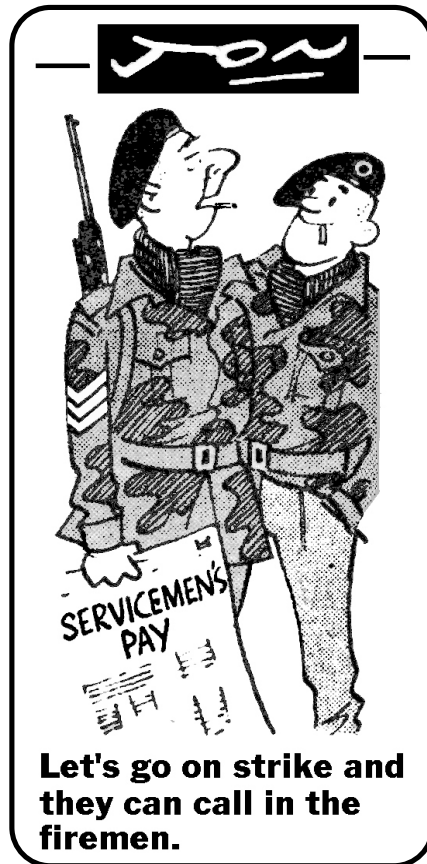


MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS



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A SEQUEL BY
HENRY T SMITH

J&J
BOOKS

By The Same Author

Sergeant Enterprise
Major Achievements
Merchant Submarine
The Necessary Peace *
Death In Small Corners
Death Is A Stranger
Death On The Record
Death From High Ground
Doppelgänger
Wacht Am Rhein
Something In The Blood **
Allah's Thunder

** published in the USA and Canada as
The Last Campaign*

*** written with L. Gordon Range*

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PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

One approach to the problem of reforming a crumbling institution is to pose a direct and public challenge to its leadership in the hope of either shaming them into renovating the rotting edifice inside and out and from top to bottom. Another approach is to take it over, demolish the old form and rebuild to a modern and sounder design.

Yet another, more subtle approach is infiltration – using the system against itself, leaving the fabric of the institution largely undisturbed, and remodelling selected key interior structures. In this second case, the *Old Guard* still stride the corridors of power, unaware that they no longer wield their former degree of influence.

When the institution in question is the nation's Armed Services, the infiltration option offers distinct advantages – the most significant of which is a lack of outcry from the three Ps of democracy: Public, Parliament and Press.

A number of army NCOs, worried about the government's cuts in Defence spending and their effects on unofficial sales of 'surplus' materials, decided to take over a department of the Ministry of Defence. They chose the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit as their target and, by a program of transfers and blackmail over a period of months, they succeeded in providing themselves with the right sort of civilian staff.

In the final phase of their *Operation Life-Preserver*, the NCOs became inspectors for the CSSSU and they acquired commissions. By this time, they had expanded the operation to include similar groups of naval NCOs, who had taken over the neighbouring Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department, and they had formed an alliance with a group of like-minded junior RAF officers, who had already successfully completed their independent version of *Operation Life-Preserver*.

The conspirators had gained control of a range of goods and services not available to the general public and generated closer loyalties to one another. Their intentions had broadened from simply doing themselves a lot of good to the grander concept of safeguarding the interests of their respective Services.

Their aim had become to make the Armed Services profitable and quite independent of the whims of politicians.

What you can achieve is all tied up with your status in society. Most people make very little progress in that direction and they tend to end up not too far away from where they started.

But if you can persuade others that your status is higher than it actually is, that can give you the freedom to grow to your full potential and do some real achieving!

Major George McAndrew.

13. THE WIND AND THE HEATHER

Autumn dawn unfolded across Sussex and included the golf course of the Bellside Country Club. No rain had fallen for six weeks. Memories had started to drift back to the great drought of '76. The sun began to burn early morning mist off the River Bell, which ran through the woods to the south of the club and offered a source of emergency refreshment to the greens if mains-driven sprinklers were banned. But with October just a week away, a rainy end to the sunny spell very soon was a good bet.

Thirty-five minutes after sunrise, punctually at 07:30 hours, the Bellside cats assembled in their mess outside the door of the kitchen. Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins waited impatiently for their slave to bash open a couple of tins and serve breakfast.

Two hours later, the owners of the Bellside assembled in their mess in the residential suite, which consisted of the whole of the first floor of the west wing of the club. Major George McAndrew, Captain Arthur Fairclough and Lieutenants Norman Birky and James Spinner were inspectors attached to the Westminster-based Combined Services Special Statistical Unit. The fifth owner, Lieutenant Hank Newton, RN, lived on the floor above. He was an inspector with the CSSSU's near neighbour, the Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department.

Captain Fairclough found that he had been elected duty officer as far as breakfast was concerned – mainly because he had picked the chair nearest the house telephone. He relayed orders to the kitchen at the rear of the ground floor and took charge of one of the newspapers which had been delivered to the residential suite.

Major McAndrew started at the sports pages of his newspaper and worked his way forward to the news. He reached the front page as he finished his cup of coffee.

"That was a waste of time," he remarked. His accent was Scottish and

it revealed his south-east coast origins to a discerning ear. "There doesn't seem to be much in the news."

Lieutenant Birky, a diminutive Londoner, swapped the *Mirror* for dark and taciturn Lieutenant Newton's *Sun* and turned to page three.

"I think I'll go home for a few days," McAndrew added. "Mother's been moaning again. Reckons she never sees me these days."

The thought of McAndrew actually having a mother stunned his companions into even deeper silence – but it was true. He had received a birthday card from his parents in the mail that very morning. The fact that McAndrew had celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday on the twentieth, four days earlier, strengthened the common opinion that second-class post received fifth-class treatment.

"Maybe look up a few friends and do some fishing," mused McAndrew, half to himself.

Knowing their leader, the other members of the group realized that most of the fishing would be done without the benefit of rod and line or a net.

"This is where you can reach me if you really have to," McAndrew concluded, writing a telephone number on a corner of his newspaper.

"How are you getting there?" asked Fairclough, the second tallest of the group. He had short, blond hair, he wore army-issue, steel-rimmed spectacles and was five years and almost two months younger than McAndrew.

"Fly, I suppose," decided the Scot. "You might give Bert Carter a ring and tell him to be ready with his air-taxi in about an hour and a half. Usual route."

McAndrew circled a combined book and magazine rack at the top of the lounge and disappeared into the private section of the residential suite. Each of the four army men had a self-contained flatlet at the southern end of the wing. McAndrew's bedroom, sitting room and bathroom unit was the first unit on the left.

A panel in the bedroom wall opened into the club-owner's first-floor office, which communicated in turn with a ground-floor office by means of a small lift. The upper office was used for business, the lower mainly for entertaining. Gordon Bryant, the club's manager, had a similar pair of offices on the other side of the building's main entrance.

Since the success of *Operation Life-Preserver* and their elevation to the dizzy heights of officers and gentlemen, McAndrew and his private enter-

prise group had done very little other than enjoy a long, lazy, summer holiday. While other members of their loose confederation, under Colonel (formerly Sergeant) Hector Blackshaw, had continued the good work of consolidating their stranglehold on the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit, McAndrew and partners had spent a fortnight tying up loose ends before settling back to enjoy the spell of fine weather.

They were ready for action but no interesting projects had appeared on the horizon and nobody had asked them for help. Lieutenant Newton had spent long periods on the golf course, pursuing his self-appointed role of golf professional. His only break had been three miserable days spent fighting the effects of a summer cold, which he had succeeded in transmitting to everyone but McAndrew.

When Birky had demanded an explanation for their leader's annoying good health, Spinner had dug into an encyclopaedic memory for trivia and decided that McAndrew had been exposed to that particular virus before and he was therefore immune. He was unable to explain how Newton had caught one of McAndrew's cast-off diseases instead of a brand new one.

Lieutenant Birky had acquired an impressive tan after a month of intermittent sunbathing on the roof of the club. He had given up his new look when Spinner had shown him a magazine containing an article which alleged that prolonged exposure to the sun shrinks the human skin. Having stopped growing at a height of five feet eight inches, Birky couldn't afford any reversal of the process.

Captain Fairclough devoted a great deal of time to sorting out his collection of rock music on tape, and he spent several hours of his leisure days messing about with various tape recorders. McAndrew had delegated to Lieutenant Spinner the role of liaison officer with the club's management.

As Gordon Bryant had his command well under control, Spinner, a six foot one former regimental heavyweight boxing champion of West Indian extraction, had been required to do little other than add his seal of approval. The arrangement had left him with plenty of free time for his current project – the exploration of his collection of samples of whiskies in search of the perfect blend.

Major McAndrew had kept dashing off to see various people, seeking inspiration, between periods of inactivity. His restlessness had soon communicated itself to Fairclough and Birky. Fairclough, an explosives expert,

had begun to devote an hour or so after dinner to his hobby of devising cunning and terrible booby traps just in case McAndrew came up with an interesting project. Birky had taken advantage of his role as a CSSSU inspector to polish Army-taught skills that did not appear in his personal file – burglary and safe cracking. He had taken two weekend security courses, which was a sure sign that he was getting bored and that it was time McAndrew came up with another project.

Their leader's latest trip, allegedly to see his parents and indulge in some fishing, didn't fool Fairclough or Birky for a minute. They could detect something special going on from McAndrew's over-casual manner. Spinner too could sense that something was in the air but he chose to ignore the signals until someone put concrete proposals before him.

Birky offered to drive McAndrew to the conveniently-placed local airfield. He kept dropping hints through the short journey, hoping to achieve the impossible and get some clue as to his intentions from the group's leader. He didn't really expect to break through McAndrew's famous wall of silence, but he lived in hope.

McAndrew evaded all of his probes with his customary dexterity. Sergeant McAndrew had made almost a religion out of secrecy in the old days. Less than two months after his promotion to Major, he had no intention of changing his ways.

So confident were they of the legitimacy of their joint hunch, that Fairclough and Birky convinced Spinner that it would be better to pack at leisure rather than fall victim to a last minute scramble. Thus all three of them were ready for an instant departure when the summons came, three days later. Only their destination, a pub in north Yorkshire, came as a surprise.

McAndrew and a man with crew-cut, fading red hair were decorating a bench outside the fortress-like stone pub, looking like a pair of holiday-makers soaking up the Indian-summer sun. Birky gave them a blast on the horn to wake them up as shot past them, decelerating towards the car park entrance. He had hired the car in York.

The stranger became Lieutenant-Colonel Porter – Dan to his friends. His name seemed strangely familiar to Captain Fairclough, even though he was sure that they had never met before. Porter was in his late forties. He looked more like a civilian in uniform than a regular army officer, even

though his turn-out could not be faulted.

"Dan," explained McAndrew, "is in charge of a CBW team at a strange place known as AT-Seventeen for even stranger security reasons. You met two of his men during *Operation Plank* – the medical technicians. And you might have seen Dan on TV."

Fairclough scratched his mental itch of recognition.

"What's that in English?" invited Birky. "The CB stuff."

"Chemical and Biological Warfare," offered Spinner.

"Close enough for jazz," nodded Colonel Porter.

"I thought we'd given all that up," added Spinner. "The government signed an international agreement ages ago. It was in the papers."

"We *have* discontinued all research in that direction," replied Porter. "Officially, that is. But as everyone else is still doing it, so must we in order to have antidotes available. That agreement was just another convenient political smokescreen. But we do quite a lot of good, actually. Things like preparing vaccines when familiar diseases throw a mutant at us. But I don't suppose you're interested in a commercial."

"I don't like the sound of this," observed Birky. "What are we going to do with a load of germs and things?"

"It's not what we're going to do with them, it's what they're going to do for us," replied McAndrew. Then he rolled down the shutters and became his normal, infuriating, wait-and-see self.

The whole object of his secrecy was to allow him to stage a grand unveiling at a climactic moment. His fellow club-owners knew that, but they still felt seething frustration whenever their leader pulled his little trick on them.

When the group left the pub, they took a fairly wide, well-maintained road which looked out of place in its country setting. A recent project, it had been built Roman-style, departing at a precise right angle from the main road through the hills and cutting the corners of stone-walled fields at eccentric angles. Clumsy patches or wire-fenced gaps showed where an old cart-track had once snaked its country way. The newer road changed direction in gentle curves, eliminating a good 30% of the original journey.

Towards the end of the road, the convoy of two vehicles reached a gate. It was set in a wire mesh fence that was a good fifteen feet high and topped with the traditional three strands of overhanging barbed wire. The

inner fence was a mere twelve feet high and it wore signs to warn visitors that guard dogs patrolled between the two fences. Armed sentries examined all identity cards before allowing the two vehicles through the inner gate.

Their destination was a group of unimpressive brick buildings huddled in the centre of a two-acre site. Birky followed Colonel Porter's car into the largest building, which held aloft a weather-beaten sign announcing that it had once belonged to the 'Marquham Engineering C'. The cavernous building contained about thirty cars and vans, a few fire extinguishers, a scattering of official signs and very little else. The group headed for a door marked PRIVATE in large, red letters.

"Tea break, is it?" asked Birky.

"I'm sorry?" frowned Colonel Porter, inclining a puzzled ear.

"I mean, where is everyone?" expanded Birky. "We've not seen a living thing in the last ten minutes. Apart from two sentries and a few sheep."

"Have patience for a few more minutes and all will be revealed." Porter slipped a credit card-size rectangle of white-striped blue plastic into a slot in the wall.

Who's been taking lessons in not telling you anything from Mac? thought Fairclough.

The door slid apart from a central seam, revealing a lift for a maximum of eight persons. Colonel Porter pushed his plastic card into another slot beneath the controls and touched the panel marked 'XSP'. The other control panels were similarly labelled with a letter code to indicate the floor instead of a number. The lift descended.

Colonel Porter led his guests into a well-lit corridor. A sporty red stripe zoomed along the pastel yellow walls, dividing in front of the lift to surround a sign which confirmed that they had reached the XSP Level. Porter confirmed that he had retrieved his identification card and moved to the left.

"We took a long time to go down three floors," remarked Captain Fairclough. "Is your lift getting tired in its old age?"

"There's a good reason for that," smiled Porter, who had insisted on dispensing with 'sir'. "Some security-minded genius came up with the bright idea of rewiring the panels out of sequence."

"I think I know a friend of his," remarked Fairclough, bringing to mind Captain Jack Medder's Bunker Hotel and the maze of tunnels behind it.

“So where are we, sir?” asked Spinner. “And what’s XSP? Or is that a secret too?”

“We’re on the last-but-one level, in Extra Security Projects Section,” obliged Porter. “But none of the equipment you’re about to see is concerned with new, world-shattering instruments of mass destruction. On the contrary, it’s relatively harmless. The only reason we located the project down here is that we happened to have some free space, and it keeps nosy people at bay.”

The corridor came to a dead end. Set in the wall was a door which was scarcely two feet wide.

“Anyone suffer from claustrophobia?” asked Colonel Porter.

The other Bellsiders looked at McAndrew suspiciously, then they shook their heads. In single file, they entered a corridor of the same width as the door. Spinner found the fact that his shoulders were brushing the walls on either side somewhat unnerving, and he was quite relieved when he succeeded in negotiating the two right-angle turns to the right and reached a relatively wide-open space.

When their sense of proportion returned, the visitors decided that the room wasn’t really very big after all. In fact, it was rather on the small side and divided in two by a transparent partition, which was probably bullet-proof. Spinner concluded that the complex had been built for five foot eight dwarfs, like ‘Knocker’ Birky, rather than normal people of six feet one and built in proportion.

The visitors saw their first signs of human habitation in this inner room. Three men, a sergeant and two privates, were sitting beyond the partition, most of their attention focussed on a control board covered in meters and switches, and fitted with three television monitors. One of the privates, was engaged in the vitally important task of tea-making. He had an excuse to ignore the visitors.

“So there is someone here, after all,” commented Birky in tones of mock surprise, earning himself a warning look from McAndrew.

The tea-maker began to pour as the other two subjected the visitors to rapid but thorough body searches for concealed instruments of sabotage. A metal detector in the security filter had failed to detect any weapons. Colonel Porter called a halt to the search when one of his men found a set of lock-picks built in to the strap of Birky’s watch.

“Just to show you our security isn’t a joke,” he smiled as Birky clipped

the watch back onto his wrist to conceal a paler area of his tan. "Although you haven't seen anyone, we've been under constant surveillance every step of the way since we reached the outer gate of the complex. The corridor we just passed through is called a security filter.

"An enemy can only attack us in single file through such a system, making life that bit more difficult for him. In case the enemy is a little more sneaky, the metal detector in the filter also serves the secondary purpose of fogging the film in concealed cameras, if you happen to have brought any to photograph us."

Birky snapped his fingers and muttered, "Shucks! I knew I'd forgotten something."

"On the way out," continued Colonel Porter, "we have a bulk eraser to wipe out secret tape recordings."

"What about my watch?" Spinner asked anxiously. "Magnets don't do them any good." He rolled back his cuff to check that it was still going.

Birky followed suit.

"Your watch won't be affected," replied Colonel Porter. "In fact, it will be totally demagnetized, which should do it good rather than ill. And all for free."

Spinner wasn't convinced. "If it buggers it up, I'll know where to send the bill, sir," he threatened.

Major McAndrew gave *him* a warning glare. Discipline seemed to be dropping to pieces. The group had been inactive for far too long.

"The body search can continue down to the heels of your shoes," continued Porter. "Just in case you've brought in any non-ferrous offensive weapons. But I think we can deviate from the letter of the regulations for once. You didn't know you were coming here and we don't have to impress you into giving us some investment money."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Fairclough. "I was just wondering what I could sneak past the search we've just had."

"You're getting off very lightly," smiled Porter. "We insist that politicians and officers of the General Staff suffer a complete change of clothing before they're allowed near the lifts. They inconvenience us, so we like to get a little of our own back."

"What would happen if someone managed to beat your normal security precautions?" asked Fairclough.

Porter waved a hand in the direction of the control board. "And

managed to get through the armour-glass screen? Well, if you got through there, what would you do?"

"I've no idea," Fairclough confessed, scanning the array of controls blankly. Neither had anyone else. "I haven't got a clue what it's supposed to do, which doesn't help," Fairclough added.

"As a matter of fact, I consider all this to be mainly window dressing," Porter admitted. "Someone who wants to blow us to bits or steal our secrets should never be allowed near our surface installation, never mind down here. But the military can get into all sorts of trouble if we point out the doubtful allegiances of certain politicians. So we just have to allow our security advisors to make life as tough as possible for them when they visit us."

"Others have as little use for politicians as we do," observed McAndrew cryptically, dropping his first clue. His companions braced themselves to view either a project which did not have direct Ministry of Defence backing, or the misuse of an official project.

"To answer your point," Colonel Porter added to Fairclough, "if you look at the board, you'll see all the controls are numbered – in contrast to the letter codes in the lifts. To open the door that gives access to the laboratories and the offices, two buttons more than a man's reach apart have to be pressed simultaneously. Unauthorized experimenting with the control board can flood this whole area with anaesthetic gas, just in case the intruders have forgotten their gas masks, and an alarm sounds on all levels. Care to try your luck?"

"No thanks," grinned Fairclough. "I bet you have some right fun and games when you put a new bloke on the board."

"We do keep gas masks and earplugs handy," admitted Porter.

"What about a fire?" asked Birky nervously. "I don't give much for the chances of the last man out through your security filter."

"We have a rapid evacuation procedure. It's very effective," smiled the Colonel, giving nothing away. "Now; if you gentlemen would turn your backs on the board? Open up, please."

Captain Fairclough tried to use his glasses as a mirror, but the bodies of the sergeant and one of his men blocked his view of the control board.

A section of the wall to their right lifted into the ceiling, revealing another corridor. This one was double the width of the security filter and a much more comfortable passage. Colonel Porter led the way to the far end.

The visitors peered through the vast expanse of glass to their left, ignoring the succession of doors and frosted glass windows on the right-hand side of the corridor. The laboratories were divided from their neighbours by double-glazed partitions, which offered a fascinating view into the mysterious world of the research scientist.

Some of the laboratories were devoted to instruments, many of them looking distinctly home-made. Multi-coloured cable strips and lengths of plastic tubing coiled and looped between boxed instruments and exotic glassware. Lights flashed on and off again, relays clicked shut and open, tape readers chewed at reels of punched paper tape, pens drew on slow-moving chart paper and printers zipped out lines of data. Everything seemed to be happening without the benefit of human interference.

Other laboratories contained the tangled thickets of glass and metal of the synthetic organic chemist. The liquids distilling and refluxing were either colourless or various shades of yellow. No one had thought to bring out flasks of bright blue, red or green fluids containing a submerged slug of solid carbon dioxide to make them froth for the benefit of visitors.

Bug-breeding and other biological activities did not seem to take place on the XSP Level. There were no animals in cages, waiting to end their short lives with a dose of the latest lethal potion. There was strong sense that the machines were running everything and the humans were just there because humans are supposed to be in charge of machines.

The visible inhabitants of Colonel Porter's empire matched the variety of their surroundings. A chemist in a white labcoat was talking to an instrument technician in an open-necked shirt and jeans. At the back of the first laboratory, two figures in spacesuits were busy in an enclosure on which the word DANGER in large red letters featured prominently.

"This way, gentlemen." Colonel Porter held the door of his office open.

The Bellsiders had not noticed that they had reached their destination. They were too busy indulging in a favourite British passion – watching other people at work. Colonel Porter's announcement stopped them from colliding with the wall at the end of the corridor.

14. THE SECRET OF AT-17

Colonel Porter waved his guests to a group of chairs gathered round his desk. "Be seated, gentlemen," he invited.

A pair of telephones, a decanter and six squat glasses did their best to fill large expense of polished wood. Colonel Porter splashed amber liquid into five of the glasses and pushed one towards Spinner.

"Mac tells me you're an expert on the subject, young man. Tell me what you think of this Scotch."

Lieutenant Spinner picked the glass up, sniffed at it suspiciously, and tasted it. He pulled a face and swallowed the rest. "What a load of crap," was his considered opinion in a strong Midlands accent.

The others tasted the strange fluid. Birky turned to his colleague. "You miserable sod! It's not a bad drop of Scotch." He held his glass out for a refill, as did Spinner.

Colonel Porter poured again. "Perhaps you'd care to enlarge on your opinion?" he invited.

Spinner tasted the alleged Scotch whisky again. "It's drinkable all right. But there's a lot wrong with the blending. I've never tasted anything quite like it before. It's not Japanese is it? Or do you make it here?" he added in a rush of perception. "It's not a bad imitation, I suppose. You might be able to disguise it a bit more if you can manage a better blend. But you won't fool a real expert without some serious work on it."

McAndrew grinned at Colonel Porter, who took out his wallet and extracted a ten pound note. "You win, Mac. He guessed the whole thing. I didn't think it was possible."

"You mean, you really do make this stuff here?" asked Birky, looking at the Colonel with new respect.

Colonel Porter nodded.

"How about telling us what's going on?" Fairclough gave McAndrew a

pointed look. "And it might be interesting to find out why you're here in the wilds of Yorkshire, Mac, instead of fishing in Scotland, where you ought to be."

"Well, laddie, it's like this," began McAndrew, pushing his glass closer to the decanter as a gentle hint. "I was doing a quiet bit of fishing the evening before last when I ran into an old friend of my father's. He's in the whisky trade, you know. The friend, not my father – he only drinks it. Anyway, he was moaning about the downward trend in whisky sales. You know they've actually closed several distilleries?"

"Yeah, there was something about it in the paper," nodded Spinner, drawing from his encyclopaedic memory for trivia.

"Anyway, this bloke reckons the English government isn't helping sales any by slapping so much tax on Scotland's traditional tippie," McAndrew continued. "So the wheels started to turn and I remembered Dan's technicians mentioning he was doing something in the whisky line at the time of *Operation Plank*. And being at a loose end, I decided to drop in and see how he was getting on. It looks like he's just about cracked it – if only the expert could tell this isn't genuine Scotch."

"He's the first one of the self-styled experts to tell me this isn't the real thing," added Colonel Porter. "It's a good job you wouldn't let me bet more, Mac."

Major McAndrew smiled innocently.

"What's in this . . . brew of yours?" asked Fairclough. "I take it you haven't added some caramel to potato peelings-vodka and a bit of flavouring?"

"It's a blend of grain and malt whisky, just like the brew they make in Scotland," Colonel Porter assured him. "The only difference is that we've developed a process for maturing it artificially. After one pass through our system, we have the equivalent of roughly three-year-old whisky. That's the legal minimum age, by the way. Anything younger can't be sold as 'Scotch'."

"And it has to be matured in bond in Scotland for those three years," added Spinner. "Or you can't call it 'Scotch whisky'."

"Not a drop sold till it's ten minutes old," commented Birky. "This is no pound-a-bottle rot-gut."

"We can mature our product further by sending the distillate through more cycles of the treatment process," said Colonel Porter. "With losses

in the region of one half of one per cent per run, which takes about one hour, our process compares favourably with the traditional method, where losses due to evaporation can reduce the eventual yield very significantly.”

“Anything up to twenty-five per cent and more,” added Spinner, who was well read in his hobby.

“Exactly,” nodded Colonel Porter. “Well, our current situation is we’ve treated several hundred litres of raw whisky from various sources. All of them unofficial, I might add. We’ve even made some of it ourselves as part of our experimental program. But more of that later. We’ve been trying to blend the various batches into a satisfactory and consistent brew so that we can get a shipment off to a client in Japan. That should be one of our biggest markets when we succeed in perfecting the process. I thought we’d done quite well – until our friend Spinner appeared on the scene.”

“With all these distilleries closing down, couldn’t you have recruited a redundant blender?” said Fairclough with a frown.

“They tend not to be made redundant, or stay out of a job, if they’re any good,” smiled the Colonel. “And there are one or two problems involved in getting civilians who aren’t politicians into this place. It’s easier to get clearance for Ministry of Defence people, like you lot. Mac tells me blending whisky has been your hobby for some time, James. Would you care to have a crack at ours?”

