, were met by another.

"I see you still have that ruffian Billson carting you around," said a prim and acidulous voice.

Quarterdeck or no spotless, rigidly-to-attention quarterdeck, Bentley grinned.

"I'll pass on the word that you remembered him, sir," he said, saluting then holding out his hand. "Ruffian he may be, but you have to admit he knows how to handle a boat."

"His boat handling ability was never in question," agreed Captain Sainsbury, V.C., etc. "I seem to remember I had some small hand in his training. However, what undoubtedly is in question is his knowledge, and yours, of correct naval procedure."

"Eh?" said Bentley, and then, abruptly as realisation and memory flood in, "Oh my God!"

"Precisely. Many of the service's customs are obscurely based, it is true, and one supposes that youth must have its whims, but the next time you indulge yourself in one of them I do wish you would let us know in advance.

The best-trained piping party finds it somewhat difficult, to say the least, to cross over to the port side of a cruiser's quarterdeck when they have already been drawn up on the starb'd side."

Oh Christ, Bentley thought. In his eager excitement at meeting

his mentor again, the prim-faced old maiden aunt who had taught him most of what he knew, he had clean failed to notice that that bloody Billson was heading for the port ladder—reserved for libertymen and such. Now he knew what that scurrying sound had been.

He turned his head slowly. They were still there, lined up at the head of the gangway; the officer of the day, the chief quartermaster, the leading-seaman quartermaster, the bosun's mate, the sideboy — representing all the pomp of a cruiser's ceremony. Their faces were stiff and respectful, and their eyes were grinning.

"I'll have that bugger Billson's guts for a necktie," Bentley growled in his throat.

"I beg your pardon?" enquired Sainsbury.

"I said," Bentley said, looking straight at the piping party, "that I did it deliberately, to test their quickness of reaction."

"Ah," murmured Sainsbury, "an exercise, I see. A destroyer testing a cruiser's efficiency. There should be more of it—I suppose."

The grins slipped down from eyes to mouths. This cruiser and that destroyer had sailed together before, and these men knew these two captains. Sailors claim to know many things, even unto an admiral's bank balance and the way he treats his wife, but certainly this lot knew that the younger captain was the heavyweight champion of the Fleet, and that once he had served as first lieutenant under their captain. As for their personal relationship— blind Freddy could see that they were the best of friends. Any other commanding-officer coming alongside the wrong gangway would not have been treated to an acid, eye-glinting castigation; it would have been simply acid. The very fact that Sainsbury's homily had been delivered within earshot of junior ratings was evidence enough.

Sainsbury nodded to the officer of the day, who fell-out the piping party. At this indication of formality's end, two officers came forward from beside the triple-barrelled gunhouse of Y-turret.

"You remember Commander Blaskayne?" Sainsbury murmured.

"Of course."

"Nice to see you again, sir."

The voice was gruff; unlike most voices, it fitted perfectly the owner's frame. Bentley nodded to a heavy reddish face, and shook a

big hand with thick fingers. As on that first time, he got the immediate impression of an old time seaman, though Sainsbury's second-in-command could be no more than thirty-five; a bosun type, Bentley thought, one who would seem to be more at home splicing rope than using a sextant. He had another impression—that the commander's greeting had been simply and honestly meant. An odd but pleasant counterpoint, he reflected; this bluff fellow against Sainsbury's prim fastidiousness.

The reflection made him smile a little. He turned to the other officer, and as Sainsbury said, "You will also remember my first lieutenant, Lieutenant-Commander Cowdray," the smile involuntarily eased under the compulsion of a remembered dislike.

"How d'you do, sir?" Cowdray said.

Bentley knew that this fellow's greeting would be formal. The face was thin and dark, the same characteristics of Dalziel's, and his hair was black, extending in side-levers almost level with the bottom of his ears. But where Dalziel's face held a clean, hard saturnity, this face looked—Bentley could find no softer word—slimy.

Junior, Cowdray had his hand held ready to accept the handshake which the senior officer must initiate. Casually, Bentley clasped his hands behind his back. Cowdray's smile slipped off under the tightening of his face. Sainsbury's expression did not change.

"Good morning, Number One," said Bentley, then turned to the captain. "I didn't expect to see Tempest in here this morning, sir."

"Life is full of surprises, my boy. However, it is too hot to talk here. Please follow me."

"Goodbye, Commander," Bentley said to Blaskayne, and nodded to Cowdray then he walked after Sainsbury to a hatch leading below.

"He hasn't changed much," said Cowdray, with an edge of bitterness to his tone.

Makes two of you, Blaskayne thought distastefully. He said, with bluff and pretended innocence:

"Why should he change? Seems to me he's doing all right as it is. Boxing champion, one of the youngest post-captains in the Service, his own flotilla—not to mention his cross. That's a pretty impressive tally."

"Yes, it is," said Cowdray in a hard flat tone. "Trouble is, he's

aware of it. You saw that. Didn't bother to shake hands. It was a deliberate snub. I'm not a bloody sideboy, you know!"

"Speaking of your job," said Blaskayne, suddenly hard-faced, "how's the painting of the fore top messdeck coming along? I don't want to sail with wet paint everywhere. Better check on it."

It was an order. Cowdray nodded curtly and moved off to his 'tween deck province.

Bentley flopped his weight into a chair and Sainsbury said:

"I see you still dislike my first lieutenant."

"I see you've still got him."

Sainsbury pushed a box of cigarettes across the low coffee table. It was perhaps the most significant evidence of the relationship between them when he said, to another officer about one of his own:

"How can I get rid of him? He is, one must admit, not the most desirable of shipmates, but unfortunately— if you will excuse the paradox—he does know his job, and performs it well. Between decks Tempest is in excellent shape."

"Good for him. So transfer him to an old destroyer or a frigate. He looks senior enough to be due for command."

"Unfortunately," and Sainsbury offered his vinegary smile, "he is due, but not fit for command. You have, I should think, a similar situation obtaining with your own first lieutenant?"

Bentley was momentarily startled; not so long back those had been precisely his own thoughts. The sharp-witted old coot. He didn't miss much. Then the other implication struck Bentley. His tone was belligerent. "You can't compare Bob Randall with that septic specimen, for God's sake!"

"On the contrary, my dear boy. In two respects they are most comparably similar. Both do their respective jobs well, and both are not command material."

"I could argue about the degree of that comparison. Randall does a bloody sight more than see the messdecks are kept clean!"

"I was," Sainsbury admonished him gently, "once in command of a destroyer."

"All right. But there's a third aspect. Nature and personality. Randall's as much like the louse as I'm like a ... like a bloody ballet dancer!"

Bentley was again startled. Sainsbury's acerbic face smiled infrequently enough, but Bentley couldn't remember the last time he had heard him chuckle.

"Your pardon, Peter. I was imagining you in a tutu and toe shoes."

"What the hell," frowned Bentley, "is a tutu?"

"I see your cultural education has been sadly neglected. However, I did not bring you aboard to discuss either ballet or junior officers. You will lunch with me?"

"Of course."

"And you will, I suppose, wish to imbibe before lunch?"

No, Bentley thought, grinning inwardly, you just couldn't expect talk any different to that from such a face. And it wasn't an act. "Imbibe" means to drink, to absorb, and so, precisely, Sainsbury used the word.

"Naturally."

"Whisky?"

"Scotch?"

"Yes."

"We do all right in the luxury liners, don't we? No thanks, it's too hot. You have beer?"

"I think a bottle can be arranged."

"A bottle. If I didn't know you better," Bentley said, "I'd get the impression you'd become stingy. Or couldn't hold your liquor," he added maliciously—remembering that on more than one occasion Sainsbury's bony frame had still been erect when all of them, he and Randall included, had been figuratively, and in one case actually, under the table.

"If you persist in becoming obese," Sainsbury smiled, "I suppose I shall have to keep you company. Press that buzzer, would you?"

Bentley did so, remembering that smile — twice within a minute—and thinking with pleasure that either the old boy had become more mature, or else the comforts and easier life aboard a big ship had psychologically fattened him after the lean rigours of life aboard a bucking tin-can.

Suddenly, impulsively, he said:

"It's damn good to see you again."

For a moment their eyes held, this young captain now without a

father and the man who had been almost that to him. Then Sainsbury coughed, and the steward came in, and the moment of intimacy passed.

It was not forgotten.

Bentley thoroughly enjoyed the meal. He was a destroyerman, and at heart always would be, yet it was the confines of his own address which enabled him to appreciate so much his lunch here; the food was well cooked and the service was swift and silent. And the company—which others might have found awkward-he enjoyed as much as the food.

They chattered easily, mainly about the war and old times shared, though Sainsbury forebore from mentioning Bentley's father, who had been killed some months before aboard Wind Rode. Then, over coffee and a liqueur brandy, Bentley returned to the particular.

"What's up? Why are you here? You didn't get me over just to lunch."

"Questions, questions," Sainsbury sighed. "You are just as impetuous as ever, aren't you?"

"I'm damn curious."

"Yes. Well now, first I have a few questions of my own. The answers could be illuminating. You've been out on patrol?"

"Yes."

"Where, exactly?"

"Up towards Mindanao."

"Ah."

"Ah what?"

"Patience, my boy. What, if anything, did you see?" Now, mentally, Bentley uttered his own "Ah.". This could be very interesting. But he curbed his impatience and began at the beginning.

"We contacted a submarine and sank it—or Benson did."

"Good. Where?"

"Off Pusan Point on Mindanao. Benson clobbered a shore battery there, too."

A shade of disappointment flitted across Sainsbury's face.

"Pusan Point is a long way off," he murmured.

"Biak's not."

Sainsbury's head jerked up. He looked at Bentley sharply.

"You found something off Biak?"

Bentley told him what they'd found, while he noted that those clear, shrewd eyes were watching him intently.

"I thought it odd," he concluded. "Jap destroyers, only three, unsupported by aircraft or heavier units have never come so close to Manus, at least not to my knowledge. They were headed towards the harbour, yet they must have known it held big trouble. The bastards also knew they were well within the range of Yank aircraft."

Sainsbury's eyes were gleaming, yet instead of discussing the subject in hand he said, reprovingly:

"I do wish you would use more temperate language, by boy."

"Eh? Oh, sorry. Okay, the blighters knew they were in range of Yank aircraft. Does that satisfy you?" he grinned ironically.

"It does not."

"Come again? Blighters offends you? Why, I've known you yourself to so far forget decorum as to call the Japs devils. Once, you even said bloody devils."

"I, too, am a captain," said Sainsbury. "I am not required to guffaw at your alleged wit. For your information, I myself have referred to both Germans and Japs as bastards, especially those employed in the submarine service."

Bentley goggled at him. "Then what the devil are you offended at?"

"At your use of the word Yank."

"I think you're serious," Bentley said wonderingly.

"Most serious, believe me. The American civil war was fought a long time ago, but, if I may steal a phrase, the memory lingers on. In those days the term Yank, or Yankee, was to southern Americans an expression of distaste, even opprobrium. In the United States Navy today, in ships which are right here, in fact, there are many southern Americans serving. They like being called Yanks as much as the Japs like being called little slant-eyed yellow bastards."

"Oh come on! Surely that's taking it a bit far? I don't object to being called an Aussie, or even a Digger."

"Perhaps not. But think back, my boy. From your own experience you are well aware that Englishmen find distasteful the terms Limey and Pommy. Especially do they dislike being called kippers."

Bentley smiled. “I imagine you’re right.”

“Be sure of that. I have known a bar-room brawl to start with the use of the word Yank. If you say it, so will your men. Elsewhere it would not matter so much. But here we must be more circumspect. You might be good enough to remind your libertymen of that.”

“Will do.”

Bentley lit a cigarette. The idea came. He rejected it. But they were very old friends. From a composed face he said:

“May I have some more coffee?”

“Certainly.”

The steward came in with a fresh pot. He poured and was about to leave when Bentley said:

“Just a moment, steward.”

“Sir?”

“What is the Missouri?”

A waiter in a first-class hotel is well trained. A steward in the captain’s cabin of a cruiser is disciplined and trained. This one barely batted an eyelid in front of his astonished mind.

“The Missouri is a large river in the United States, sir. I think it is also a state, sir.”

“Right. Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. The Missouri is an American battleship.”

“Thank you, steward. That’s all.”

“Aye aye, sir.” When he’d gone Bentley said:

“You noticed that emphasis on the word American? The beggar heard our discussion.”

“His emphasis on that particular word was due entirely to my presence,” said Sainsbury deadpan. “In my ship the word has already been passed. Would you like me to send for one of my stokers?”

Bentley laughed. “You win.”

“Thank you. Now that you have proved your point— in a most dubious manner, I might add—perhaps we can get on with our somewhat more important discussion?”

“Shoot.”

“What is your appreciation of that enemy flotilla’s intentions?”

“Not offensive, that’s for sure.”

“I see we have picked up some American terminology. What

makes you so sure?"

"Didn't I mention it? Almost as soon as we opened fire, after the second broadside, in fact, the Japs turned right away and scuttled off to the northward without firing a shot."

"Which means?"

"I think they meant to reconnoitre the harbour at night. All the vegetation near the entrance has been destroyed. Even from well out, with night glasses, they could identify battleships and carriers, maybe even..."

Bentley stopped. Sainsbury was nodding his head with the remembered bird-like gestures.

"You agree?" Bentley said.

"More than that, my boy. I am pleased to see that you still have all your wits about you."

"Why thank you, sir."

"I find little humour in the situation, Peter. In fact, I expected a reconnaissance mission such as you suggested, either by aircraft or destroyers. Personally, I plumped for destroyers. They are much harder to kill than a recco aircraft, and at least one of them would have got off a message about what they'd discovered."

Bentley was aware of all that. "You expected it?" he frowned.

"Yes. That is why I'm here."

"Then you've been given a damn sight more information than I have!"

"That is possible, dear boy."

Bentley took a deep breath and expelled it slowly.

"All right. How about putting me in the picture, loud and clear?"

"Certainly," Sainsbury surprised him. "As of now, you and your flotilla sail under my command. Is that clear enough?"

Excitement moved in Bentley. His eyes snapped with eagerness.

"The group again. Same as before!"

"In some respects."

"What d'you mean?"

"We sail and fight as a group, certainly, but this time we have no specific target. Neither do the Japs, though they would very much like to."

At this, cryptic statement Bentley said nothing, though his silence

was a questioning shout.

"Yes," Sainsbury smiled thinly. "Well now. The Japs tried a reconnaissance of Seeadler Harbour because they suspect a large build-up of naval force here. They are right. They also suspect that the build-up is connected with a large-scale allied invasion. In this, too, they are right. The task of our group, both before and during the invasion, is to scout to the westward. Objective... to sight, if possible delay, but most definitely to report on any heavy Japanese naval units conning from the direction of the Philippines. A simple assignment, Peter?"

And highly bloody dangerous, Bentley thought. He said, with a casualness that would not have deceived a deaf mole:

"Where's the invasion to be?"

"I cannot divulge that yet, not even to you."

But you know, thought Bentley—which says a hell of a lot for the American admiral's trust in you. But then, like the Congressional Medal of Honour, the Victoria Cross carried a deal of weight, especially when it was owned by the captain of a cruiser, now commanding-officer of a hunting group.

"Fair enough," Bentley nodded then: "Y'know, it's highly probable that any major intercepting force will come from the direction of the Philippines."

"Correct."

"Then we've been given a responsible job."

"Correct."

"How nice of them," Bentley grinned. "The Americans, I mean."

"It can be assumed, 1 think, that the admiral reposes a certain amount of trust in your flotilla and my cruiser."

"Fine. But you mentioned before the invasion as well as during. When do we sail?"

"Tomorrow, at 0.700."

"Area? Any specific objective?"

"We will return on your earlier patrol course, though not as far north as Pusan Point. In fact, we will keep well clear of all land, and it's quite possible that if the Japs' suspicions become more than that, then we might be required back in this locality. I don't want to get too far away."

"No argument. But what do you hope to find?"

"One never knows, does one?"

"One never does," Bentley grinned.

"Hmmm. However, there is something I do know, for your cauliflower ears alone."

Automatically one of Bentley's hands went to his ear, before he whipped it down again. Sainsbury's mouth twitched.

"Joke, my lad. You have been singularly and undeservedly fortunate in the slugging matches from which you seem to derive such odd enjoyment."

"Quick ducking."

"Yes. Well now, as I was saying. More American heavy units are due in here tomorrow."

"So the big day's fairly close?"

"Who knows?"

Cagey coot, Bentley thought, then Sainsbury rose up to his full five-feet-six. Standing also and at once, Bentley loomed over him, above and sideways. Yet the smaller man failed to suffer by comparison. It was not his equal rings nor his equal ribbons, but in his face. The thin weathered visage held a stamp of absolute surety.

"Goodbye, Peter," Sainsbury said, and shook hands, his slight fingers smothered in Bentley's grip. "I shall see you over the side. By the way," turning a little at the door, "you do understand, my boy, but I took the liberty of adding the words starb'd gangway to the signal for your boat."

Bentley nodded. His smile was warm. In a different measure of heat, so were his thoughts—they concerned Leading-seaman Billson.

On the way aft to the starboard gangway Sainsbury held his cap beneath his left arm. This was one of the Navy's old customs, and like all of them it had a practical point. The cap under the arm meant that the captain did not wish to be accorded the usual courtesies of men standing to attention and interrupting their work as he passed. It was undesirable, as a captain passed up and down his own decks, to have scores of men standing to attention. It would be, in fact, damned silly.

The two officers moved along the deck and the groups of men continued with their work; ordered, in effect, to ignore the usual

order of things.