“Would I!” enthused Spinner. “If you give me samples of the different brews, I’ll see what I can do. I suppose you’re after a new blend, not a Chinese copy of one of the existing brands?”

“That’s a very good idea,” nodded the Colonel. “We hadn’t really thought that far ahead yet. We’ve been concerned more about making something that tastes right, not with creating a new taste.”

“Okay, when do I start?” invited Spinner.

Colonel Porter glanced at his watch. “Let’s have some lunch first. We can get down to business afterwards. You chaps will need something to mop up that alcohol. I know I do. And it’s been a long time since breakfast.”

“Not for this lot,” remarked Major McAndrew.

His colleagues chose to ignore a crack about their late-rising habits.

The route to the canteen lay through the guardroom and the narrow corridor with the double bend. This time, Colonel Porter touched a panel labelled ‘CAR’ in the lift. The panel was located near the bottom of the

double column and indicated the *Canteen and Recreation* Level.

After rising an indeterminate number of floors, the visitors found themselves on the edge of an area filled with the sounds of conversation and the clink of cutlery on crockery. The establishment's security advisors had not provided the canteen with a security filter.

A large room had been divided into irregular compartments by shoulder-high, moveable partitions. The arrangement allowed a group to obtain a measure of privacy in a public place while maintaining an informal atmosphere. The canteen manager altered the configuration of the partitions at irregular intervals. His customers agreed that his policy introduced a welcome touch of variety to a building noted for its sameness.

During a meal of summer salads, Colonel Porter gave the visitors a short history of his project, which had been running for the best part of two years. The colonel, it emerged, was a civilian scientist who had been issued with a commission, like a box of test tubes, to satisfy security requirements. His political masters felt that he would be more under control if he were subject to military discipline.

Shortly before beginning his current line of research, he had suffered a great set-back. The politicians had cancelled one of his pet projects as part of a rather suspect deal to transfer funds to other, more politically acceptable areas of research. The arbitrary decision had so enraged Colonel Porter that he had resigned and gone into business on his own account.

As he had failed to notify the director of the establishment of his decision, he still had the run of the place. Years of experience at playing the security game allowed him to spread a smoke screen across his activities – with the result that whenever his name was mentioned, or somebody wanted to know what he was doing, they received an official brush-off.

Colonel Porter's work was so Top Secret that mentioning his name could be a dangerous breach of security. Like the director-generals of the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service, he had become one of the unmentionables.

Colonel Porter admitted that he could have directed his efforts into continuing his cancelled research project but, as time went by, he had found his former line of work becoming less and less important to him. His current project, in its original form, had been aimed at producing ethyl alcohol to making vodka. He had been assisted by a small team of

similarly disillusioned colleagues, some well-bred bacteria and a number of rather unlikely raw materials.

The change of direction had come as a consequence of a business trip to Scotland, during which he had been offered a glass of 'home brew' whisky. When the fire in his throat had died down and he could speak again with only moderate discomfort, he had decided that it would be a fitting challenge to his scientific expertise to convert an apology for paint stripper into a drink fit for civilized human beings.

He had been encouraged by the work of Manxman Lucien Landau, who had made the national newspapers in the late Seventies with his 'instant' whisky process. Using modern chemical technology, Mr. Landau had managed to produce the equivalent of seven-year-old whisky in twenty-four hours, reducing his production costs to about half of those of conventional distiller's by eliminating the requirement to tie up capital with stock held in bonded warehouses while it matured.

The achievement looked impressive in isolation, but given production costs measure in tens of pence per bottle and combined excise duty and VAT amounting to pounds, the saving amounted to about six per cent of the retail price.

One slight problem was the *appellation* of the product. A public analyst in Liverpool had examined Mr. Landau's product and decided that it was 'whisky', but the relevant Customs and Excise Act lays down details of how 'whisky' should be made rather than defining its constitution. Mr. Landau had solved the problem of a name for his Manx 'whisky' by calling it *Glen Kella* after the site of his plant.

Colonel Porter had decided to call his product *Uisge Beatha*, a name which recalled the original do-it-yourself aspect of Scotch whisky and evaded the description sat down on paper by officialdom. As he had no intention of paying either excise duty or VAT on his product, reductions in processing costs represented increased profits.

Inevitably, during his vodka manufacturing days, the Colonel had made contact with several of the army's private enterprise groups – teams like McAndrew's, which supplemented their pay by disposing of surplus stores and dutiable items like cigarettes and drink.

News of a source of top quality vodka at very competitive prices had spread from group to group. Someone had suggested that Colonel Porter be invited to take part in *Operation Life-Preserver*, the scheme designed

to secure a base of operations right inside the Ministry of Defence's protective umbrella. Others had disagreed on the grounds that Porter was an officer and therefore one of the enemy and not fitting company for decent NCOs.

Sergeant, later Colonel, Hector Blackshaw had investigated his background and discovered that Dan Porter was a civilian in uniform rather than a 'proper' officer. As his soul was demonstrably as black as anyone else's, the Colonel had been invited to become an associate member of the operation.

Colonel Porter had survived the shock of the invitation and entered their ranks eagerly. The idea of the Armed Services being used to make money, rather than to satisfy political whims, had appealed greatly to him. A generous donation from his profits to Life-Preserver's Subversion Fund had sealed his acceptance.

His business had boomed as more and more markets had opened to him, and now that his whisky-making project was approaching completion, Major McAndrew had produced a genius in the dusky shape of Lieutenant James Spinner to bring it to perfection.

The Colonel had persuaded Spinner to stay at AT-17 for at least a week by the end of lunch. McAndrew and the others were expecting Spinner to transfer himself to the Uisge Beatha factory on a permanent basis eventually. It was the logical posting for a self-made expert on whisky blending. After the meal, and back on the XSP Level, Colonel Porter led the visitors to the right from the lift, and through yet another security filter.

"Why not have just one security post? Right in front of the lifts?" asked Captain Fairclough when the door had risen into the ceiling and closed behind them. "Surely it would make life simpler and be just as effective?"

"A very good question," said Porter. "But this place was designed by experts who cultivate galloping paranoia and throw logic out of the window. Their idea was that in the event of an attack by someone, they never said just who, each level, even each half-level, will have to be assaulted individually. All of which will take time and allow our side to do something to neutralize them.

"If we had just one security post at ground level, our theoretical enemy would only have to capture it to place the whole complex at his mercy. If they were quick enough, they'd be able to steal all our secrets and sneak away before reinforcements could arrive to rescue us."

"How often do these bad guys attack you?" asked Lieutenant Birky in a sceptical tone.

"Not too often, I admit," smiled the Colonel. "Well, not ever. But we do have the odd exercise. They sent the SAS against us once. A couple of them managed to grab a hostage and get into a lift. But they got stuck in a security filter."

"Have you never thought of doing anything about it?" McAndrew asked. "I know I'd find it a real bother."

"After living with the system for fifteen years, I hardly notice it any more," said the Colonel. "Passing through security checks wherever I go is as natural as brushing my teeth. I only really become aware of it when I'm with visitors and they mention it. And we do have all these security personnel assigned to us, They have to do something all day to stop them getting fat and lazy."

"I see you run the checkpoint on this side remotely from the other post," commented Fairclough.

"A small concession to productivity," smiled the Colonel. "As for doing something about the inconvenience, I have, in an indirect sort of way. What goes on in this place won't be my problem much longer. I'm preparing for a move to more pleasant surroundings."

"Where to?" invited Spinner.

"When you decide the production process is as close to perfection as humanly possible," said the Colonel, "my people will be moving to our distillery in Scotland. After all, where else could one make synthetic Scotch?"

"What d'you make it from?" asked Lieutenant Birky. "Or will I be sorry I asked?"

"Traditional ingredients," returned the Colonel. "Malted barley, plus unmalted barley and maize for the grain whisky. Add to the list Scottish water, Scottish air, peat smoke and the long years of experience of a dedicated staff. We only help Nature along in the final, maturation stage, you know. Of course, what we'd really like to market is our own single malt. If we can make a drinkable and consistent brew, the export market is wide open for that line, if the price is right. Well, what do you think of it?"

The right hand side of the level had been divided into just two laboratories. The visitors had been taken to the farther one. Their first impression was one of pipes, pumps and a cutting pong of alcoholic

substances. Red NO SMOKING signs decorated the glass and tiled walls of the laboratory. A platoon of blue twenty-litre drums bearing white code markings stood to attention against the back and left-hand walls. Everything looked very scientific and official. Only the smell gave the game away.

To a background of chugging pumps, Colonel Porter launched into a brief sketch of what happened when raw spirit made its journey through a spider web of pipes into the treatment columns. These were the heart of the process, an uninspiring collection of stainless steel baby drainpipes, in which mysterious chemical reactions took place.

A pair of technicians, one in a white coat and the other wearing a pale yellow shirt and jeans, prowled around the apparatus, shooting curious glances at the visitors. They displayed a studied air of casual professionalism. Following a well-established rhythm, they noted pressure readings, checked pump settings and flow rates, and kept an eye on temperatures. Every so often, they took samples from various parts of the apparatus for later analysis.

The tour of inspection over, Colonel Porter took the visitors into the adjoining laboratory, out of the technicians' way.

"We don't pretend to understand fully all that goes on inside the plant," he continued. "I doubt anyone ever will. Nevertheless, we'll be quite happy with a process that works and turns out a reasonably consistent product. Here are samples of the processed batches."

He gestured to a row of about fifty bottles, all containing colourless or very pale-yellow liquid. "The ones at this end contain a harmless colouring agent. Perhaps James would care to try them? There are glasses in a box in the cupboard under the bench."

The others watched in silence as Spinner set a glass in front of each half-pint bottle and poured a generous tot into each glass. Birky started at the other end to speed things up. Spinner swirled the glasses to release the bouquet and inhaled deeply. He tasted the liquid then he spat it into a pink polythene bucket. He rinsed his mouth out with water between each glass. He pushed some bottles away with a grimace. Others seemed more acceptable. By the time he had reached glass number 52, he had selected half a dozen of the samples as worthy of a second investigation.

"We could use these five straight away," was his final decision. "There are about nine or ten others that are almost there, but they're still a bit on

the rough side.” He pointed them out. “These two are more or less the same. Are they meant to be like that?” He indicated bottles 18 and 39.

Colonel Porter consulted a list. “That’s good. Yes, Batch Thirty-nine was a repeat of the conditions used for Batch Eighteen, but about three months later. It’s nice to know the expert confirms our conditions are reproducible.”

“This one’s not bad,” Spinner concluded. “It’s almost good enough to sell as your single malt.”

Lieutenant Birky appropriated a glass to give Spinner’s opinion an independent check.

“In that case, we’re just about in business, wouldn’t you say?” suggested Colonel Porter.

“More or less,” agreed Spinner.

The party adjourned to Colonel Porter’s office, which meant passing through both security filters to get to the other side of the level. The Colonel set in motion the machinery that would provide Lieutenant Spinner with a security pass. He seemed quite surprised to hear that the blending expert had packed for a stay of about a week.

The others left in the middle of the afternoon. Colonel Porter touched the ‘MEC’ panel in the lift.

“What’s Mec?” asked Birky after a pause for thought. He had failed to find an obvious solution.

“Remember the name of this place? Before we took it over?” said Colonel Porter, answering a question with a question.

“It was Marquham Engineering C.” Spinner’s wonderful memory trotted out the information. “Is that the original wartime camouflage on some of your buildings?”

“It makes us almost buildings of historical interest,” said the Colonel.

They reached the surface and Spinner claimed a large suitcase from the hired car. McAndrew filled the gap with his case. He was going part of the way home with Fairclough and Birky, who had packed in vain.

Emerging from the gloomy building into brilliant afternoon sunshine was a strange experience. The visitors were used to subterranean hideaways like the Office, a converted ammunition store at the RASC supply depot at East Saltby, their former home, and Captain Jack Medder’s Bunker Hotel at Buddford. Even so, the sheer size of Colonel Porter’s underground skyscraper, if the number of control panels in the lift could be believed,

made then feel as though they had been half way to Australia.

Birky shot down the access road, making AT-17 dwindle rapidly in the distance. Farmers and their helpers were busy with various harvest tasks in some of the surrounding fields. Their work looked very hot and dusty. "Do they grow barley round here?" wondered Birky.

His companions made noises of ignorance, not sure that they would recognize barley if Birky drove through a field of it.

"I wonder if that lot have the slightest idea what strange things go on right under their noses," commented Fairclough.

"Maybe it's just as well they don't," decided McAndrew.

The group surrendered the hire car in York and took a taxi out to a private airfield near the city. Their driver looked as though he was itching to ask what their mission was, but he contented himself with making general conversation. Soldiers in uniform, officers and lesser beings, had become a rare sight. The military had taken to travelling disguised as civilians.

McAndrew left for London the following morning, driving a car which was Ministry of Defence property but sub-let to the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit. He had some business to sort out before he returned to his fishing. Fairclough and Birky invited themselves over to the REME depot at Buddford in Somerset, the home of Captain Jack Medder, in search of a change of scenery.

Fairclough soon realized that Birky and their host were much better acquainted than he had thought. When questioned, the two Londoners admitted that they had formed an unholy alliance during one of the parties at the time of the first *Operation Life-Preserver* conference.

Their joint exploits included almost getting arrested for bombarding a police car with snowballs from the roof of the Reynolds Hotel in the coastal town of Saltby. They had made their escape by climbing down a drainpipe and in at somebody's window when the police had climbed up to the roof and attempted a flanking assault. Medder admitted that, had he been sober, he would have allowed himself to be arrested rather than risk swanning around on the side of a building from six storeys up. Fairclough could see his point.

The group's naval recruit, Lieutenant Hank Newton, seemed quite unaffected by the restless mood of his colleagues, but he had a golf course in fine weather to keep him occupied. Newton knew that Major

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

McAndrew was plotting something, and that McAndrew would bring the group to action stations when the time was right. In the meantime, Hank Newton was content to look after the club, do battle with the Bellside cats when they joined in his sessions on the putting green, and just wait for something to happen.

15. COWBOY TIME

Lieutenant Spinner's week at AT-17 extended into a fortnight. Captain Fairclough and Lieutenant Birky returned from their holiday in Somerset in nice time to take a telephone call from darkest Yorkshire. Spinner was coming back to the Bellside to pack, ready for the move to Colonel Porter's distillery in Scotland. The club's cellars still contained a generous selection of packing cases, which the group had used during the move from their previous base in East Salty.

His companions allowed Spinner to strip his rooms of clothes and personal possessions and get most of his portables boxed up, then they insisted that he stopped dashing about long enough to deliver a progress report.

They tested, appropriately enough, a sample bottle of Uisge Beatha. Spinner had brought them a case of the magic fluid. Colonel Porter had declared the development stage of the project completed. Spinner had signed on as Chief Blender and Quality Control Officer. He had found himself the ideal niche for his talents, just like Hank Newton, the demon golfer.

"Well, Spin," said Fairclough, "we're sorry to see you go. The place won't be the same without you."

"I'll probably miss your ugly mugs too," admitted Spinner.

Birky offered him a handkerchief.

"What's that for?" added Spinner suspiciously.

"Thought you might want a cry," grinned Birky.

"Very funny!" scoffed Spinner. "Yeah, it seems strange leaving this place now I've got used to it. It's not exactly just another posting. But that's the Army for you. Plenty of travel to foreign countries – like Scotland. And like Mac says, there's some chances you just don't want to pass up on."

"I think we'll just about manage without you. If you keep on sending us

samples,” grinned Birky, helping himself to another drink.

“You look like you need some porridge more than that stuff. Build you up a bit,” retorted Spinner. “Anyway, I’d better get off. My driver’s a bit of a bolshy sod.”

“Hark at him!” scoffed Birky. “Ow many weeks have you been a bleedin’ orficer?”

“Say hello to Mac for me next time you see him,” continued Spinner. “Why don’t you come up to Haggisland and have a look round? I’ll give you a ring in a few days to fix it up. What’s that you got there, Hank?”

Lieutenant Newton returned from the dumb waiter. “Thought you might like some lunch for the trip. A flask of the good coffee and a slab of the special veal and ham pie. And some buttered rolls.”

“Cheers! It’s a long drag up there,” approved Spinner.

Four packing cases travelled down to the ground floor in the lift and exited through the back door to be loaded onto a dark green lorry. The attitude of Spinner’s driver hovered on the border of dumb insolence. It never became clear whether he disliked officers in general or Black officers in particular. Fortunately, the drive to the airfield was relatively short.

The group shook hands and exchanged farewells. The lorry rushed away towards the main road. The remaining Bellsiders headed for the collection of tables on the dining room terrace. It was lunchtime. A trip to Scotland and a guided tour of a distillery filled their thoughts – but fate had other plans for them.

Three days after Spinner’s departure, Captain Fairclough answered a summons to the telephone and found himself having to cancel an assumption. The call had come from the south-west of England, not Scotland as he had expected. Captain Jack Medder was calling from his Bunker at REME, Buddford.

“Hello, is that you, Art?” asked a voice an accent which had developed in the same part of London as Lieutenant Birky’s. “Good! How would you like a bit of fun for a while?”

“What d’you have in mind, Jack?” invited Fairclough, waving to Birky to tell him to abandon the racing on the television and pick up an extension.

“I need a couple of blokes who aren’t known in these parts to front this deal I’ve got cooking,” explained Medder. “How are you fixed?”

“Say no more,” said Birky before Fairclough could open his mouth.

"We'll do it. There's sod all going on round here."

"Looks like I've had my mind made up for me," said Fairclough. "Do we get a hint on what it's about? Or are you going to do a Mac on us and keep it a deep, dark secret?"

"That's an idea," chuckled Medder. "No, the thing is, we're making a film – or part of one. Tell you all about it when you get here. There's a chopper on the way. It should get to your place in about forty minutes. I phoned the Raf first. I was that sure you'd be interested."

"How long should we pack for?" Fairclough asked.

"Well, that's up to you," replied Medder. "We'll need you today and tomorrow at the very least. After that, we've got a lot of things to get ready. You can either hang on here for a week or so, or wander back to the Bellside. Shooting ought to take about a fortnight, depending on what the weather does to us. That's what the Yanks reckon, anyway."

"Yanks? What Yanks?" asked Birky.

"He can tell us later," Fairclough decided. "We'll probably inflict ourselves on you for the whole three weeks, Jack," he added to Medder. "As my friend here has told you, there's nothing much going on in Sussex right now."

"Fair enough, if you'll pardon the expression," chuckled Medder. "See you later. Cheers!"

"Cheers, Jack," replied the Bellsiders in chorus.

"How about that!" said Fairclough. "He didn't mention anything about a film to me when we were at his place. How about you?"

"Not a whisper." Birky shrugged. "The idea must have come to him sudden, like. Well, we'd better get packed before that chopper gets here." He launched himself from his armchair as if driven by a catapult and headed for his suite of rooms at the southern end of the club's west wing.

Captain Fairclough followed at a more leisurely pace.

The arrival of a helicopter at the Bellside was no sort of a special occasion. Air-taxis were a common sight. Some people, however, could do without them.

"We're thinking about putting something about choppers in the rules for the golf course," remarked Hank Newton as he walked with Fairclough and Birky to the waiting helicopter. "You're allowed to vary the standard rules for special local conditions, But we have to figure out some way to stop

people abusing a special rule. The trouble is, anyone who makes a duff shot these days usually has a quick look round for a passing chopper to blame his clumsiness on."

"You could try selling ear muffs in the golf shop," suggested Birky. "They'll shut the noise out. And keep your ears warm when the cold weather comes."

"You'd not be able to hear someone shouting *Fore!*" Fairclough pointed out.

Birky shrugged. "You can't have everything."

A figure in an RAF blue flying suit took charge of the luggage. Fairclough and Birky were wearing civilian clothing beneath their green flying suits. They strapped themselves into their seats and waved to Newton. Rotors began to turn, faster and faster. The helicopter lurched into the air and crabbed in a southerly direction, steering well clear of the golf course.

The helicopter landed at RAF Milaston a little after 13:00 hours. Captain Medder was waiting for them on the platform when Fairclough and Birky stepped out of the private tube train, which linked Milaston and Buddford. He took them straight to their rooms in the hotel section of his forgotten wartime control centre, and issued them with maps of the maze of corridors behind the communal area. The visitors handed back their maps immediately, admitting sheepishly that they had forgotten to return the ones issued on their last visit.

Medder shook his head in mock reproof. "You can't trust anyone these days. So much for our security plans. We print so many of these, any spy that breaks in here is bound to be able to find his way around. I'll leave you to unpack. Lunch in ten minutes. You should know the way by now."

The dining area was one of five colour-coded zones in a hall that was forty feet wide by thirty deep. It had once contained a double row of offices. Removing the partition walls had created the large, open space. Pastel green walls and a brighter carpet defined the games area with its billiards and pool tables, and the inevitable dart boards.

Panelled walls and a shoulder-high privacy partition made brown the natural colour for the office area. Rows of blue chairs faced the screen in the cinema, which could also project television pictures and videos. Reproduction antique furniture of military uniformity in the yellow dining area contrasted with the twelve-piece suite in the bar. Every chair there was

a shade of orange, but no two were the same in style. The hall had looked rather odd at first but Fairclough and Birky were used to its disparities now.

Lunch featured thick steak sandwiches, served with either red wine of uncertain ancestry or draught beer. The wine had been transferred to decanters but the visitors knew that it had made the journey from France through unofficial channels, which eliminated middle-men such as the minions of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise Department. Chips were also available for the benefit of those who considered no meal complete without them. After small-talk over the food, Medder and his guests moved round to the bar and got down to business.

"It all started the day after you left," began Medder. "Me and another bloke was driving home after a business deal when we come across this geezer waving his arms in the middle of the road. So we stop. It was either that or run him over. And he says: 'Can you-all give us a hand, like?' He was a Yank, you see."

"Do they all talk like that, Jack?" grinned Birky.

"Cheeky sod," returned Medder without interrupting his flow. "Anyway, we drive round the corner and there's this car with its nose in a ditch. And there's this old pot with a cowboy hat and cowboy boots, leaning against it and looking dead bloody miserable. Prob'ly wishing he'd got his horse with him. So we tow the car out of the ditch and the Yanks are chuffed to buggery 'coz they'd been stranded there about an hour."

"That's about the stage when you think, 'Shall we try walking to the next village because no bugger's ever going to come down this road ever again,'" decided Fairclough. "Or you think, 'Have we waited so long someone's bound to come along any minute?'"

"Yeah, that was these problem with the Yanks," grinned Medder. "I reckon they were about ready to kip down in the car for the night. They didn't know there's a pub about a mile further on. Anyway, the cowboy gives us a fiver each, along with some spiel about what a pity it is our once great country has gone right down the tubes.

"We was so surprised, we took the money at first. Then we had to tell him officers in the British Army aren't allowed to take money from civvies for pulling them out of the muck, that being part of our job, like. So the cowboy says he has to buy us a drink, and asks how far it is to Princetown. Billy, the bloke with me, tells him it's over fifty miles.

"'Jesus!' says the cowboy in this funny, sort of squeaky voice, 'I didn't

know your Dart Moor,’ – that’s what he called it, Dart Moor, two words – ‘I didn’t know your Dart Moor was so big.’

“So we have a bit of a grin and Billy tells him he’s on bloody Exmoor, not his famous Dart Moor. The other Yank had a map, so we showed them where they was and where they want to get to. Then the cowboy has a go at his mate, telling him what a rotten navigator he is. And his mate has a go back at him, telling the cowboy he’s a bleedin’ cameraman, not a navigator. And anyway, it’s not his fault if one bit of moorland looks just like any other bit. So that’s when me and Billy start wondering just who these buggers are.”

“Commercial instinct,” remarked Fairclough.

“If that means a nose for dosh, dead right,” said Medder. “So anyway, when the Yanks run out of steam, we tell them about the pub down the road and we all shoot off for a drink. The cowboy orders pints all round, then, while we’re waiting for them to come, he starts going on about warm British beer and how he always has to put ice in his to make it drinkable.

“Well, we know the landlord at the ‘Hunt’, so Billy had a quiet word with him. And old Bert slips the Yank a pint of really ice-cold lager in a warm pot. So he shovels in some ice cubes and starts to pour it down his neck. Nearly froze his bloody self to death! He’s not a bad old geezer, though. Saw the joke in the end. He even bought the landlord a pint. When he got his voice back.

“So then we got talking about why he was looking for Dart Moor. Harve, that’s the cowboy with the squeaky voice, he reckons he’s making a film about a non-nuclear war in Europe. He was trying to find Dart Moor to get permission to do some shooting on the Army tank ranges. He got quite peeved when we told him it’s not that easy, and he’d need permission from the Ministry of Defence, which he prob’ly wouldn’t get anyway.

“Then he says, ‘In that case I don’t reckon they’d let us have the tanks either.’ So I ask him, ‘Wot tanks?’

“All he wants to do is borrow about forty tanks and a company of infantry for extras! Forty bloody tanks! Not to mention the other bits and pieces. Billy starts to tell him no chance, but I’ve got the old brain ticking over by then. So I stick an elbow in Billy’s ribs to tell him to shut up and I tell the Yank he *might* get some of what he wants if he’s dead lucky, but he has to go about it the right way.

“Well, this doesn’t bother him. Oh, no. He starts looking quite happy

then. Back-handers is something yer Yanks know all about. 'Back-handers,' I tell him!" Captain Medder tried for a shocked and indignant expression. "'The British Army doesn't take back-handers, squire. It's all a matter of approach and going through the proper channels.'

"So he starts looking a bit doubtful. Then I show him my ID card that says I'm an inspector for the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit of the Ministry of Defence. I tell him we can't promise anything but if he hangs about for a few days, I might have some good news for him. If I can get in touch with the right *cheps* at the MoD."

"Where are these Yanks now?" asked Captain Fairclough.

"I got them a couple of rooms at the Buddford Arms," grinned Medder. He and his group owned the pub. "After all, if your country's gone down the tubes, we need all the dollars the Yanks can chuck our way. They've been hanging over fences, looking at possible locations since then. And running up bloody huge phone bills with calls to the States."