Yet there were many surreptitious glances directed at both captains, the one so thin as almost to seem frail, the other wide-shouldered, big and light-stepping. They all knew who he was, of course—the heavyweight champion of the Fleet cannot hope for anonymity—but mainly their interest was concerned with the identical ribbons on each chest.

In a ship or even in the Navy it is rare to see a man entitled to write V.C. after his name: to have two of them together, both post-captains, is exceptional. The men of Tempest were suitably impressed. They understood that this pair denoted a good deal of skill and experience. What they did not know, yet, was that, with what in the not too distant future they were to meet, those attributes were to be sorely needed. But now the cruiser's men were simply curious.

The joke was over. The piping party drawn up at right-angles to the starboard gangway were disciplined of eye as well as face. The pipes shrilled as Bentley stepped on to the upper platform, and again as the motorboat drew away. Then there was only the sound of its engine, but quite clearly the coxswain heard above it: "Billson!"

A freckled face turned. "Sir?"

"You know what you did, you great oaf?"

"Yessir, I do ... now. But it won't happen again, sir."

"Of course it won't. Since when does an ordinary-seaman cox'n a motorboat?"

"No, sir."

But Billson was smiling—after he had turned his face back. A leading-seaman can with the greatest of ease be disrated to an able-seaman, but never to an ordinary-seaman. Billson knew he was safe.

Bentley sat down in the sternsheets, forgetting his boat coxswain. It had been a leisurely lunch, but only because Sainsbury knew the sailing time, and that the flotilla would be refuelling and restoring under the capable superintendence of Randall. Bentley was musing on the implications of what he'd been told. It would be a large-scale invasion, that was certain: heavy units meant battleships and carriers, and expensive vehicles like those were too precious to be used except for the most important functions.

Yet it was the other near-certainty that exercised Bentley's thoughts. Already the Japs were suspicious. It needed only the briefest sighting from a recco aircraft, a periscope, or even a motor torpedo boat, and the Japs would hasten to send along their own heavy units, and these would come from bases in the Philippines—and standing in the way of their nasty intention would be Tempest and his flotilla.

Their job was to sight and report, Sainsbury had said— and, if possible, delay. Knowing Sainsbury, Bentley knew what that last bit meant, at least if the enemy force were contacted at night. By day, of course, Sainsbury would simply open the range and shadow the threatening force, reporting regularly on its course and speed.

At this point, while the boat was shaping-up to come alongside Wind Rode's gangway, Bentley was unpleasantly reminded of his own dictum—at sea, nothing is certain.

But there are other dictums, like sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, or let the future take care of itself, or don't cross your bridges, and as he went up the ladder Bentley replaced his unpleasant thoughts with another less worrying.

"Anything up?" asked Randall when the piping party had fallen-out.

"Buy me a drink and I'll think about telling you."

"Ah... Yes, of course."

Bentley understood his first lieutenant's hesitation when he stepped into the mess. With the captain out of the ship the wardroom, too, had enjoyed a leisurely lunch. It was still almost full.

They got to their feet and a flick of Bentley's finger sat them down again. He was not in the least annoyed that they were still here. One patrol had just finished, and in the morning another would start. They deserved all the relaxation they could get. There is discipline, and discipline. They saw by his face that all was well and their own expressions eased, though curiosity was alive in them.

Bentley sat down, with Randall beside him. A frosted glass filled with cold amber was placed in his ready hand. He took a swallow, then he said:

"Now gentlemen."

They knew where he had just come from. At his words their expressions tightened into alertness. This was it— a nice long spell

in harbour, protected by the big stuff, or else a sailing into possible mayhem, possibly this afternoon. Destroyers were good to serve in, but by Jehoshaphat they were worked! But they were used to that, and you couldn't have everything, and so they waited for the verdict, and Bentley said:

"What the hell, gentlemen, is a tutu?"

Some jaws fell open, while others clicked shut. But it was a young team. Most of them were unmarried, and childless. All of them remained silent. Until from the far side of the mess there came a deep, clearing cough.

All those young faces swung, to stare at the defensively belligerent and bald headed dial of Mr. McGuire, commissioned engineer.

"You, Chief?" queried Bentley.

"Yes, me sir," said the oldest officer in the ship.

"All right, all right," smiled Bentley, for McGuire also happened to be one of his most important officers. "If this embarrasses you, forget it."

"Why should it embarrass me?" demanded McGuire, glaring round those curious faces, most of them young enough to belong to his son.

"Okay then. So what is a blasted tutu?" asked Bentley.

"It's one of them ballet dancer's dresses, sir. A tight satin top and those layers and layers of that netty stuff that stick out from the hips. Y'know, like they wear in the dance of the dying swan. Les Sylphides and Coppelia, things like that."

Their astonishment was understandable. Ask the Chief about forced lubrication or working pressure of a boiler ... sure. But ballet!

"How the devil do you know this?" wondered Bentley.

"I oughta know," growled McGuire. "Got a daughter, fourteen. She's learning ballet, and just before we left Sydney I had to fork out for a bloody new tutu. Cost me quids!"

"Ah..." smiled Bentley, and:

"Why the devil do you want to know?" wondered Randall, for all of them.

"Just a casual reference, came up in the conversation," Bentley said airily. "Yes. Well, now. I suppose you want to know about leave, Number One?"

Randall did, even more than he wanted to know about tutus. He'd worm that reference out of his friend some other time. He nodded.

"Usual midnight leave," Bentley said, "ship under sailing orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

They were disappointed. The captain's words told them nothing. In a port such as Manus, lacking accommodation for hundreds of libertymen, leave was always up at midnight, and during wartime, unless she were laid up for a refit or a boiler-clean, a ship was always under sailing orders.

Then Bentley said to Randall, "Have the duty petty-officer stress that midnight limit," and as he rose and they stood up with him, they knew, at least, that some time tomorrow they could expect to be at sea again.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE destroyers went out first, snaking through the entrance and then forming a sub-hunting line outside to clear the way for the bigger ship.

You like cars, or maybe the way a tennis champ serves or a fullback runs? Seamen like ships, and the way they run.

As she came out Tempest was something to look at, and for a seaman to like very much. With nothing on asdic—only an extraordinary gutsy, or stupid, submarine commander would have his boat in this particular area— Bentley laid his glasses on Sainsbury's ship, now clearing the entrance.

Ostensibly, Tempest was a light cruiser. But this class of ship is usually about 6000 tons,—Tempest rated 8000 tons, which put her closer to the class of heavy cruiser. And each turret mounted three guns, and she had four turrets; twelve high-velocity 6-inch cannon. A very handy broadside indeed.

She was long, better than 550 feet, and with attractive lines. There was a racy look about her—understandable, with her four screws, 72,000 horsepower and 33 knots— though he thought her silhouette might have been improved with the funnels raked instead of vertical. But that was merely an aesthetic consideration. More to the point was her square-cut, sloping stern—speed—and the four wide triple turrets—fast and heavy hitting power— and the six torpedo tubes—handy against a bigger enemy—and the advanced-type radar aerials above the director and on her foremast.

Level with the forward turret and running aft past the boilers and engine-rooms to the after turret—all her vitals —he could see the bulge of a belt of armour plate rising a couple of feet above the waterline. But to allow Tempest her speed, almost a destroyer's pace, this armour would be only about four inches thick, and while it would protect to some degree against torpedoes it would present a much less effective barrier to a battleship's one-ton projectiles.

But then, Bentley smiled at his thoughts, she would hardly take on a battleship.

Ferris called. The flotilla was to form-up in an inverted V position ahead of their big sister.

Presently this was done, with Bentley watching hawk-eyed for any slackness or mistake in front of those other watching, senior eyes—owned by a man who had once owned this flotilla.

Now the course was north-west, with Bentley in the van and two of his destroyers stepped-back on each side of the cruiser in the middle of the formation. Thus Tempest was protected ahead and to port and starboard by visible, overlapping arcs of underwater detection.

But no one was worried very much by the threat of submarine attack. The group was moving quite fast, and anyway it could be assumed that a hunting submarine commander would pass up five anti-submarine Fleet destroyers for the chance at a less malevolent and more vulnerable merchant ship.

"Nice group, eh?" Randall said suddenly beside him. Bentley nodded. It was a nice group indeed... altogether 50 sizeable guns, counting Tempest's eight dual-purpose 4-inch, plus a total of 56 torpedo tubes. Some punch. But most of all, to Bentley, it was the group's speed and manoeuvrability that impressed and comforted him. No 12-knot convoy to hamper them or worry about; just six fast, powerful and battle-experienced warships, under the independent command of a man who provenly knew what he was about. And every manjack of them Australians. Very, very nice, Bentley was thinking, and Ferris called: "From Tempest, sir. 'you are half a cable ahead of station'."

That was 100 yards. Not much, perhaps, when the ship itself was only a little more than 100 yards long, and with the group at speed. But the sea was calm, and the admonition had come from a senior officer to an officer who until yesterday had been his own lord and master, and still was of his flotilla.

Bentley glared at luckless Torps, officer of the forenoon watch. His mouth was shaped in the formation of a snarl—and then he remembered that most senior officers indicated their seniority, and thus by implication their ceaseless watchfulness, like this at the start of a mission; he could also imagine the private, vinegary humour exercising that mind back there, and so instead of snarling his condemnation Bentley said in a merely curt tone: "Ease her back, Torps. Watch your station-keeping." 'Aye aye, sir!"

To Ferris, Bentley said, “Acknowledge.” He thought of adding some half-humorous excuse or explanation, but decided against it. The admonition had been half-humorous, and it was unwise to try and cap your captain’s little joke.

Joke or not, the effect was there. During the rest of that patrol, even with her captain down below, Wind Rode was to be never more than a few permissible yards out of station.

On that first day at sea the officers of watches got plenty of practice.

Bentley was halfway through his delayed breakfast when the signal flew for squadron manoeuvres. He cursed, at the same time as he sourly conceded that the enemy would not wait for a more convenient time. He hurried up to the compass platform, and the drill commenced.

For most of the day it went on. As Nutty Ferris was later and tiredly to growl. “The old bastard’s hoisted bloody near every bloody Fleet Signal Book.”

This was not strictly accurate. Sainsbury did not have his ships strike their topmasts, nor did he order the starboard screws unshipped and lashed down on the quarterdecks. But he made one or two other signals.

He carried out “blue turn,” and hoisted the flags “blue 9”. This indicated that all ships would turn 90 degrees to starboard. No sooner was this done than up went “Nine blue.” Round they came in a 90-degree turn to port.

These manoeuvres were for ships in line-abreast desiring—or being desired—to turn line-ahead. Once Sainsbury got them in line-ahead he swung them back to line-abreast— “red turn.”

Then he increased speed and before the signalled pace was achieved he suddenly dropped them back to half of it. This required the utmost in skill and concentration to prevent a collision. It did not require, but gave birth to, many private curses.

Then he ordered a destroyer to take station astern of him, and at the same time another to take station ten miles on his port beam. Then he signalled them back, but before they made it he had once again changed the squadron’s formation, so that it took a bit of dicey work on the part of Benson and Cartwright to regain station without

fouling-up the group.

Then they spread out to perform a box search for a pretended submarine and then they closed-in to carry out an attack on it. They raced in in line abreast to loose torpedoes at a Jap cruiser squadron, and raced past a shore in line-ahead firing bombardment broadsides. They spread out to avoid falling bombs and closed in to circle a crippled merchantman.

At first, Bentley enjoyed it. All his skill was required and he was constantly worried—but that was compensated for by the - exhilaration of a manoeuvre precisely executed at high speed. And all the time he was helped in his acceptance of the potentially dangerous work because of his knowledge that Sainsbury must have been a long time without a destroyer flotilla, and needed the practice in handling one.

But round about eleven-thirty, after more than three hours of it, he became fed up with the gyrations and wished to hell they would cease. At last came noon, which was dinner time, and meant an hour's rest at least, and then came Tempest's signal.

"Squadron manoeuvres successfully completed. Evolutions will commence at 1230."

Someone on the bridge groaned. Randall snarled, "Pipe down!"; his tone indicating his own feelings.

"Send the hands to dinner, Number One," ordered Bentley. "Warn them they will be required for evolutions in half an hour's time."

"Make an evolution of it" is a term freely used in the Service, and can apply to jobs ranging from scrubbing out a mess to painting its side. Used thus, the term means smack it about, or get the lead out, or pull your finger

out, or get off your great arse and get stuck into it — in short, hurry.

But Captain Sainsbury's meaning of evolutions was entirely different. The only similarity was in his requirement of speed. His evolutions concerned shipboard drill. As each ship completed its given task it hoisted a signal to the effect—and so it was a competition, with the whole group able to see who was last.

There was much bellowing.

They fought fires in the tiller flat aft and the cable locker forward.

They prepared their ships for towing and they prepared their ships for being towed. They each had a man overboard and they had to lower a lifeboat to get him back, and the boat had to be hoisted. They lost a screw and had to manoeuvre with the remaining one. They provided collision mats and sheer-legs and closed watertight doors and rigged sounding booms and spread awnings. And all this time, well ahead of the cursing, griping, sweating hundreds back there, Benson's ship cruised on a zig-zag course ahead of the squadron's line of advance — scouting, hunting, and excused.

Benson, and Bentley, too, wondered if his sinking of that submarine off Pusan Point was behind his present immunity from ordeal; Benson gratefully, and Bentley enviously.

Then came the order: "Quarterdeckmen to dance on the foc's'le."

Now as this was an old senior officer's joke, or meant to be, they knew their travail was at last over. Savagely, Bentley said to Ferris:

"Make to Tempest: 'Unable to concur your last evolution. My quarterdeckmen not fitted out with tutus'."

For possibly the first time in his life the yeoman had to ask for the spelling of a word, but then he got the signal off. Promptly, back came the answer:

"You inability to carry out last evolution acknowledged. In lieu, come alongside my port side and exercise fuelling procedure."

Ferris had called out the message. Everyone heard. Bentley glared round his bridge.

"One word," he gritted, "just one word...!"

There was no word — not spoken. "Number One!"

"Sir!"

"Prepare to fuel ship starb'd side. Pilot! Pilot! thirty! Bring her round on that old... on Tempest's port quarter!"

"Aye aye, sir."

Wind Rode was round, running back to make her come-alongside turn, and Hooky Walker in his best, or worst, chief bosun's mate's voice was saying things about wires and fenders and such, when a light blinked from the cruiser's bridge.

"Belay my last order," it said. "Resume station in the screen."

Ferris called that out, too. They all looked at Bentley, and all their eyes pleaded, "Please, for God's sake, no more cracks."

Bentley's stomach quivered with his inward chuckling.

"All right," he growled at them, "all right. Acknowledge Yeoman."

Wind Rode turned away to head for her spearhead position in the van. Presently the group was back in its normal steaming formation, with Benson's Witch, fresh and unsweated, last ship in the left-hand leg of the V. The time was just on four o'clock. Unfresh, sweating, the tortured went below for afternoon tea.

"Where are we, Pilot?" Bentley asked.

After a moment the navigator came back from the chart table. He gave the latitude and longitude, then added more explicitly:

"One hundred and thirty miles north-west of Manus, sir."

"Well I'm damned," muttered Bentley, while Pilot nodded his own appreciation.

The mental arithmetic was not difficult. Although at times it had been higher, the mean speed had been 20 knots, so that while they were fighting imaginary fires and cruisers, their asdic could still hunt for real submarines. They had been at sea for eight hours. That would have placed them 160 miles north-west of Manus. Yet, taking into account all that day's mad mucking about, the cunning old devil back there had them no more than thirty miles, an hour's run if necessary, behind normal schedule.

"He had the mean line of advance in mind all the time," said Pilot admiringly.

"What did you expect?" asked Bentley, who had not expected it—he had been too long away from his old mentor, forgetting the comprehension and agility of the brain behind that maiden-aunt face. Then he remembered just who he was discussing with a junior officer, and in a tone more curt than normally he would have used, Bentley asked:

"Who has the watch?"

"Me, sir," answered Pilot. "I'm looking-out for Number One while he has his tea."

"Right. Sea-cabin."

"Sea-cabin. Aye aye, sir."

CHAPTER SIX

CRAVEN, again: partly because he had been put at the masthead for the last hour of daylight, the important time, but mainly because with his ship ahead of the others he could see further than they.

There was another reason, but right now Craven was not interested in psychological advantages, only facts, and the facts were three topmasts, looking as if they might be the same he had sighted before. At such long range he could not be sure of this, but there was no doubt about his surety that under those thin sticks sailed three destroyers.

He spoke to the bridge.

Randall had come up to take over the dog-watches and his call brought Bentley up. They both used glasses, but from their lower level the horizon ahead showed unmarried by sticks or anything else, and their gesture was automatic.

Yet Bentley was sure of Craven. He himself had ordered him up there. He glanced at the sun, a big orange ball lowering itself off the port bow. Not much more than an hour of sunlight left, but with those masts approaching they would need less than an hour. Even so, this time they had plenty of fuel, and the group had fought at night before.

Bentley crossed to the radiotelephone.

"Tempest this is Wind Rode. Captain to captain."

Waiting, he was thinking that all bridges would be listening-in—idly expecting some unimportant domestic matter to be discussed. Consciously, he had to stop himself from having Ferris signal his four destroyers; he was not in command now.

A brittle voice came from the instrument.

"Sainsbury. What is it, Bentley?"

As is the pupil, so must be the master. This one answered correctly:

"Bearing right ahead, sir, topmasts of three destroyers." With the vital information given, Bentley added to it: "I think they're coming towards, sir—only the masthead has them in sight. I also think they might be our friends of the other day, intending to take a look at Seeadler Harbour late tonight."