"Okay, so how do we fit in?" inquired Lieutenant Birky.

"We, I suspect, will be the bearers of good news, right?" answered Captain Fairclough.

"Right in one," nodded Medder. "I've been on the blower to Hector Blackshaw at CSSSU and he reckons he can fix it up for us to co-operate with a film unit to make scenes for a NATO training film."

"So why do you need us?" frowned Birky.

"Hang about," said Medder patiently. "My CO got a big enough shock when I came out of my closet and he found out I'm really an inspector for the CSSSU and a Captain, not a miserable little Corporal. He can believe I'm authorized to count nuts and bolts, and tanks even. But he might start getting suspicious if I start dragging film crews around. All right, so we can handle awkward questions, but it's best if no one asks any."

"Hence the two brand new faces with impeccable MoD credentials," nodded Fairclough.

"Right!" agreed Medder. "I've told Harve the Army can't be seen lending out tanks, but it can all be done under this NATO film cover story if he can pay the full, economical price for hiring the tanks and his 'extras'."

"You know, Jack," mused Fairclough, "this is exactly what we set up *Operation Life Preserver* to achieve. Allowing anyone who can afford the price to use our expensive equipment."

"And us making a profit out of it," grinned Medder.

"Oh, of course," said Fairclough. "And Harve is swallowing all this on the strength of your word and a Ministry of Defence ID card, which he couldn't recognize as a forgery if it was?"

"I've not asked him for any money yet," grinned Medder. "And he's going to meet the men from the Ministry in my CO's office, which should prove we're on the up and up. We've got that pencilled in for this afternoon, when your orders come through. I've already got things moving as far as the tanks go. We've got to make up some dummy bodies. Harve wants mainly Russian and Yank tanks. With one or two British and German ones thrown in for good luck."

"What, the Yanks are going to win World War Three for us as well?" scoffed Birky.

"Something like that," laughed Medder. "We've got to build tank shells he can blow up too. That's going to take a day or to. And getting hold of the rest of the tanks takes time. We've only got about half a dozen in here for repairs."

"I always wanted a go in a tank," mused Birky.

"You should join the Army," remarked Fairclough.

"I'll see what I can do," Medder promised. "But if you bend it, you'll bloody well have to pay for it."

"I mean a real one, not a cardboard one," scoffed Birky.

"What about the infantry?" asked Fairclough.

"There's quite a few bodies lounging about here," said Medder. "And we've got some Territorials coming for a week's training. They can spend a couple of days running around for Harve. Shouldn't think they'll notice the difference. And we've got to knock up some cheap but convincing anti-tank missiles. They're a bit too expensive to use in the numbers he wants."

"That why you've roped in an expert at making bangs?" said Birky, glancing at Fairclough.

"Yes, we've got an opening for an explosives expert," nodded Medder. "And we'll need you to keep an eye on Harve, Knocker. His film crew know they're working for him. We'll need someone to remind Harve he's working for NATO."

The orders for Fairclough and Birky arrived at Milaston, dropped off by a passing RAF Phantom on a navigational training exercise. They also

acquired new identity cards, which alleged that Captain Greene and Lieutenant Browne were attached to the Ministry of Defence while failing to specify in which capacity.

Captain Medder's guests ran a clothes brush over their expensive suits, then they took the other tube train from the Bunker Hotel to the station beneath Buddford Autos, the garage next door to the Buddford Arms. A car with a Ministry of Defence registration plate was waiting for them in the repair shop. Heavy traffic on the main road through Buddford extended their journey back to the REME depot to a six-minute drive.

The CO received his very important visitors cordially, having been given adequate warning of their arrival. Colonel Thomas insisted on providing them with drinks before settling down to glance through their orders. His easy smile became a trifle strained when Fairclough asked him where he could find Captain Medder, explaining that Medder's Special Operations Group would take charge of modifications to the exteriors of the tanks.

The directions were simple enough. Then the colonel added a note of warning. "I think you should know that Corporal, er, Captain Medder isn't always the easiest person to find," The colonel blew a stream of pipe smoke at a passing fly, then added in an apologetic tone, "His comings and goings are erratic, to say the least. I suppose you know what he does?" The colonel was fishing for information.

"I believe he's with CSSSU," returned Fairclough, using the initials with the confidence of someone who knew what they meant and not giving much away. "The sort of chap who'll know where to lay his hands on everything the film people will need."

"Ah, yes," said Colonel Thomas thoughtfully.

When Corporal Medder and his cronies had been revealed as members of a Ministry of Defence statistical unit, the depot's personnel had assumed that they were spies, watching for the slightest misuse of official property. A state of guilt multiplied by galloping paranoia had been quite normal for the depot's staff for the last ten weeks and they had tended to steer well clear of Medder's Special Operations Compound.

The arrival of Captain Greene and Lieutenant Browne, however, had thrown new light on Medder's status. Colonel Thomas began to see him more as a keeper of records – a pen-pusher rather than a detective – which made him an entirely less dangerous being. The colonel made a mental note to be slightly more friendly with Medder in the mess, just to

prove to the rest of his staff that he wasn't afraid of a book-keeper.

"Right, shall we make a move?" Fairclough said to Birky, having begun a campaign to take some of the tension out of the air at Buddford. Medder and his cronies had enjoyed being treated as beings with vast if undefined powers for a time, but life had to return to normal if they were to get on with their money-making activities.

Medder's enclave looked like a carpenter's workshop and smelled like a paint factory. Five tanks were being converted simultaneously. White American stars gazed coolly at the blood-red of Soviet stars. Fairclough and Birky deposited their borrowed car next to Medder's parking space and left it in the lap of the Gods whether the vehicle would be painted along with everything else in sight. Then they took the lift down to the Bunker, in search of their host.

Jack Medder was using a mini-computer to make plans and to keep track of costs so that he could present an accurate bill to the film maker. Fairclough and Birky joined him in his oak-panelled office deep underground.

"One thing's occurred to me," remarked Fairclough as Medder gave a grunt of satisfaction and switched the computer off. "What do we call these Yanks? I don't think they'd appreciate 'Hey, you!'"

"Didn't I tell you their names?" frowned Medder.

"The cowboy's called Harve," offered Birky.

"Yeah. What's the rest of his name?" wondered Medder. "I've got so used to calling him just Harve. It's Harvey Wall-something."

"Wallbanger?" suggested Birky.

"Walenski, that's it," Medder recalled. "And the cameraman is Joe Peterssen. But they'll want you to call them Harve and Joe. They're a pretty casual pair. They'll be here in about half an hour. You'd better get ready."

Changed into their uniforms, Fairclough and Birky no longer looked out of place in an army camp. They travelled back to the REME depot on the private Tube train. Harve and Joe arrived by appointment at Buddford's main gate. They were escorted to the CO's office, and then on to the Officers' Mess.

Medder and his guests accepted cups of afternoon coffee and biscuits and remained discreetly in the background until Colonel Thomas had

finished a story about his days with the British Army of the Rhine. The mess steward looked on in surprise when the Colonel spoke to Medder in a relaxed, if not affable, fashion, wondering why the Old Man was no longer afraid of the super-spy.

Introductions over, Colonel Thomas made his excuses and returned to his mountain of paperwork. Medder piloted his guests to a secluded corner and asked Harve how the NATO cover story was standing up. As anticipated, the magic word, coupled with the right pieces of paper, was opening doors satisfactorily. Joe, however, was a little disappointed that he wasn't expected to parade in US army uniform. He was something of a uniform freak.

After coffee, the group had a look at the work in progress in the Special Operations Compound, then they retired to Medder's office at ground level for further discussions. Harve, the director of the film, seemed a decent sort of a bloke, even if his peculiar, whining accent did tend to grate at first. His only defect seemed to be an unconscious compulsion to call all soldiers in uniform 'General' – whether they were privates, corporals, captains or colonels.

In fact, Harve turned out to be more important than Medder had thought at first. As well as being the director and advance guard of the unit – which intended to use videotape, not film – he was also the writer and producer of the epic, and also the paymaster. His lack of previous experience in the film and video businesses seemed not to bother him over much.

Harve, it emerged over ice-cold lager for the Americans and more drinkable bitter for the Brits, had been born rich and he had worked hard for many years to become richer still. He had acquired control of an impressive chain of companies and saddled himself along the way with a depressing string of ex-wives with greedy lawyers.

Harve had imagined for a while that he had fulfilled the American Dream. Everyone else thought that he had everything that man could wish for. Three days before his forty-ninth birthday, he found that all he had was just an illusion. A sequence of heart attacks brought his world shuddering to an abrupt halt.

Recovering from by-pass surgery in his own company's private hospital, Harve had time to assess the quality of his possessions as well as their quantity. He was rich in belongings but poor in experiences. His visitors –

ex-wives, children, assorted relatives and minions – all gave him the impression that they had come to see him because they were anxious to remain on the gravy train if he lived, or to make sure that they got a mention in his will before he kicked that great bucket in the sky.

Harve made the distressing discovery that he was a lonely man. He had no real friends – people who would drop in for a chat because they enjoyed his company, people who would take pleasure in his recovery because they thought that Harve Walenski was a nice guy.

Harve was forced to confront the unpleasant truth that his sole function in life was to provide a river of money to keep a tribe of people, whom he didn't particularly like and vice versa, in goodies. From a purely personal point of view, he was getting a very close approximation to bugger all out of the deal.

Phoenix-like, a new Harve emerged from the hospital. He became Harve the anything-he-goddam-wanted-to-be-man who was determined to fulfill all of the ambitions and dreams which he had subordinated to money-making.

Of course, he had to be very discreet about his change of lifestyle. He had to ensure that his relatives didn't buy themselves a couple of shrinks and order their crooked lawyers to consign him to the funny farm. But his business empire generated enough millions of dollars to keep everyone happy, and Harve had made damn sure that his grasping relatives had never managed to assemble an accurate picture of his holdings.

Whenever he felt slightly down, he could always cheer himself up by trying to picture the expressions on the faces of his clan of hangers-on when the vultures gathered after his funeral and discovered just how much gravy had leaked away through an unsuspected hole in the plate.

Now, within striking range of Exmoor as the leaves were tumbling from the trees in mid-autumn, he was Harve the Film Maker, the successor to Harve the Railroad Engineer, who had spent an agreeable summer vacation and enormous sums of money in the company of a private railway society in rural Wales.

Harve and Joe returned to the Buddford Arms blessing their chance encounter with Captain Medder when they had been forty miles lost. Harve kept wondering when he would be asked for an advance payment to be made out to something that sounded like an official account. He couldn't understand what Medder and the others would get out of the deal if the

money was going to the Ministry of Defence.

But he didn't know that a reasonable profit would be built into his account, and that when Colonel Blackshaw had subtracted the army's share, the rest would go to his willing helpers. He had never before come across a unit of a European country's armed forces which was run for the benefit of the unit's members.

16. SHOW ON THE ROAD

Captain Fairclough and Lieutenant Birky paid a visit to Milaston in the Ministry of Defence car the following day. They returned to Buddford with a promise that five helicopters would be made available to the film unit – to be used for transport and as camera positions. The CO had made the small condition that he and his wife were to be invited to watch part of the filming but, as he had been expecting to obtain the use of only four helicopters, Fairclough was well satisfied with the deal. A platoon of men of the RAF Regiment joined the list, thrown in for good measure to be Russians.

Back at Buddford, Captain Greene and Lieutenant Browne had to wait outside the REME depot until a fleet of tank transporters bearing white and red-starred tanks had crawled onto the by-pass to begin their journey to the tank range on Dartmoor. The upraised gun barrels seemed to be giving Roman salutes as the tanks trundled past. On the other side of the dual carriageway, the traffic had slowed right down to allow drivers and their passengers a longer eyeful of the spectacle.

Fairclough wondered how many wartime memories and downright lies would be evoked by the sight of the tanks on the march – stories to be dragged out, dusted down and paraded once more before fresh audiences.

A generation of fathers, who had grown up after the abolition of National Service, would have to admit to their offspring that they had never actually seen the inside of a tank – except on television or on a cinema screen. *Yomping* paratroopers and *viffing* Harriers had become the modern combatants. Tanks were almost dinosaurs.

Captain Medder was glad to see his colleagues again. Things were happening at an accelerating pace. Medder and his cronies were in danger of being submerged by the mass of materiel that was pouring into the

Special Operations Compound.

"Bloody hell, it's all go, innit?" said Medder, wiping his dripping brow with a large, blue handkerchief.

Just as businessmen have a *natural* and a *telephone* voice, Medder 'pushed up' when talking to strangers and other officers at the depot, but he relaxed in the presence of his friends. An echo of summer in mid-October had raised the temperature to the mid-sixties and made working out in the sun a sweaty business.

"We're okay," grinned Birky. "You should get yourself air-conditioned, Jack, like the car."

"That's an idea," said Medder, fanning himself with a clipboard. "Everything go okay at Milaston?"

"Better than just okay," said Birky.

"That's right," agreed Fairclough. "We got an extra chopper and a promise of some Rock Apes to be the enemy."

"Great! We should be all right for bodies now," approved Medder. "How d'you fancy shooting off to the tank, range to get things tied down before they arrive?"

"Do they know the tanks are coming, or did you just send them?" grinned Fairclough.

"I phoned them this morning," said Medder, trying to look indignant. "But they need the paperwork to make it official. It's in the office."

"I think that's a good idea," Fairclough decided, stepping out of the way of two men carrying a gun barrel on their shoulders. "A bloke could get flattened hanging round here."

"Not if you've got eyes in the back of your head," grinned Medder. "The bloke to see at Dart Moor is a Lieutenant Gordon. He sounded a bit of a deadleg on the phone, so give him a boot up the Arsenal if he needs one. We can't afford people dragging their feet on this job."

"We'd better fill the car up with gas," decided Birky.

"Oh, that's much too slow for the modern Army, Knocker," said Medder scornfully. "Tommy Doran's coming over in a chopper in about twenty minutes."

"Just enough time for a quick cough and a drag," remarked Birky.

"Or whatever," added Medder. "Brew's on in the office over there, if you're interested." He hurried away to take care of some vital matter.

"You know," Fairclough remarked as he and Birky threaded their way

through the confusion in the direction of the building that Medder had indicated, "by the time we've waited here for Tommy, flying isn't going to be that much faster than by car."

"Aye, lad," Birky said in an exaggerated Lancashire accent, which was supposed to mimic Fairclough's, "but at least we'll have had us tea."

A wooden counter bisected the office. Birky waved to Joe, who was skulking on the other side, taking refuge from the chaos that his boss had unleashed.. Fairclough and Birky ducked under the flap to join him, catching the eye of a harassed corporal, who was arguing with a lorry driver about where he was to unload his cargo.

"Oi! You two! Bugger off out of it!" shouted the corporal, catching a glimpse of two invading shapes. Then he saw the pips on the shoulder tabs of the dark green jerseys. "Oh! Sorry, sirs!" His face flamed and he ran out of things to say.

"Carry on, Corporal," Birky drawled in his 'poshed up' voice. "Take no notice of us."

The corporal recovered some of his poise and glared at the driver, daring him to laugh or display the slightest trace of a grin. The driver wisely maintained a poker face and retreated as soon as possible to tell his mates what an idiot their old enemy had made of himself.

Rather reluctantly, the corporal made a note on a clipboard then turned to face the visitors, shuffling his feet. Fairclough looked up from his tea. The corporal raced to attention and his right hand jerked as if it couldn't make up its mind whether or not to salute. After all, the lieutenant had told him to ignore the intruders.

Captain Fairclough solved his problem by putting his uniform cap on the table and pushing a chair in the corporal's direction with his foot. The corporal sat down uncertainly and topped up an enamel mug which was decorated with two thick, white stripes. The teapot was also a corporal.

You never know where you are with the officers in this place, the corporal reflected. Some of them are right bastards. Some of them don't know no better. And some of them were corporals until a couple of months ago, when we found out they're really vampires from the Ministry of Defence.

'All officers are to be treated as inhuman bastards until experience proves otherwise.' One of his colleagues had summed up their feelings accurately, and provided the Corporals' Mess with an unofficial motto,

which was engraved on their hearts if it could not be displayed on the wall.

Eventually, Captain Medder stuck his head round the door and shouted, "Chopper's here!"

Fairclough and Birky finished their tea and climbed to their feet.

"Goin' somewhere?" asked Joe.

"Tank range on Dartmoor," replied Birky. They had been talking about Joe's previous experiences in the film business rather than their plans for that day. "Want to come along?"

"You betcha," nodded Joe. "It's getting a little too crowded here."

Fairclough took charge of a briefcase containing all the necessary pieces of official paper and exchanged greetings with Squadron Leader Doran as they boarded the helicopter. "What's up, Tommy?" he grinned. "Been demoted or something? Doing a humble chauffeuring job like this."

"I volunteered, old boy, strange as that may sound," replied Doran. "Gives me a chance to get acquainted with the latest model. Brand spanking new, you know." He gave the perspex cockpit canopy an affectionate pat. "This is my own, personal runabout. I'm still running it in, more or less."

Medder gave them a thumbs up and hurried away. Blasting dust across the parade ground, the helicopter slid into the air and set a south-westerly course. Joe spent the journey peering at the terrain through his camera-man's eyepiece, like an admiral reviewing his fleet through a sawn-off telescope. Doran soon caught up with the tanks and circled them a couple of times to allow Joe to take a good look at them from the air. Then he rushed on to their destination.

A lieutenant with an expression of supreme boredom on a long face 'welcomed' them to the permanent camp on the tank range. Over coffee in the Officers' Mess, he scanned the orders briefly, then sent the steward to summon his sergeant and take a cup of coffee to Squadron Leader Doran, who was doing something to the engine of his helicopter. Lieutenant Gordon radiated indifference mixed with resentment at being stuck in an out-of-the-way hole.

"Sergeant Curran will take care of you, sir," he said to Fairclough. "He knows there everything is. Practically runs the place, to hear him talk." He bestowed a tired smile on the visitors. "Excuse me a moment, please." He disappeared through the door to the left of the bar.

"He looks a proper bundle of fun," remarked Birky.

"A reg'lar riot," agreed Joe.

The Lieutenant returned, looking as hard-done-by as before. A sergeant breezed into the room and came to a semblance of attention in front of his officer. His posture was beautiful exercise in the ancient crime of dumb insolence.

"Reporting as ordered, sir!" bellowed the sergeant, as if the officers were on the other side of the parade ground. His victims winced before the sonic attack.

"We're not deaf, Curran," snapped Lieutenant Gordon. "Moderate your tone."

"No, sir," agreed the sergeant at a slightly reduced volume.

"These gentlemen are the advance party of a NATO film unit," continued Gordon. "They are to receive our fullest co-operation. Captain Greene will brief you fully later. In the meantime, we are expecting a number of tank transporters. Arrange garage space for five tanks in number two workshop. Dismiss."

"Sah!" bellowed the sergeant in his parade ground voice. He sketched a mockery of a salute and marched away, doing his best to drive his boots through the thick carpet.

Lieutenant Gordon sighed and shook his head. "Really! The quality of NCOs in today's army isn't what it used to be," he said dismally.

Fairclough, who was approaching his thirtieth birthday, decided that he had not noticed the rapid decline spotted by an officer who looked no more than twenty-two or three years old. Lieutenant Gordon, he decided, would have to go.

"How would you like a spot of leave, Gordon?" said Captain Greene, coming to a rapid decision.

"Sir?" The Weary Willie came to life for the first time.

Fairclough had pressed the right button.

"We'll be here for about three weeks. If you give Lieutenant Browne your address, we'll contact you when we're about to depart. It should be a nice break for you."

"Thank you, sir. If you're sure you can manage without me?" The question begged an affirmative answer.

"We'll do our best," smiled Fairclough. "We'll clear everything with head office."

"Ah, thank you, sir." Lieutenant Gordon failed to see the sarcasm in Fairclough's first comment in his haste to dash away to pack.

"Thank Christ for that!" said Birky with great feeling. "I wasn't looking forward to three weeks of *his* happy, smiling face."

"You said it!" agreed Joe.

"I suppose you realize this means we'll have to take over here," Fairclough told Birky.

Birky shrugged. "I don't mind. "I'm going to have a go of one of those tanks tomorrow. I've decided."

"Remind me to spend the day in the air. Come on," Fairclough finished his coffee. "Let's take a look at what this paradise has to offer."

The camp had been built astride a road, which divided it into two unequal parts. A segregation of living quarters and messes filled the smaller segment. Officers were quartered in an L-shaped building with arms of roughly equal length, which was located in one corner of the almost square area. They enjoyed an excellent view of the boundary fence and the moorland beyond. On the inward side of the building, the Officers' Mess, an office building and a grove of carefully sited trees screened them from their men. Between training courses, Lieutenant Gordon was the sole occupant of the officers' quarters.

NCOs and Other Ranks occupied one or both of two long barrack buildings, which sandwiched a canteen. The canteen trebled as the camp assembly hall and cinema, and also housed separate Corporals' and Sergeants' Messes. Sergeant Curran was the only sergeant on the strength between courses. A small holding force was deemed sufficient to mount guards to keep thieves and vagrants from pillaging the buildings or setting up home in them.

On the other side of the camp's road was a dusty expanse of cracked and oil-stained concrete. Two stores buildings slumped behind a row of hanger-like garages, which ran almost the full length of the south-western side of the compound from road to boundary fence. All of the buildings looked in need of the attention of window cleaners and several coats of paint. The only other buildings near the vast expanse of parade ground were two small, pill-box-like structures, which were the entrances to underground ammunition stores and the refuelling point.

Fairclough, Birky and Joe stepped out of the Officers' Mess onto a path which was shaded during summer mornings and afternoons by a double

row of bushy oaks, which had shed most of their coppery leaves. The grass beyond the trees seemed to be in the grip of an evil disease which had turned large patches brown, giving it a camouflaged appearance from the air

Squadron Leader Doran waved and strolled over to join the trio, coffee cup in hand.

"Fixed it, have you?" asked Birky.

"Slight blockage in an oil feed," nodded Doran. "Nothing terribly serious. Just the same, someone's going to his backside soundly kicked when I get home. I don't fancy having to dig myself out of a prang if something seizes up."

"I thought your mob's all in favour of wizard prangs, Tommy," grinned Birky.

"Only in World War Two films," returned Doran. "What are you lot up to?"

"We're on our way to have a look around," explained Fairclough. "Fancy stretching your legs?"

"No, thanks. They're quite long enough," said Doran with a straight face. The others grinned dutifully. Doran looked at his greasy hands and the black smears on his cup. "I think I'll have a wash then put my feet up till you're ready to go. I've not finished the paper yet, and this lot make damn good coffee."

"Okay, see you later," said Fairclough.

The trio turned right, along the road through the camp.

"Hey, look at that!" exclaimed Birky almost at once.

Fairclough and Joe followed the direction of his outstretched arm. A dark green, electric golf cart had just emerged from one of the garages and it was heading towards the road. A sergeant, he had to be Curran, lounged behind the steering bar. His face turned towards the visitors briefly but he continued on his course as if he had not seen them.

"Give him a whistle," ordered Fairclough.

Birky obliged with a piercing blast that caused a small flock of birds to abandon the boundary fence in terror. Sergeant Curran proceeded on his way regardless.

"I think the bugger's deaf," commented Birky.

"He's got company," said Joe, sticking a finger in the ear nearest to Birky and wagging it vigorously.

"Give him another blast," said Fairclough.

Joe covered his ears. He was a fast learner. Birky emitted another shrieking whistle. This time, he achieved his object. Sergeant Curran turned his head. Birky waved him over imperiously. The golf cart altered course and crept up the road towards the visitors.

"Either the battery's nearly flat or he's got the bloody brakes on," Birky decided.

"Yeah, he doesn't seem to be busting a gut to obey orders, does he?" agreed Joe.

"Probably lack of practice," was Captain Fairclough's opinion.

Sergeant Curran rolled to a gentle halt in front of them. After a pause, which could only have been a calculated insult, he dismounted and saluted. "Sah!" he said in an aggressively loud voice.

"A word in your ear, Sergeant," said Fairclough. He led Curran a few yards away from his companions. "I think it's very important we reach an understanding without further delay," he began in a dangerously gentle tone. "Unlike your Lieutenant Gordon, I know what it's like to be a *real* soldier. During my time in the Army, I've been shot at, spat on and shat on by a fair number of people. Most of them have lived to regret their indiscretions. Some didn't," he added with a menacing smile.

"I've forgotten more about the ways of the Army than you'll ever learn, Sergeant. I know all the tricks – I even invented some of them. Now then: I have a job to do which, I might add, will be done with or without your assistance. I don't care which. In short, either you cut the crap right now or I'll pick up a telephone. I'll have those stripes off your arm so fast you'll get whiplash. And I'll get you posted to the grottiest hell-hole the Army can find for you. You'll be out of this cushy little number before you know whether you're on your arse or your elbow."

Sergeant Curran's glazed expression of boredom had acquired a widening of fear.

"If you don't believe I can sink you without a trace," Fairclough added through a gentle smile, "if you think I might be bluffing, just try me. You'll be on your way within the hour. That's a promise. Well, the choice, my friend, is entirely yours. Shape up or ship out, as the Americans say." Fairclough raised his eyebrows in question.

"What would you like me to do first, sir?" asked the Sergeant in a throaty whisper. With a worried look on his face, he tried to adjust his casual

stance to a regulation position of attention as unobtrusively as possible. He could sense that the strange officer with the tinted glasses, which kept flashing in his eyes, didn't have to bluff. The wise man knows when to admit defeat. And the visitors would be gone in three weeks.

"That's better, Sergeant," said Fairclough through a predatory smile of encouragement. "Now, then. How many of these runabouts do you have?" He gestured towards the golf cart.

"One more in use and another nine in store, sir."

"Fine! Dig them all out and get the batteries charging if they need it. I'd like them ready for use tomorrow. Also arrange accommodation for myself and three others for tonight. We're expecting a few more people later on, but you'll hear more about that tonight. Carry on."

"Sir!" Sergeant Curran saluted smartly and doubled over to the golf cart. Trailing a minor dust cloud, he raced away to dig some bodies out of the canteen to assist with the preparations, and to warn his cronies about the bunch of regimental bastards that had descended on them.

"You sure lit a fire under his tail," said Joe admiringly.

"T'weren't much," grinned Fairclough. "Especially as he knows I can jump all over him in size fourteen boots if I have to."

Fairclough led his party across a corner of the parade ground to the garages and entered one of the echoing caverns. A faint smell of machinery lingered, fading for lack of reinforcement. The workshop had an air of unused neatness. The normal litter of tools, empty tins, greasy rags, cigarette packets and cups had either been cleared away or it had fallen to pieces from old age. Even the floor showed signs of having been swept recently.

"There should be enough room for all our bits and pieces if the other garages are the same as this one," decided Fairclough. "There's no rain forecast, but I suppose they'll want to keep the mock-ups and the dummy tank bodies under cover."

"Those mock-ups are pretty good," remarked Joe. "Pity about what's going to happen to them." He burst into laughter, which echoed hollowly in the garage. "Man, you should have seen the look on Jack's face when Harve told him he wanted to blow up some real tanks."

"If you knew what they cost and how few we've got, you wouldn't be mad about the idea," promised Fairclough.

"That's right," added Birky. "Jack told me you're borrowing about fifty

million dollars' worth of tanks. And then there's all the rest of the gear on top of that."

Joe released a long, slow whistle. "You guys really are worth knowing."

"You ain't wrong there, sweetheart," growled Birky out of the side of his mouth.

"Even so," said Joe, "I reckon Harve could afford to blow up some of them. He's loaded, you know."

"It's not so much the money as the time it takes to get them replaced," Fairclough told him. "You can't just walk out and buy a tank, you know. Not in this country, anyway. You have to fill in thousands of forms. Then some idiot in the Treasury thinks about it for a couple of years. By which time the price has gone up and they have to do some more thinking to find out if they can still afford it. It's a wonder anything ever gets done with the Treasury millstone around our necks."

"Yeah, Jack told Harve the same sad story," grinned Joe.

"But having said that," added Fairclough, "I dare say we can arrange some pretty convincing explosions."

"Come on, let's have a look at the rest," urged Birky. "Then we can have a look across the road," he added, meaning a drink or two in the Officers' Mess.

The visitors soon realized two things about the camp. Anything involving just human effort, such as cutting grass and weeding paths, had been done. Jobs which involved spending more than a modest sum of money, such as repainting, had been deferred in the hope that more prosperous times would arrive in the future. The tank training range underlined the need for *Operation Life-Preserver* to Fairclough and Birky.

Squadron Leader Doran glanced up from his newspaper as the trio entered the bar in the Officers' Mess after their tour of inspection. "Seen everything?" he enquired.

"What there is, which isn't much," replied Birky, sagging into a chair. "Ah'm plumb tuckered out," he drawled, earning a suspicion-filled glance from Joe, who thought that he might be taking the mickey.

"I'm not going to say it, so there's no use looking at me, mate," Fairclough told Birky.

"He's supposed to say, 'Well, tuck it back in again,'" Doran explained to a puzzled Joe. "It's a joke. Well, very nearly. Ready for off?"

"Just about," nodded Fairclough. "When Knocker's tongue stops

hanging out. We have to get back to Buddford to do some packing. Could borrow one of your lads tonight to bring us back here?"

"I don't see why not," replied Doran. "There's nothing much doing at the moment. And as you've got five choppers at your beck and call from tomorrow, getting one a few hours early won't make that much difference."

"Good! That's that settled. Corporal!" Fairclough waved the steward over. "Where is Lieutenant Gordon?"

"On the phone at the moment, sir, fixing up his leave. He gave me this for Lieutenant Browne." The corporal produced a sheet of notepaper on which an address in Exeter had been written in an elegant, flowing, italic script.

"We'll be leaving in about ten minutes, after a drink," said Fairclough. "You can tell Mr. Gordon we'll be back about six to take over from him. Could you lay on dinner for five at eightish this evening?"

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir. Dinner for five at eight." The corporal filed the information in his memory.

"I think a half of bitter would lay the dust nicely," commented Birky as the corporal headed for the bar.

Six days of preparations followed. Captain Medder's team requisitioned and scrounged equipment, and constructed props. Harve and Joe spent a couple of days hanging half-in and half-out of a helicopter, looking for suitable locations. They allowed their pilots to mark their chosen battle-grounds on the maps. By tacit agreement, they had decided to leave the navigation to experts.

Furniture vans full of lights, sound equipment, video-cameras and all the paraphernalia of the film industry joined a rank of unmodified Barron tanks on the parade ground. The production team took over the office block and set up a studio on the upper floor. Harve, who had given up offices, conducted all of his business from an armchair beside the bar in the Officers' Mess.

The camp enjoyed once more the bellow of tank engines and the clatter and squeal of tracks on the parade ground. Lieutenant Birky began a course of driving lessons and helped to decorate the concrete with fresh oil stains. His instructors were surprised to find a Ministry of Defence type who was willing to get his hands dirty.

Voices with American accents were heard in the camp for the first time since the Second World War. Dark green golf carts became a major hazard. The approach of a tank could not be missed, but the gentle whirring of an electric motor was easily lost in the general uproar. Sergeant Curran was ordered to fit the vehicles with klaxon horns – which shattered nerves instead of bodies.

No stars were required for the battle scenes. Their appearances would be added later by intercutting studio footage, which made keeping up the NATO cover story so much easier. Harve's crews were employed by one of his companies. Whether or not the company had was working for NATO made no difference to them as long as they were paid regularly at the proper union rates. The art of deception works best when the point is laboured least.

Most of the Americans defected at the weekend, taking an opportunity to sample the night life of Devon before the hard work of filming began. Medder and his cronies laboured on – without the assistance of Fairclough and Birky, who had been invited to Portsmouth to attend a Trafalgar Day celebration.

The party had been arranged by Hank Newton's former leader, Lieutenant-Commander Don Smith, whose birthday fell on the anniversary of the battle. Travelling, partying, recovering and then travelling again filled up the weekend nicely.

17. HARVE MANOEUVRES NATO

To the surprise of everyone but Harve's production team, the mass of equipment was assembled on time. Shooting began on the Wednesday of the second week at Dartmoor, as planned. It soon became clear that Harve had aimed his epic at the American television market, which revels in blood and violence, but turns pale at the mention of the most innocuous swear word.

By the end of the week, Harve had written off his foot soldiers – Americans, Russians, Britons and Germans – at least a dozen times over. Plastic replicas of severed limbs swam in oceans of artificial blood. Dummies disappeared under the tracks of advancing tanks in long shot, to be converted to a sort of red and muddy-brown porridge.

Regular soldiers, Territorials and men of the RAF Regiment tumbled in explosions of blood capsules in close up. A number of people, both military and civilian, found themselves unable to face food for a couple of days. Some of the production team and a handful of Territorials had very vivid imaginations and they found the special effects rather too real. But they became battle-hardened in the end – luckily, before they starved to death.

Harve had avoided showing any recognizable faces in close-up to disguise the fact that he had created several armies using around one hundred men. He seemed concerned that the audience would lose faith if they studied the faces of the extras and saw the same person die several times.

Thus only faces covered in mud or blood, or rendered suitably horrific and mutilated by the make-up teams, were ever filmed close to. Harve also wanted to be sure that lip-readers in the audience would not be able to pick out soldierly oaths, which tended to fly around with the occasionally burst of manic laughter.

Captain Medder and his assistants began to doubt that Harve would be able to slide parts of his film past the censors. It was all very well trying to shock people into realizing that war isn't all jolly fun and games, and it can be a shockingly fatal experience for all but the politicians who invoke it, but some of the make-up department's creations seemed to border on the obscene.

Harve, of course, had an answer for the doubters. He had been told that censors feel obliged to chop something out of a film just to prove that they have earned their pay. He was giving them an obvious something in the hope that they would leave the rest of his masterpiece alone.

The 'actors' soon realized that they were involved in a spectacle which was unlike any training film that they had ever seen. Those not in the know found Harve a complete mystery. He was no expert of the film industry and completely dependent on his military advisors. As he was a very approachable sort, some of the 'actors' began to help him out with his dialogue.

Harve always carried a blue notebook, in which he recorded useful expressions and appropriate remarks. The troops did their best to help him fill the notebook with idiomatic phrases known only to themselves. Many of the gems, they alleged, were free translations of expressions which they had picked up while training in West Germany. Closing the turret hatch of a tank became 'putting the lid on the biscuit tin', and smoke screens were labelled 'Dutch pharts' until Harve tried out some of his jargon on Captain Medder and learned that his leg was being heaved vigorously.

Even though the camp was surrounded by apparent death and mutilation on all sides, no one had been killed or injured seriously when the weekend came around. There were the usual cuts and bruises expected on any training course, but all of the damaged actors were able to resume their duties immediately after minor medical treatment.

The day's film tapes were shown each evening on special projection equipment in the camp's cinema. Harve had chosen videotape to preserve his images because of the clean picture quality. He considered the graininess so much beloved by film buffs to be a defect of the medium, and *buff* to be short for *buffoon* in the context of a film buff.

The rushes lacked both sound and continuity – which were to be added at a later stage by experts. Harve's sound technicians had done a certain amount of recording, but they were planning to create the shattering roar of the battlefield in stereo sound in the studio using synthesizers on top of

recordings made in the field. Although the audience found the silent pictures a little lacking at first, they soon began to respond.

One of the Territorials and a piano ended up positioned beside the screen. Each soundless explosion and the consequent mass killing, with their musical underscoring, provoked a storm of cheering. Cat-calls and yells of derision for the acting qualities of the victim greeted each individual violent death.

At first, Harve resented the fact that the deaths of 'Americans' were greeted with the same enthusiasm as the deaths of 'Russians' and 'Germans'. He ascribed the cheers at the extermination of the British Army Of The Rhine to the natural lack of patriotism of the British.

He was on the point of excluding outsiders from the showings when Captain Fairclough smoothed his ruffled feathers by explaining that it was only inter-Service rivalry at work, not a lack of respect for Uncle Sam. The Engineers from Buddford and the Territorials, who were playing the NATO forces, were cheering the deaths of the RAF Regiment, who were playing Warsaw Pact forces, and vice versa.

Fairclough decided not to mention that the troops felt no particular loyalty to the Americans. World War Two was ancient history and the citizens of the good old USA had become just another bunch of foreigners. As the world is full of foreigners, the troops could not feel the loss of a few hundred of them.

Recording ended at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. The official reason was bad light caused by gathering clouds. Harve and the other Americans disappeared to Plymouth, Torbay or Exeter in search of night life. By the time the Buddford and Milaston contingents had returned to their respective bases, the camp on Dartmoor was starting to look deserted again, even though forty Terriers were still quartered in one of the barrack buildings in addition to the permanent staff.

Birky had ordered some barrels of real ale during the week. They were opened for those who chose to stay in camp in preference to trying the pubs around Dartmoor. It was the Army's equivalent of slicing the main-brace and a way of thanking the Territorials for their sterling efforts.

The last group of tanks arrived in time for lunch on Sunday. Harve had the whole group rolled out onto the parade ground and parked in nationality groups so that he could review his armies.

It was a day of adjustment and twenty five hours. The clocks had been put back an hour to cancel British Summer Time and restore Greenwich Mean Time. Harve insisted on holding briefings for the tank crews in an attempt to whip up national team spirit and build rivalries, Then he allowed them to join the others to finish off the real ale. He was a firm believer in bribery as a way to get the best out of his men.

Some achieved Monday morning's early start easily. Others experienced great difficulty in willing themselves out of bed. The ones who had made pigs of themselves with the free beer had pale faces and tended to allow their eyelids to droop lower and lower as dawn brightened the eastern sky. Harve began to complain that some of the men looked more like junkies than fighting troops. Captain Medder pointed out that the men with hang-overs looked shell-shocked and battle-fatigued without the aid of make-up.

His remarks struck a chord in Harve's vivid imagination and caused him to rearrange the day's recording to include a scene in which blank-eyed zombies stumbled through an improvised field hospital. His working method seemed to involve careful planning coupled with reaction to happy accidents.

The tanks were the stars of the second week at Dartmoor. Joe, wearing a US Army helmet, dark blue denim jeans and a Ranger jacket, taped them from all ranges and all angles. Taking care not to cast unwanted shadows, he buzzed them with helicopters, swooping in graceful arcs through ranks of metal monsters advancing in open order across bleak moorland, and zooming in on their intended targets.

Harve was of the opinion that the Warsaw Pact countries would attack between late October and early April if they ever decided to invade Western Europe. The bare branches of deciduous trees and shrubs would improve visibility and make ambushes more difficult to lay and easier to by-pass.

His scenario involved a Blitzkrieg which was aimed at isolating American nuclear bases. If the invaders just cut them off, and ignored them if they made no hostile moves, Harve was fairly confident that the American Government of the day would play a waiting game, reluctant to plunge the world into the extinction of a nuclear war if American citizens were not being threatened directly.

A surprised silence fell over those within earshot when Harve made his views known during a lunch-break in the field. After a hard morning's

manoeuvres, the troops were well into their roles of enemies and defenders of democracy.

"You really think your people would sit idly by if the Russkies invaded Europe, Mr., ah, Harve?" asked one of the tank commanders, who had a red star on his cap. "They're under all sorts of treaty obligations to the contrary."

"I think there'd be a lot of jumping up and down and a lot of hot air let off," smiled Harve, showing white and even teeth. "And not much more."

"They'd be queueing up to push the button," scoffed one of the 'American' crews. "Some of them are real mad sods. But not all of them," he added hastily for Harve's benefit..

"What about NATO?" asked a driver. "They'd have to jump in. Like the boss said," he nodded towards the tank commander, "they've got treaties with Europe. We went to war with Germany in Thirty-Nine when they invaded Poland."

"Yes, but *we* didn't have *The Bomb*," said the commander of a 'German' crew darkly.

"That's about it, Gen'ral," nodded Harve. "You're talking about a war three thousand miles from home. And not against a buncha gooks like the Viet Cong. If we push that button, it's the end of everything. And that's the point of the film. What could happen if the Russkies decide they could win in Europe before Uncle Sam gets up the nerve to push his button."

"It's a pretty gruesome thought," remarked Captain Fairclough.

"Hey, it's only a film, guys," smiled Harve. "Harmless entertainment."

"I've never heard anyone admitting a training film is just harmless entertainment before," warned Fairclough.

"Well, the truth will slip out occasionally," smiled Harve, admitting his error and remembering the NATO cover story.

"You're putting forward the proposition it's not such a big step from invading somewhere outside the Communist Block, like Afghanistan, to invading Europe?" said the tank commander with the red star.

"The training film is exploring the concept that it's easy to accept a fait accompli as a status quo," nodded Harve. "It's easier to let the bad guy get away with something than let the world fry. Of course, you keep telling everyone it's an outrage and you don't go to his Olympic Games, but it takes a hell of a long time to uninvade somewhere. Look at the Russkies in Afghanistan."

"Or the Yanks in Vietnam?" suggested one of the 'Germans'.

"Different story, son," countered Harve. "We went into Vietnam at the request of the Government to stop the dominoes falling."

"The Russkies reckon they're in Afghanistan because the government asked them in," grinned Captain Medder.

"Okay, it's all history, and on the other side of the world anyway." Harve shrugged. "And you guys weren't involved. But if communism's so great, how come South-East Asia's in such a hell of a mess? And how come all these Boat People are risking their lives to get the hell out of Vietnam if it's a Commie paradise on earth? Same way they're getting out of East Germany by the busload."

"Perhaps they were corrupted by a brief glimpse of the American Way of Life in Viet Nam?" suggested Fairclough. "People will wallow quite happily in utter squalor as long as no one tells them how badly off they are."

"Yeah, could be," nodded Harve. "Like we did to you guys in World War Two."

Amid hostile mutters, Joe the cameraman managed to draw the director's attention to an item on the shooting schedule. "You serious about this?" Joe asked anxiously. "Can't we use stock shots?"

Harve read the item above Joe's finger, then frowned at him. "No way. We need pictures of these tanks."

"What's up?" asked Lieutenant Birky.

"He wants me to shoot tanks from underneath," complained Joe. "Going right over my head."

"It's all right. All you need is a hole in a nice, firm stretch of ground," offered Captain Medder. "Piece of cake."

"Yeah, right," agreed Harve. "You're not going chicken on me, Joe?"

Joe reserved his answer and muttered something about a will and insurance.

While his camera position was being prepared, the tank drivers took advantage of his misgivings by inventing lurid tales of men meeting horrible deaths under tanks during training exercises. They had Joe quaking nicely by the time Harve called the gathering to order.

A column of 'Russian' tanks rumbled past him towards their start line. The off-duty drivers looked from Joe to the tanks, then back at Joe, shaking their heads in pity. Then, before Joe's horrified eyes, one of the

drivers stepped between two of the tanks and allowed the last four of the column to drive over him.

He emerged grinning, covered in dust and suffering from a slight case of carbon monoxide poisoning, but otherwise unharmed. Joe realized that the general laughter had been triggered by the look of disbelief on his face. Summoning all of the dignity at his command, he dropped into his dugout.

"I'll show you Limey wise-guys what Joe Peterssen's made of," he vowed.

"Right, Joe, let's see some American guts," called one of the drivers.

"Just don't get them tangled up in the tracks, Joe," added another. "They're a bugger to clean off."

"Okay, you guys! Can it!" called Harve the director, restoring a more serious atmosphere as the work proceeded.

In his role of writer, Harve had all the agility of a politician. He could start the day waving a fistful of scribbled notes and hold a lengthy briefing session to explain exactly what was going to happen – only for the 'actors' to find themselves watching either the exact opposite or something completely different at the evening cinema show.

At fifty-three, Harve was too young to have fought in World War Two. He had been drafted at the time of the Korean 'Police Action', but he had been too rich and important to be sent to the battlefields, and he had been too old for the Vietnam Civil War.

Along with his generation, he had grown up with Hollywood's version of the Second World War – Errol Flynn stomping the Japs in Burma and John Wayne sorting out the rest of the Axis powers on land, at sea and under it, and in the air, as well as the fact and fiction set in Korea. He was also aware of the great silence about Vietnam until the sudden rush of films in the late Seventies.

Harve wanted to tell an entertaining and exciting story, but he also wanted to get it right. Believing himself to be surrounded by experts, he was open to their opinions at all times. His problem was that he couldn't tell a genuine expert from an odd bod who had been dragged into a scene to make up the numbers. Captain Medder had soon realized that he was going to have to provide Harve with a minder to shield him from spurious helpful advice.

Captain Fairclough and Lieutenant Birky were minding the mastermind

on the second Wednesday of the session, while Harve was briefing his troops for the last set-up of the day. In theory, the scene dealt with the bloody massacre of five Russian tanks by a group of British troops making a gloriously brave last-stand.

Harve had been feeling guilty about the heavy American slant of the battles, and he had included the scene in an attempt to keep his hosts happy. He didn't know that Captain Medder and his allies were true businessmen – doing it for the money and not bothered about the content of the film.

Harve was leaning on a folding table, helping four stones to hold down a sketch map of the immediate area. The tank crews and the British troops were gathered in front of him, sitting on the dusty ground and radiating interest.

"Okay, you guys, listen to this, I'm only going to say it once," Harve announced, playing the dynamic director. "The guy with the anti-tank missiles and the anti-tank guns are dug in behind the hedge there, waiting. You've got three missiles and about a dozen shells left, so you can't afford to waste them. It's very quiet. The calm before the storm. You guys are all tensed up. Then you hear them!

"You look up towards the top of the ridge. The guys with the missiles haul them onto their shoulders and start sighting. I want to see some white knuckles on the pistol grips of the guidance mechanisms, The rest of you get ready to train the guns.

"Then the Russkie tanks swing up over the ridge, lazily, confidently, on a milk run. Then they start down towards you. Any questions so far?" Harve had noticed grins in his audience. "Something wrong, son?" he asked a corporal-driver, who seemed to be more amused than most.

"Nothing, sir," said the corporal, looking embarrassed.

"Your *nothing* has our full attention, Corporal." Captain Fairclough looked at him in expectation of a revelation – but warning him not to waste their time. He knew that there would be grins and whispers until the troops got something off their chests.

"Well, sir," said the young second-lieutenant commanding the tanks, responding to discreet nudges, "it's just that we'll be showing the bellies of our tanks to the enemy as we come over the ridge."

"That's right, sir," added the corporal, encouraged by the misgivings of an officer. "If they're waiting for us, all they have to do is give us one each

up the kilt while the nose is in the air. On the thinnest armour. And that's that. Five tanks brewed up on the top of the ridge. End of engagement."

"There'll be no need for all the explosions and things the special effects mob have got lined up for us," added one of the gunners. "The tanks won't get to our position if we're any good. Unless you were planning to build up the tension and have an anticlimax, sir. And use the explosions for something else."

Harve looked suspiciously from one speaker to the next. "Are you guys puttin' me on?" he demanded.

"Wouldn't dream of it," the second-lieutenant assured him.

"Shee-yit!" groaned Harve. "What in hell we gonna do about this?"

"Well, how about a diversion of some sort?" Fairclough suggested because Harve was looking at him.

"If you get a helicopter gunship to give the ambushers a few squirts at the right moment, that would make them get their heads down and take their minds off the tanks," added Birky.

"Yeah!" breathed Harve to a background of approval from the troops. "Good thinking, Gen'ral. I can just see it. Two of the guys with missiles get blown away, but the other one turns and fires at the chopper from point blank range. That gets the chopper off their backs before they're all blown away. We can get special effects to put in a Russian gunship getting splatted.

"The surviving ambushers scramble out of their slit trenches to man their guns. Then they open up on the Russkie tanks and give the bastards the shock of their lives."

"With respect, sir," offered the second-lieutenant, "We could hardly miss seeing the helicopter in action. And we've bound to and start wondering who shot it down."

"Right," Harve admitted. "What do we do about that?"

"We'll have to scramble to our guns with those sods in the tanks machine gunning and shelling us, sir," said one of the gunners.

"We'll just get wiped out that bit faster," offered another.

"Yeah, I like that," nodded Harve. "It compresses the action and gives the scene more punch. You guys ought to be in the film business."

"I thought we were," murmured a sergeant, whose head was swathed in blood-stained bandages.

"Right, you guys take a coffee break," said Harve. "Effects!"

Tank crews and gunners moved over to the refreshments truck to help themselves to free coffee and cigarettes. The special effects team began to prepare strips of small explosive charges to simulate machine gunning during the air-strike.

Harve held a discussion with the camera helicopter pilots to arrange for the unit that taped the gunners while they were being 'shot up' to cast menacing shadows on them. It was a happy production. A sense of close involvement kept the 'actors' enthusiastic and willing.

Captain Fairclough had discharged his obligation to the CO of RAF Milaston by inviting Group Captain Gough-Pollard and his lady wife to watch the taping that afternoon. Captain Medder had been entrusted with the task of keeping the guests entertained – and at a safe distance from the battlefield. Fairclough joined the guests when the briefing was over to give them an idea of what to expect.

Harve had said hello to the group captain and his slightly horsey wife earlier on. He had given Captain Medder a knowing wink, assuming that Milaston's station commander would be in on his private working arrangement with the Ministry of Defence. Medder had kept the guests at a safe distance from Harve that moment on, explaining that Mr. Walenski needed plenty of working room. He saw no point in giving Harve another chance to be indiscreet.

"A few more minutes, then the shooting starts," Fairclough told the special guests. He gave Mrs. Gough-Pollard his best smile, then he took the opportunity to polish his tinted glasses. He had three pairs of spectacles available for different lighting conditions: a clear pair, a light tint, and a darker tint for very strong sunlight.

"Coffee, Ma'am? Sir?" asked one of the men from the refreshment truck, arriving with a tray.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Gough-Pollard with a toothy smile. "Tell me, Captain Greene, why does that man have a steel plate strapped to his back?"

Fairclough followed a long finger to a gunner who was being wired up by the special effects team. "He's about to be shot, Ma'am," he explained. "They use explosive blood capsules."

"How gruesome!" smiled Mrs. Gough-Pollard.

"The plate's to protect him when they let them off," Fairclough finished. "It may seem a bit gruesome, but the whole point of a training film is to

show a man what he can expect in combat. It may not be pleasant, but it's one less surprise for him. Surprise lowers general vigilance, and that can kill you."

"I never imagined the Ministry of Defence was such a dangerous place," smiled Mrs. Gough-Pollard, offering an unsuspected note of irony.

"There's a fair amount of back-stabbing goes on," Fairclough told her with a modest smile. "And I've done three tours in Ulster."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Gough-Pollard, realizing that she was in the presence of a man whose knowledge of combat was more than theoretical.

Wearing a headset over his baseball cap and a transmitter pack on his belt, Harve looked like an American football coach. The absence of sound recording equipment allowed him to stand on the sidelines with a loud-hailer and shout cues to the gunners. The tanks were linked in to his radio net, along with the two camera positions on the ground and the two in the air.

Make-up and special effects teams scuttled away from the gunners, most of whom were smoking and enjoying a joke at one another's expense. Harve aimed his loudhailer at them.

"Okay, you guys," he yelled. "Put those cigarettes out. The war's coming."

The gunners crushed cigarettes into the dust and adopted more sober attitudes. They slumped wearily on the bank at the foot of the hedge. Harve ran a final check via his radio net, behaving like the mission controller at a space centre. He received a series of calls of 'Go!' from the cameramen.

"Roll cameras," ordered Harve.

Electronic system marked tapes with scene and take numbers.

"Action!" yelled Harve.

The gunners slumped in a slightly more self-conscious fashion, as if resigned to their fate.

"Tanks!" yelled Harve.

The suicide squad of ambushers appeared to listen, frozen for an instant, then they leapt for their weapons. Their officer said a few words into a field telephone before training his binoculars on the virgin grass of the ridge. Harve was hoping to record the scene in one take because the ridge would become well chewed up when the tanks crossed it.