"Right." There was only a short pause before Sainsbury's voice came again, crisp and decisive. "Those additional heavy units will be in harbour by now. They must not be seen. Neither must Tempest, for the moment. Take one destroyer on an intercepting course, I shall head to the westward. As of now, unless in an emergency, wireless silence is to be maintained. Over and out."

Bentley replaced the hand mike. Ferris was waiting, pencil at the ready.

"Make to Witch: 'Disengage and take station on me, two miles astern. Standby to close and engage'."

Ferris blinked his Aldis lamp astern, for Witch was back there off the cruiser's port beam. Tempest's yeoman read the signal. Automatically, believing that any disposition signal would be of interest to the group's senior officer, he repeated it to him.

"Very well," Sainsbury acknowledged.

Commander Blaskayne acknowledged something else. He and Sainsbury were standing clear on the forebridge, and he could speak safely.

"That young feller's got his head screwed on right," muttered Blaskayne, nodding his own head in appreciation. "The Japs will sight only one topmast at first, and they'll probably close it at full speed to engage. That'll bring 'em nicely into the trap."

"Yes, Tom."

"Cunning. But then you trained him, didn't you?"

"Yes, Tom." The thin mouth twitched a fraction.

Sainsbury would not have taken talk like that—nor answered it like that—from an officer like, say, Cowdray. But right now other talk was required.

"Officer of the watch!"

"Sir?"

"Navigating officer on the bridge. Port thirty, go on to 33 knots."

"Port thirty, 33 knots, aye aye, sir. Bosun's mate!"

"Port fifteen Pilot," said Benson. "Take her outside of the screen then line-up astern of the Leader, distance two miles."

"Aye aye, sir." And, when Witch was on the turn, lugubriously: "Why does it always have to be us?"

"Because we're junior ship, fathead." Benson was smiling tightly;

those cocky bastards wouldn't get away this time, and in this stoush he wouldn't be on his own. "Or maybe," he went on casually, deceiving no one let alone himself, "the Leader reckons we're the best ship to have along with him."

"Yes," Pilot answered, but shaking his gaunt head gloomily, "and maybe it's because we're the last ship in the line, closer to that two miles distance he wants."

"Oh, pack up laughing," Benson grinned, and abruptly his grin snapped off and he jerked: "Watch out! Hard-a-starb'd! Get it on, for Christ sake!"

Benson had trained his crew but Sainsbury had trained Benson too, which was just as well. Pilot shouted down the voice pipe and the quarter-master made the wheel spokes whirr.

Power-operated, huge for her size, the rudder went over until its steel face met the rushing water at an angle of thirty-five degrees, the maximum for turning efficiency.

Witch needed it all. Her sharp driving stem wiped past a staring bridge, then a thin-skinned belly, then a quarterdeck packed with depth charges, and then at last her stem was in clear water. Not calm water; the tossing white of her sister's wake. Her sister was heading westward, though there was little enough sisterly about the dark and angered face which still glared at Benson as he drew clear.

"Dalziel," Pilot whispered.

Benson grinned. "Thank God," he said, "for wireless silence..."

"Now," Pilot gloomed. "But wait till we get back to Manus."

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Come on, straighten her up. We're heading for the bloody Panama Canal."

Witch swung back until her nose sniffed along that other, safer wake. Benson had to bring her speed well down to gain his ordered distance, for instead of racing to engage the Japs and possibly frighten them off a second time, Wind Rode was idling along at her earlier - 20 knots so that engagement would be delayed and Tempest could get into her position.

"Range to the Leader two miles," Pilot reported at last.

"Fine. Don't get any closer or he'll have our guts for garters."

On his bridge Bentley still could see nothing. He went to the voice pipe.

"I've got both yardarms now, sir," Craven told him. "They're destroyers all right, and coming towards."

"Very well."

It was well. If the Japs had sighted his own topmast, which was likely, then they believed he was alone and were still coming on. As he came up from the voice pipe Bentley looked to the westward, and was glad that he had to squint his eyes. If he hadn't known the rest of the group was over there it would have been hard to pick them out against the glare of that great orange ball. Sainsbury had known what he was doing, heading west instead of east. At Tempest's full speed she was already more than halfway to the horizon, seven or eight miles further away from the Japs than Wind Rode, and increasing her distance every minute. The earth curved in all directions; it was unlikely that the enemy would sight her.

Bentley hoped they wouldn't. Two against three was somewhat different to that earlier five against three, and to have been selected to come so close to a base like Manus those Jap skippers must be old hands, not youngsters like Benson. Perhaps he should have brought Dalziel along.

But that wasn't fair or practical, Bentley castigated himself. Young Tubby could handle his ship and fight all right, and Dalziel had to be left in command of Tempest's anti-submarine protection. So forget it and trust to...

"What'll we do," Randall broke into his thoughts, "when we sight 'em? Fight like tigers, or make like a scared rabbit and run?"

"What would you do, Roberto?" smiled Bentley; his decision had been made, and he was glad of the chance to talk through the waiting period.

"Belt the bastards!" .

"But that might turn them..."

"Before they belt hell out of us," Randall continued. His face was hard.

"Don't like the odds, eh? I think you've got the wind up."

"Sure 1 have." Randall's grin was a thin-lipped stretch. "Man's got a wife to think of now, y'know."

"Not that again, for Pete's sake," Bentley groaned, and Ferris called:

"Enemy in sight, sir, three destroyers."

As if activated by the one pair of hands their binoculars whipped up together. But Ferris was using a long and very powerful telescope, so that a few seconds passed before Bentley made out what Craven had seen long before.

Yet there was no doubt Craven had been right. So thin and so tall—visible while the directors and bridges below them were not—those sticks could belong only to destroyers. And from the inclination of the yardarms they were heading straight towards him.

With the masts sighted it was not long before the bridge structures hove into view. Then Wind Rode's forepart rose an extra few feet on a swell, and Bentley got a glimpse of a pair of twin white arches. Only for a second, yet those bow-waves said to him—thirty knots, and that said danger.

Randall too had seen, and judged. "What now, gallant leader?"

"They're still well out of range. We'll press on for a bit and see what happens. In the meantime, you might get the ship closed-up for action."

Randall sounded the alarm, though there was small need. The word had passed; it might have been difficult to find a man asleep in his hammock. Even so, in the brief time before Randall reported action stations manned, the enemy destroyers were in almost full view.

Bentley glanced astern. Witch was dead in his wake and keeping her distance. At such long range Wind Rode should be masking her from the Japs. Bentley turned back and said:

"All guns load with semi-armour piercing shell."

Ah! thought Randall, there's my answer. He had the order repeated up to Lasenby in the director, from where it went down to the transmitting station and along to the guns. Clanging sounds, came, followed by the thud of breech-blocks closing. But though loaded, the guns would not fire until the executive order "Broadsides," when the electric firing interceptors would be slammed shut by the palms of the breechworkers. By men like Rohan, back there in Witch.

Both groups of ships rushed to meet. Wind Rode's bridge was a small quiet island of tension. Lasenby's report broke the silence, if not the tension.

"Enemy's opened fire. Salvoes from twin guns on the foc's'les, all ships firing together. They're Sigure-class, same as before."

Now, Randall's sight mind gloated. Sigure-class. mounted only two guns forward, while Wind Rode and Witch rated four apiece up there. Bring Benson up right now, quickly before the bastards turned, and it would be eight forward guns against six.

Then Benson spoke, and to his astonishment Randall understood that he did not have his answer after all, at least not the one he'd expected.

"Port thirty," Bentley ordered, "Steer west, increase to thirty knots. By light, Yeoman."

Ferris was already at his Aldis lamp, realising that a ship on her own does not make a flag hoist, flicking the course and speed to Witch in a blur of dots and dashes. As she began her turn away the enemy shells landed.

"Damn near a mile short," murmured Bentley, "but the spread's quite good."

But you don't need thirty degrees of wheel to avoid a fall of shot, Randall was thinking. He said, keeping his voice low:

"Look, Peter, how about putting me in the picture? We're so close to being in maximum effective range it doesn't matter! What the hell are you up to?"

"Several things, Bob. First, we have to make sure of those three, and we can't risk trying it with just the two of us. If one of 'em gets away, and sights a hunting group made up of a cruiser and a destroyer flotilla not much more than a hundred miles from Seeadler Harbour, they'll wake up to the reason for such a group. They won't need to scout the harbour. They'll know there's something mighty important in there.

"Okay, okay," said Randall tensely. "But on this course you're leading 'em straight towards the group." His arm japped out. "Look! They're turning to follow!"

"Fine."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Why not? We're opening the range and on this course they'll be squinting straight into the sun."

"I wasn't thinking about that." Less sharp-witted than his captain,

but still no fool, Randall had already recognised the advantages of their present course. He also saw its vital disadvantage.

"You're leading 'em on to the group." he repeated. "One of 'em doesn't have to get away. They just have to sight the group, that's all. Or have you forgotten a thing called radio?"

"Good point, Bob. But you're forgetting our lord and master. He's out of sight now, but you can bet a bee to a bull's foot that the cunning old devil will come down on these bastards from the north. That way, he'll catch 'em totally by surprise."

"But he didn't tell you that. You could be wrong. He might come belting in from the west."

"Let's hope I'm right," muttered Bentley "In which case... "snatching a glance astern at the relative positions of the two groups, "I'd better not lead too far to the west. Port thirty, Pilot. Well run back eastward."

"Aye aye, sir."

Wind Rode came round hard left and Witch followed. Randall was still unconvinced. From experience he knew that Bentley's decisions usually turned out to be right— they were still alive—but here he was dealing with another man's decisions. And three other ships' gunnery.

Randall saw that the next fall of shot was no more than two hundred yards short. The bastards were finding the range.

His inactivity irked him. He had to do something. "Captain, sir!"

Intent on his own schemes, Bentley was a little startled by his deputy's abrupt formality. "Yes, Number one?" "Permission to open fire, sir. All guns are now bearing."

"So they are, Number one." This had been part of Bentley's intention, to have a full broadside bearing after he'd made his turn back. "But the Japs mount 5-inch. Their range could be greater than ours."

"I'd like to find out!"

"Very well," Bentley said" to that tough and grimly eager face. "Yeoman, make to Witch..."

But Randall didn't care a damn about their consort. He jumped across the bridge and took the phone from its usual handler, the captain's messenger.

"Bridge, director!"

"Director."

"Guns. Number One here."

"Yessir?"

"Open fire."

"Open fire sir. But I think we're still outside maximum..."

"Never mind that! Target right-hand destroyer. Open with all guns. After the first fall of shot go into rapid broadsides. Understood?"

There was only the briefest hesitation before Lasenby answered:

"Aye aye, sir."

But Randall noticed it. He handed the phone back and waited silent and grim to see if he, the gunnery officer, were wrong, and the gunner right. They had accurate radar range; they also had the range of their guns. Theoretical range, that was. Guns of 4.7-inch calibre were supposed to fire a certain distance, but many variables came into it, one of which was barometric pressure. Flying high over a long-range trajectory, the flight of the shells could be affected by the air's density. The day was hot, the air would be heated and thus thinned. Or so Randall hoped.

Wind Rode jerked. The blast smacked into their faces and the stink of burnt cordite followed. A moment later Witch fired. Randall was not interested in his own blast or hers. His glasses were up, laid on the right-hand destroyer. Over or short, over or short... The refrain seemed to drum in his mind. In front of them all, the gunnery control officer as well as the captain, he had laid his judgement on the line.

Seconds passed. By now the six shells would be high up in the air, about to commence their downward run. Over or short? A Jap salvo landed. The enemy had not turned parallel to the Australian ships but was still coming on, firing only his forward guns, not a full broadside. That salvo landed short. Was it faulty range setting? Randall worried—or were even 5-inch guns still out of range? If so, he'd made a bloody fool of himself, in front of them all. Why the hell hadn't he listened to Bentley' He was a gunnery officer!

Bentley gave a wheel order and the ship swung to avoid the next fall of shot and Randall rode her heel with automatic ease; his glasses never left the right-hand target.

So that he saw. Brightly white against the blue the leaping columns

showed—but only their tops, like the tips of asparagus stalks. The target hid the rest of them. Over!

Bentley swung on him. “Nice work, Number One,” he said, and meant it. “You can go into rapid broadsides now.”

“I’ve ordered that, sir,” Randall croaked, and put up the binoculars again to cover the relief in his face.

He had won his point, but he was given no chance to show if he might win the battle. The R/T speaker crackled and on to Wind Rode’s bridge sprang a tartly familiar voice.

“Clear my line of fire!”

The phrase was also familiar, and it meant precisely what it said. Randall had prayed for his shot to fall over. If they didn’t get to hell out of there, fast, they stood an excellent chance of collecting other overs—from long-range 6-inch guns.

“Jesus!” someone said, while eyes scanned the horizon. There was nothing—nothing but the group of three Jap destroyers close together to the northward.

Of all the bridge team it was Bentley alone who did not waste time looking for the vehicle carrying that voice. But then he was the captain, he could afford no time whatever, and so he snapped:

“Cease firing! Hard-a-starb’d! Full power both engines! Yeoman!”

Never mind the signal... Benson, too, had a radiotelephone, and a pair of ears. He waited only for the direction of Wind Rode’s swing, for the beginning of her swing, and then he was rapping his own orders.

Together, a few cables apart, both destroyers picked up their feet and ran like hell towards the sun.

As with Sainsbury’s order, full power meant just that. McGuire gave her the lot, the whole forty thousand. The needle of the electric speed log was nudging 37 when Bentley looked to his right toward the north and saw that he was clear of the Jap group—and saw what a few minutes earlier it had hidden.

There she came, eight thousand tons of ferocious intent, leaping literally from the blue upon the astonished Japs, deck-high arches of spuming white flanking the grey of her body.

But not wholly grey. Several times a minute angry yellow flared

against the basic colour, spewed out by the six big rifles on her forepart. Each of those shells weighed a hundred pounds and were flung at a muzzle velocity of nearly two thousand miles per hour. And radar aimed them.

"Holy hell," breathed Randall.

It was his target—or it had been. First there showed the leaping, smothering white, and then that, with shocking vehemence, was flung to nothing by the gargantuan spew of a magazine exploding.

Brief, black-and-yellow, the blaze was too stunning in its implication to surface exultation or cheers, or even grins. To see 200 men and 1400 tons of ship die so quickly, so fiercely, is not a pretty thing.

"Shift target," Randall muttered, more to himself, and in an oddly strained tone the yeoman called:

"Tempest turning to port, sir."

She was, and they all knew why. A few seconds of turning under hard-over rudder brought her full broadside to bear, all twelve main-armament guns.

They fired together. Unlike the Americans, the British have always stuck to controlled broadsides, as opposed to guns firing as soon as they were ready. Tempest was still a good way from Wind Rode, and from that distance the whole of her starboard side seemed one ripple of flame.

Her target was the second Jap ship in the line, the one which earlier had been in the middle of the three. Two broadsides were fired, twenty-four shells, and when the destroyer emerged from its forest of flung white it was seen that her bow hung down so low that the sea was lapping round the barbette of her forward mounting. As a fighting ship she was finished.

But she still floated, the red-balled ensign still flagged its defiance from the staff on the quarterdeck.

"Sir!" said Pilot, pointing.

Bentley followed his direction and understood at once. Whole and under full control, the third Jap was running fast toward the sun—toward Wind Rode and Witch. Clear, the two Australian ships had slowed their desperate rush. But in a few minutes they would be again in the line of fire.

"Hard-a-port, steer east," Bentley ordered. "Go on to thirty knots."

Just in time. ,They were heading back, about midway between the two Jap destroyers but south of them, when the sea leaped—in two different places.

"She's gone into divided control," Randall said.

Bentley nodded. Tempest rated two gunnery directors, the second one just abaft the mainmast and controlling both after turrets on the quarterdeck. Now her forward guns were engaging the crippled Jap, while the after triplets were fastened on the running one; six 6-inch to each target.

But Bentley made no comment on the obvious. His interest was concentrated on Tempest's efficiency, and more importantly her speed of despatch. His wireless office had been warned to listen for transmissions, and so far no report had come up, but there was still time for even the damaged ship to get off the information which would indicate so much to the Japanese High Command.

Then, suddenly, Bentley's interest was elsewhere concentrated. The third Jap was running no more—she had nothing to run with. The blast was not so huge as the first one, but her quarterdeck had been packed with depth charges, and these were more than enough. Now she had no stern.

But both enemy ships remained afloat. Tempest remained in action.

"Why aren't her destroyers firing?" asked a voice.

Randall's blood lust was up; in his eagerness he answered the voice.

"The destroyers are keeping out of it so their fire won't confuse her spotting. She has to correct on her own fall of shot. If there were other columns she might mistake them for her own, and make a wrong correction."

"Thank you, sir," said the surprised bosun's mate, whose questions had been addressed to the director phone number. But Randall didn't notice even then who he had answered so civilly.

Just at that moment, as if to give him the lie, the three destroyers with Tempest did open fire. But their target was the third, sternless Jap, while the cruiser returned her undivided attention to the ship with its bow hanging down like a broken jaw.

The sun was only a couple of degrees above the horizon when the job was finally done. The thunder muttered away to rest and the area of fouled sea was empty at least of ships. A thin voice, quite unexcited, told Witch to pick up survivors and Wind Rode's captain to repair on board.