"Stand by, tanks," Harve said into his stick microphone. "Stand by,

effects. Cue the chopper. *Chopper!*" he shouted into his loudhailer.

A gun-layer looked up, then pointed to the sky. The audience looked up instinctively – and saw only a passing cloud. Then one of the camera helicopters swooped round a low hill.

"Move it!" screamed Harve.

Lines of small explosions ripped among the gunners, slaughtering two of them, as they dived for their slit trenches. A helicopter shadow raced across their position. One of the survivors, an expert in the use of the weapon, fired a dummy anti-tank missile.

It roared into the sky, missing the helicopter by a comfortable fifteen yards. The weapon had no warhead, but a strike at such a short range would have done considerable damage to both the machine and its occupants. Special effects would paint in a hit later.

"Tanks advance," Harve told his microphone. "*Bang!*" he shouted into his loudhailer. "Okay, you guys, the chopper's down. Someone spot the tanks."

Five Russian tanks churned over the ridge and advanced on the hedge in a purposeful fashion. The gunners abandoned their dead and wounded and leapt to the guns. Simulated machine gun fire shook the hedge. Grass and earth leapt into the air fifty yards away. Plumes of smoke emerged from their guns as the tanks opened fire on the hedge.

One anti-tank gun disappeared in a cloud of smoke and became a collection of jagged bits. A red-tailed rocket zoomed into the air, bouncing from the front of one of the tanks, leaving what looked like a bright silver scar on the green paint. Captain Medder explained to the visitors that optical effects would be added to simulate a tracer shell striking the sloping armour and being deflected away from the tank.

Two more guns died spectacularly. One tank had stopped, pouring smoke from its turret. Another on the left of the formation slewed half-round, shedding a broken track. Four figures scrambled out and raced for shelter behind another tank. One of them didn't make it. A near miss blew him to soggy confetti – or it would in the final version of the scene.

More bursts from the tanks' heavy machine guns made the hedge dance and sent twigs flying in all directions. The visitors admitted to Captain Medder that the battle looked surprisingly real, even though they could see the director, video-cameras and another knot of spectators. The last of the gunners flopped over backwards in a shower of exploding red liquid. Then

one of them moved. Exerting every ounce of his dying strength, he picked up a shell and dragged himself towards the last gun. Then he collapsed in a pool of his own and everyone else's blood.

The tanks crashed through the hedge, at a safe distance from the bodies, and resumed their stately advance. The massacre was over.

To a background of spontaneous applause from the audience, Harve checked with his camera units, who seemed satisfied with the way things had gone. Then he wrapped things up for the day.

Group Captain and Mrs. Gough-Pollard shook his hand again and offered words of congratulation. Then they boarded a helicopter to be whisked back to Milaston, having thoroughly enjoyed their afternoon in the country.

"Okay for public relations?" Harve asked Captain Medder.

"Just the job," nodded Medder. "That's the Brass for you. Put on a bit of a show for them, give the wife a couple of cups of coffee and slip the old man a couple of stiff drinks, and you get one hundred and ten per cent co-operation."

"Yeah, well, that little bit of personal attention's been working for me in the States for thirty years," smiled Harve, reminding Medder that a shrewd businessman lurked behind the amateur film-maker. "No reason why it shouldn't work over here."

"In that case, you won't mind if Colonel Thomas from Buddford and his wife drop by tomorrow afternoon?" suggested Medder.

Harve shrugged. "Same deal as before. You keep them outa my hair, and you can bring who you like, son."

18. DIVERSION & CONCLUSION

The days became duller, more overcast than fine, but the rain held off. Colder winds from the north and east lowered the temperature to the high Fifties. Harve kept his production team busy enough to take their minds off the weather, and the actors got more than enough exercise to keep them warm. On an appropriately chilly day, winter came to Dartmoor.

Harve's had hired a firm that specialized in creating snow scenes. They drove two tankers out onto the moors and proceeded to spray a white foam based on particles of paper into the air. Very quickly, a blanket of small, rough particles had converted a large area of moorland into a white desert.

Captain Medder was slightly alarmed at first. When he saw the 'snow' for the first time, he rushed over to Harve for an assurance that it would be cleared up when it was no longer required. The Ministry of Defence had enough trouble from local and visiting environmentalists and conservationists without presenting them with such a ready-made target.

The man in charge of the spraying assured him that the 'snow' was biodegradable and that it would disappear without a trace in two to three weeks, or much sooner if there was a lot of rain. Not really believing him, Medder suspended his disbelief and allowed the expert to get on with it.

According to Harve's scenario, the Russians and their allies had made their initial advance just ahead of a weather front, which would blot out satellite surveillance, interfere with radar coverage and restrict air activity. Just because the Americans lacked all-weather strike aircraft, he had assumed that their NATO allies in Europe would be similarly deficient.

The following morning, at the height of a loud and violent thunderstorm, which had delayed the departure of the film makers for the snowfield, Captain Fairclough dragged Harve over to windows on the north-eastern side of the Officers' Mess.

Rain was lashing the glass but they could just see the parade ground. Harve began to get impatient. Then it arrived. Before his astonished eyes, a British-German-Italian all-weather fighter swooped low over the parade ground and dropped a canister, which erupted into flame seconds after the aircraft had rushed away to continue its navigation training exercise.

"Yeah, okay," said Harve. "So you've got a few cute airplanes." Then he returned to his coffee. He wasn't going to allow inconvenient facts to get in the way of his fantasies.

The rain had made the snowfield too wet to use. Harve's expert decided that it would become churned to mud very quickly once the tanks started to operate. Harve moved to another location and another part of the shooting schedule.

He taped defeated troops retreating along muddy roads and tracks, slipping and sliding as their vehicles lost traction, and straining to release the vehicles from particularly boggy patches. To obtain a sense of balance, he showed the invading forces in similar trouble. Tank drivers had the chance to show off the skill by putting their vehicles into graceful yet terrifying slides when the sheer bulk of metal-on-the-move was considered.

Harve had planned a hand-to-hand battle at the foot of a hill. The NATO forces were bogged down and the invaders had been unable to prevent themselves sliding down to join them. Unfortunately, the engagement turned into a wrestling in mud session. The combatants became indistinguishable under a uniform coating of dark, sticky ooze. After taping a few minutes of fighting, just in case they could be used, Harve let the troops to retire to shower and change into clean clothing.

Joe risked life and a number of times while filming tanks with a hand-held video-camera, which had its own pale-blue waterproof jacket. He seemed not to be aware of danger. A large part of his attention was always devoted to keeping himself upright. The rest was on his work. He was brought down to earth with a bump one day when he suddenly found himself between two tanks, which were sliding helplessly towards each other, their tracks scrabbling uselessly for traction.

The prompt action of the squad crouching on the rear deck of one of the tanks saved him from injury or worse. They fished Joe aboard just in the nick of time. Joe went out like a light as the tanks glanced off each other with a muffled clang. Diplomatically, Harve decided that he had

enough close-ups of muddy tanks for the film's needs.

The brief episode of rain ended, to be followed by clear skies and drying winds. Harve's experts carried out tests, then they announced that the snowfield would be ready for shooting on Monday after some patching up over the weekend. The director gave his troops Saturday off, but insisted that the tank crews spend the night in camp, where he could keep an eye on them. He wanted to be sure that they would be present and correct for an eight-thirty start the following day.

Captain's Fairclough and Medder took a stroll around the camp on Saturday afternoon. The Territorials had gone. All of the scenes involving foot soldiers had been shot. Just tanks advancing through the snow and two tank battles remained.

"Morale's a little low," remarked Medder as they strolled along a line of tanks. All of the hatches and inspection covers were open, and maintenance teams were preparing them for the following day. "They don't know what they can do in a dead and alive hole like this."

"Yes, I've caught the odd rebellious muttering myself," nodded Fairclough. "Among Harve's people as well as ours. Hello, that lot look cheerful enough."

Medder followed the direction of Fairclough's nod to the group clustered around a portable television. The diminutive form of Lieutenant Birky could be seen at the heart of the group. He was holding the receiver of a telephone to his ear.

"No prizes for guessing what they're up to," commented Medder.

"The only mystery is only which bookmaker Knocker's hammering," agreed Fairclough. "And whether they're watching racing on BBC or ITV."

"I suppose we could lay on some sort of film show tonight, perhaps with some great sporting moments with a heavy slant on racing."

"Maybe we could do our own racing," decided Fairclough, watching Sergeant Curran speeding along the camp road on an electric golf cart, which had proved a very successful vehicle on the moorland tracks, where traction had proved more important than pure speed.

By the middle of the afternoon, the maintenance crews had completed their work on the tanks and moved most of them into the garages, out of the way. The rest of the tanks, with the assistance of empty oil drums and stacks of white-painted tyres, marked out a winding rally-style course.

Sergeant Curran had done a creditable job of improvising a grandstand along the start/finish straight.

As the speed of the motors on the golf carts had been fitted with governors, which limited their top speed to twenty-five miles per hour, the course contained no long straights. Frequent curves and corners and a couple of chicanes, allowed the maximum length of track to be laid out on the parade ground, and placed a heavy emphasis on the skill of the driver.

Morale was sky-high as preliminary heats began to whittle down the huge field of competitors, all of whom believed themselves to be expert drivers. The golf carts now wore numbers from one to nine in white paint.

Sergeant Curran's personal runabout had developed mechanical trouble and it had been excused competition – at least, that was his story. The other golf carts had been fitted with bumpers improvised from old tyres in case the contestants tried to play dodgems with their opponents.

Drivers drew lots to select their chariot. Any differences in the performances of the vehicles were marginal, but the procedure allow a loser to blame his ill fortune on the machine rather than his bad driving.

After the first ten races, each of six laps, a team of scrutineers checked the batteries of the racing cars, and called a halt so that they could be replaced with fully charged ones. By dinnertime, twenty winners and the four fastest losers had been selected for the second and last elimination round, and the floodlights had been turned up to full power to push back a black night.

After dinner and a break for digestion, four ten-lap races produced eight finalists. Someone had found a record of racing car noises, and he had rigged up a sound system to give the occasion some of the noisy atmosphere that silent electric cars cannot provide.

Mechanics checked the racing cars, and found them to be in good working condition, despite a few bumps collected during earlier rounds. Then came the draw for the cars. The stewards had decided to make the draw after the mechanics had checked the vehicles to ensure that no unscrupulous competitors, or their supporters, had the opportunity to sabotage the favourite's chariot. Betting had been brisk and heavy, and a prize of over five hundred pounds in entry fees awaited the winner.

The organizing committee had decided on a Le Mans-style start for the final because the record of motor-racing sounds included a track containing instructions to the drivers to take their marks and then a count-

down. Eight men in crash helmets and overalls lined up at the edge of the parade ground, tugging nervously at gloves and straps.

Most of the finalists were tank crew – they included three drivers, one loader and two commanders. The corporal-steward from the Officers' Mess was upholding the honour of the camp. Harve's second unit cameraman completed the line-up.

Five minutes before the off, Lieutenant Birky closed his book on the race. To a background of revved engines, an American voice on the speaker system alerted the drivers, then counted down from ten. Eight electric golf carts barged onto the track to begin the first of twenty-five laps.

Sportsmanship came a poor second to determination to win right from the start. It was victor take all, as far as the prize money was concerned. The losers would receive just token consolation prizes. As well as blocking opponents who tried to overtake on the wide course, the competitors saw nothing wrong with trying to push rivals off the track. Anyone who was 'side-lined' had to rejoin the race at the point at which he had left the track, which cost him valuable time.

By lap fifteen, the field had declined to six effective runners. A tank driver had been forced to retire with a dead engine – the result of a hefty thump up the back. The video-cameraman had suffered a puncture of one of his fat tyres and he had lost five laps trying to fit a spare.

A cheer went up from the crowd when one of the leaders, a tank driver, tried to lap his commander and received a nudge which sent him speeding off the track at one of the sharpest bends. He had been the odds-on favourite. The field began to bunch up behind the tank commander, who was weaving furiously to block the others. Two drivers attacked him simultaneously. One was forced into an oil drum and off the track. The other sneaked past and put on speed.

Missiles from the crowd distracted the tank commander's attention as he was entering a sharp bend. Rather than ram one of the tanks, he steered around the wrong side of it and off the course. No longer obstructed, the rest surged ahead, but they were unable to catch the other tank commander, who took the chequered flag fifty yards ahead of his nearest rival.

The winner received his prize money and congratulations from Harve. He was also presented with a magnum of champagne, which he shared

with the other finalists instead of wasting it by using the bottle as a shower. Those who had made the right guess rushed to the unofficial Tote to collect their winnings, Losers made noises about the event being a fix, even though there was nothing in the rules to prevent collusion between the two tank commanders, had the idea occurred to them.

Harve restored the smiles by announcing that the beer was on the house – after a reminder that anyone who failed to turn up for work in the morning would be in big trouble. It was Saturday night on one of the wilder parts of Dartmoor, but the excitement of the races lingered on.

Forty tanks spend two days on Harve's artificial snowfield, shooting day and night scenes, the latter with the aid of the ubiquitous blue filters. Monday was November the Fifth. Captain Fairclough borrowed the special effects team to set up a fireworks display – a forerunner to the following day's business.

Half of the tanks departed on Tuesday morning. The rest remained for a course which was due to begin on the Thursday. Harve's last two days on Dartmoor were totally explosive. Assisted by Captain Fairclough and other weapons experts, the special effects team blew apart dummy tanks of all four nationalities, creating material which would be cut in to the two major tank battles.

All at once, the taping came to an end. Harve had reached the end of his schedule – and on time. The production crew completed their loading operation in the last hour of daylight on an autumn afternoon. Furniture vans moved past the guardhouse and onto the moor road to begin the long haul to London as Lieutenant Gordon was beating a miserable path back to Dartmoor to recover his command.

Lieutenant Birky telephoned the Bellside Country Club to tell Hank Newton that he and Captain Fairclough would be back the following morning. Prompted by Fairclough, he asked what the other Bellsiders had been up to.

Major McAndrew was definitely up to something, Newton reported, but he was being mysterious, as usual. He had put in a brief appearance with two strangers – both with Geordie accents and both called Jones – and then he had disappeared again. James Spinner was still in Scotland and he had been promoted to captain.

"What!?" gasped Birky.

"Right enough," confirmed Hank Newton. "It's a bit of a bombshell, isn't it. His new boss worked it. Reckoned he deserved it with all his new responsibilities."

"Well, that's a turn-up, isn't it?" grinned Fairclough when Birky had passed the news on. "One of us actually getting a promotion because he deserves it. Must be a world record."

"I'd better get on the phone to Guinness," grinned Birky.

"Anyway," continued Newton, "Spin left a phone number and you're to call him when you get back and arrange a visit to the distillery."

"Right, Hank," said Birky, signing off, "we'll get the details in the morning."

Harve used his portable business computer to contact his bank in Chicago, and authorized the second and final payment to the Ministry of Defence account. A little discreet checking had told him that the information supplied by Captain Medder did indeed refer to an official account. Harve still couldn't see what Medder, Captain Greene and Lieutenant Browne were getting out of their enthusiastic co-operation if all of the money was going to their government.

After shaking hands with everyone in sight, Harve led Joe, an aide and his personal computer to a waiting helicopter. The last part of his deal with the army involved a ride to Milaston and a flight to London.

At the tank range on Dartmoor, life was already settling back to its normal low, between-course level. The production team had left surprisingly little evidence of their brief stay. There were new oil stains and the scorch-marks from Monday's bonfire on the parade ground. A fine collection of discards swelled a host of plastic bags, which awaiting disposal.

Parts of the moor had been well-mashed by tanks. Other parts were scorched where dummy tanks had been exploded or set alight, according to Harve's tastes. And the winter zone was decaying steadily, as promised. They were all traces which Nature or Sergeant Curran's clean-up squads could erase.

The Men from the Ministry of Defence stayed on until Lieutenant Gordon drove into camp. It was not clear whether his unexpected holiday had done him any good. Gordon had become his normal miserable self within seconds of passing through the main gate.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

Squadron Leader Doran's helicopter lifted smoothly into deepening twilight, taking his passengers to Buddford, where they would spend the night. Captain Fairclough looked out at the dwindling figures of Lieutenant Gordon and Sergeant Curran as they sped across the parade ground on an electric golf cart. He felt a familiar sense of dislocation sweeping over him. To a soldier, spending three weeks in a camp was enough to make it home. It always felt strange to be leaving home.

19. NO REST

Lieutenant Hank Newton, RN, looked up from his armchair wearing an expression of mild interest. "Oh, so you're back then?" he remarked. "I thought I heard the gentle racket of a chopper." His casual greeting suggested that his colleagues had just returned from a trip to one of the pubs in Bellsham for lunch on a dull Thursday.

"Not been kidnapped by pirates?" asked Lieutenant Birky, turning a chair round to face Newton's table in the west-wing lounge.

"Hello," Captain Fairclough said to Newton's companion.

"Annabelle, this is Arthur and Norman, two of my partners," said Newton in a warning tone.

The new arrivals said hello to Newton's girlfriend, a borderline redhead with the blue eyes of a blonde and a light dusting of freckles. Then Annabelle finished her coffee and produced a set of car keys. She had to get back to work. Newton escorted her to her car, then he returned to the lounge to hear about his partners' adventures on Dart Moor.

Fairclough had just about run out of steam when Birky produced a paper wallet. "These are my holiday snaps, part one," he explained.

"I don't remember seeing you with a camera," said Fairclough suspiciously.

"No, it was just a small one," grinned Birky. "Easy to hide."

"They've enlarged quite well, haven't they?" remarked Newton as Birky spread the prints on the table, clearing coffee cups out of the way.

"Yeah, I'm quite chuffed with them. They must have rushed them through quick. I only sent them off last week. That's Harve and Joe in that one. Harve's the one in the cowboy hat."

Most of the photographs followed the course of the taping. Birky was able to prove that the events that had put a sceptical grin on Newton's face really had happened.

"This last one's me and Jack Medder on a Russian tank," Birky concluded.

"Which is which?" asked Newton.

Birky and Medder were sometimes taken for brothers. They were about the same height and build, and they had the same shade of mousey hair and the same cheeky grin. They were both wearing sunglasses in the photograph.

"I'm the handsome one on the right, of course," scoffed Birky. "Joe took that one. That's why it's not as good as the rest."

"I was wondering why it was framed properly," observed Newton with a straight face.

"Oh, here's another one. Art chatting up one of the make-up girls."

"Spying on me, eh?" remarked Fairclough.

"Someone has to keep an eye on you when Mac's not around," said Birky.

"Talking about our esteemed leader," said Fairclough, "what was he up to the other day?"

Newton shrugged. "There's not a lot to tell. As I said on the phone, he was here last week with these two blokes. Big, red faces, with enormous hands. They looked like a couple of farmers, but I'd say they were fellow sea dogs."

"Both called Jones – the way we call ourselves Smith?"

"Right! Mac's definitely up to something. But you know him. He likes his secrets."

"He didn't even give you a hint what's going on?" said Fairclough.

Newton shrugged again. "Not really. I only met them for a moment when they arrived. It was: 'Say hello to Mr. Jones and Mr. Jones, laddie.' Then the three of them shot off to the office upstairs. They were gone in a couple of hours. The hall porter mentioned they were carrying some boxes when they left, so I had a look in the special storeroom in the basement. Mac took some walkie-talkies, three or four FN automatic pistols and three Stirlings. Plus ammo and some spare magazines."

"Sounds like he's starting a war somewhere in Geordieland," observed Birky.

"Don't joke about it, you might be right," warned Newton. "Anyway, that was on Tuesday. I've not heard anything from him since. It looks like someone's in for a tough time, though."

"Probably because he's been making a nuisance of himself," decided Fairclough. "Oh, well. No doubt we'll find out what it's about when he's good and ready," he added with an air of indifference which was a transparent sham.

"Yeah, prob'ly something incredibly boring," Birky agreed with a mock yawn. "What about Spin being made up to Captain?"

"Not quite as big a jump as Corporal to Lieutenant, but he was thoroughly chuffed about it," said Newton.

"We'd better phone him to offer our congratulations," decided Fairclough. "Have you got the number handy?"

"It's in the address book in the office upstairs," replied Newton.

The owners of the club had two offices, one on the ground floor to the left of the main entrance, which was used mainly for entertainment, and a working office directly above it on the first floor. The two were connected by a small lift. Gordon Bryant, the club's manager, had a similar pair of offices on the other side of the main entrance.

"It's under 'B'," Newton added helpfully.

"That's 'B' for Jimmy Spinner?" said Birky sarcastically.

"No, 'B' for Berelogie, where the distillery is." Hank Newton gave his colleague a superior smile, then he returned the nods of a couple of members, who were passing through the lounge, carrying golf bags.

"How's the golfing going, Hank?" Fairclough asked automatically.

"Not bad. I've just taken on an assistant," said Newton.

"I was just going to ask why you're not out there digging holes with the rest of them," Birky remarked.

"That's him on the practice green, showing those birds which end of the club to hold," Newton added.

An athletic-looking young man of around twenty-five, about the same age as Hank Newton, could be seen intermittently beyond his admirers.

"He used to work in an office, but he got fed up of pen pushing."

"Is he any good?" said Fairclough.

"He beats me occasionally," nodded Newton. "He's not a bad coach, either."

"Why do you need an assistant anyway?" prodded Birky. "Getting old and past it?" He was six months younger than Newton.

"Not for golf," grinned his partner. "And there has to be someone to keep the golf shop open when I have to dash off. And your game tends to

go to cock if you do too much teaching and not enough playing. Taking the lad on lets me do both in sensible proportions."

Fairclough glanced at his watch, then he pushed away from the table. "Spin should have finished his lunch by now. Are we going to ring him?"

"And get invited to his Scotch factory? Dead right," agreed Birky. "We could do with a bit of a holiday. You interested, Hank?"

"Maybe next time. When I've staked a bit of a claim on Annabelle," decided Newton.

"You can ring Bert Carter afterwards," Birky told Fairclough as they traversed the lounge, heading for the entrance hall. "He can fly us up there tomorrow."

"And fly us back with a load of free samples?" laughed Fairclough.

"Well, if they're giving any away, it wouldn't be polite to refuse them," grinned Birky.

Captain James Spinner accepted their congratulations with pleasure and some embarrassment, and invited them to fly up to Scotland the following day. He was anxious to hear all about the filming and to see Birky's photographs. His curiosity had been aroused by Hank Newton's bald statement that Fairclough and Birky had disappeared off to Devon for three weeks, but pressure of work and a gale which had brought the telephone lines down had prevented him following up the report. He broke off the conversation briefly to telephone Colonel Porter to get his approval for the visit. The colonel had no objections.

"What's the weather like up there?" asked Fairclough. "We've had a couple of wet days in the South, but it's been surprisingly warm for November."

"I should bring your raincoats," advised Spinner. "And an interpreter. They all talk like Mac up here. Apart from the ones from Glasgow. I can even tell what some of them are saying now."

"How do they get on with your accent?" asked Fairclough.

"I haven't got an accent!" protested Spinner, exaggerating his Midlands whine. "And they're all psychic, too. I was looking around on the first day, and this bloke sneaked up behind me with a trolley. The next thing I knew, he told me, 'Get oot ra bluddy wey, Jimmy.' How was he to know that's my name?"

"How indeed?" groaned Fairclough. "We'll see you about lunchtime

tomorrow. Okay?"

"See you then," acknowledged Spinner.

At ten-fifteen on a cold November morning, Hank Newton nosed his car onto the main road beside the club and set off cautiously, keeping half an eye on the black ice warning light. The weather had changed dramatically overnight, and there had been a severe frost. A continuous white overcast covered the sky, threatening lots of snow, but rain had been forecast for the afternoon.

Apart from one mild skid, Newton and his passengers reached the local airfield untroubled by the prospect of becoming road accident statistics. Fairclough and Birky hurried into the welcoming warmth of the club room. They nodded to the two pilots, who were awaiting the arrival of business-class passengers in front of a television, and headed for the snack counter.

"Morning, Mrs. S.," said Birky. "Nice day for freezing to death."

"Hello, boys," replied a woman of about the same age as Birky's mother. She was wearing a thick Fair Isle jumper and she had a pair of glasses slung round her neck on a golden chain. "Coffee, is it?"

"Hot and strong," nodded Fairclough.

"Weather's a bit rough in the North Sea," added Mrs S. As the British Army travels disguised as civilians, she had assumed that Bert Carter's passengers were travelling north on oil business. They looked young enough to tolerate isolation if they could alternate it with fast living, and also very well off.

"The weather's not that much fun round here," said Birky, wondering what the North Sea had to do with anything. "You'd better make that three coffees, Mrs. S."

Bert Carter joined his customers wearing an RAF surplus flying overall and a woolly cap of black and white bands to show that he was a Spurs supporter. "Take off in about ten minutes," he announced after tasting coffee loaded heavily with sugar. "I'm waiting for three more blokes on their way to Aberdeen and the oil rigs. I'll be dropping you off on the way, okay?"

"Fine by us," nodded Fairclough.

"The weather's a bit rough along the east coast," added Carter, "but we should be there ahead of the rain."

The east coast of Scotland was cold and swept by a knife-like wind from the North Sea. Fairclough and Birky said goodbye to their pilot and three French divers, and hurried over to a waiting car. The newly-promoted Captain Spinner looked like a model for cold weather gear. His dusky face was outlined by the white fur lining of his anorak's hood. He was wearing thick trousers and fur-lined flying boots and gloves.

"Welcome to bonny Scotland, home of the incomplete brass money," he remarked to his colleagues as they loaded suitcases into the boot of his car.

"*You're* welcome to the place," returned Birky as the cold attacked his fillings. "Sir," he added as an afterthought.

"It's not always like this, you know," said Spinner, bracing himself against a more violent gust of the wind. "There's a rumour going round they had two warm days in the summer." He suddenly realized that Birky had called him 'sir'. "Nice to hear you showing proper respect for a senior officer, young Knocker."

"Up yours, sir," mumbled Birky, keeping his mouth almost closed to protect his fillings.