"I know, I know," said Benson to Pilot's opening mouth. "This time it's us because we're closest. Well take the third ship first. Close the area at twenty knots. Number One, provide heaving lines and scrambling nets, and warn the surgeon. I want only the live ones inboard."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Port thirty," said Bentley, "close Tempest. Number One, away seaboat's crew. You have the ship."

"Aye aye, sir."

Witch went about her grisly task and Wind Rode hurried on to hers. The cruiser had dropped back to an easy fifteen knots, now steaming on the original course of north-west, and in a few minutes Wind Rode's rush brought her up level.

Sainsbury stopped. But about him three asdic-operating destroyers circled, shortly to be joined by Wind Rode. The seaboat was slipped.

"Out oars," said Billson, "give way together. Come on then—bend 'em!"

With a captain on board and another watching, they did their best to break 'em. After all the excitement Billson must have been feeling a bit light-headed, for he dared to say:

"Starb'd gangway, sir?"

Bentley himself was not feeling exactly depressed, and so he answered, deliberately literal:

"That Jacob's ladder will do. I think they've lowered it for me."

One crack was enough.

"Yessir," said Billson.

He slid the whaler alongside. Bentley jumped for the ladder and said over his shoulder:

"Return to the ship. Stand by for my signal."

"Aye aye, sir."

This suited Billson, and his five oarsmen, fine. Soon it would be

night and they didn't relish having to wait all alone on a dark sea, even with a bloody great cruiser and five destroyers around them. Radar was good, but quite easily it could miss echoing from a boat with a freeboard of only a couple of feet...

It never occurred to Billson that there'd be no intention of leaving him to wait there—which would mean that a bloody great, and very valuable, cruiser would have had to wait with him. But then, though he was a good leading-hand and pom-pom layer, Billson never bothered to look much further than his freckled nose. He had officers to do that for him.

"Bear off forrard," he said, relieved, "give way together."

And this time also, even with no captain on board, they tried to break the oars on their way across that darkling water. Between them they rated about fifty years' service at sea; but this, being so intimately close, was a different sea altogether. They couldn't wait to get solid steel beneath their feet.

Bentley had forgotten the whaler. Cowdray met him on deck. This was acceptably understandable, with the ship under way and the captain on the bridge. Bentley found Cowdray's conversation less acceptable.

"What do you think now, sir?"

The smile was slimy and the voice gloating.

"About what, Number One?" queried Bentley, quickening his pace along the foretop deck.

"Why, sir, our gunnery. I thought it excellent, just about perfect, in fact. But then, of course, you wouldn't be familiar with such a refined system of fire control, being used to destroyers."

Bentley had served his time in a cruiser bigger than Tempest, and rating a first-class fire control system, but he wouldn't talk of that to this septic specimen. He glanced sideways at him. Why did Sainsbury put up with those silly bloody side-levers? With the effeminate clown who wore them, for that matter? But the old boy had given him the answer to that.

"Oh, I see. Yes, your gunnery-officer did a first-class job," said Bentley pointedly.

The shot seemed to have hit home; anyway, Cowdray did not speak again until on the bridge he said:

"Captain Bentley, sir."

Sainsbury' turned. "Evening, Captain. Be with you in a moment."

He gave orders which got the group under way again at 20 knots in its regular formation, this time with Dalziel in the van, and others which told Benson to rejoin as soon as his rescue job was completed, giving his group's course and speed.

Bentley smiled to himself at those last instructions Witch had been left alone in the night before; that rescue job would be clewed-up in double quick time.

Then Sainsbury said to the officer of the watch, "Sea-cabin," and he took his visitor below.

"Coffee, Peter?"

"With pleasure."

It was ready. Sipping, looking at Bentley over the rim of his cup, Sainsbury said:

"Well, my boy, what do you think now, eh?"

"Good Lord, not you too!"

"I beg your pardon?" Then, understanding, Sainsbury added: "Oh, I see." And added, from that vinegary grin: "I could have him appointed to Wind Rode, you know."

"Sure. And one dark and stormy night I could have him lowered over the side on a piece of very thin string. But to return."

"Yes, let's," suggested the senior officer.

Bentley knew the subject of Cowdray was closed. He gained no displeasure from that.

"I don't think I've seen better gunnery," he said sincerely. "Unless it's Dutchy Holland's marvel of electronics, which I haven't seen in gun action. Nor, by the way, have I seen a more hoggish captain. We could have finished off that third Jap."

"No doubt. But time, my lad, time. Did you pick up any radio transmissions?"

"None."

"Excellent. I imagine those captains were a mite too busy to concern themselves with the implications of a group such as ours."

"That could be true," Bentley grinned.

"Hmmm. Actually, though I did not mention it at our last meeting, those destroyers were the specific objective of this patrol. I rather

expected to find them, on their way to having another try at Seeadler Harbour."

So had Bentley; it was this possibility about which he had alerted Craven before sending him to the masthead, thus giving him the psychological advantage of knowing what to look for. Bentley said: "Yes, sir."

It was unwise to cap a senior captain's joke; it was damned stupid to boast that your predictions were as accurate as his.

But Bentley wasn't as good an actor as he thought he was. There was something in his tone that had Sainsbury glancing at him shrewdly. Yet the senior man was pleased, not offended; and as much at Bentley's circumspection as at his correctness of prediction. And at something else.

"He was right," Sainsbury murmured absently. "I did train you."

Bentley squinted at him. "Of course you did. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just thinking aloud. Now, Peter, you really think Tempest's gunnery is first-class?"

"You're kidding!"

Sainsbury laid down his coffee cup with a gentle tap.

"Really, old chap, must you use those American colloquialisms? 1 know you have mixed with them a good deal lately, but while we have accepted their code of signalling—mainly because they found it too difficult to use that of the Royal Navy—I see no reason why we should accept their language."

"Some of their terms are pretty catchy." Bentley smiled. "And listen. Many of 'em are ye pure olde English, taken across in the Mayflower from Chaucer and Shakespeare."

"Is that so?"

"Sure thing."

"Harumph, However, the subject is gunnery."

"I thought we'd covered that? Tempest admittedly lobs 'em where they're supposed to lob—which means she has a good control system, good radar, a good gunnery officer and, of course, a good captain."

"Thank you," he was answered drily. "With all that admitted, perhaps we may now proceed to the main reason why I called you on board."

"Which is?"

"My plan of action in future."

Interest, not to mention self-preservation, drove Bentley's grin away. This was serious business.

"Yes, sir?" He leaned forward a little.

"You know how naval war is. Tempest has not been in action for some time. I really wanted those destroyers, Peter. You understand?"

Bentley nodded. Maybe "needed" was a better word. As if to make sure his protege understood, Sainsbury went on:

"I wanted them for the obvious reasons, of course, but more than that, to test if my gunners could do in action what for so long they've been able to do only at drill. Today I got my answer."

"So did the Japs."

"And so have you. Now you know why I hogged, as you put it, most of the action to myself."

"Fair enough."

"Thank you. And now to my action plan. In fu..."

"Why not stick to today's operation? God knows it worked bloody well."

Bentley was reminded of the lapse in his normal circumspection when, with a slight drawing together of his brows, Sainsbury ignored him and went on:

"In future, in the event of sighting an enemy force comparable to those destroyers, or any force we can expect to handle, today's plan of operation will be repeated. I had been working on the idea for some time, but today was the first chance vouchsafed me of implementing it. With, as you remarked, God-known success."

Oh, my Lord, Bentley thought—vouchsafed... But:

"It's a good idea, sir," he said penitently. "In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's foolproof. Congratulations."

Sainsbury winced.

This may strain your credulity—unless, of course, you have been with us so long as to have voyaged with Bruce Thornton before—but beneath that acidulous and school marmish exterior there lurked, to coin a phrase, a subtle, extraordinarily perceptive and, perhaps most hard-to-believe of all, a really quite amiable nature. As well, Captain Sainsbury had not always worn four rings; once, indeed, he

had been so low down in the scale of rank as to find himself ashore with, and to have his vocabulary greatly enlarged by, such ineffable characters as Petty-officer Hooky Walter, Petty-officer Dave Hobden, and Petty-officer Pop Barr. It had been a wonderful and instructive night—he'd finished up drinking bottled beer with them in Skeleton Park; which, on entering it, he had been astonished to find was a most unusual place for drinking beer.

Perceptive, amiable, and strangely vocabularised... Now, in answer to his visitor's last words, Captain Bruce Thornton Sainsbury offered proof of those qualities.

"Peter," he said pleasantly, "get up off your goddamn belly. If there's one thing that gives me the torn-tits it's a suckholing bastard. At piling up points you're as handy as a cow in a spit-kid. Now pack up all that mundungus and tell me what you really think of my plan."

Bentley's jaw sagged slowly open. His eyes popped like organ stops.

"Well I'm buggered," he said weakly.

"Probably. Is that all you have to say?"

"No. I'm bloody sorry."

"Thank you."

"Sorry that I said it was a good idea!"

"You don't think it is?"

"Of course I do. I said I was sorry I said it was. Suckhole! The say I suck up to you will be the day!"

"You just did," he was reminded gently.

"Why, you cunning, sneaky old..."

"Captain..."

A deep slow, breath. "Yes sir."

"More coffee, my boy?"

"I wouldn't take a drink of water!"

"And no doubt you wouldn't fart in my face if I were gasping for breath?"

Bentley leaned forward across the table. "Where in God's name," he said to that prim face, "did you learn language like that?"

"The source does not matter, though in point of fact," Sainsbury returned to his normal delivery, "part of the source is presently resident in your own command. However, the plan of operation."

Sainsbury lit a cigarette and Bentley said:

"But damn it all, I know the plan. I was there, remember?"

"And, dear boy, 1 remember your impetuousness, which seems not have mellowed in the least over the years."

Bentley gave a sudden grin—remembering the way a certain cruiser had come leaping, very much unmellowed, upon those destroyers.

"You find my comment humorous?"

"Not at all, sir. I was thinking of something else. Please go on."

"Very well. As I was saying, or meant to say before I was so rudely interrupted, you do not know the whole of the plan. As amended, that is."

"Oh?"

"There will be one change. We owe a fair deal of luck to the fact that the Japanese ships did not sight my higher topmasts. It is a risk we must obviate. In future, Wind Rode's station will be two miles further ahead than at present. You follow me?"

"Yes. But from that far ahead you won't be covered by my asdic. We, er, obviate one risk and make another."

"Quite so. But we have to accept that. In any case, I believe it highly unlikely that a submarine commander would even think of taking on a group such as ours."

This was the belief of a man who in one day in the Atlantic had sunk four U-boats. It was a belief you accepted.

"Yes, sir," said Bentley, "two miles further ahead."

He checked his watch—thinking that they could have been wrong about the scouting intentions of those three destroyers; it was just possible that they could have been scouting far ahead for a cruiser squadron, which could be on an approaching course.

"If there's nothing else, sir?" he suggested.

Unfortunately there wasn't, Sainsbury was thinking as he saw and interpreted Bentley's watch checking. He had greatly enjoyed this little tete-a-tete, because at any time a captain is a lonely man, and in this powerful new ship, though he had a good and disciplined team of officers, Sainsbury was especially lonely—for just over there, where this friend was going, so close and so far, were most of the other friends he had made in the Service. He knew them so well,

having commanded them for so long...

But though a squadron captain may be a man of sentiment, even of compassion, he cannot appear to be, unless under unusual and safe conditions; under the conditions obtaining here he must indeed, appear to be nothing but a stern, disciplined and devoted destroyer of his country's enemies.

Crisply, Sainsbury said

"No, Peter, that's all. I'll have your boat signalled. You'll excuse my not coming down to see you over the side?"

"Of course."

They stood up. But Bentley was also a captain, and thus knew something of loneliness. And neither was Sainsbury as good an actor as he imagined himself to be.

There was no need for it, of course, with a junior captain leaving his senior to travel a few hundred yards; so that Sainsbury was surprised, and quite failed to cover it, when Bentley held out his hand.

Sainsbury took it, feeling the warmth in the grip's strength.

"Goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight. Peter."

The cabin door closed. Sainsbury was still looking at it, blinking a bit, when the steward came in from his pantry to clear the coffee things away. Until the day he died that poor steward would never know why, when Sainsbury caught his curious look, he was snappishly ordered to "Get the devil out of here!" If a cat can look at a king... But then the steward was used to captains of all habits and natures, and after he had said a few choice words to his mate in the pantry he forgot the incident.

Back on his bridge, so did Sainsbury.

Back on his bridge, Bentley's curiosity was still alive. He saw the seaboat hoisted, got the ship under way, and then he said:

"Torps."

"Sir?" answered the officer of the watch.

"Chief bosun's mate on the bridge, please."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was well after full dark by now, with the moon not risen, and Chief Petty-officer Walker could pick out the captain only by his

bulk and his position on the sacrosanct stool in the sacrosanct starboard forward corner of the bridge. By reason of the fact that his right hand was steel instead of flesh and bones, the Buffer was the only man in the Royal Australian Navy excused saluting. A huge man, larger by far than Bentley, he stood to attention beside him and said:

"You send for me, sir?"

"At ease, Hooky."

Hooky, was it? the big fellow pondered as he spread a pair of legs like tree trunks to counter Wind Rode's roll: she was at speed to regain her van position. What's all this lot about?

Bentley gave him the first clue.

"You've known Captain Sainsbury a long time, haven't you?"

So it was old Bruce Thornton, eh? Hooky hoped to hell there'd been no nastiness between them over in Tempest. Along with messmates like Jack Rennie and Saunders the gunner's mate, those two captains were the men he respected most in his circumscribed world. He said:

"Yes sir, quite a while."

"How long? Before Scimitar and Wind Rode?"

"Hell yes, long before that." The hook scratched tentatively behind one ear. "Come to think of it, we were in the old Aussie together, well before the war. After that I think he went to a kipper battleship, and I sorta lost touch until we met again in the boats." Hooky chuckled. "Funny thing, sir, but I used to wonder about him, in that battler I mean."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well, he's... well, y'know, he's not exactly what you might call a big bloke. In those days he was even skinnier than he is now. Though the face hasn't changed all that much," Hooky said reflectively.

"Matter of fact— though I reckon you know this anyway—we used to call him Aunty. Jesus, some old aunt he turned out to be! Ah, sorry, sir."

"That's all right. But what about this battleship?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, being so small, y'know, I used to think that in a great ship like that he'd be about as handy as a cow in a spit-kid, if you get what I mean."

"Ah..." said Bentley.

"Come again, sir?" "Just thinking of your expression. Hooky, just thinking. It is very expressive, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," Hooky said doubtfully.

"In station, sir," said Torps.

"Very well. That cruiser, now, the Australia. I don't imagine you remember... no, it must be too long ago."

"Nothing wrong with my memory, sir. I can still draw you a diagram of all the watertight doors in my first ship, and that was one of the old V and Ws. the Aussie? A cinch. What d'you want to know?"

"Nothing about the ship, actually," said Bentley, who had served in her. "But do you remember ever going ashore with an officer?"

Hooky's laugh was deep and full of reminiscence. "Do I! Only once, except for a couple of times with you and the Jimmy in the old days, but she was one hell of a humdinger pissy run, believe... Hold on a minute. Didn't you ask me something like this once before, years ago?"

"Not that I recall," Bentley answered truthfully.

"Oh. Musta been something else, then. Anyhow, what do you want to know about this for "now? The three of us were senior petty-officers, captains of tops in fact, and he was only a green subby. We had one hell of a good night, but there was no harm in it, sir. You know that. I reckon it did him a lot of good, matter of fact, seeing how the other half lives, sorta thing. Anyhow, all that night, no matter where we was, in the pub or the Stardust cabaret, even in Skeleton Park where we clewed-up afterwards with a dozen bottles, he never stopped asking questions. I mean, things about matelots, how they thought and felt about the Andrew, thinks like that. Regular quiz session it was. Yes, sir. I reckon that young subby learned a lot that night."

"I'm sure he did," Bentley murmured. "What was his name?"

"Eh?"

"What was his name?"

Hooky frowned. "Didn't I mention that? It was Aunty—y'know, Captain Sainsbury. But I don't suppose he remembers that night, so far back."

"So I was right," Bentley said obliquely. "You're that part of the

resident source."

"Come again, sir?"

"Just thinking aloud, Hooky. But don't worry—he remembers that night, all right."

Remembering how he had come to know Sainsbury remembered his night's instruction, Bentley's tone was falsely grim. To Hooky it sounded simply grim. He didn't know how or why, but he and his story seemed to be the cause of it.

"Look, sir..." he started, then stopped.

"Yes?"

"It's none of my business," Hooky blurted, "and tear me off a strip if you like—but have I said the wrong thing? I mean, is there anything wrong between you and him?"

"What!" Bentley swung to stare into the tough weathered face of the man he would trust with his life, and more than once had. "Wrong? Good Lord no, Hooky. What on earth made you ask a thing like that?"

"Well, sir, you sounded a bit cheesed-off, sorta."

"On the contrary, I'm feeling very much cheesed-on, if there is such an expression in a matelot's vocabulary."

Hooky wagged his head. "You've lost me, sir."

"But found a potent weapon, old shipmate. One I shall keep honed for future use, thanks to you. What was that park you mentioned? The one with the odd name?"

"Skeleton Park," Hooky said reluctantly. "Why was it called that?" "I forget, sir." "Chief bosun's mate..."

"You think you've got me over a barrel, don't you?" "That's right. Talk"

"It's not right, swinging rank like that." "Talk."

"I never thought you'd come at this." "What's this Skeleton Park where you guzzled a dozen bottles?"