"I don't know how you stand this," said Fairclough when they had shut themselves in the oven-like interior of Spinner's car. "Freezing cold out there and boiling hot in here. If you get in and out of the car more than a couple of times, the expansions and contractions will shake your body to pieces."

"Not me," said Spinner, "I'm tough."

"Huh!" scoffed Birky. "Who reckoned it was cold at East Saltby? And that's right on the bloody south coast. How d'you manage up here?"

"It's all right at the distillery. There's full central heating. And you don't have to go out in the open if you don't want to. It's all connected up."

"It's not another moles' paradise, like AT-Sixteen?" said Fairclough.

"Seventeen," corrected Spinner. "And it's all on the surface – apart from a car park and a few cellars."

Spinner left the windswept airfield and headed deeper inland. A quarter of an hour later, he turned onto the expected new road that seemed to lead nowhere. The road eased around the flank of a low hill, and there was the distillery, screened partially from curious eyes by a row of naked trees. A dark green, chain-link fence strung on greenish concrete posts surrounded a collection of a dozen or so venerable buildings, which were

arranged in two groups. A three-lane road connected the encampments.

"Doesn't look all that new," remarked Birky. "Not like that place in Yorkshire."

"Mainly because the Colonel took over an existing distillery," Spinner explained. "One that had to close down. That way, he got everything he needed. There's five new buildings, the ones on the right there. Concrete, but they've been textured to blend in with the rest."

Spinner drove up to a double gate. The outer gate opened as he approached. A sentry checked the identification documents of the three occupants of the car before opening the inner gate.

"More security," remarked Fairclough.

"As the sign says, this is Ministry of Defence property," returned Spinner. "You can't have just anyone waltzing in here."

The road curved towards a double row of buildings. Spinner selected a branch that led to an underground car park, which was situated beneath a stubby office block and connected the encampments.

"We'll pick the bags up later," said Spinner. "Let's have lunch first."

"Bloody good idea," agreed Birky. "I'm starving. Nothing like a plane ride for giving you an appetite."

"The lift's over here," Spinner added.

The lift ascended when Spinner touched a panel labelled 'CAN'. In spite of his earlier assurance that the complex was all on the surface, Fairclough and Birky were still half expecting to go downwards.

"First floor, officers only, no peasants allowed," intoned Spinner as the lift doors slid apart.

A passing corporal clerk glanced at him with a surprised look on her unpainted face. The white paint of the walls of the corridor glowed with reflections of the orange carpet. Canteen sounds drifted to them from the left.

"Hello, hello! This looks very familiar," remarked Birky when they had pushed through a set of double doors.

"The canteen manager here used to be the assistant manager at AT-Seventeen," explained Spinner.

The idea of using moveable screens to divide the tables into intimate units had been transplanted to Berelogie. Those who had been moved north from AT-17 found the arrangement a welcome touch of continuity with their previous posting. Locals – former employees of the distillery –

had not thought much of it at first, mainly because it was new. But good food and heavily subsidized prices had converted all but a stubborn core of die-hards to the new way of life.

After lunch, Spinner took his friends on a tour of the distillery. They started on the other side of the road, immediately opposite the office block. A double-glazed, enclosed walkway, which was maintained at a comfortable temperature that very rarely matched conditions outside, ran along the inner side of both rows of buildings.

"There's not much to see over here," Spinner began, "but this is the start of the story. This first building is a storehouse for grain – that's the barley and maize. Behind it are the steeps where the barley gets steeped in pure Scottish water before it goes next door, to the malt barn."

Spinner opened a door and led the way inside. "These revolving drums are where malting takes place."

Fairclough and Birky stared solemnly at a series of large drums which were revolving slowly, Birky looked into one of them.

"Where's the malt, then?" he asked, expecting to see a dark brown, treacly liquid sloshing around inside.

"That's it there," said Spinner. "Malting means the wet barley is converted to a soluble sugar called maltose by the action of two enzymes called cytase and diastase. And it also grows rootlets and a small shoot at the other end. When that's about two thirds the length of the grain, malting's complete."

"Think he's just blinding us with science, or does he know what he's talking about?" Birky asked Fairclough.

"I can't see him bluffing Colonel Porter," returned Fairclough. "So he must know what he's talking about."

"Next door, in the place that looks like a Chinese pagoda," continued Spinner, "is the malt kiln. The malted barley is dried over a fire of peat and coke. This stops the malting process, and the peat-smoke gives it the traditional flavour for malt whisky. When it's dry and the diastase action has been stopped, the barley is milled to strip off the roots and shoots. Then it's allowed to rest."

"So it's not exactly a continuous production line?" observed Fairclough.

"No, we stick close to traditional methods in the early stages," said Spinner. "Well, with saving years at the maturation stage, we can afford to take a few days to get things started right. Anyway, when the barley's had

its rest, it's crunched up. It's very brittle after the smoking stage. Then it goes to the mash tuns to be stewed up with water.

"This gets rid of insoluble solid vegetable matter, which we sell off for cattle food. You're left with maltose and convertible starch. Part of this wort is used as it is for making malt whisky. They add more barley and the maize to the rest for making grain whisky. That gives you more starch. All this goes on in the end building."

"And that's what makes malt whisky more expensive?" said Fairclough. "Not putting all that other junk into it?"

"That and the extra work that goes into it," agreed Spinner. "Grain whisky's made from a brew containing only twenty-five per cent malted barley. We go down here now." He led the way along a subway under the road.

"When the barley and so on has been stewed up, the wort goes across the road in these pipes to what's called the tun room. In there, it's cooled and run into fermentation vessels called wash backs. Yeast extract goes in, and the usual fermentation converts the sugars and starches into alcohol."

"Just like a home brew kit," remarked Birky.

"A bloody big one," agreed Spinner as he held a door open for his colleagues.

"Phew, Gov! Smells like a brewery in here," commented Fairclough.

"Amazing, but you can get used to this horrible pong," Spinner assured him. "The brew ferments in these big wooden tubs for two or three days, chucking off tons of carbon dioxide, which we collect and sell off for industrial use. Putting in fire extinguishers and like that, I suppose.

"One of the local Jocks has a look at the brew every so often until he thinks it's ready for distillation. That seems to depend on all sorts of things – like the weather, what he had for his breakfast and the colour of his socks."

"Go on!" scoffed Birky.

"Straight up. No one knows how he does it, but he always manages gets it right. The Colonel keeps taking all sorts of samples to see if he can work out some test to tell him then it's ready, but I don't think he's going to put this bloke out of a job.

"The grain whisky's made in the back half of this row of buildings by a continuous process. More or less the same things happen in the malt process." Spinner dismissed the grain process with a wave of his hand as

being of no interest to the connoisseur.

The group continued through a wooden sliding door with scarred aluminium kick- and hand-plates. "This is where the malt whisky's made, in these spring-onion things called pot stills."

Birky opened his mouth.

"No, not that sort of pot, Knocker." Spinner jumped in before he could speak. "They're made of copper because that doesn't affect the taste of the whisky."

"I know a bloke made some rum once," Birky recalled. "In a copper pot an' all, with a copper tube for a condenser. The rum came out green!"

"What did it taste like?" asked Spinner.

"I dunno. He didn't dare try it in case he got copper poisoning or he went green too. He just ditched the whole lot."

"Well, our stuff has never gone green," Spinner assured him. "This is the final distillation stage. There's about ten per cent alcohol in the brew after fermentation. It's distilled once in the wash still, and again in this spirit still. Over here, in the glass box thing called a spirit safe, you can see the end of the normal process. This is Bruce McFee, our Chief Distiller. Two chaps from the Ministry of Defence, Bruce."

A short, craggy man of about fifty gave the visitors a brief smile, then he turned back to his work.

"He tests the liquid from the still and discards the first part, the fore-shots, because they contain aldehydes, which give you a rotten hangover. When the good stuff comes along, he switches the flow to the right and we keep that. Then he watches for the last part, the feints, because that's low in alcohol. The middle fraction goes on to the next stage. Everything else is recycled."

"That stuff looks more like vodka than Scotch," remarked Birky. "Or even your Scottish water."

"Drink some of that and it'd melt your socks," grinned Spinner. "It's a hundred and twenty-five proof. It picks up the colour from the barrels during the maturation process. Normally, that takes a minimum of three years, and it can take up to fifteen years. But we have our short cut."

"The cut's a bit more than short," remarked Fairclough.

"True," nodded Spinner. "Anyway, we're about to enter forbidden territory, as the Colonel calls it. So hang on to your hats."

20. BEHIND THE SCENES

Spinner produced a plastic security pass and pushed it into a slot beside a door at the end of the still house. A white panel above the slot turned green. Spinner ushered his guests into a small room of the same dimensions of an average lift.

"Army personnel and those in the know only from here on," he remarked. Then he pressed a button on the wall. "Captain Spinner, Captain Fairclough, Lieutenant Birky," he told a metal grill.

A second door opened in front of them, releasing the familiar rippling throb of pumps.

"Thanks to Colonel Porter, each batch of malt is collected and run through the processor here," Spinner resumed. "As you can see, it's more or less like the one you saw in Yorkshire, only bigger."

"And quieter," added Fairclough.

"Yes, I suppose it is. They've put sound-absorbing stuff on the walls and ceiling." Spinner tended to become vague when he moved away from his speciality. "This one nearest us is the malt processor. The one behind it is the grain processor. Again, it's more or less the same, except it's stuck on the end of a continuous process.

"When the raw spirit's been mellowed and the nasties taken out, it's stored in these tanks till I've had a go at it. They draw off a sample from each batch of malt and each tankful of grain and send them along to my lab. That's on the ground floor of the office building. I have a sniff and a slurp at it, then I tell them if the single malt's up to standard, and how to blend the cooking whisky. The colouring material goes in at that stage – just a very little bit goes in the single malt."

"Yeah, I've noticed that's a bit pale," commented Birky.

"Your true connoisseur's more interested in the taste than the colour," explained Spinner. "The last stage is through that door at the end. There's

tanks of the finished product and the bottling plant. It's all automatic and bloody noisy, but it's quite fun watching all those bottles charging around and never quite smashing into each other. You get what the Colonel calls 'machine-fascination', looking at it."

The door opened onto a world of conveyors. Empty bottles rattled past the visitors to the filler, where whisky was squirted into them so fast, it looked like well-shaken beer. Another section fitted either metal screw caps or lead foil-sealed corks, according to whether the line contained bottles of blended or malt whisky. Yet another machine slapped on ornate labels which proclaimed with great pride that the bottles contained 'Uisge Beatha' and were 'Produce of Scotland'.

Birky picked up a bottle which was standing forlornly on its own, rejected. "What's wrong with this?" he yelled, trying to fight the noise of the machinery.

"Label," bellowed Spinner, tapping the label to point out that it had slipped and stuck on askew. He led the visitors to the end of the bottling plant and through a double set of doors, which led to the enclosed walkway on the outside of the building.

Fairclough noticed that there was no handle on the outer door.

"This is a chuck out, is it?" asked Birky hopefully, still clutching his prisoner. "If the label's on wonky?"

"I suppose so," replied Spinner resignedly. "Stick it in your sky rocket quick, or they'll all want one. There are people around here who don't know about our bottling plant."

The reject disappeared into the capacious pocket of Birky's overcoat.

"Typical, isn't it," remarked Fairclough. "He can afford to buy thousands of bottles of Scotch, there's plenty back at the Bellside, but he's still on the scrounge."

"You're just jealous 'cause you didn't get there first," grinned Birky.

"Force of habit with Klocker," decided Spinner. "This last bit of the set-up is the most important one," he added, coming back to the business in hand. "It's where I do my thing."

The trio negotiated a revolving door and crossed a short entrance hall. Spinner waved to the sentry, who was sitting behind a curved counter, under a large sign which read 'RECEPTION' in clear, white capitals.

The sergeant waved back and did something under his counter. A door opened in front of Spinner and his guests.

"All the labs are on the ground floor," said Spinner. "There's offices on the first and second floors. And the canteen, of course. Down below is the car park, one of them. This is where I live."

He pushed open a door on which his name shone in golden letters. Spinner's den looked more like a pub than a laboratory. It contained rows and rows of shelves, lined with tightly packed four-ounce bottles, all bearing mysterious code letters and numbers instead of names. A large cupboard with a transparent plastic door bulged with glasses. The visitors identified a cream-enamelled object lurking in one corner as a washing and drying machine for used glasses.

"They can't have made all this lot since you arrived, surely," said Fairclough, surveying the ranks of bottles.

"Oh, no. Just the ones at this end," explained Spinner. "Most of the rest are from AT-Seventeen. I've found out one important thing since I signed up – us scientists never chuck anything out. We put every sample on a shelf when we've finished with it, and just leave it to fester."

"Us scientists?" scoffed Birky. "Since when?"

"Since I joined this lot," said Spinner. "It's funny, really, The Colonel gave me a real big build-up when I signed on. Now, I get blokes who've been in the business for years coming up to me and asking me what I think when they're stuck. They reckon I'm the expert, so whatever I say must be right. It's like a sort of game."

"What you've got to do is find out what they was going to do in the first place, then tell them to do that. It's a bit of a bugger at times, but you soon learn how to bluff your way along. Then, all of a sudden, you find you really do know what you're talking about. Then you're really in business."

While Birky made the inevitable cracks about Spinner's new status, Fairclough turned their friend's last statement over in his mind. The move had certainly been very good for Spinner. He had a new air of confidence now that he had the opportunity to make practical use of what had once been a hobby and he was making use of physical powers other than his strength.

Anyone recruited to George McAndrew's private enterprise group had to be a special sort of person, willing to risk liberty and career for a more comfortable life. Spinner had never been much of a talker, but a few weeks of responsibility had given him the ability to rival Birky. A lot of the change was a direct consequence of his new rank.

As Colonel Blackshaw had told them at the beginning of August, when he had brought the news of the success of *Operation Life-Preserver* and their promotions, many more doors are open to an officer than to a humble NCO. None of the experts who sought Spinner out now would have listened to a mere Corporal.

Just as the whole lot of them had acquired a 'posher' voice for talking to outsiders, Spinner had acquired a new vocabulary and fluency. Just like the rest of them, he was adapting successfully to survive in changed circumstances.

"Are we right, then?" asked Spinner.

"What?" said Fairclough.

"He was well away then," laughed Birky.

"I said, are we ready to have a look at the guest quarters and the last bit of the operation?" repeated Spinner.

"Sure, why not?" nodded Fairclough.

The visitors followed Spinner out of his laboratory and into a small room directly across the corridor. Spinner used his security card to open the door, then he pushed the card into a slot in the wall. The room descended. It was a lift. Doors on the opposite side slid apart.

"What's this, then?" Birky asked of no one in particular. "The Bunker Express Mark II?"

They were in an underground railway station similar to the ones at Buddford and Milaston. A train stood at the platform, moving forward in quantum jumps as machinery loaded what could only be cases of whisky onto the open trucks.

"We use the other line," said Spinner.

A torpedo shape waited behind them. To their right, the platform tapered away to nothing at the mouth of a tunnel. White globes, spaced at twenty yard intervals, glowed into the distance.

"We'd better get your bags first," Spinner remarked as he opened a door which led to the car park. His car was parked just beyond the door. Having retrieved their suitcases, Fairclough and Birky followed Spinner back to the station. "All aboard," he said. "Who wants to drive?"

Fairclough looked at Birky and raised his eyebrows.

"Leaving me to do all the bloody work, eh?" grinned Birky, who was a train-enthusiast. "Is it the same as the one at Jack Medder's place?"

"Better. It's all automatic," Spinner told him. "All you have to do is press

this button to close the doors. Then that one to start it up.”

“Takes all the fun out of it, doesn’t it?” observed Birky, following the instructions.

The automatic controls started a carefully calculated acceleration program to send the carriage hurtling into the tunnel. Thirty seconds later, it slowed to a halt in the bright lights of another station. Spinner led the way onto the platform. Fairclough and Birky began to look for an exit.

“Hang on a minute,” said Spinner. “The Scotch train’ll be here in a minute.”

They waited. A rushing noise surged from the other tunnel. The other train sighed to a stop opposite them. A second set of automatic machinery began to unload the cases of *Uisge Beatha*.

“Let’s have a look topside,” said Spinner.

He produced his security card to open part of what had looked like a blank wall and then to operate another lift. The trio emerged into a short corridor, which contained two doors – both made of steel and both looking very solid.

“That’s the way out,” said Spinner, nodding to the left-hand door. He used his card to open the other one. “This is the warehouse.”

In the large room, they found one of Colonel Porter’s special force keeping a watchful eye on the machinery that loaded cases of *Uisge Beatha* into standard containers while making occasional notes on his clipboard.

“Hello, Captain,” called the man, giving Spinner a casual salute. “Everything okay?” He snapped to attention when the visitors moved into sight round a stack of boxes.

“Carry on, Jenkins,” replied Spinner. “Yes, I’m just showing a couple of colleagues around the business.” His Midlands accent disappeared almost completely when he was talking to the Other Ranks.

“Does one’s heart good to see, sight like this,” drawled Fairclough, feasting his eyes on a mountain of artificially aged whisky.

“Not half, old boy,” added Birky. “Most impressive.”

“This way,” said Spinner, dragging them away from the glorious sight. “I’ll take you to your rooms.”

Another double-glazed walkway connected the residential section of the camp to the warehouse. Colonel Porter and his staff lived in a pair of two-storey buildings. They were concrete panels on a steel frame, but had

been faced with stone so that they blended in with the original buildings of the distillery. Thanks to a little artificial ageing, there were no external signs that this part of the camp was one hundred and fifty years younger than the rest.

Fairclough and Birky dumped their bags in guest quarters the size of a double room in a luxury hotel, then they returned to the corridor to see what their host was up to. Spinner hunted through his pockets and produced plastic cards bearing the visitors' names, initials, ranks and origins. These, he slotted into brass holders on their doors. His guests were amused to find themselves described as Captain A.P. Greene, MoD and Lieutenant N.W. Browne, MoD.

Spinner glanced at his watch. "I'll be back shortly. I just have to catch someone before he sods off for the weekend."

"Okay," replied Fairclough, "that'll give us time to unpack and have a quick wash."

He lifted his suitcase onto the king-size bed and began to transfer clothing to the drawers and cupboards in what looked like genuine Jacobean furniture to an untrained eye. Having discovered that the water piped to the adjoining bathroom was unquestionably hot as well as icy cold, he took a look at the rest of his quarters.

Sliding doors on the front of an oak cabinet revealed the blank eye of a twenty-three-inch television. The card in the cubby hole with the remote control unit gave operating instructions in seven language, European and Scandinavian, and hinted at the scope of Colonel Porter's actual or planned business. A drawer beneath the television contained a keyboard and an acoustic modem to allow the minicomputer to be connected to larger computers via the national telephone network.

The dark green telephone was perched on its own table, handily placed for both the writing desk and the minicomputer. An internal directory had been placed on a shelf below the telephone, along with a card to tell him, in seven languages, that national telephone numbers could be obtained by using the minicomputer or the exchange.

Four pictures, which combined both Scottish and military themes, broke the sweep of the wallpaper. The drinks cabinet featured a well-stocked refrigerated cabinet. Fairclough helped himself to a can of beer and rattled the bottles in the spirits section. Bottles of each of the local products, blended and single malt, combined forces to prop up a card which read:

'Welcome to Berelogie Experimental Station, Home of the Modern Uisge Beatha Industry'.

Discreet tags on the easy chairs announced that they were padded with non-flammable, non-toxic material – presumably to reassure the guest who was planning a bonfire. A modern table on a wheeled base looked distinctly out of place. On closer examination, Fairclough found a lever recessed into the underside. A gas system floated the table up to shoulder height. Fairclough pressed down, and succeeded in lowering it to coffee table height.

He was still playing with the gadget, trying to imagine circumstances under which he would want to use a table standing up, when Spinner's voice remarked, "See, I told you he'd be messing with it, too."

Fairclough looked up to see two heads peering round the door, one above the other, both wearing a broad grin.

"Come on," said Spinner, "we're off to see the boss."

The visitors found Colonel Porter waiting for them in the bar of the recreation building, which was connected to the living quarters by the inevitable walkway.

"What I don't understand," Fairclough confessed when they were all sitting down, clutching drinks, "is how you get away with all this. Here you are, quite openly making whisky. Everyone in the area must know the distillery is back in business. How come you're not knee-deep in Government inspectors? We don't expect to see any, but the locals must be used to Customs and Excise people dropping in here."

"It all hinges on what happens to the spirit we distil," replied the Colonel. "Officially, we're attempting to isolate the small quantities of a very active chemical present in the foreshots. In what way it's active is too Top Secret to discuss, of course. But as the yield of this chemical is so small, we have to make thousands of litres of whisky to isolate useful quantities."

"Ministry of Defence or no Ministry of Defence, I'd still expect to see a Revenue man watching to make sure you dump the surplus alcohol down a drain to get the fish drunk," Fairclough added.

"We couldn't just pour it away," smiled Porter. "Ethanol is a very valuable industrial chemical. It can be dehydrated, for instance, into ethylene, which can be made into polythene. Or it can be mixed with petrol to make so-called gasohol. Naturally, full returns of the ways in which we dispose of our surplus alcohol are made to the Combined Services Special Statistical

Unit at the MoD.”

“I’ll bet,” chuckled Fairclough.

“And of course, certain sections of the camp can be reached only by the use of a security card and positive identification.” Colonel Porter ticked them off on his fingers. “The processors, the bottling plant, the underground railway and the warehouses. Plus the laboratories and the offices on the second floor of that building. And if the alcohol goes out in containers instead of tankers, well, that’s the Ministry of Defence for you. They believe in doing things the hard way.

“It’s absolutely amazing what you can get away with if you use a little imagination. All you have to do is play on the collective paranoia of the Westminster Wonders, and you can pull off any sort of a bluff against them. They love secrets. Especially ones they can hint at to show how important they are, and how close to the centre of power.”

“What about unwanted visitors?” asked Fairclough. “We had a spot of trouble at the Bellside when a cover story rebounded on us. The Russians decided we were worth a look and sent a tame burglar round.”

“Yes, we heard about that,” chuckled the Colonel. “And how they had to put everyone in your local police station to sleep to get him out. One of the first things we did was to leak our alleged aims to the Americans and some rather dodgy NATO types, who must have sent carrier pigeons across the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. And we make sure they see our routine negative reports.

“I’ve heard they had a good laugh about what we’re up to at first. But recently, we’ve heard a few whispers to the effect they’re all setting up parallel projects. Politicians worried about this country getting ahead of them. Who knows, we might even have started something to rival the Space Race.”

“I thought you can only make Scotch in Scotland,” said Birky. “Even the Japs can’t manage anything like the real thing.”

“True enough, but it keeps a good many people employed. At home as well as abroad. And we’re such an efficient outfit, our profits more or less balance our running costs – on paper, at any rate. So there’s no political advantage to be gained from shutting us down, should any of our alleged masters feel the need for cuts. At the moment, we seem doomed to becoming disgustingly rich.”

“What a terrible fate,” laughed Fairclough.

"Excuse me, sir. Phone for Captain Greene," interrupted the corporal steward as he dumped a telephone on the table beside Fairclough and plugged it in to a handy wall socket.

"Just as a matter of interest," said Fairclough, "how do you know the call's for me, Corporal?"

"Simple, sir," smiled the steward. "The gentleman was certain the person he wants would be in here, and you're the only visitor who's a Captain. So you must be Captain Greene."

"Your name wouldn't Holmes, by any chance?"

"No, sir. It's Watson, actually. Yes, really." Corporal Watson sloped off, grinning.

Fairclough picked up the receiver. "Captain Greene. I believe you have a call for me?"

"Yes, sir," said a female voice. "Go ahead, caller."

"Is that you, laddie?" said a familiar voice.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. McSmith," said Fairclough for Birky's benefit. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, laddie, just fine," replied Major McAndrew. "Listen, I've got a wee job for you, if you can spare the time from your drinking."

"Sarcasm, sir, will get you nowhere. What's to do?"

"A wee spot of trouble from, eh, pirates."

"You know, I could have sworn you just said pirates."

His companions focussed their attention of Fairclough, trying to overhear the other half of the conversation.

"Aye, pirates," confirmed McAndrew. "When can you leave?"

"Anytime, I suppose," Fairclough admitted. "When we've packed again. Where are you, by the way? If you're at the North Pole, it might take us an hour or two to get there."

"Don't talk to me about the bloody North Pole," returned McAndrew. "I'm only about a hundred and twenty miles away, as the helicopter files. Just North of Newcastle. I can probably get a plane to your local airfield to pick you up before you can get there yourselves."

"Sounds like you've been here before, Mac."

"Once or twice, laddie. Let's have a word with Dan. I want to borrow his Chief Taster, if Spin's after some action."

Fairclough turned to Colonel Porter. "I'm sorry, Sir. We seem to have a slight emergency on our hands. Or even a major disaster, for all I know."

Mac's not exactly giving anything away, as usual, He'd like a word with you."

"I've been expecting this," nodded Colonel Porter, accepting the receiver.

"Interested in some action, to quote the man himself?" Fairclough added to Spinner.

"If I can get away," returned Spinner cautiously.

"This is unfortunate," said Colonel Porter, having finished his conversation with McAndrew. "Having to dash off just as soon as you've unpacked."

"What's going on?" demanded Birky, bursting with impatience.

"Your fearless leader and I have become partners recently in an exporting venture," explained the Colonel. "We've been having a spot of trouble lately. It looks as though matters have come to a head."

"What did he mean about pirates?" asked Birky.

"I'm not quite sure," Colonel Porter admitted. "Mac didn't want to say too much on an open line – not that I imagine anyone was listening in. You'll have to ask him when you see him."

"So we're off then?" said Birky, finishing his drink.

"How am I fixed for some leave, Dan?" asked Spinner.

"Leave?" said the Colonel. "You'll be going on the firm's business. And as we're well ahead of orders at the moment, and the process seems to be sufficiently stable, I think we can take the opportunity to let your understudies have a chance. Off you go, son."