"I'm under duress. I'll whack in a complaint." "You do that—to the captain. Now talk." Hooky Calked. Bentley smacked his thigh. Like Hooky's had been, his laugh deep, but full of triumph.

"A cemetery," he choked. "Oh, my God. A cemetery!"

"Where I'll end up if the old bastard finds out I ratted," Hooky muttered.

"What's that, Buffer?"

Hooky was saved by the light, for suddenly Ferris started to talk, and he talked loud and clear.

"Message from Tempest, sir. 'You are maintaining previous station. My orders were to take station two miles ahead. Please advise when and if you intend concurring with those orders'."

"Christ!" jerked Bentley. Reactively he glared at the officer of the watch, but Torps returned him a puzzled and noncomprehending expression. It was no fault of his, Bentley realised at once. In his preoccupation at getting the drop on Sainsbury he had clean forgotten those extra two miles.

"Sorry, Torps," he apologised for the glare, then his tone rapped. "Our new station is two miles ahead of the old. Smack it about, for God's sake!"

"Yessir!"

Torps rang on more revs and ordered a radar range of Tempest. Ferris came in with a reminder:

"He said please advise, sir..."

"Tell him you were dreaming about Skeleton Park," said a low and malicious voice.

"Get off the bridge, damn you!"

"At the rush! Aye aye, sir!"

"Make to Tempest," Bentley said, and hesitated, and thought about a place called Skeleton Park, and wisely forgot about it. He looked round the bridge, seeing no gaint shadow on it, then he continued:

"'Captain's error. Am taking up ordered position with all despatch.' That's all."

"Yes, sir. The flotilla, sir?" said Ferris carefully.

"Hell, yes!" Damn and blast that bloody Skeleton Park! Already Wind Rode was on the leap, and the flotilla would be wondering what the blazes he was up to. "Make to all ships in the screen: 'Disregard my movements. Am taking station two miles ahead of normal position.' That's all."

"Yes, sir. Which signal goes first?"

"To Tempest, blast your eyes, you ought to know that!"

"Yes, sir." What the hell had Hooky been talking about? the

yeoman wondered.

"Wait!" The flotilla might be increasing speed to conform with his movements; certainly captains would have been sent for. Sainsbury could wait. His bridge would read the signal anyway.

"Sorry, Yeoman. Signal the screen first, then Tempest."

"Aye aye, sir."

Halted halfway down the ladder, Hooky Walker grinned so that the bottoms of his ears were forced upward. Apologising twice to his bridge team in less than two minutes—that'd learn the bugger not to put him through the bloody third degree again!

Meanwhile, back at the scene of mayhem, the normally cheerful captain of Witch had never felt less like grinning in his life. His lips were stretched, but in a grimace of distaste and paradoxical sympathy. The sickbay was full, of course, while the decks were crammed, and clearly to the bridge carried the screams and even the groans of horribly mutilated men.

Trouble was, they were men, regardless of nationality and their earlier intention to reduce Witch's crew to their own present state, and with only a surgeon and his sick-berth petty-officer Benson could do little to ease the suffering of the scores of Japs he had brought inboard. He'd actually stuffed his ears with the rubber plugs issued to dull the sound of gunfire, but those other sounds, not as loud yet more piercing, still got through. They lacerated his nerves, and it gave him small comfort to know from their expressions that his bridge team felt the same.

But at least the job was done. He'd searched as thoroughly as possible across the dark, stinking sea, not daring nor even intending to use ten-inch lamps as searchlights—the bright white beams could be seen for miles, and submarines might have been attracted to the area by those massive transmitted blasts. Now, thank God, he could get under way again for the group, and maybe in the preoccupation of finding it his mind might be partially blocked from creating images out of what his ears received Certainly the 30-knot wind of her movement would carry off the sounds from abaft the bridge.

"Pilot," he said, conscious of having to raise his voice—being cooler than the iron-deck above the engine-room, the foc's'le was crammed; it was also close to the bridge. "Estimated position of the

squadron."

Waiting for this, Pilot gave it at once, as well as the course to get them there.

"Put her on that," Benson ordered. "Go on to thirty knots."

"Aye aye, sir. But there's a bit of a lop," Pilot advised, and this time his despondency of tone went unnoticed; it fitted the scene too well. "They'll get spray on the foc's'le."

"Thirty knots. Salt water won't hurt 'em."

Though even to himself Benson's words sounded brutal, they were nonetheless true. Men in such pain as to cry like that would hardly notice spray, while its cooling effect might help them, and salt water held some antiseptic properties. Thinking about this, Benson managed to smother in his mind the real reason for the high speed-to transfer across to the bigger and better equipped cruiser at least most of his load of agony.

Witch started to run, shuddering with thrust as she picked up pace. The air pushed against Benson's sweating face, cooling it, rising to a swift tide equalling almost gale force as she reached the ordered speed. And, blessedly, the screams dwindled in volume.

Pilot checked that she was properly on course, then he came over to stand beside him.

"All the gun mountings are cluttered with 'em," he said, "even the torpedo tubes. There'd be hell to pay if we had to go into action. We wouldn't stand a chance."

"Jesus Christ Almighty!" Benson exploded, "haven't I got enough on my plate without your bloody whining?"

Pilot winced as if he'd been struck, and Benson got hold of himself. It hadn't been the actual situation outlined by the words—if trouble hove in sight a signal to the squadron would bring swift help—but the fact that the cheerless things had been uttered, and at a moment when for the first time since his work had started he'd begun to feel a measure of relief from its hideousness.

Some of those dreadful sounds had eased, only to be replaced by Pilot's oppressive offering.

"Sorry, sir, shouldn't have said that. And I didn't mean to whine."

He spoke stiffly. He was also a damned good navigator, and at any other time his melancholy visage and tone were a matter for fun.

He could hardly be expected to change either under conditions like these. So for the third time that night a captainly apology was offered.

Benson's hand gripped Pilot's arm. "Sorry old feller!— shouldn't have said that. Please forget it. The old nerves aren't so calm and collected. Okay?"

"That's all right, sir. It is rather a depressing situation."

At that adjective from a man who traded in depression as a gag-writer in jokes, Benson very nearly laughed out loud. He might have—if he thought it wouldn't develop into an uncontrollable cackle.

Right at that moment, suddenly, he was glad he hadn't taken the risk, for he saw it clearly—the figure rising on the foc's'le, lurching to the guardrails, then with a high wild scream of agony at the effort, heaving itself over.

There were armed sentries on the foc'sle. One of them lifted his voice in an urgent shout to the bridge.

"Man overboard, port side!"

The normal and instant reaction to a cry like that was to stop both engines, swing the ship's stern away from the victim and call away the lifeboat's crew. Benson shouted back:

"Who was it? One of ours?"

"No, sir, one of them."

"Very well."

That was all, and all the bridge team knew it was right. If the poor devil was so desperate as to do a thing like that, then he was better off back there, his agony ended by the port screw. If by some miracle he missed that mercy, then without being able to use searchlights they hadn't a hope in hell of finding him.

"You'd better log that, Pilot," Benson said in a husky tone, and that was the unknown sailor's epitaph.

Witch ran on fast to the north-west, blessedly clear water all the way, angling to intercept the squadron's line of advance, asdic home housed but search radar operating. On his way to the foc's'le after further bodies for his operating, the surgeon-lieutenant diverted from his objective a moment to tell the captain that ten survivors had died of wounds, and to ask what would be done about them.

Benson noted the weariness in his voice, but without any surge of compassion. No one on board was feeling sprightly, and it was

seldom the surgeon was loaded with work like this.

"Where are they?"

"In the sickbay, sir. I need the space."

"Right, Doc, it's organised." The surgeon turned away and Benson spoke to Pilot, who happened to be officer of the watch. "Chief bosun's mate and ten men. Tell him to make sure they're all staid hands."

"Yes, sir. Over the side?"

"Over the side, and quick about it."

It was done, as the term has it, with all despatch. And it was done again, this time with six bodies, before radar reported it had made contact with a group of ships fine on the starboard bow. That was the expected bearing of the squadron, but Benson reacted cautiously—anything could have happened while he was away, like the hunting group being hunted by another group.

"Speed and course?" he asked the radar plot.

"We're getting it now, sir." A moment, while the bridge crew waited silent, barely hearing the sounds from forward: then: "Course 310, speed 20 knots."

That was near enough to north-west, which was 315, and the speed seemed to check—fast enough for asdic operation and to make a torpedo shot difficult, slow enough to allow Witch to catch up. Yet the first two values could apply just as validly to an enemy group. There was also the consideration that at her fast closing speed, Witch would shortly be in radar range of those other sets. There was no consideration at all about her breaking wireless silence; no matter who that was out there, she must remain totally mute.

"Come down to 20 knots," Benson ordered, and when this precaution was completed he spoke again to the radar plot. "Can you tell how many ships?"

"Not definitely, sir. We have three contacts, but if it's the squadron then both destroyers in the starb'd screen could be masked by Tempest."

"You're sure of that?"

"On this angle of approach, quite sure, sir."

"That's you, Tyler?"

"Yes, sir."

Unlike Dutchy Holland's big brute of a Jackal, Witch did not rate a specialist radar officer, but in Tyler Benson knew he had an experienced and reliable petty-officer operator. Coming up from the south at this angle to the squadron's line of advance, the two destroyers on the far side would be hidden behind Tempest's bulk and 550-ft. length. He had to trust Tyler's judgement; otherwise why carry him? And there was no doubt that that group of ships was almost precisely in the position where Pilot had estimated the squadron to be. Benson could sense the bridge team's impatience. He began to feel a bit foolish about all these precautions.

"Very well, Tyler. Report at once any change in speed or course of the contacts."

Now that was a damn fool thing to say to his senior radar operator, especially under present conditions. Ease up on the revs, boy, Benson warn himself; you've got a nasty load on board but that's no reason for letting the old nerves go.

"Aye aye, sir," Tyler answered, dutifully neutral; in fact, a bit too much that way. It was the recognition of this, though a minor thing in itself, that had Benson saying with crisp decisiveness:

"Go on to 33 knots. Bring her up off the port quarter of Tempest. She'll be the right-hand contact on the scan."

Suddenly there was movement on the bridge. The easing of tension was almost palpable. Pilot busied himself between the compass and the bridge's repeat radar scope showing the sausage-shaped blips of contact, along with their bearing and range, and Benson thumped down on his stool in the corner. Now that caution was done with and the decision made, he felt bone weary. The afternoon had been violent enough, not to mention he and Bentley being used as bait for a superior force, and his recent task had put an ugly cap on the night's events. He tried to shut his ears to the foc's'le sounds, now reduced mainly to moaning, and wondered instead if Bentley or Dalziel, or even Sainsbury, felt as tired as he did. Probably not, his experiences of those three told him, even though Sainsbury had done practically all of the fighting. What his experience did not tell him, or perhaps what he would not allow it to, was that his greater degree of weariness was due to his being younger than they. Youth has vigour and vitality; seasoned age has resilience and staying power.

Suddenly Benson felt less tired, for a voice spoke beside him, and incredibly it said:

"Everything's apples, sir. We're well within their radar range but their course and speed remain steady. It's the squadron all right, and soon we'll be under big brother's wing."

"Well, I'll be buggered," Benson muttered, but to himself. He was so pleased, and even more surprised, at what was relatively a ringing peal of cheerfulness that he played along with it, but maliciously on the opposing side.

"I still wouldn't be too sure about that, Pilot."

"Eh? But they can't be Japs. We'd have been blown out of the water by now!"

"Agreed. If, that is, they think we're enemy."

"If they're Japs, what the hell else can they think? Oh, come on!"

"Now hold your horses, old feller. Cast your mind back a few months. You must have read the story. Some fighter base in southern England. The weather was bad, the landing field almost socked-in solid.

Back home came the Spits and Hurricanes, glad to make it. Too bloody glad, in fact, too concentrated on just getting down in one piece—because right behind 'em, tailing along unnoticed, or accepted as one of their own even if he was noticed, came a Messerschmitt. The weather was bad, remember, but not so bad that the Messerschmitt couldn't have a wild old field day shooting up those aircraft so nicely parked after they'd landed. I'm not sure, but I think he got something like six British fighters before the outhouse fell and they took off after him. By that time he was a speck dwindling fast into the murk over the channel.

Ah, I see by your disappointed expression that you do recall the story."

"Yes," nodded Pilot. "And I hear from your unworried tone that you're having me on."

"That, I admit." Benson's head turned quickly. "Yes, Yeoman?"

"I have Tempest in visual, sir. Will I tell 'em we're here?"

Benson was close to being his old cheerful self again. "That won't be necessary. Hawkeye. They know we're here, and you never know what horrible little slant eyes might pick up even a shaded blue light,

say looking through a periscope, and our senior officer might not like the possible results of that."

"No, sir," grinned the yeoman. In fact, there were smiles everywhere; not at the captain's dubious wit, but because he felt safe enough to indulge in it, and that meant they were safe. Only now, with big brother's protection so close ahead, did they fully recognise how lonely it had been back there.

"We'll go alongside Tempest" Benson went on. "I'll use the loud-hailer. Check it please, Yeoman."

"Will do, sir."

Benson took the con, if you'll pardon the Americanism; but as Bentley had intimated, some of our ally's terms are most expressive, and in this case more concise than saying Benson took charge of the ship.

He brought her in close up the port quarter, and though no light or any other indication of alertness showed from that looming bulk, he knew damned well just how tightly he was being watched. Then the bridges were level, at least horizontally, and he activated the loud-hailer.

"Tempest, this is Witch. Captain to captain, please."

"It'd be bloody funny if Admiral Tojo answered you," muttered Number One, who had heard the tale of aircraft told in the corner.

"Okay, Pilot," jibed Benson, then his grin snapped in like a released elastic band, for in a tone like that of a man interrupted in the middle of his dinner or a snooze, a voice cracked across the gap.

"What is it, Benson? Trouble? More than you can handle?" "No, sir, no trouble. But I have ninety-odd survivors on board, most of 'em badly wounded. Makes things a bit crowded, sir. We're doing our best to cope, but I was wondering if it might be possible to.."

"Stop wondering and prepare to secure alongside, your foc'sle abreast my torpedo space. That will make both decks almost level. We will take all survivors. Clear lowerdeck, make an evolution of it. The transfer will be completed in thirty minutes. That's all."

"And that's what I call decision rapped out as to the manner born," said Number One wonderingly.

"You bloody fool, I haven't..." started Benson, and before he could say "switched off," the acid voice crackled again.

"Repeat that statement."

"Ah... My first lieutenant, sir. He was just saying how pleased he was that you had made the decision to transfer."

"Was he now? They why did you call him a bloody fool? Am I to understand that you do not agree with my decision?"

"Hell, no! I mean no, sir, not at all. On the contrary. I said that to the yeoman, telling him I hadn't finished talking. He was about to take the microphone out of my hand, sir."

"A very eager yeoman, you have there. Well now, what further communication did you have in mind when the yeoman so ardently interrupted you? We await it with bated breath."

So did the rest of Witch's bridge team. But Benson, so young, had not reached command through lack of mental agility. He knew his chief, he knew he was being played with, just as he knew that Sainsbury wanted the game ended.

"I would have said, sir," he blurted. "How bloody good it is to be back!"

"Ah, the truth—at last."

"Sorry, sir, I didn't mean to ..."

"Secure alongside," said Sainsbury. "And that is all."

Benson whipped his finger off the activating switch as if it had suddenly become red hot.

"Hell, sir, I'm sorry," the first lieutenant apologised in not much above a whisper. "I didn't realise we were still on the air."

"That's quite all right, Number One," returned Benson amiably. "We'll discuss the stoppage of your wine bill later. In the meantime," he snarled, "get those blasted wires ready!"

"Yessir!"

Tempest carried more than a thousand men. They formed a human chain down to her big sickbay and the messdecks nearest to it. They had no taste for what they handled, from either a nationalistic or medical viewpoint, and not too much compassion, being hardened men of war fighting a singularly uncompassionate foe. But a lively awareness they did have, and it concerned the target their slow-moving ships made for submarines, circling destroyers regardless. The transfer was completed in twenty-five minutes.

Witch cast off and thankfully resumed her place in the screen.

The stink of blood and retching and exposed other things would stay with her all night, until daylight allowed scuttles to be opened to the cleansing rush of salt air, but that was nothing compared with the sounds she had rid herself of. It was more bearable to smell than to hear, and see.

The squadron steamed steadily on towards the Philippines, still many hundreds of miles distant, while the moon which had been Benson's bane rose and the watches changed. Men thought of the day's action, yet about it they talked little. They felt somehow edgy. The kill had been easy—too easy. Sailors are by nature superstitious, though many might jibingly disclaim this. But the old beliefs are there. In a calm you stick a knife into the mast and you get wind. You whistle at sea and you raise the wind. Big waves come in threes, and big waves can mean trouble, even danger. For certain, you get change at sea, whether it's in the weather or in your luck. Today they'd had great luck—three destroyers sunk, and not a single man of their own side killed or even hurt.

Was there to be a price exacted for this? What would it be? When? They thought and some feared, but they didn't talk much. And all of them felt edgy, especially through that first, long, moonlit night. But then the day came, and with its brightly sunny arrival good cheer replaced the apprehension.

"Secure action stations, Number One," said Benson.

There was no need for him to give the other order which had been in his mind. Already, while a few men secured the guardrails and ready-use lockers, the rest of A-gun's crew on the foc's'le had fire hoses and long-handled scrubbers out, clearing away the dark stains from the deck. Benson knew it would be the same below. Sailors are superstitious and disciplined and regulated; they may drink overmuch and can be perhaps too preoccupied with sex; but this above all, they are fanatically clean. Before noon Witch would smell of nothing but soap and disinfectant and brasso.