"Thanks, Dan," beamed Spinner. "Come on, you two. We've got to get packed."

21. A WEE SPOT OF TROUBLE

An RAF passenger jet of the sort reserved for VIPs was crouching at the end of the runway when the staff car from Berelogie arrived at the nearby airfield. The pilot had remained in his aircraft to keep warm and to avoid questions from the curious. Colonel Porter's distillery had not been in operation long enough for the locals to become accustomed to military aircraft coming and going.

The airfield staff and a group of plane-spotting boys watched three very ordinary men in winter clothing transfer several pieces of luggage from the car to the aircraft, then climb aboard. If the passengers were important enough to travel in military style, the onlookers asked one another, why were they loading their own luggage?

Trailing a fog of purest black carbon, the aircraft screamed down the runway and swung out in a wide arc towards the sea. The spectators watched it disappear into the last rays of the sun, then they resumed their respective activities. It had been a red-letter day for the plane-spotters.

Captain Fairclough gave the pilot time to settle on his course before asking their destination.

"RAF Mitton," came the reply. "In a hell of a hurry, too. Must be a big flap on, eh?" The pilot's tone invited an explanation.

"Who knows?" said Birky casually. "No one ever tells us anything." He had followed Fairclough to the flight deck.

"You mean you don't know what's going on either?" The pilot didn't seem sure whether or not he was joking.

"Sounds a bit of a rum do to me," offered the navigator as his systems locked on to an automatic beacon.

"That's the Ministry of Defence for you," shrugged Fairclough. "They just point you somewhere and you hope there's someone at the other end to tell you why you're there."

"Which mob are you in?" said the navigator. "Or shouldn't we be asking?"

"Special Unit," said Fairclough cryptically, implying something like the SAS rather than a special statistical unit.

"Probably something we don't want to know," decided the navigator. "Coffee, anyone?" he added, producing a huge vacuum flask.

"Ah, good," said Birky, inspecting the control panel over the pilot's shoulder. "I was just wondering which button you press for room service."

Major George McAndrew had turned out in person to meet his colleagues and to drive them the last ten miles to their destination, a smallish town on the east coast of England. According to the map, the town was called Oxenbois, which looked like a blend of Saxon and Norman. The locals managed to pronounce the name *Ooksba*.

The evening rush hour traffic seemed surprisingly heavy for such an out-of-the-way place, even allowing for the fact that it was Friday night and the people would want to get home either to start the weekend in front of their televisions or to change to go out again to celebrate. A certain feeling of claustrophobia could be attributed to the rainstorm, which had blotted out the last traces of twilight and squashed the world in on the visitors.

Their destination turned out to be a pub called *Ye Blacke Swanne*. It had been built on the profits from a similarly named merchant vessel, which had traded between England and Australia in the previous century. Locals called the pub the *Dirty Duck*.

McAndrew squeezed his borrowed car in beside the landlord's and filled about ten per cent of the small car park. He led his companions round to the back of the pub and in through a door for which he had a key. They tramped up a steep, uncarpeted staircase in creaking wood, and found themselves at the brighter end of a dimly-lit corridor.

"Here we are, lads," McAndrew opened doors and assigned rooms. "Home sweet home for the next few days. Sling your gear inside."

"If this is the best you can do, I'm for slinging me bloody 'ook!" muttered Birky rebelliously.

"Courage, laddie," smiled McAndrew. "You're getting soft in your old age. The lights are just inside the door. Your keys are on the dressing table. I've switched all the radiators on. It'll soon be nice and warm for you. And the doings is at the end, on the left."

"Thank you, mother," grinned Fairclough.

"On yer bike," chuckled McAndrew. "Park your cases and let's get on."

He shepherded his companions to the far end of the corridor. Opposite the door marked 'WC' was another staircase, the twin of the one that they had just climbed.

"The rooms don't look too bad after all," commented Fairclough. "From the quick glimpse I got before the slave driver dragged me out again. Mine looks pretty comfortable."

"Yeah, I was just thinking the same," agreed Spinner. "The place may look a couple of hundred years old from the outside, but I think they must have done the rooms up after the War."

"Okay, okay, maybe it's not so bad after all," admitted Birky. "But it's not as posh as Spin's Scotch factory."

"That's more like it," encouraged McAndrew. He seemed dangerously cheerful. "Meet the rest of the gang. Mind the top step, by the way."

His companions staggered into the brightly-lit room on the top floor, each finding out for himself that some fiendish eighteenth-century builder had provided one step down into the room from the staircase.

They found themselves in a mixture of conference room and lounge bar. A polished counter ran along the wall to their right, facing a blazing fire in a large, stone fireplace. Six of the chairs circling it were filled with tough-looking men, all wearing a uniform of dark jersey, faded and much-patched jeans and black boots of various descriptions. McAndrew was dressed similarly, except that his jeans were almost new and they retained creases fore and aft.

A cloud of smoke rising above the back of another chair signified that it was either occupied or on fire.

"Yo, ho, ho!" said a well-known voice, which belonged in Devon rather than Durham.

The high-backed chair revolved on a short spindle to reveal, in a flash of highly polished buttons and sparkling gold braid, that Lieutenant-Commander Donald Smith had joined the party. Horse's neck in one hand and cigar in the other, he looked about two sheets to the wind. The Bell-siders exchanged greetings with him and asked if he knew what was going on. Smith returned an enigmatic smile of fairly complete ignorance.

"No wonder the Navy gets so many recruits," remarked Birky. "Look at the posh uniforms they get."

"I'm on my way to a do," smiled Smith.

"Come on, you lot," said McAndrew. "Enough of this messing about. Lads, I'd like you to meet my team. Captains Art Fairclough and Jim Spinner, and Lieutenant Norm Birky. Reading from the left, we have Skipper, Pete, Old Mick, Young Mick, Geoff and Terry."

Nods and hellos passed back and forth. Spinner's sponge-like memory soaked up the new names effortlessly. Fairclough and Birky knew that they would have to do some improvisation before they learned to put together names and faces accurately.

"I didn't know you'd be getting the Army in on this, young feller," commented Skipper, who looked old enough to be the Ancient Mariner. He had grown a beard as an expression of the impossibility of shaving his deeply-lined and weather-beaten face.

"Aye, lad," agreed Young Mick, who managed to look about the same age as his father. "The Navy, yes. But why the Army?" His accent was a curious mixture of Humberside superimposed on a Devon drawl similar to Lieutenant-Commander Smith's.

"When you want a job done, you often need to bring in a wide range of experts," explained McAndrew.

Birky opened his mouth to ask who they were going to burgle. Fairclough tapped his ankle. Birky subsided and started to take an interest in the bar.

"Well, let's give them a chance. They've only just got here," decided Skipper. "What are you drinking, lads?"

"Right, I'll put you in the picture now," said McAndrew when pints had been distributed.

The visitors followed their leader past the long conference table to a door at the far end of the room. They found themselves in a much smaller room which contained a table, a window, a blocked-up fireplace, and not much else apart from six chairs.

The pub had been expanded in the recent past to take over the upper floors of two adjoining shops as function rooms. Until they had worked out the geography of their situation, the visitors toyed with the notion that The *Mucky Duck* had annexed space in other dimensions, like the interior of Dr Who's *Tardis*.

"Right," said McAndrew as the group dropped onto dining chairs with a token layer of padding. "This is just a brief word on what's going on for the

moment. Hank is on his way from the Bellside right now, and so is the *Ned Kelly* with the rest of Don Smith's crew. You'll get the full treatment when we're all here.

"The lads out there are trawlermen who've had to give up fishing because they don't get the subsidies other European governments hand out to their fleets. So they've turned to smuggling, like Don's ancestors."

"But not for entirely the same reasons," offered Smith.

"A lot more necessity," nodded McAndrew. "Anyway, they're having trouble with pirates. And we're going to put a stop to it before it gets too out of hand."

"Sort of fishery protection duty?" remarked Smith.

"Something like that," agreed McAndrew. "Anyhow, the point is, these blokes think we're Service personnel moonlighting, running our own sort of security firm. I thought it would give them a bit more confidence in us if they knew we're not a bunch of gangsters. And we have a whole range of special equipment that they, as taxpayers, have helped to buy. Which is all ready and waiting at our disposal – as well as the experts I mentioned. But be a lot coy if they ask you what you do."

"I take it we're not to mention we're from the Ministry of Defence?" grinned Fairclough.

"They'd probably have heart attacks if you did," chuckled McAndrew. "And start worrying about be arrested as Russian spies. Well, I'm sure you want to unpack before dinner."

"Again," commented Birky.

"Do you want us in uniform?" asked Spinner. "'Cos I didn't bring mine."

"All taken care of," smiled McAndrew. "You'll find your official fishery protection gear in your rooms. If it doesn't fit, you've either been slimming or overeating. Dinner will be served next door. Don't wait for me, I'll be back in an hour."

"Guess who's shooting off so we can't put the thumbscrews on him," scoffed Birky.

The conference table doubled as a dining table. By the time the Bellsiders had washed, brushed up and changed into dark blue jeans and matching high-necked pullovers, the shiny oak table top had disappeared under a sequence of snowy tablecloths. Lieutenant-Commander Smith had already left to attend his naval occasion.

By tacit consent, the visitors and the ex-trawlermen restricted their conversation to topics of general interest through pre-dinner drinks and a meal designed to stick to the ribs on a cold autumn evening. Spinner, who had once been heavyweight champion of his regiment, talked about boxing. Old Mick and Geoff were keen students of form, and very interested in Birky's opinions on the merits of the following day's runners. Some bookie, probably not a poor one, was in for a tough time, Fairclough decided.

As his own area of special interest, rock music, seemed to be foreign territory to the former trawlermen, Fairclough contributed a recruiting lecture to a father and two uncles, who had jobless sons and nephews. The modern Army, he assured them, is no sort of second-best career and not just an escape from unemployment, as certain elements in the Labour Party maintain. And entry is by no means guaranteed to every hopeful who turns up on the recruiting centre doorstep. The Army is just as selective as any other employer, and a soldier's job is just as proper as any other. His audience was looking thoughtful at the end of the lecture.

Thick vegetable soup was followed by generous steaks with chips and peas, ice cream and then cheese and biscuits. The company had retired to the fireside by the time McAndrew and Hank Newton showed themselves. The new arrivals worked their way through the menu with keen appetites, then joined the drinkers' semicircle. Newton added golf to the topics of conversation. There was a course within easy reach of the town, and the senior trawlermen were keen students of the professional game on television.

While the attention of the others was suitably diverted, Fairclough attempted to pump McAndrew for information – more for something to do than in the hope of succeeding. The group spent a reasonably quiet Friday evening in the pub. There wasn't much else to do in Oxenbois anyway.

McAndrew held his detailed briefing session after breakfast the next morning. He had an audience of thirteen, and he had taken over the conference/dining room. The Ned Kelly, Lieutenant-Commander Smith's own private Motor Torpedo Boat, had arrived under the command of Sub-Lieutenant Logan, who always hid his flaming red hair under a black balaclava helmet on operations.

The vessel was moored under cover in a boat yard a couple of miles up

the coast. Smith had returned from his do, and he had changed into the approved casual clothing. The trawlermen, on the other hand, had business elsewhere, which allowed McAndrew to speak frankly. His first action was to spread a large map on the conference table.

"Right, let's get to it," said McAndrew, cutting short the reunion. "First, a bit of background. One of the main industries on this coast used to be fishing. The deep sea variety, But since Iceland pulled down the shutters on their waters, and we've had to share our waters with Europeans who've fished out their own waters, the industry's gone right down the drain.

"A trawler can come in with a full load, and with the price of fuel, wages and what they get at the quayside, still lose a packet. Which is why you can see trawlers worth millions of pounds tied up and just rusting away. That's why a few of the brighter sparks decided to try their hands at something else.

"They began exporting selected items to Norway. Others imitated them and set up exporting operations to the rest of that part of the world. Eventually, they all got together so they could buy in bulk, which does wonders for profit margins. They call themselves Skanda Exports, appropriately enough."

"So they're taking our Uisge Beatha across the North Sea," remarked Spinner. "To get the Vikings stoned."

"Not just booze," countered McAndrew. "It may come as a surprise to you gentlemen, but there's an incredible number of things you can buy retail in this country, retail remember, and flog at a two to three hundred per cent mark up in Scandinavia. When you buy wholesale, or direct from the manufacturer, the mark up becomes even more attractive.

"There's all sorts on the list – instant coffee, colour films, aspirins and similar patent medicines, branded sun tan oil, wine, even the odd item of Scandinavian furniture. Disposable nappies, I've been assured, are monstrously overpriced across the North Sea. And other things, like Coke and its imitators, have been taxed off the market by some of the governments, so there's no official price and you can ship over as much as you can carry.

"Fighting for top place on the list of highly desirable items is Scotch. If you've ever wondered why Swedes are such a bunch of miserable sods, it's because their government slaps on enough tax to make it cost three times the UK price. This is where we come into the picture. As Don's crew

should know by now, Captain James Spinner has joined an outfit which manufactures very drinkable whisky.

"I heard about Skanda Exports and the Scotch manufacturing scheme more or less together, and I've been acting as a liaison officer. Last week, Colonel Porter, the CO of the Scotch factory, he sent the first consignment of goods to this place. The last we saw of it was when we loaded it onto a trawler called *Cap's Rose*, which sailed on the afternoon of the same day."

"That's an odd name, *Cap's Rose*," observed Fairclough.

"Local custom," returned McAndrew. "The registered name is the *Green Rose*, or is it the *Blue Rose*? Anyway, the mob here give their boats a personal touch by using the name of the current skipper. So if his name's Fred, his boat's called *Fred's Rose*, or whatever. Okay?"

"Fine, thanks," nodded Fairclough.

"Anyway," continued McAndrew, having disposed of a distraction, "the round trip should have taken three days at the very outside. After four days, the locals got in touch with the people in Norway. The Rose hadn't arrived.

"We got the RAF Air/Sea Rescue boys to sweep the North Sea on either side of their route, but they found nothing. Not even wreckage. And the sea hadn't been that rough. Yesterday afternoon, we got a phone call from the bloody Shetlands. It was the skipper of the Rose . . ."

"Who's called Cap," said Birky to prove that he was awake.

"Brilliant, laddie," smiled McAndrew. "Anyhow, he told us they'd been ambushed by a pack of Icelandic trawlers. We assume they'd unloaded their catch at Grimsby and they were doing a bit of casual piracy on the way home. They made the crew of the Rose transfer the cargo at gun point, which can't have been too easy at sea, then they opened the sea cocks and scuttled it.

"Cap and his crew were locked up on one of their trawlers until yesterday. Then the Icelanders hauled them up on deck, made them get into a small boat, and told them to get rowing. They were a couple of miles from land at the time, so at least they had somewhere to head for.

"They landed on Bressay. That's this bit of an island here, down at the bottom on the right hand side." McAndrew stabbed the map with a finger, missing the target by no more than five miles. "Cap sold the rowing boat for a few quid and a lift to Lerwick, on the mainland. There's where he phoned us from, to give us the bad news.

"We've got a plane flying out there at the moment to pick them up at Sumburgh Airport. We've also got an RAF Nimrod doing a recce in the area. Our Raf colleagues should have recovered the bodies and prepared their reconnaissance report by this afternoon. We'll have another session then. This time with the locals, so watch what you say. For the benefit of the new arrivals, they know you're Navy men, but there's no need to tell them more than that. Okay?"

"It's a bit bloody cheeky, isn't it?" observed Sub-Lieutenant Kurt Bronski, the Ned Kelly's radar and radio operator. "Hijacking a British vessel in the middle of the North Sea with all that oil rig traffic around."

"Winning the last Cod War must have done their nerve some good," said Lieutenant-Commander Smith, implying that the result would have been quite different if he been in charge of the proceedings.

"And don't forget, they're hijacking smugglers," added McAndrew. "Who can't exactly complain to anyone."

"I can just see them going into their local cop shop to moan about getting done over by a bunch of Icelanders," chuckled Birky. "And getting locked up for smuggling."

"Which is just why they've come to us," said McAndrew through a predatory smile.

22. WARMING UP

Skipper and the other directors of Skanda Exports returned with the sad story of another trawler missing, presumed sunk. Repeated attempts had failed to make contact with a vessel on the run to Sweden. The storm cones had been hoisted. There would be no more sailings until the problem had been resolved.

In due course, the shipwrecked mariners arrived, looking none the worse for their ordeal. Cap turned out to be a huge, weather-beaten man of forty-something. None of the visitors dared to ask whether his name was a contracted form of *Captain*, or a tribute to his battered yachting cap, a form of headgear favoured by Lieutenant-Commander Smith when Ned Kelly went to war.

In the conference room on the top floor of the Blacke Swanne, a wholly owned subsidiary of Skanda Exports, Cap handed McAndrew a large, grey envelope and took his place at the table, looking as though he wanted to tear the whole world to pieces with his bare hands.

McAndrew took a brief look at the collection of aerial photographs, then passed them on to Smith for examination and distribution. Most of the delegates to the conference stared at the pictures, not quite knowing what to make of them but giving McAndrew a chance to study the accompanying report.

“Okay,” he said at last, “the reconnaissance plane has told us two things. Number one, there’s a fleet of about a dozen Icelandic trawlers hovering to the north of the Shetlands. Commander Smith has been in touch with the Admiralty, and they tell us they’ve been doing this hovering lark regularly for the last six weeks.

“It was assumed they’ve been refuelling and restocking between their fishing grounds and Grimsby, and changing crews – so the boats spend more time fishing and they cut out detours in and out of their home ports.

In short, an exercise in reducing overheads while the weather's not too grim."

"The trouble is, we can't send the Navy out to see them off the premises," remarked Smith. "Otherwise some anti-British sod will get up on his hind legs in the European Parliament and accuse us of being rotten to poor little Iceland. And our idiot Westminster Wonders won't tell him to get lost. Even though Iceland's not in the EEC."

"Keel-haul the bloody lot of them," muttered Old Mick, surrounding himself in a cloud of evil-smelling smoke from his pipe.

"Good idea," agreed Sub-Lieutenant Logan who, along with the rest of Ned Kelly's crew, had gained some practical experience of that ancient nautical art.

"The second thing we have from the RAF, gentlemen," continued McAndrew, raising his voice to drown the interrupters, "is these photographs of three more Icelandic trawlers, about a hundred miles to the south of the cluster. We assume they're the ones that attacked the latest missing trawler. I think we'd better hear from Cap now, on the subject of how they go about hijacking us."

"Well," said Cap, pulling the map closer, "I'd say we were about here." He rested a thick fingertip on the appropriate spot. "We'd just come out of a spot of rough weather, like, when we spotted three other blips on the radar. They looked like they were going to pass behind us at first, but they changed course when they were within about a mile of us.

"We didn't think anything of it at the time. But when they got near us, one of the bastards shot away our radio serials. They'd all got heavy machine guns mounted on the decks and the bridge. The ones on the decks were hidden by box affairs till they got in range. Like the Q-ships the Jerries had in the War. We didn't have a ghost of a chance, man. You've heard the rest, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid so, Cap," nodded McAndrew. "Questions so far?"

"Yes, I've got a question," said Fairclough over vague mutterings from Skipper. "Where did they intercept you again?"

Cap stuck his finger on the spot again.

Fairclough marked it with a neat pencil cross. "Hmm, interesting," he commented. "How fast can their trawlers go? I mean, compared to ours?"

"About the same speed," replied Cap. "A few knots faster without a cargo, of course."

Fairclough produced a pocket computer and plugged it into a handy wall socket.

"More questions? Or comments?" invited McAndrew.

The sight of Captain Fairclough touching buttons and scribbling figures on a small pad was too much of a distraction.

"Very interesting!" Fairclough said eventually, speaking very slowly with a thick German accent. He looked up from his calculations to find every eye in the room on him.

"What is?" asked Birky, beating the rest to it.

"Look at this. The interception point is nearer to here," Fairclough tapped Oxenbois with the blunt end of his pencil, "than the Icelandic cluster. Even allowing for a fifty per cent higher speed, this means they must have started out some time before Cap's Rose to make the interception. If they weren't hovering between us and Scandinavia, and the Navy tells us they weren't, they must have had advance information of both the trip and the destination before the Rose sailed."

"Not from us, matie," protested one of Cap's crew in an angry voice.

"And we didn't know we were sailing ourselves until that afternoon," added Cap. "So *we* couldn't have told any bugger else. And I know for a fact none of the other lads would have tipped the bastards off."

"I wasn't saying it was anyone in your organization," said Fairclough mildly, polishing his glasses and looking surprised that his remarks had caused offence. "Everything points to it being an outside job. The simplest way would be to post a man with a radio somewhere where he can watch the harbour. He'd contact the bad guys when you start loading, and perhaps again when you sail."

"That makes sense," said McAndrew, nodding wisely.

Cap's crew unclenched their fists.

"That still doesn't explain how they knew where the Rose was going," said Smith, tracing courses on the map with Fairclough's pencil. "On a direct route to the nearest point of Norway and Denmark, there's a lot of distance between the two routes around the middle of the North Sea, and it increases the closer you get to Scandinavia. Unless they've got their own spotter plane."

"That's something we can check," said McAndrew, making a note.

"What I can't see is how they got onto us in the first place," muttered Skipper.

"Bleedin' rotten security, old boy, that's how," Birky informed him.

McAndrew gave Birky a menacing look as the trawlermen returned to the boil.

"Bloody impossible!" scoffed one.

"Don't talk so phucking daft, man!" snarled another.

"None of our lads'd talk to strangers about the business," added Cap.

"What about the other end, though?" said McAndrew. "Can you trust your buyers to keep their traps firmly shut?"

The general silence conveyed the trawlermens' doubts.

"It's up to *you* to sort that out," McAndrew told Cap and Skipper. "In the meantime, we've got to do something about the leak at this end. I know just the man to handle it. What's the weather like for sailing?"

"It's bloody awful for landlubbers," replied Skipper, assuming that McAndrew had a voyage in mind. "Gales force eight at the moment, rising to storm force ten forecast."

"Good!" said McAndrew, radiating satisfaction.

"Good?" repeated Skipper in surprise.

"Aye, good," smiled McAndrew. "It gives us a good excuse for not trying to slip past the opposition with a cargo right away. And it also gives us time to catch up with them. That's all for now, lads." McAndrew retired to his room and his telephone. The trawlermen tried to pump his colleagues for information on his plans – in vain. The others made it perfectly clear that they were just as much in the dark as anyone else.

McAndrew spent a fair amount of the weekend on his telephone, trying to track someone down. To celebrate his eventual success, he organized a darts tournament on Sunday evening. The landlord even turned the board round to present the unmarked face in his honour. Some of the locals called loudly for brandy, proclaiming that the shock of seeing the dark side of the board was too much for them.

To the surprise of all, McAndrew romped through the preliminary rounds, and thrashed the local champion in the final, winning the bottle of Uisge Beatha single malt which he himself had put up as the prize. The Bellsiders retired wondering when their leader had installed a dartboard in his suite.

Another working week began, bringing with it a certain Archie McFee, a friend of McAndrew's from Army Intelligence. Colonel McFee's speciality

was offensive and defensive electronic warfare, and his services were in great demand, which explained McAndrew's difficulty in tracking him down. As a reward for services rendered to McAndrew in the main, and to other participants in *Operation Life-Preserver* incidentally, he had been promoted recently from Major to Lieutenant-Colonel.

Archie McFee had lost a little weight since the summer, but he still left an impression of a round, avuncular type of about forty. His journey to the Bellside Country Club in July, in order to help to protect it from Soviet-inspired intruders, had taken him just fifty miles from the Security & Surveillance Research and Development Establishment at Coprill Hall, near Chelmsford. Four months later, the call for assistance had taken him two hundred and forty miles from home.

Major McAndrew called another conference after breakfast. He began by introducing Colonel McFee and one of his subordinates. The other two members of the team were with their three vehicles, which they had locked away, out of sight. The sentries were armed and ready to use their weapons, as if expecting the town to rise up against them at any moment.

"I've got the latest weather forecast here," McAndrew announced, returning to business. "According to this, we're about to have a period of fairly light seas between gales. The next gale will be along during the night. I want someone to take a reserve trawler out this afternoon."

A chorus of protests greeted the request.

". . . sail be buggered!" Skipper ended emphatically, his voice suddenly becoming embarrassingly loud as the noise subsided. "We're not going out into a force ten. We'll smash half the cargo up."

The mutterings started to build up again.

"Belt up!" roared Spinner in his best parade ground voice, frightening the seagulls on the roof.

"Thank you," smiled McAndrew. "I wish you'd let me finish. As I said, I want someone to sail this afternoon, and keep going till they're out of sight of land. Then they can cruise about till the gale blows up, smash the boat about a bit and limp home with engine trouble."

"I'm not smashing up an expensive trawler without a bloody good reason," interrupted Skipper.

"If you'll shut up for one minute, I'll give you one," continued McAndrew. "When you start loading – with a dummy cargo, by the way – our friends with the radio will broadcast the news to the mob at sea. Archie, here, and

his men have the latest in radio detection equipment with them. Once we get that message, it'll tell us how they know the trawler's destination and where they're transmitting from."

"Then we grab the buggers," wheezed Young Mick.

"Not so fast, laddie," checked McAndrew. "I think you'll all agree we owe the pirates something?"

The meeting returned its whole-hearted agreement. Commander Smith contributed one of his special blood-curdling chuckles.

"Right, then," added McAndrew. "The trawler comes back tomorrow morning, knocked about by the weather. Purely cosmetic damage. You don't have to go mad. And with the engines making a lot of noise. The opposition shouldn't find that suspicious and they'll send another message to call off the hijackers. Which will give us another chance to pin-point them in the unlikely event of a miss the first time.

"When we've got the shore station spotted, we move into Phase Two of the operation, followed by Phase Three to put the tin hat on the whole thing. The last two parts of the operation will be carried out by my people and Mr. Smith's crew in the front line, with you trawlermen in reserve."

Protests and abuse drowned McAndrew's voice.