And it was so. Yet by a little after noon she was filled with something else apart from cleanliness and the sweet rush of salt air, for Sainsbury's amended plan paid its dividend, and the dividend was a return of apprehension.

Not Craven this time—he was being kept for the twilight hour—

but one of the other action lookouts named Mellor. High up in his eyrie, well ahead of the group, visibility unlimited, Mellor sighted the sticks in his lenses and without hesitation he reported:

"Bearing fine off the port bow, topmasts of four Japanese heavy cruisers, estimated course north."

Now this was a good deal to presume from just a few black pencils showing above the horizon, and instead of acknowledging "Very well," Bentley waited. Mellor knew what he was waiting for.

"The main topmasts are higher than the foremasts, sir."

"Very well."

Bentley was convinced; this difference in mast height was peculiar to first-class, 8-inch Japanese cruisers, and from the inclination between masts Mellor had been able to estimate the enemy's course. They were moving almost directly away from the Australian squadron.

Bentley gave orders which swung Wind Rode directly toward it, at the same time increasing speed. He spoke to Ferris. Because of the Leader's position well ahead, every other ship in the group was able to read the yeoman's urgent flickers of light, and so Witch was not the only ship to experience a return of the night's uneasiness. Forty 8-inch monsters, not to mention 24 4.7s as big as their own main armament, were a different barrel of trouble altogether to three overwhelmed destroyers. His warning passed and his ship hidden below the horizon from those ominous masts, Bentley turned Wind Rode back on to her original course ahead of the squadron. There was no commendation of his quick thinking— he was Captain (D), not a sub-lieutenant.

But there were orders. Every half-hour Wind Rode was to creep further ahead until she could sight the enemy's masts at maximum range, thus ensuring her own slender truck would remain unseen, and report if the Japs were still on their opening course to the northward. Twice she did this, and made her report, whereupon Randall gave his opinion.

"Whatever they were up to," he said, not trying to hide his relief, "it's finished. They're heading back to base." Bentley agreed, but privately. There was no percentage in a captain giving an opinion which in the next few minutes could be proved wrong. Instead, and

with no nullifying orders from Tempest, he turned Wind Rode back on her cautious scouting mission.

For the fourth time Mellor made his sighting and reported the position unchanged. Wind Rode scurried back out of sight. More than two hours had passed, and this time Sainsbury made his decision.

"These prisoners are inconvenient. We shall return to base."

Every man knew what the real inconvenience was, and no man disagreed with the decision. The group swung about on to a south-east heading. Wind Rode picked up her feet to take position in the van.

Her bridge was feeling nicely relaxed. A couple of days' steaming and they wouldn't give a tinker's damn for all the cruisers in the Jap Navy. They were much, much bigger things waiting to protect them in Seeadler Harbour. Reflectively, Randall said:

"Y'know, that little exercise back there makes a man think."

Wind Rode was in position, still two miles ahead of her normal station. Every minute took her further away from 40 big guns. Bentley's smile and tone were both nice and easy.

"You're thinking of radar, Roberto?"

Randall's frown said, How the hell did you know? Aloud, he said:

"That's right. For all our gear we might've been back in Nelson's day, just like a fast frigate playing tag with French ships of the line, signalling back to the main British fleet. Come to think of it, we didn't even use radio."

"The Ya... the Americans have a word for it," Bentley smiled, "Never forget the old Mark One eyeball."

"The British were using it before America was discovered," Randall snorted. Suddenly he changed tack. "You think there's any chance of mail in Manus?"

Bentley was feeling too relieved and thankful to rib his old friend. You fought, of course—if you had to...

"Mail?" he grinned. "Sure to be bags of it."

Randall eyed him suspiciously.

Benson was eyeing his navigating officer suspiciously, for Pilot had just said:

"Y'know, sir, what happened back there makes a man think."

“That so?” said Benson warily. “About what?”

“Well, you know the old sailor’s saying that big waves, like troubles, come in threes. It’s only a question of time before we hit the third lot.”

“Well, thank the Lord for that,” Benson growled.

“Come again, sir?”

“Now I know where I stand. You’re back in bloody form!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR the second time in a few days Bentley was surprised at what he saw on entering Seeadler Harbour. Like the first time, his reaction was one of pleasure.

The battleships were big, of course, but they were also modern. Behemoths of 52,000 tons carrying nine 16-inch guns apiece. Four of them, plus three Fleet carriers. Hegave up counting cruisers, and didn't bother to start on the swarm of destroyers.

"That," said Randall with snapping eyes, "is what I call a Battle Fleet! God knows what they're after, and God help whatever it is."

"That's treason." Bentley's grin was tight while his eyes had found what the fleet's presence told him should also be in the huge harbour. "Look across there."

Randall looked, and uttered a whistling Phew. The troop transports were so many that they were anchored bow and stern, almost alongside each other. Their decks were packed with khaki-clad men, who seemed to be showing- small interest in the relatively insignificant group of ships entering through the reef. And later, in the minds of those thousands of soldiers, unknowing, concerned solely with their own task and their self-preservation, the group was to remain insignificant.

Yet somebody in that vast concourse seemed to think Tempest and her brood rated some importance. No sooner were they anchored than, with typical American logistic efficiency, oil and stores lighters were nudged alongside and the refurbishing began.

Though quick, this was normal procedure; for obvious reasons, a ship in the war zone was made ready for sea again as soon as possible, no matter how long she might have in harbour. Then a signal came from Tempest, and any doubts about the time facter were definitely resolved: there was to be no leave given.

A following signal from Tempest required the presence of Captain (D) and his captains on board. They met in the big day cabin—Sainsbury and Bentley at the table's head; Dalziel, Cartwright, Gilmore and Benson along its sides. This was no amiable tete-a-tete. Sainsbury spoke with plain conciseness, and he was listened to soberly. He rose.

"That is all, gentlemen."

Bentley was out of his ship hardly more than fifteen minutes. The time when he returned was about three p.m. As the piping died away he said:

"How's it coming, Number One?"

"Another two hours should do it, sir." "Right. Soon as you're finished, secure ship for sea. If I may, I'd like to dine in the wardroom tonight."

"Pleasure, sir."

Randall knew he was being given, personally and unofficially, an approximate time of departure. Preparing the ship for sea meant some time tonight—dining in the wardroom meant not before, say, nine p.m.

Randall plumped for a little before midnight. Sainsbury was a meticulous commander. Having the group at sea by midnight would mean a full, unbroken watch for the middle-watchmen.

The group weighed anchor at eleven-thirty.

As before, their course was to the north-westward. It was a calm, clear, moonlit night. The weather had been like this for almost a week—no one expected it to last much longer. The only thing constant on this earth, at sea as elsewhere, is change.

Special sea-dutymen and the cable party fell-out. Other men, also no longer required, stayed up on deck, peering astern. But through that bombardment-devastated entrance no battleships or carriers steamed. Still they waited, until Manus Island was only a dim blur breaking the even line of horizon, and they knew their group was sailing alone.

They learned why and where to after action stations had secured the following morning. The change had begun. Half the northern sky was whitened with cloud, and Wind Rode was wetting her nose a little.

Then throughout the ship speakers crackled their throats clear and men lost interest in the weather.

"D'you hear there. This is the captain. You all saw that heavy stuff in the harbour. It's a task force supporting an invasion group, and it will sail late this afternoon. The objective is the Palau Islands—more specifically, Peleliu and Yap. The Palaus are due west of

Mindanao, about 500 miles. Usual procedure—battleship, cruiser and aerial bombardment, then the landing craft go in. However, we'll see none of all that hubbub. Our mission is different, and distant.

"Before you start cheering, I want you to know that our Intelligence believes the Japs are suspicious that an invasion is about to take place. Personally, I think they're more than just suspicious, which is why they sent those three destroyers down to try and get a moonlit view of Seeadler Harbour. It's possible, if the Japs are edgy enough—and maybe after the disappearance of those destroyers they will be—that a heavy enemy task force will be sent out from the Philippines just on spec. If so, it will almost certainly come through Surigao Strait, between Leyte and Mindanao, which is near enough to being level with the Palaus. Our assignment is to search for and report on the approach of any threatening force, giving the Americans plenty of time to take counter measures against it. Our patrol position is a north-south line about midway between Surigao Strait and the Palaus. We should reach it a day before the bombardment is due to start, giving us time to see if anything nasty's about.

"I don't have to stress the importance of our mission. In effect, we are a sighting barrier between the Japs and the American bombardment force, a sort of long-range eye for the admiral. No doubt he'll use recco aircraft as well, but if the weather closes in, or at night, planes won't be of much use. The admiral must know of the approach of any hostile force. Our radar, and perhaps more importantly our eyes, should be able to help him in that. So keep your fingers out. Starting at down tomorrow lookouts will be doubled, the masthead manned, and one member of each gun crew will take lookout duty round the mounting. We're on our own, remember, and what the eye doesn't see, the heart may very well grieve for. That's all."

The speakers clicked off. They didn't cheer, but they didn't look too troubled, either. The Old Man had laid it on a bit thick with that grieving heart bit, they said. Sure, the job was important enough, but not all that dangerous. They were there to sight, not fight. If they found anything the aerials would run hot, but so would the bloody screws—away from a Jap force hefty enough to tackle what would leave Manus today. Look at how old Aunty had handled them four

Jap cruisers. Wary as hell he'd been, about as full of fight as a rabbit stalking a tiger. So what would he do with battleships? Run, that's what, yelling loud and clear as he went. All they had to do was keep a sharp eye lifting, make sure they saw well before they were seen, and then it was money for old rope. Only the very latest Yamato-class battlers, and there were only two, rated 30 knots, while the rest would be lucky to raise 26. They'd leave 'em standing. Just the same, as Leading-seaman Billson warned one of his messmates:

"You keep your optics peeled up there, me lad." "Don't I always?" answered Craven laconically.

Time and the group moved on. They reached their patrol line without incident. To the west lay the gap between Leyte and Mindanao; to the east, the Palaus. Invisible to the south-east steamed a vast mass of American ships, destination Peleliu, objective destruction. Around Tempest and her termagants nothing showed, either on radar scopes or in vigilant eyes. The only change was in the weather. Now the cloud was ten-tenths, the sky completely covered; it was intermittently raining, while the rising wind had lifted a moderate sea, just this side of rough, so that, heading into it, the whitestreaming destroyers made a pretty sight. Pretty, that is, from Tempest's 8000-ton bulk. Aboard the smaller ships men cursed as plates slid along the tables and sometimes into their laps, for though it was not yet suppertime, not yet dark, they had been sent to fill their bellies early, because if anything nasty meant to reach the Palaus before the Americans, it could be expected in this area tonight.

An hour before dark there was a slight stir; slight because of the report's lack of definition, yet potentially dangerous if the report turned out to be accurate. Witch, the yeoman of Tempest reported to Sainsbury, had thought she'd sighted a submarine periscope distant about five miles on her port beam.

Sainsbury's first reaction was sceptical. It was raining, the sea was foaming with whitecaps, there was no sunlight to reflect from a glass eye. Under these conditions the sighting of a periscope at five miles was unlikely. But memory helped Sainsbury toward his decision. Not so long ago Benson had chased after another dubious contact, which had turned out to be most definite. If a submarine was out there, it had to be kept down so that no transmission could

be made about the patrolling group. This was vital.

Sainsbury spoke to his yeoman.

In obedience Witch wheeled away from the screen to the westward, over toward the distant Philippines. The disengaging signal was repeated to Captain (D). Reading it from beside Bentley on his stool, Randall smiled.

"Young Tubby's got subs on the brain. Looks like he wants to become the Ace of the South-west Pacific."

Bentley agreed with the mildly jibing tone of Randall's voice, but he answered:

"I seem to remember he's started his tally."

"Sure, but that was an asdic contact. Even our Eyes of the Fleet couldn't sight a periscope out there in this muck."

Luckily Ferris was busy acknowledging the senior ship's signal, and thus failed to hear the dubious compliment. Witch's navigator was busy putting her on the new hunting course, but that did not stop him from making a definite comment.

"Out into the wild black yonder—again," he said dolefully. "This time we're really wasting our time."

"The Boss doesn't seem to think so," returned Benson, who would dearly like to add a second submarine to his first, especially with such a short interval between kills. "Watch it now. You'll be past the bearing in a minute."

This was true. With wind and sea from the north Witch was being helped round very fast on her westward turn. Pilot checked it, and she ran at speed for the sighting point. Rolled, rather, for now the thrusting elements were on her starboard beam, able to get at the whole length of her. It was extremely uncomfortable for the man at the masthead, but Benson could not reduce speed—he had to get over the submarine in the shortest possible time before slowing to operate his asdic.

He got there, and lowered the dome, but the sonic shafts from its oscillating quartz sent back no echoes. Not that he had expected any so soon; that would be too easy. The submarine could have run off in any one of a dozen different directions. Except two, Benson thought. He said:

"What d'you think, Number One?" "West or south, sir," he was

corroborated. “North would take him along the squadron’s line of advance, and east towards it.”

“Right. Pilot?”

After a moment, while his gaunt face held a hang-dog expression, Pilot gave his appreciation:

“If there is a submarine, sir, and if he was looking at us, both of which I doubt, then the easiest opening course for him to take would be south. West would mean a turn of 180 degrees, south only 90.”

“Accurate, concise and brilliant,” said Benson admiringly; actually he doubted the masthead’s report himself, but that other kill had given him a taste for hunting on his own and you never knew. “You know the squadron’s position?”

“Of course I know the...”

“All right, all right. Joke. Come round to south. Number One, warn all hands on deck to keep a sharp lookout.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Witch started her turn to bring wind and seas astern. In a minute she was on south, and opening the range from the squadron at a combined speed of 45 knots. Radar contact waned, then failed, and now she was on her own. But no one was really worried. Not only Pilot knew the squadron’s position, course, speed and distance it would run on the northern leg before returning to a southerly heading. They were alone, moving further away and toward darkness, but it would be easy to find friendly company.

“How long are you going to search?” asked Number One.

“Too early to say, old feller. Remember the last time. About three hours, wasn’t it? And look what happened then. But there are no shore batteries in this neck of the woods,” Benson said cheerfully.

You don’t sound worried, thought Number One, and cheered up himself.

Sainsbury was similarly unworried about his departed and invisible charge. All Witch’s executive officers were qualified navigators, not girl guides, and a signal could have her back at the rush. But all this was elementary, and Sainsbury gave it no thought.

He had just come back from the chart table. His mind was occupied with speeds and times and distances— relating to the enemy. This was the critical period, the one he had worried about all the

way up. If a Jap task force hove in sight now, and if it were heading across to the eastward, then the timing was perfect—for the Japs. They would catch not only the admiral's naval force, but his troop transports as well, before the bombardment could start and the troops be got ashore. By morning it would be too late for the enemy. Beachheads would be established and the admiral would be free to deal with any threat; in fact, eager to.

Sainsbury lit a cigarette and put a damper on his worry. This was not hard. It would be the most extraordinary luck if a Jap task force, acting only on suspicion, happened to be in the right position at the right time. Sainsbury enjoyed his cigarette, smoking it slowly. It would be just about the last he could have, before failing light forbid the showing of any light, no matter how small, in the open. It was raining, and Sainsbury on his covered bridge was thinking, with a certain amount of malicious satisfaction, about his young protege on an open bridge, when Commander Blaskayne stepped up beside him.

"Don't like the look of those clouds," Blaskayne muttered. "There's an electrical storm in that lot, if I'm not mistaken."

"All the better to see 'em with," said Sainsbury.

A second later, as if to prove Blaskayne's forecast, the northern horizon ahead rippled with brief light.

"Hmmm," said Sainsbury, "sheet lightning."

This is caused by the glow from lightning below the horizon or a considerable distance away. Blaskayne knew this, of course. He said:

"Yes, but it's coming towards and we're heading into it."

"I can't control the elements, Tom," Sainsbury said mildly.

"No," Blaskayne smiled, "but how about closing-up for night action?"

Sainsbury glanced over toward the west, where it was lighter with the sun filtering through the clouds. "Give them another half-hour. Young Bentley's well ahead up there, and the men need all the time they can get away from the turrets."

"You think there might be fun and games tonight, then?"

"I doubt it, Tom. But you never know."

"No, you never know," nodded Blaskayne, and on that sombre phrase both officers fell silent.

Well ahead up there, Bentley crossed to the masthead voice pipe

and said:

"Craven?"

"Sir!"

"There's not too much light left. Concentrate on the north and west, mainly the west."

Because he knew those were the danger directions, and the west held more light, Craven had been doing this anyway. But he was wise for his age, at least in the attitudes of captains, and he answered simply:

"North and west, aye aye, sir."

Bentley remained near the voice pipe a moment—it was on the port, westward side of the compass platform—his binoculars up. The lightning was almost continuous now and much closer, while in the late-afternoon light the sea under its carapace of cloud showed livid. His glasses showed nothing. He was about to turn away for the binnacle when, faintly, he heard something which sounded like "Jesus!"

Bentley's glance flicked round the bridge. It was normally quiet; there was nothing to give rise to such an exclamation. Then Bentley froze. Craven's voice leaped from the tube.

"Masthead, bridge!"

"Bridge?"

"Bearing fine off the port bow, two... two..."

"Come on, man!"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Take a stab at it."

"Yessir. Two sets of fighting tops."

Christ. Bentley knew there was only one class of Jap ship which carried no foremast, which carried a bridge and fighting-top structure so peculiarly high as not to need a foremast for halliard yardarms and wireless aerials. These were fitted to the rearing structure, with aerials running aft to the mainmast, which would be hidden...

"Craven," Bentley said, forcing levelness on to his tone, "you're sure?"

In the time while Bentley had been digesting this ominous information Wind Rode's bow had lifted twice, giving Craven about ten extra feet of height and greater visual distance.

"Yes, sir, I'm sure. It's two Jap battleships. I can't see their mainmasts, so they must be coming towards."

They would be, Bentley judged. The Palaus were east, but also a little south of Surigao Strait. If the Japs suspected the invasion point, then they would be heading about east-south-east on an intercepting course, which would be bringing them straight for the group on its northerly course.

"Any cruisers?"

"Not yet, sir. At least, none that I can see."

That didn't mean a thing, Bentley realised; in that light, so far, not even Craven could spot a slender topmast.

"Good man, keep on 'em," Bentley snapped, and whirled round for Ferris.

But this time he flashed the signal to Tempest from where he was. There was no point in dropping back. Against the much darker eastern backdrop Wind Rode's lower, thinner topmast couldn't possibly be seen, while from the Jap's position all her radar-echoing structure was still below the horizon.

Sainsbury received the message, and though his guts clenched at its import, his first comment was to Blaskayne standing tight-faced beside him.

"You never know, eh, Tom?"

Blaskayne was not feeling humorous. "My God," he jerked. "If they maintain their course they'll run smack into the invasion force!"

"Quite so." Then Sainsbury made further comment, but this time to his yeoman and in a different tone of voice. Wind Rode was to close the enemy force and establish its size, speed and formation; and fast before the light failed, and if possible keeping herself unsighted. Only the first of these requirements was signalled. Bentley would know the rest without being told. Then: "Increase to thirty knots," Sainsbury ordered his own squadron, and crossed to his stool. He did not sit on it.

Cowdray was the P.C.O., principal control officer, with a lieutenant as his officer of the watch. He supervised the increase in speed, then he said in an oddly high voice to Blaskayne:

"What are we going on for? Surely to God he's not even thinking of attacking!"

“Pipe down, damn you!” Blaskayne growled. He glanced uneasily at the skinny figure in the corner, certain it must have heard. But Sainsbury remained looking ahead.

Presently, with Tempest quivering under thrust, a distant blue light flickered back. There were definitely two battleships, Ferris told them, probably Haruna-class, plus four heavy cruisers and two flotillas of destroyers.

Sainsbury had come back near the binnacle beside Blaskayne.

“Haruna-class,” he murmured reflectively, while nearby men wondered at his calm. “They were designed when the Japs were our friends, by a gentleman with the good old Nipponese name of Sir George Thurston. As for the cruisers, I should say that in all probability they are the four we sighted earlier. Now we know what they were up to—a scouting mission the same as our own.”

“Haruna-class,” repeated Blaskayne. His tone was not at all reflective, but sourly definite. “Eight 14-inch main armament, sixteen 6-inch secondary armament, four 5-inch anti-aircraft guns and 26 knots.”

“Sorry, Tom,” Sainsbury corrected him, “but latest Intelligence reports put her A.A. defence at eight 5-inch, and all of them dual-purpose.”

“Fine, fine,” nodded Blaskayne, trying to match his superior’s apparent negligence of tone. “That’ll make it even easier to smash the troop transports.”

“If they reach the transports.”

“What’s to stop ‘em?”

“What, indeed?” Sainsbury murmured, and now nearby men felt chilled at the ominous calmness of that tone.

“Look, sir...” Cowdray started, and Sainsbury rode over him with tense quietness:

“Just a moment, Number One, if you please. Yeoman, you have all the relevant information. Get it coded and off to the admiral, repeated Manus. Absolute top priority.”

“Aye aye, sir!”

All this time the opposing forces had been approaching each other at a total speed of more than 50 knots. Tempest’s radar reported it was in contact—God knows how it had enough to make contact with.

Sainsbury acknowledged, then he said:

"Now, Number One, what is your trouble?"

Cowdray hesitated. He knew he was right in his opinion —only an idiot could believe otherwise—but he could be treading on very dangerous ground. Then he sensed the palpable tension on the bridge, and felt he had them all behind him—or thought he had. This decided him.

"I think you mean to attack that battle fleet, sir!" he blurted.

"I see." A pair of thin lips pushed out thoughtfully, but alert eyes were on the radar scope, reading relative positions and range. "I don't think, Number One, that you realise the significance of what it would mean if the enemy force were let through unimpeded."

Cowdray was deceived by the reasonableness of Sainsbury's tone.

"What I realise, sir, is that if we take on such a force it's committing suicide!"

"Oh? Then, Number One, you would not attack?"

"Of course not, sir! We wouldn't have a hope."

Cowdray understood the trap laid for him when Sainsbury said, his voice suddenly glacial:

"Whether or not I attack, I do not wish to have on my bridge an officer holding such odd convictions. Please go to your cabin and remain there until further orders."

"But, sir, I was only..."

"At once!"

Cowdray remained there, his face contorted with the anger of a weak man. For the first time since his sublieutenant days in the gunroom Commander Blaskayne laid his hands on a junior officer. It was a big rough hand, and it gripped Cowdray's arm roughly, hauling him like a child to the ladder.

"Get to hell out of here, you dingo bastard," Blaskayne snarled softly, and shoved, and Cowdray very nearly went headfirst down the ladder. Blaskayne hurried back to the binnacle.

"I have them in visual, Tom" said Sainsbury. "Wind Rode reports herself under fire from the cruisers."

Perhaps because he wished to wipe out the effect of Cowdray's gutlessness—certainly for no personal reason, for he was the same sort of fighter as Randall—Blaskayne said:

"There's still light enough, sir. A few tin fish might make those big bastards think again."

Sainsbury flicked him a swift glance of understanding.

"You could be right, Tom."

He ordered the ship closed-up for action, and then in a normally crisp tone he told the yeoman to hoist the signal for all destroyers to make a torpedo attack, target left-hand battleship.

The yeoman bellowed. His minions scurried. Flags were bent on, then scissoring hands hoisted them to the yardarm for all the screen to see. Answering pendants flew from the destroyers. Satisfied, the yeoman swung. His eyes fastened on Sainsbury's face and stayed there, waiting.

Sainsbury turned away. For one of the few times in his Service life he hesitated. Just as easily as the ordering flags, even more quickly, the black-crossed negative flag could be hoisted, nullifying the torpedo attack.

But time, his mind shouted, distance to the invasion force. The first of these vital factors had to be altered, and thus the other. The bombardment was due to start early in the morning. All the warning signals in the world could not change that prime requirement. The admiral could not detach a sufficiently strong force to engage the Japs, otherwise the bombardment he mounted would be much less effective, and if heavy resistance ashore were met, then the whole meticulous timetable of the landing could be thrown out of kilter.

Sainsbury thought of telling his men all this. There was no time. They would have to trust him, to believe he knew what he was doing, what he had to do.

Sainsbury turned back to the yeoman and in a brittle voice he uttered one word:

"Execute!"

It was deliberately simple. The yeoman shouted and unaltered, their instructions unchanged, the hoist of flags whipped down. That was all. But in obedience three destroyers, ready and fearing and brave, rang on revs and thrust forward to take station on their Leader.

At the precise moment of the yeoman's shout, as if the heavens themselves were shocked at this stupidity, thunder burst like a bomb above the bridge and lightning lunged with a brilliant white fork at

the sea. Then again and again it struck; while deeper, louder, the heavy artillery of those electrified clouds smothered the sounds of cruiser gunfire directed at the racing destroyers. The darkening sea was everywhere pockmarked with rain. The sea about the destroyers was leaping.

Tempest held back.

"Are we in range?" Sainsbury asked his gunnery officer.

"Just inside maximum effective range, sir."

"You've got a bloody big target!" Sainsbury snarled, surprising the gunnery officer by the tone and the adjective, before he understood the reason behind both—it was not an easy thing to send four ships and 800 men in to their probable deaths.

"Smother it," Sainsbury went on. "Confuse them. Open in rapid broadsides and stay that way!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

The yeoman wasn't interested in all this. He had been startled by the thunderous crash and the glare of lightning, but momentarily—these things he had experienced before. Something else was worming round at the base of his brain for attention. It wasn't right, it didn't fit. Then, as training had him looking over toward the destroyer line rushing in to make its deadly delivery, or to receive worse, the coil of uncertainty straightened into a line of awareness. There were four destroyers...

"Captain, sir! "he shouted above the crash of Tempest's broadside.

"Yes?"

"Witch, sir!"

In the making of his ugly decision and now in waiting to see the result of it, Sainsbury had forgotten the detached ship.

"Get our position," he shouted back above the thunder, natural and man-made. "Tell her to rejoin with all despatch, from the eastward. Repeat, eastward."

"Yessir."

Witch was forgotten again. Sainsbury had his glasses up. There was just enough light left for him to see, through the rain, the destroyer line turn to loose its torpedoes. Thank God, he prayed—and thank God they were all still there.

Round they heeled and back they came. Knowing him so well,

having trained him, Sainsbury judged that Bentley would have fired only one torpedo from each ship, making four altogether. But one would have done; one had wounded Bismarck, loosed from an aircraft, a smaller torpedo than the 21-inch missiles destroyers carried. Fine—if it hit. Spread out to catch her 700-ft. length, that quadruple threat should make the big bastard swing.

She was, Sainsbury saw a fierce, private pride and satisfaction. The battleship was heaving her bulk round to port, to the north, and because she was the flagship the whole fleet was following her manoeuvre. Unfortunately, the rest of them were clear of Bentley's delivery, but time was being wasted on the turn away, and would be on the back turn, and time was the precious essence of his desperate throw.

That was all he seemed to have gained. The great ship was round almost 90 degrees, but no columns showed whitely leaping against the dark of her bulk. Bentley had fired from too far out to ensure a certain hit. Sainsbury blamed him not in the least for that... Yet one thing had been ensured; the Japs knew now that they would have to fight their way through to the invasion force; they would also learn, in time, that they were to be harried all night—for on this course of action, having made the initial decision, Sainsbury was determined.

Then someone shouted, "Hit!" and exultation surged in him, only to be swamped by disappointment when he saw the flare of red on the battleship's after part. The effect of a 100-lb. shell's hit was somewhat different to the strike of a warhead's half a ton of amatol. Just the same, they'd found the range, which was excellent shooting in this sea and visibility, and you never knew...

"Nice work, Guns," Sainsbury complemented. "Try for

his bridge. Even half a broadside there might make a lot of difference."

It seemed the enemy had the same idea. The air parted with a vicious tearing sound and spouts shot from the sea a hundred yards on Tempest's far side. Sainsbury took avoiding action, though his guns still belched.

"Cease firing, Guns. Resume when they regain their original course. This little fracas might go on for some time, and it could be awkward if we ran out of ammunition."

His vinegary wit was rewarded by a grin. Not much, perhaps, but then he had so comparatively little to fight with, and in circumstances like those the smallest lift in morale might be important, even decisive.

Another circumstance favoured him. It was full dark now with the rain pelting down. This would affect his radar, but also the Jap's; and where they would have only the small targets destroyers made to range on for their gunnery, Bentley had a much bigger blip and needed less accuracy for his torpedoes. In fact, Sainsbury mused, even the threat of approaching destroyers would turn the big ships away, whether torpedoes were fired or not. The Jap admiral had to assume they had been fired. Nice, very nice. Providing the approaching destroyers managed to depart again...

The yeoman coming across to him interrupted that unpleasant line of consideration.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Two signals, sir. Wind Rode reports four torpedoes fired, all missed."

"Tell her better luck next time. The other signal?"

"From the admiral, sir. He acknowledges ours and sends his thanks."

"Good. At least he knows."

"There's something else he wants to know, sir—if we're shadowing the enemy force."

"Eh? Surely to God he didn't expect us to fight it?"

The yeoman's silence could have been construed as being a bit too eloquent.

"Harumph. Tell him we're doing a Vian and Bismarck."

"He mightn't understand that reference, sir."

"You do, surely?" "I know Captain Vian held Bismarck all night with his destroyers, sir. But though the admiral might have heard of the battleship, it's possible he's never heard of the captain.

"A Solomon come to judgement," Sainsbury said admiringly, and gained another grin. He never thought about these little things consciously—they were all part of his ingrained habit. He'd been in command a long time. "Very well. Tell the admiral I have engaged the enemy force and intend holding it while ships and torpedoes

last."

"Just like that, sir?"

"Why not?"

Why not? thought the yeoman, and, with a sudden surge of national pride, Why bloody well not! That'd make those goddam Yanks sit up! He said, "Yes, sir," then an abrupt glare of lightning made him blink, and then remember, and he went on:

"One other thing, sir. We've had no acknowledgement from Witch on that rejoining signal."

"Probably atmospheric conditions..." Sainsbury started, then he saw a ripple of light from the westward which had him snapping, "Starb'd twenty!"

The yeoman, too, forgot Witch, which was understandable. All the time both of them had been looking to the westward, and the yeoman knew that that was a battleship's broadside. The range was long, the trajectory would be high, and dropping, and on her upper-deck Tempest carried practically no armour plate at all. The Jap had fired eight one-ton shells. Just one would do...

"I'll give him something to think about," a raspy voice grated across the yeoman's preoccupation with shells, and then he was addressed specifically. Bentley was to send in Dalziel and Cartwright at the flagship, firing one torpedo each as before.

In the two little ships went, full of fear but controlling it, which is the only measure of real guts. They heeled and fired and managed to get clear again, while the big Jap forgot about gunnery in his concern about his belly. And more time was gained.

Next it was Bentley and Gilmore. Sainsbury was limiting his attacks to two ships because, while they made a smaller number of targets and thus kept some of his flotilla intact, the smashing strike of even one torpedo would certainly damage the flagship and reduce her efficiency against the American force. It might—though Sainsbury was not very hopeful about this—even turn the enemy from his intention.

Unfortunately the enemy turned only too well from Sainsbury's intention, so that again and again, worried all the time at the knowledge that his destroyers carried only ten torpedoes apiece with no spares, Sainsbury had to send them in. Once, he ordered Bentley

and Gilmore to fire no torpedoes, just to carry out an attacking run.

It worked. The big ships hauled themselves clear. But Sainsbury would not risk his game midgets a second time without hope of real reward, knowing that the Jap destroyer's asdic must have detected no sound of torpedo propellers.

Tempest was not firing. Partly masked as she was from radar by the teeming rain, there was no point in having gun flashes betray her position, and unless she could aim accurately for the flagship's bridge, which under her own radar conditions was impossible, then she was merely wasting ammunition.

Sainsbury was becoming more and more worried. Certainly time was passing—it was close on midnight—but the Jap force was still pressing on toward its objective. He was simply harrying, not hurting them. At least one of those battleships had to be hit, hard. Not for the first time the thought occurred to him that he should take Tempest in as well with her six tubes, but as before he rejected the idea of a do-or-die effort. If it failed, which against two battleships and four heavy cruisers was an almost total certainty, then the way would be clear to intercept the invasion force; not only to possibly damage it, but to surely upset its timetable. He was trying to make up his mind to send Bentley in again when the gunnery officer came across.

"I was wondering, sir. Why doesn't he ... "Thunder burst, from above, so close it seemed to shake the bridge. "Why doesn't he send out his destroyers?"

Sainsbury was glad of even a minute's respite from his ugly decision. "Two reasons, Guns. First, he thinks the threat of his destroyers is keeping ours from firing torpedoes at close range. Second, he knows the calibre of Tempest's gunnery, and he wants all his destroyers intact for tomorrow's picnic. In both cases he's right. We're only a fly in the main ointment, as it were. So long as he can keep brushing us off, he doesn't have to kill us. He knows now for certain he's heading for the kill. That information," Sainsbury ended bitterly, "he gained from our sighting signal to the admiral, coded or not."

"Yes, sir." Guns noted that bitterness. "But... well, sir, it's not your fault. Damn it all, the signal had to be sent!"

"Thanks, old chap. But now I have to send another one."

Sainsbury did not change his paired order of attack— Dalziel, senior, with Cartwright, Bentley, senior, with young Gilmore.

"Yeoman," he said, flat and calm as always though his guts were sick, "Make to Wind Rode..."

Far to the south, wept over by rain and lashed at by lightning, Witch was still on the hunt. She had heard nothing from asdic, and nothing from the north. Benson was feeling worried, on two counts. If he left, taking with him the sound of his screws, the submarine could surface and as soon as this electrical furore was over she would get off her sighting signal about an enemy cruiser-destroyer group. This would alert the Jap High Command to the fact that something mighty important over eastward was being protected. On the other hand, he had been absent, from the screen a long time without any positive result, and he was worried what Sainsbury might be thinking about that.

At about the time Sainsbury sent Bentley and Gilmore in again for their ordeal by fire, Benson came to his decision.

"I think we'd better get back," he said generally to the soaked bridge.

"Full speed?" asked Pilot hopefully.

Benson pondered a moment. "No," he said, unwittingly making the decision of his life, "well return at asdic-operating speed. The group will still be in its patrol position and we just might make a contact on the way back."

"Yes, sir," Pilot said dolefully.

"Eh? Don't you want another sub.?"

"I want to get back amongst friends."

Benson chuckled, which said a deal for the amiability of his nature—for hours the open bridge had been lathered with rain.

"Okay, let's do that small thing. Come round to north and put her on course for the squadron. I presume you know where the bloody thing is?"

"Watch me get you there!"

Witch was on her best asdic-operating speed, about fifteen knots. Against the thrust of the northerly wind and seas she came round slowly, rolling gunwales under as she swung.

At about the time Pilot straightened her up on the return course,

they got Gilmore's ship.

It was a cruiser's shell punching through to one of her forward magazines, and it went up with a huge bang, ripping the bow off her.

Benson was too far off to hear, even without the aural obstructions of rain curtains and heavenly thunder. Witch bucketed on, totally ignorant of what she was heading towards.

The hours dragged by on very wet feet—monotonously for Benson, desperately for Sainsbury. He was bone-weary in body and mind, but that he was used to, it could be overcome. It was the other thing that gnawed at him. Dawn was not far off. If they stayed, and they had to stay, then with first light the Jap admiral would concentrate all his heavy guns on this "fly in the ointment" and pulverise it. Only darkness had saved them so far. But he had done practically nothing to save the invasion force. A whole night's effort of fear and hideous risk, and the net result was a few shells inboard of the Jap flagship. It had been a successful shadowing operation, and a totally negative stopping one.

Sitting on his stool, aware of the aching tiredness of his body but ignoring it, Sainsbury came to one of the most desperate decisions of his career. It would mean the end of his squadron, of the ships and the men he loved, of himself as well, but just before first light he would take the whole group in, and by first light they would be in torpedo-firing position, close in, and surely to God a few would hit. If the ships were afloat to fire them...

"Yeoman!" Sainsbury snapped "Sir?"

"Make to Wind Rode: 'My plan of action shortly before dawn..."

The yeoman got it off, then he said:

"What about Witch, sir?"

Sainsbury's tired but tenacious mind had covered Witch, too, so that he answered at once:

"No signal."

The yeoman blinked. "The atmospheric conditions have improved sir. It's still raining but the wireless-office is sure they can raise her."

One small ship could add little to what his present four might achieve, even if she got back in time, Sainsbury had earlier decided, and this way at least one of them would be saved. He said, flatly:

"No signal."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"WHAT?" demanded Benson.

"No radar contact, sir," Tyler repeated. "The rain is still heavy, but even so we should get a fuzzy contact on a large group of ships. The squadron's just not there, sir."

"Damn it all, man, it has to be! We're smack on the patrol position."

"Sorry, sir, no dice."

Jesus, Benson thought, and wasn't too sure he hadn't spoken his worry aloud. What the hell did he do now? Then Pilot came to his aid, this time professionally concise.

"I'd say Captain Sainsbury reckons it's too late for the Japs to make an interception now, sir. He's probably turned the squadron eastward, making it closer to the invasion force, now that he knows there's nothing to hurt it. Tempest couldn't break wireless silence to tell us, and even if she did that bloody lightning got hold of it. That's my appreciation, sir!"

"And mine—now. Bless you, me lad," Benson grinned, then he frowned. "But how the devil could he expect me to read his mind?"

It had been too much of an effort; Pilot returned to his normal melancholy.

"That is true, sir. Perhaps he expected too much of you."

"You doleful, dejected, despondent, disrespectful bastard!"

"Yes, sir," said the man who had just been blessed.

But Benson was grinning. Pilot was right, of course. What other explanation could there be?

"Come round to east," he ordered.

"East, sir. Speed?"

"We'll have it all on the beam, at last. Go on to thirty knots. No, see if she'll take thirty-three." Benson crossed the bridge. "Tyler?"

"Sir?"

"Feeling tired?"

"Hell no, sir. I've only been closed-up all night."

"Good man," Benson chuckled; it was that sort of bridge... "Now listen. I estimated the squadron's drawn off to the eastward, realising the Japs would have made their move by now. We're heading east,

but much faster than them. You know what that means?"

"Yes, sir. I can expect to make contact with a group of ships bearing ahead."

"Genius," Benson murmured, "pure genius. But they'll be heading east too," he warned on a sharper note.

"Have got, sir. But there's one thing I'd like you to remember—it's raining very heavily, and..."

"How the hell would you know?"

"They also serve, sir, who crouch for hours before a radar scope, even in a protected office. Anyway, with this rain, I should be able to pick 'em up, but we can't hope for anything like definite contacts. The blips will be all fuzzy, probably merged together." "Fair enough. Just give me a group, bearing ahead, steering east."

"She's in the bag, sir."

And so— a few fast-steaming hours later, just before dawn—it was.

The rain was absolutely pelting down, which said a great deal for British radar and Tyler's operating of it. The spearing shafts laughed at oilskins, but the bridge was quietly jubilant. Once again, out of dark loneliness, they were heading into friendly company.

"I'm not sure, with all the whitecaps, sir," said the yeoman, "but I think I've got a few wakes in visual. Will I tell 'em we're here?"

Just as unwittingly as the yeoman had, Benson repeated almost verbatim the words he had used in answer to that query when Witch had closed Tempest with her load of wounded.

"No need for that, Hawkeye. They're expecting us, and the senior officer mightn't fancy blue lights flicking all over the place."

This time, however, the yeoman was a bit more dubious, for weather conditions were vastly different, even if the conversation wasn't.

"But we're small, sir, they mightn't have us on radar in this muck. And if we close up and they sight us, sort of sudden like..."

"Have you no faith in the steadiness of British guns?" said Benson sternly, smiling. "However, don't worry, Daniel Boone. We'll hang back at this range and then sneak into position at first light. How does that strike you?"

"Gawd, that's a new one," muttered the yeoman.

"Come again?"

"Ah, Daniel Boone, sir."

"Oh. Yes. Just so long as I don't ever have to call you a bloody blind mole. Pilot, drop back to twenty knots, squadron speed."

"Twenty knots it is, sir, coming right up."

"Where the hell d'you think you are—on the Manly ferry?"

"Wish to God I was."

It was a happy, contented bridge.

Rain and oilskin-chafed necks regardless, it stayed that way—until dawn broke wetly grey and their binoculars came up, and Number One said, suddenly and with great vehemence, "Christ Almighty!" and the dawn's early light, along with its silence, was broken by a belch of yellow flame and a cavernous roar.

"There's the squadron, sir!" yelled the yeoman. "Right on the horizon!"

Benson wasn't interested in anything so far off as the horizon. With boggling eyes he was glaring at Tyler's fuzzy contacts. Only they weren't fuzzy any more; to Benson's shocked mind, in fact, they seemed to be about ten feet away. Two massive hulls, flanked by cruisers, and all wearing redballed ensigns. And firing at Sainsbury's group.

Shock can come up with some strange reactions. Perhaps because he was so abruptly and terribly scared, Benson's nature reverted defensively to its basic element, which was humour.

"Well now, Pilot," he said, trying to grin, and producing a ghastly grimace, "looks like we're that Messerschmitt I was telling you about."

"Like hell," returned Pilot, "that battle fleet's our third wave!"

"Then we'll make a few more!"

No one, not even Benson, noticed that he had shouted; impelled to it by a mixture of fear, natural guts and the exaltation of a wonderful possibility.

"Full-ahead both engines! Revs for thirty-six knots! Steer between the battleships and the right-hand cruiser line!" And then at last, controlling himself, he added in a voice which under the circumstances could be called normal: "Standby torpedo attack, all tubes. Forrard tubes train to port, target rear battleship. After tubes

train to starb'd, target rear cruiser. The lot, Torps, the bloody lot. And for Christ sake don't miss!"

So long as the torpedoes left their tubes, missing seemed impossible. The position was this. Close ahead, fine on Witch's port bow, steamed both battleships in line-astern; busily engaged, along with the right-hand pair of cruisers, in firing at Sainsbury's squadron. Also close ahead, fine on her starb'd bow, steamed the firing cruisers. So that Witch, a midget amongst bullocks, was heading to steam midway between the battleships and the right-hand cruisers. Once she got between them, or if she did, then no big enemy guns could fire at her for fear of hitting their own side. As for the destroyers, they had been deployed well over to the left, clear of the battleships' line of fire.

Already closed-up for dawn action stations, Witch leaped in to do or die. So far, it seemed she had not been sighted, or at least identified. But she carried something which could make identification positive, even through the weeping rain; it was old Hawkeye Daniel Boone who thought of that.

"Captain, sir! The ensign!"

"Jesus. Haul it down. Quick, man!"

It was the first time he had given that order, but in this case necessity was the mother and father of action. His mind a fear-stimulated whirl of calculations, Benson was thinking of other action.

"Number One! Soon as we fire torpedoes, open with all guns in rapid broadsides at the leading cruiser. Point of aim, the bridge."

"Aye aye..." Number One got out, and then multiple whooshes of sound swept over his acknowledgement.

From both sides of her low and narrow-gutted waist, one after the leaping other, she lashed out with every king-hitting punch she carried. Each warhead held as much blasting force as a cruiser's full

broadside; more, for they were aimed at soft underbellies, not armoured sides or decks.

Through the sea they streaked at forty knots, all ten of them, five to port, five to starb'd, while upon the sea's rain-pocked face their swift passing laid smooth tracks of awesome promise.

The promise was shatteringly fulfilled.

They never knew for sure how many torpedoes hit each target.

They did learn something they had not known before—what torpedoes sound like when they hit your own ship. This knowledge was given them because Witch was so close to her targets that she might have been one of them, so far as noise was concerned.

Not thunder; that is a deep rumbling sound. This was a much sharper, more forceful explosive blast of displaced air that whammed against their ears and set them ringing. Even the ship seemed to reel. Then it did shake, for the guns had opened at the untouched leading cruiser.

Benson snatched a glance to right and left, seeing those ugly, beautiful columns towering from both targets, then he shouted a wheel order.

Witch heeled. She aimed her spurting stem for the gap between the right-hand cruisers, still firing at the leading one, and it was then that Benson, light-headed with the fear and the beginnings of a wondrous hope, lifted his head and yelled:

"Hoist battle ensign!"

Up it went, right to the very truck of the topmast, flaunting its red, white and blue, snapping in the wind its glorious traditions of skill and guts at those other red-balled things—and out through the gap Witch went, racing for her life to the eastward, smothering in shell splashes and yelling for help.

An astonished and damn near wet-eyed Sainsbury gave her his help. But he was choked by such a fierceness of pride that he had to cough his throat savagely clear before he could give orders. These were explicit, directed at little Witch's nearest and thus most dangerous enemy.

"Shift target to right-hand cruiser!" Sainsbury snarled. "Rapid broadsides. I want that bastard smothered!"

The four triple turrets trained right, and together they belched. Witch came running in beneath that high steely rain. Before the twelve shells landed another dozen were up there hurtling through the clouds.

And presently the splashes about her rose confusedly further astern, or further to right and left.

They had made it. They lived. They looked at each other, they grinned and laughed into each other's streaming faces, and in the next second their faces were slack-mouthed, their expressions

bewildered.

"What ship are you?" sprang from the R/T. "Where are you from?"

There was no doubt whatever it was Captain Bentley's voice.

"What the hell?" wondered Number One, staring at his captain. Benson's face wore a quizzical grin of devilment. He grabbed out the R/T mike.

"This is British destroyer Javelin." She was a British destroyer, of the same class as Witch, in case the Japs bothered to check. "I'm scouting for the Tenth Destroyer Flotilla, which is screening the Third Heavy Cruiser Squadron about fifty miles south of my present position. My main aerials have been shot away." This was a downright lie. "Request you inform the squadron of the position and strength of the enemy force. Now that it's been damaged I should think my squadron would very much like to..."

Number One's hand tapping on his shoulder stopped him. Benson looked his query. The yeoman answered it.

"Wind Rode's been signalling by light, sir."

"Oh? What'd she say?"

"Ah..."

"What? Answer me, damn you, instead of grinning like an ape!"

"Aye aye, sir. From Wind Rode, sir: 'You may look like an actor but for God's sake stop trying to make like one. The Japs have got the message.' Message ends, sir."

Flushing, Benson looked astern, and saw that more than the message had ended. He could barely sight them through the rain—just clearly enough to see that the Jap force had swung away and was withdrawing to the northwestward, taking the damaged units with it. .

"Making like a bloody actor," he snarled, with the reaction of belief. "Real funny bastard, isn't... "

"Wind Rode signalling, sir!"

"What now, for God's sake?"

The yeoman told him what. "Suggest you deactivate your R/T before making unfunny comments on your senior officers. For the second time."

"Hell! Sorry, sir. Over and out."

But it wasn't quite altogether out. An hour later, with the Japs off even Tempest's radar screens and no doubt whatever that they had given up, Witch's R/T came alive again.

"This is Tempest. Captain to captain."

"Benson, sir."

"Glad to have you back—again."

"Thank you, sir."

"However, as you have been loafing all night while we have been hard at work, detach to the westward and pick up Gilmore's survivors."

"Aye aye, sir," said Benson, frantically waving his bridge team to silence.

But these were their own survivors. Sainsbury, as Witch's navigating office made sotto voce and predictable remarks, detached another ship to help, then he came back to Benson.

"Cartwright knows the position. He will lead you. I prefer you not to join up with the Japanese Navy a second time. Over and out."

Quicker than a flash Benson's finger whipped off the switch.

"All right, chaps. Now you can let her rip."

They did; making vehement, savage, mutinous and wholly false remarks. But that, Benson thought, listening with admiration to the vocabulary, was better than blubbering with the relief of tension, or giggling like a bloody schoolgirl...

The two destroyers disappeared into the murk westward on their mercy mission—they were to pick up Gilmore and more than half of his crew, which was the second miracle of that vicious patrol—and Sainsbury had Bentley repair on board while they awaited the rescue ship's return.

Coffee, cigarettes, talk about Benson's gutsy if accidental effort and the medal for which Sainsbury would recommend him, Then Bentley said:

"Benson caught on damn quick, didn't you think?"

"Hmmm, I suppose so. But then I trained him."

"My God, will we ever live that down? Just the same," Bentley went on, "those Japs must be wondering why the Third Cruiser Squadron haven't caught up with 'em."

"Really? I shouldn't think so. I imagine they're simply thankful

for the rain and lack of visibility, believing they have outsmarted the British. Quite obvious, really."

"Really?" Bentley mimicked. "You think you're pretty damn smart yourself, don't you? Beating off a Jap battle fleet—with a little help from one of my destroyers!"

"Quite so, However, I ..."

"I know. You trained him. The fact that I've had him for a long time now doesn't mean a damn thing, does it?"

"Manners," Sainsbury murmured, shaking his gaunt head. "Pitiful. It so happens that I was about to say I have some good news for you—though why it should concern you 1 really don't know. Nevertheless, you will be pleased to hear that I am getting rid of my first lieutenant, Cowdray."

"Good show!"

Bentley very much wanted to, but he didn't ask how or why. Because of this, he was told.

"We are not all brave men," Sainsbury said quietly, "yet we all fought. Cowdray publicly admitted that he thought we should not fight. It so happens that I cannot bear a cowardly officer, either personally or in my ship. So he shall leave us on return to Manus."

Bentley was pleased. The slimy bastard, he thought.

"Where are you sending him?" Some shore depot, I hope?"

"Of course. Such an officer cannot be trusted at sea."

Bentley's eyes gleamed. He remembered that superior crack about training Benson. In the most casual of tones he suggested:

"You ought to send him to Skeleton Park."

Sainsbury stiffened in surprise. "I beg your pardon!"

"Skeleton Park," Bentley repeated. "As you mentioned so wittily and so publicly about my Cartwright and my Benson, you know the position. You could lead him there."

Sainsbury's eyes narrowed into slits of shrewd speculation and preparatory challenge, and his mouth opened. But right there, before your ideas of naval discipline receive a rude revaluation, we had better

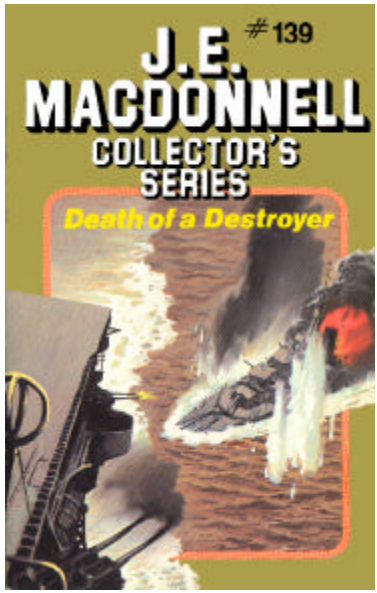
leave them.

THE END

Ask your local undernet book channel for

DEATH OF A DESTROYER

"Speed in attack is the only hope of success against odds... "We are up against tremendous odds, therefore we must act quickly." His voice burred up to a commanding rasp. "Pilot, bring her round to come up astern of the enemy. Torps, prepare all tubes for firing starb'd side. Number One, do not open fire until we're sighted. When you do, concentrate the whole main armament on her side midway between the flight-deck and water-level, using armour piercing shell," Spindrift was already leaning on the turn towards.



Ask your local undernet book channel for

BLIND INTO DOOM

Submarine contact!

"Missed astern, sir," Fawcett said. "He dived back into a cloud."

Duncan barely heard him. He was listening for, dreading to hear, another sound, while he watched to see what action the screen would take. This was not his province. It belonged to Captain Sherwood. Though junior to himself both on the Navy List and in his command, Sherwood was senior officer of the escort group: U-boats were his business. His own destroyer, leading ship of the starboard screen, heeled on the turn so acutely that Duncan was able to see the whole of her upper-deck. Swinging with the same despatch and hard-over rudder, the second destroyer followed him round.

"Standby for manoeuvring," Duncan said, and Pilot passed it down to the wheelhouse and thus the engine-room. If the U'boat had fired, a shoal of torpedoes could be heading for Warwick.