"It's not that we don't trust you," bellowed McAndrew, hammering on the table to restore order. "Or think you can't fight. It's just that when the shooting starts, and we feel sure there will be some, I don't want civilians getting in the way. We've had the training for this sort of situation. You haven't. What d'you think you've got an Army and a Navy for, anyway? Okay, how many of you are expert marksmen?"

The muttering died away. Young Mick took his glasses off and held up his hand.

"It's all right," McAndrew said through the laughter and jeers, "you won't be left out of things completely. We'll need you to look after prisoners and to act as prize crews when we dispossess the hijackers. You'll see some of the action, but from a safe distance. We guarantee to get rid of your pirates – but it has to be on our terms. What do you say, Cap? Skipper?"

There was some further argument, of course. In the end, both Cap and Skipper agreed, grudgingly, that it was a job for the professionals. McAndrew got his way, as usual.

Colonel McFee and his men positioned their vans in lockups which formed a triangle round Oxenbois. Then they established a radio net,

which included a station at the Blacke Swanne. A trawler, known as *Pete's Rose* to the locals, moved across from the trawler park and tied up opposite the warehouse of Skanda Exports. Mysterious and apparently heavy and fragile boxes disappeared into the holds. A cold wind drew the warmth from the early afternoon sun and helped to keep the workers from boiling from their efforts.

When the sun touched the hill behind the town, the trawler cast off and slipped away, heading to the east, as if on a trip to Norway.

Colonel McFee and his men had set their equipment running at 12:35 hours. By 13:00 hours, they had located five transmitters. After lunch, Smith and his crew drove away to install some new equipment aboard Ned Kelly, leaving the Bellsiders at the pub, checking weapons.

By the end of the afternoon, Colonel McFee's team had located sixteen fixed transmitters in addition to a host of mobile ones. Three could be eliminated immediately. They belonged to official bodies – the police, the fire brigade and the coastguard. Two more belonged to taxi firms.

Colonel McFee identified the rest as a TV repair firm, British Telecom talking to some men who had the pavement up in front of the gas showroom, the Gas Board talking to some men tracing a leak on a housing estate and three radio hams, who had better things to do than go to work.

One of the remaining transmissions had come from the harbour, which left two shore stations that had no right to be on the air. Both had made two sets of transmissions – the first within half of an hour of *Pete's Rose* starting to load cargo, and the second after the trawler had sailed. Each transmission had lasted about two and a half seconds.

Three more of Colonel McFee's men arrived via RAF Mitton to provide reliefs for the men in the vans. More radio hams were coming on the air, interrupting automatic frequency scans and triggering recording equipment. VHF bands were being ignored in favour of frequencies which could carry signals to the enemy fleet, five hundred miles away.

After dinner, Colonel McFee spread a large-scale map of Oxenbois on the table in the pub's top-floor back room and delivered a progress report. He began by marking two large crosses on the map.

"These are the houses that made the short transmissions," he announced. "There's no record of the occupants having radio licences, amateur or professional. As you can see, both houses have an excellent

view of the harbour from the windows at the back, both of them look equally likely as observation posts. The question is, how far do we go to find out which is the right one? Myself, I'm inclined to think they're both in on it."

"I've got a few ideas in that direction, Archie," said McAndrew with a significant glance in Birky's direction.

"Get your junior burglar kit out, Knocker," chuckled Spinner.

"One thing puzzles me, though," McAndrew added. "Why are these transmissions so short."

"They're using a squirt system," explained Colonel McFee. "You record your message, then you play it back at a much higher speed when you transmit it

"It's called SCABRAT," announced Spinner, giving the group the benefit of his retentive memory for useless information. "Otherwise, *Sealed Communications By Rapid Transmission*."

Colonel McFee blinked in surprise, then continued, "That's one name for it. We've stretched the signals out again for analysis. They're in Morse, groups of four characters, transmitted at sixteen times the base speed and sent three times at exactly sixty-second intervals."

"Saying what?" asked McAndrew.

Colonel McFee shrugged. "They're all in code, unfortunately."

"Any luck in that direction?" said Fairclough. "Cracking their code?"

"No, not yet," admitted the colonel. "We don't have a large enough sample yet. And it could well be a series of code words, which would be meaningless without the pre-arranged key."

"Are the pairs of signals the same? You know, the ones they made before and after the Rose sailed?" Fairclough added.

"No, they're all different," returned Colonel McFee.

"What about the signal from the harbour?" asked McAndrew.

"It came from where the Rose was moored," said Colonel McFee. "Just a quick burst of noise. I thought it might be a squirt signal at first, but there was no structure to it. A couple of beeps like the time signal on the radio, then nothing. I assume it was someone messing about with the radio."

"Nothing significant, then?"

The colonel shrugged. "Not really. Okay, who's going to buy me a pint now? Playing detective is thirsty work."

"Come on," said Birky. "Let's have a look at the bar before the Navy drink it dry."

Things began to happen. Discreet inquiries established that both of the sources of SCABRAT transmission had been rented by young couples who didn't go out to work. This was nothing unusual in the *Austere Eighties*, which the Labour Party liked to pretend were a replay of the *Tedious Thirties*, but the couples were managing to survive without drawing State benefits.

The source of their independent means defied cautious probing, but the investigators did manage to establish that the couples were 'foreign' – in the nationality sense, rather than from the point of view of local xenophobics who saw people from the next town as foreigners.

The man of House A was alleged to be a writer but no one had ever heard of him, including the larger bookshops in Newcastle, the BBC and the sixteen independent television companies, and the national archives responsible for holding copies of all publications issued in the British Isles.

The occupants of House B had even less to offer in the way of visible means of support and they kept themselves to themselves so closely that the neighbours thought that they were either fugitives from justice or pools winners seeking seclusion. Regarding their anonymity as proof that they were up to something, McAndrew gave the naval contingent the job of keeping watch on the two sets of suspects.

Pete's Rose limped back to port early on Tuesday afternoon, 'storm'-battered but still afloat by some miracle. The expected gale had been hanging back for bets. Heavy seas had not blown up until just after a grey dawn. The crew made their vessel fast to the landing stage and shouted accounts of their battles with huge waves to the quayside loungers, enjoying the chance to tell tall tales in the line of duty.

Colonel McFee and his men had checked the overnight recordings and found no new transmissions from the enemy. As Pete's Rose crawled over the horizon, they settled back to watch the flickering lights on the displays of the minicomputers that controlled the 'Bloodhound' frequency scanners. An RAF Nimrod had provided McAndrew and Smith with another reconnaissance report.

"There they are." McAndrew selected a photograph from the new batch.

"Three of them off to intercept Pete's Rose. Looks like Art was right about them starting out as soon as the trawler starts loading."

"The trouble is," contributed Fairclough, attracted by the sound of his name, "we can't tell which message sent them on their way. They left the fleet after the second one."

"True enough," nodded Smith. "But they should be sending again to call off the dogs pretty soon. We'll have them then."

Half an hour later, the radiophone buzzed. Captain Fairclough picked up the receiver. "Hello? Yes. Okay, I'll tell him. Well done! Message from Archie, Mac. House B has just made a squirt transmission – in code. Looks like our phoney literary friend could be in the clear."

"That's fine," beamed McAndrew. "Get hold of Knocker, laddie. We'll set things up for the next step."

"Interesting, that," mused Smith as Fairclough used the house telephone to call the bar downstairs. "If House A is in the clear from our point of view, who are they spying on?"

"One of life's little mysteries," admitted McAndrew.

Five minutes later, Spinner and Birky strolled into the room at the top of the pub, carrying half empty pint pots. "What's up?" asked Spinner. "You caught us right in the middle of a game of a thousand and one. For the Town Hall clock."

Before McAndrew could reply, the radiophone buzzed. As he was the nearest, Birky picked up the receiver.

"Hello? What? Yes, got it, Okay, good work! That was your mate Archie, Mac. He says House A's just been on the air, Scabratting. I thought it'd be them."

"Shee-it!" sighed McAndrew. "That buggers it."

"What?" said Birky and Spinner together, unable to understand McAndrew's strange reaction to what should have been good news.

"It's just that we've already had a call from Archie to say it's House B," Fairclough explained. "Now we're back to square one."

"Get us Archie, laddie," sighed McAndrew. "Put him on the speaker."

Birky fiddled with the controls of the radiophone, then he pressed the call button.

"Command vehicle, what is it, Mac?" said a voice.

"What's this about House A getting in on the act too?" said McAndrew.

"Looks like they're both at it, Mac," said Colonel McFee.

"I suppose they're still sending in code?"

"Yes, but we've recorded a lot more this time. I suspect the earlier messages were just pre-arranged code words to cover standard situations. These latest ones are a bit more chatty because they have to cover something out of the ordinary. I'm just setting up a phone link to our main computer at Coprill Hall. I should have something more for you shortly."

"Okay, we'll expect a call, Archie," said McAndrew.

23. SPYCATCHERS

A quarter of an hour went by, then the radio-telephone gave the expected buzz. Above the faint hiss from the speaker could be heard a tapping in the background as a silenced teletypewriter chatted with the distant computer.

"Hello, Mac?" said Colonel McFee as the tapping ended.

"Yes, Archie?" replied McAndrew as silence fell in the conference room.

"I've got something and nothing for you, Both sets of messages are in the same code, but we can't crack it on the information we've got. My best guess is that it involves a transposition based on some foreign language, possibly Icelandic, but that's not one we've met before."

"I shouldn't waste too much time on it," McAndrew advised, "we're about to try a more direct approach."

"It's an intellectual challenge now," returned Colonel McFee. "I've still got one or two things up my sleeve, and the experience might prove useful in the future."

A light began to flash on the radio-telephone. "Hang on, Archie, we've got another call." McAndrew changed channels. "Hello, Mac here. What can I do you for?"

"Kurt Bronski here, Mac, Our lot are going out. What d'you want us to do?" Bronski was in charge of the naval surveillance team covering House B.

"How are they going? On foot, by car, what?"

"Car. They've just got in."

"Follow them – at a very discreet distance. Call us when you know where they're going."

"Okay, on our way, over and out," said Bronski.

McAndrew clicked the channel selector. "Go ahead, Archie."

Heavy rain lashed down suddenly as a thunderstorm swept in from the sea. Static from the lightning erupted from the speaker as a gush of

crackling. Then an explosion of thunder crashed across the rooftops and rattled the windows.

"Say again, Archie," McAndrew said. "We're getting some weather."

"Yes, we're just thinking about building an Arc ourselves," laughed Colonel McFee. "I was saying it could be that the opposition have put two independent teams in the field. They must be pretty cautious people. I'd put the odds of tracking them down without all our specialized equipment at zero. But I suppose their hijackings pay off at the rate of tens of thousands of pounds a time. They might also be using a double-cover system."

"What's that when it's at home?" asked Fairclough.

"It could well be that the two messages confirm each other," said the colonel. "So that if we capture one station, due to their carelessness and, say, a bloody good private investigator, and start sending false messages, they'll know something's wrong. You may have noticed the transmissions we've intercepted have been made in the same order – B first, then A some ten to fifteen minutes later. The order of the transmissions and the time interval may or may not be significant."

"Bloody complicated, innit?" remarked Birky.

"That's the spy game for you," replied Colonel McFee. "Mind you, I'm only suggesting that's how they *could* be playing it. We don't actually know the opposition's views on the subject, They could equally well be using a much simpler system."

"Aye, and we're not about to ask them just yet," commented McAndrew. "No new transmissions, I take it?"

"No, just the same gang as before. Did you know it's also raining in Hamburg, Oslo and Stavanger?"

"How d'you know that, Archie?"

"One of the hams is working his chess partners."

"How incredibly boring! Okay, Archie. We'll carry on with the plan this end. We'll be in touch later."

"Okay, Mac. Over and out."

"Go on, what's this plan?" invited Birky. "Is there time for another pint?"

"How many have you had?" asked McAndrew, ignoring the first question."

"Two. And a half."

"How long have you been drinking half pints?"

"That's what they were playing darts for, a half."

"Okay, you can have another half. But don't go too far. I might need you almost immediately."

The radio-telephone interrupted McAndrew with a buzz.

"Kurt here," reported Sub-Lieutenant Bronski. "Our lot are off to Newcastle. Can't think why. It's absolutely pissing down. Only an idiot'd be out in this lot."

"Right, Kurt," said McAndrew. "Stick with them for the moment. Call us if they turn back."

"Roger, dodger. Over and out."

"Knocker! Got a job for you," called McAndrew.

"What sort of job?" Birky returned from the bar with a tray of half-pint glasses.

"How d'you fancy a spot of gentle house-breaking, laddie?"

"In this rain? Have a bleedin' heart, Mac."

"I do, laddie. It's made of stone. You go with him, Art. We don't want him picked up for drunken driving."

"Whosh drunk?" slurred Birky, weaving dramatically and alarmingly as he set a drink in front of McAndrew. "Never a drop spilled."

"Lucky for you," threatened McAndrew, returning to the table after a hurried retreat in case of accidents. "Take a camera with you, Art. We want that code, if you can find it. The chances are this lot are just a bunch of amateurs with a lot of fancy equipment, and it's written down somewhere. Off you go."

Fairclough and Birky headed for their rooms on the floor below in search of waterproof clothing. McAndrew contacted the other naval surveillance team.

"Mac here, Al. What are your lot doing at the moment?"

"Not a lot," replied Sub-Lieutenant Logan. "They're at the back of the house. Could be watching the landing stage for activity."

"I see from the reports they've got a car. Where is it right now?"

"Yes, it's parked on the road, in front of the house. It's a fairly old *Escort* sixteen hundred. A red one."

"Right; I'll be in touch later. Over and out."

"What's that about the car?" asked Spinner, picking out a significant point of the exchange.

"Something's going to happen to it," replied McAndrew, smirking mysteriously.

Captain Fairclough parked the car round the corner from House B. The rain was as bad as ever, drumming loudly on the roof, but it kept possible witnesses off the streets. Sodium street lamps began to glow deepest red in belated response to the premature night that the storm had brought.

Fairclough looked at Birky, then at the rain. He removed the ignition key but he made no move to release his seat belt. So much rain was coming down that it couldn't last more than a few minutes more. Birky's posture made clear his intention to stay put and wait until the downpour had done its worst.

The storm moved inland. Rivers flowed down the gutters, forming huge ponds at flooded drains. Fairclough and Birky stepped out into light drizzle and strolled round the corner. Birky opened the porch door of House B as quickly as if he had a key. The house-breakers paused to slip on plastic overshoes in order to be certain not to leave the ghost of a damp footprint.

Birky made short work of the front door and led the way upstairs. He found the transmitter in the first place that he looked – in a cardboard box which had once contained a stereo tape deck, which was tucked neatly out of sight under a chest of drawers in the spare bedroom.

There was a message pad under the yellowed newspaper in the bottom drawer of the chest and a single sheet of paper. As anticipated, someone had typed a transposition code for the alphabet and the ten basic numbers across the top of the sheet. Below the code was a long column of four-letter groups, and beside each group, an explanation in a foreign language, which Fairclough assumed was Icelandic.

While Fairclough photographed both transmitter and code, Birky had a quick prowling around the house to see if he could find anything else of interest. Fairclough replaced the carton under the chest of drawers, and moved the code and the message pad back to their original positions under the sheet of newspaper. Some former tenant of the house had been a *Daily Telegraph* reader.

Disappointingly, the top sheet of the message pad lacked interesting indentations. The person who used it was in the habit of either removing the top sheet or sliding something firm beneath it. After a last check of the bedroom, Fairclough went downstairs. He found Birky in the hall, eating an apple.

"You idiot! Where did you get that?" he hissed.

"There's a bowl full of them in there. Three or four pounds." Birky

turned a thumb over his left shoulder.

"And what if they notice some bugger's been nicking their apples?"

"Who counts apples?"

Fairclough had no answer to such devastatingly simple logic. "Find anything else?"

"There's about a grand in fivers behind the frozen peas in the freezer compartment of the fridge."

"That explains what they're living on. Right, let's go."

The wind had picked up. Occasional gusts seemed to blow thin drizzle horizontally, right into unprotected faces of pedestrians. A police car cruised past as they turned the corner and approached their car. Birky nudged Fairclough with an elbow and winked cheekily.

Making small puddles on the rubber mats at their feet, the house-breakers reported the success of their mission to Major McAndrew, then they drove to the command vehicle of Colonel McFee's force to drop off the film.

Back at the pub, McAndrew stirred more sugar into his coffee and made a mental note to call off Sub-Lieutenant Bronski and his surveillance partner when they returned to radio range on the way back from Newcastle.

Fairclough and Birky returned to the top floor of the Blacke Swanne and shed their anoraks, noticing with approval the large flask of coffee and a plate of biscuits on the conference table.

"Don't get too comfortable," warned McAndrew. "I've got another job for you. Two, in fact."

"Not out in the bloody rain again!" moaned Birky, throwing himself onto a chair. "Not till we've had some coffee."

"Very thirsty work, is spying," agreed Fairclough.

"Put plenty of milk in it," said McAndrew. "Hang on." He turned back to the radio-telephone, which was buzzing, and touched a button.

"Al Logan here," crackled from the speaker as distant lightning spoke to them. "Someone's leaving our place. It's the man. He's getting into the car."

"You follow him, Al," McAndrew cut in. "Leave Jake there to watch the house. I'll send someone round with a car in a few minutes."

"Okay, but Jake says you're a rotten sod, turning him out into this rain. Over and out."

"I've been called worse," said McAndrew with a grim smile.

"I can believe that," nodded Fairclough.

"You two can take your time over your coffee now," McAndrew added. "There's been a slight change of plan."

"Yeah, well, I think I'll keep this handy." Birky carried on mixing coffee, milk and sugar into a four-cup vacuum flask. "Just in case there's another slight change of plan."

"Suit yourself, laddie." McAndrew shrugged, then he picked up the house phone to tell Hank Newton to go to House A to rescue Jake before he drowned.

Ten minutes passed, then Logan called again. "Hey, guess what he's doing?" he challenged.

"I'll buy it," replied McAndrew.

"He's going swimming."

"Don't bugger me about, laddie."

"No, straight up. He must have been wearing a wetsuit under his ordinary clothes. He's just getting his air bottle out of the boot now."

"Where are you?"

"A bit over a quarter of a mile north of you."

"Hang on there, but stay out of sight. I'm sending Knocker and Art out to you," decided McAndrew.

Fairclough and Birky reached Alan Logan's position just in time to see the male spy enter the water. His wetsuit was black, and so was the single air bottle on his back. As the secret agent swam out from the shore, he could have been mistaken for a seal. No one had figured out what he was up to. Birky dismissed the problem with a shrug and got on with the business in hand – stealing the man's car.

A quarter of an hour later, a car pulled up outside House A. One of the occupants hurried up the front path and rang the bell. The young woman who answered the summons admitted being the wife of the owner of a red Ford *Escort* with the registration number quoted by the caller.

Hank Newton identified himself as Detective Sergeant Robinson, but failed to offer any identification. Worried about her husband, the woman didn't ask for any. Newton calmed her fears by telling her that he had reason to believe that the car had been stolen by joy-riders, and asked whether she would like it back.

The unmarked 'police' car drove away, taking the woman to identify her vehicle and to check its contents. Fairclough and Birky waited until Newton and Company were out of sight, then got on with their third crime of the day – another burglary.

Their second search was more successful than the first. As well as another copy of the code, they found the text of the last two messages from House A and their coded version. The piece of paper had been crumpled into a ball and dropped into a pedal bin. The house-breakers dropped off another roll of film at Colonel McFee's van and returned to the Dirty Duck to await further orders.

The language used by the spies turned out to be Icelandic, but a variation used only by fishermen who wanted to tell colleagues where they were catching fish while excluding outsiders. Provided with a solid foundation of information, Colonel McFee was able to translate all of the messages received to date.

Crystal Rose loading. 14:18, read the first to be recorded. House A had transmitted the same information ten minutes later. The second pair of messages gave the time of sailing of Pete's Rose. As expected, the final pair were warnings that Pete's Rose had returned to harbour without completing its mission. House B had also added the probable reason for the early return – storm damage.

As there was no mention of the supposed destination of Pete's Rose, a significant piece of the puzzle continued to elude the men of Skanda Exports and their allies – unless the information had been divined by magical means and transmitted before Colonel McFee and his men had started to scan the ether.

"Bugs," Cap decided at a briefing of the senior trawlermen. "The bastards have got us bugged. They've been listening to every word we say."

"No chance!" countered Pete. "They'd have known the last run was a bluff and we're on to them. They'd have legged it by now."

"Not if they wanted us to think they'd fallen for the bluff," insisted Cap.

"Why?" demanded Pete.

"We've been into that," interrupted McAndrew, cutting the argument short. "We've swept this place for bugs three times, and come up clean each time. There has to be some other explanation."

"Reading minds," muttered Old Mick darkly. "Learned it off them

Russians, I'll be bound."

"What minds?" muttered Birky, grinning innocently.

"That won't stand up either," insisted Pete.

"All right, let's not get in a panic about how they're doing it," said McAndrew. "We can still sort them out without knowing every last detail of how they're doing it."

Colonel McFee and his men packed up and left on another job, promising to return when McAndrew was ready to put the next part of his master plan into operation. After a session with his colleagues to finish the planning for Phases Two and Three, the waiting began – waiting for the necessary break in the weather.

One wet, stormy day passed, then another. The crew of John's Star, the second vessel to be hijacked, returned from the Shetlands, boiling mad and ready to invade Iceland. They had been trying to talk the crew of the RAF rescue aircraft into making a slight detour to the north to drop a few bombs.

Lieutenant-Commander Smith reported that the Ned Kelly was ready for instant action. A launch, captured during *Operation Blackbird* and not returned to its original owners, joined the fleet the same day. Then Smith and Fairclough disappeared for most of an afternoon. McAndrew told the others only that they were preparing for Phase Three.

The weather improved gradually. At the end of the week, the rain gave up. Clouds thinned for the first time in days, allowing the sun to make sure that the town had not been washed away. Colonel McFee and his men returned. The naval contingent resumed their watch on the spies.

At around lunchtime on Friday, Cap's new trawler left the park and began to load a genuine cargo. Seamen are traditionally reluctant to sail on a Friday, but the trawlermen were sure that any bad luck would fall on their enemies.

A second trawler joined Cap's Castle in front of the landing stage. Colonel McFee reported that both pairs of spies had transmitted messages naming the trawlers and giving the time when they had started to take cargo aboard. There had been no previous messages giving details of the trawlers' destinations, which were known only to the skippers anyway.

Ten minutes after the second set of transmissions from House A, Sub-Lieutenant Logan called Major McAndrew's command post to report that his people were leaving the house. A short time later, Logan reported: "Guess what? The bugger's going swimming again."

"Where are you?" said McAndrew.

"We're about half a mile up the coast from you. I reckon he's brought his wife along to watch the car. To make sure Knocker doesn't nick it again."

"See if you can tell which way he's going," ordered McAndrew.

"No chance," offered CPO Jake Millington, the Ned Kelly's chief engineer. "He was going straight out to sea when he submerged."

"What about his bubbles?"

"There aren't any. He must be on an oxygen rebreather."

"That's not usual, is it?" asked McAndrew. "I thought they used compressed air for skin diving?"

"They do. Oxygen's bloody tricky stuff to handle. There's something very odd going on here. You use oxygen on special operations when you don't want to leave a trail of bubbles."

"Okay," said McAndrew, his brows drawn into a puzzled frown. "Let us know if anything happens. Over and out."

After a bout of fruitless thinking, McAndrew left Fairclough in charge of the command centre at the pub and strolled down to the trawlers to watch the loading, buried in his sheepskin coat. The vessels were riding up on the tide. Cap invited him onto the bridge to get a better view.

"What's new?" asked the master of Cap's New Rose.

"Something and nothing," replied McAndrew, borrowing a catch-phrase from Colonel McFee. "We intercepted messages from the local lot reporting two trawlers are loading. And a Nimrod keeping an eye on the oil rigs in the North Sea has reported a bunch of Icelandic trawlers steaming south – presumed destination Fleetwood to unload fish. They're clogging it a bit, the Raf boys said. Looks like they know where to go, and they were only waiting for the off."

"So they're on their way, are they?" mused Cap. "Well, they're in for a nasty shock this time."

"Aye, they are that. You know, that's pretty clever machinery Archie's brought. He even picked up whoever it was messing about with your radios just now."

"It can't be that clever, son," chuckled Cap. "No one's been messing about with our radio."

"Are you sure?" frowned McAndrew. "Archie reckons all his Bloodhounds picked up signals from both trawlers."

"When was this?" frowned Cap.

"Can't be more than two or three minutes ago. Just before I left the pub to come down here. We assumed someone switched them on to see if they were working."

"Your mate Archie must be wrong," insisted Cap. "No one's been near the radio. We've all been busy with the loading. Hang on a tick. Ahoy, the Castle," he roared at the other trawler.

The other skipper stuck his head out of a wheelhouse window.

"Have any of your lads been on the radio, Terry?"

"No, we've been too busy. Why?"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter. There, you see?" Cap turned back to McAndrew. "What price your precious machines now?"

"Let's get to the bottom of this," said McAndrew, pulling a radio transceiver from his coat pocket. "Mac to Archie."

"What is it, Mac?" responded Colonel McFee.

"You know those signals you picked up from the trawlers? Well, neither of them used their radios. Looks like your gear is on the blink."

"Not a chance. Everything's working perfectly. We definitely picked up transmissions from the trawlers. All three systems recorded them each time." Colonel McFee paused for a few seconds. "Just a minute, I've had an idea. Have you got any free-diving equipment there?"

"We can try and scare some up for you," replied Cap, conjuring up a mental picture of Archie McFee's rotund figure. "What do you want it for?"

"I'll tell you about it later." Colonel McFee seemed to have been taking lessons in being mysterious from McAndrew.

A figure in a light blue wetsuit slipped unobtrusively into uneasy, oily water behind a screen of boxes and dived under Cap's trawler. Colonel McFee bubbled around the vessel, pausing at the stern for about two or three minutes, before heading for Terry's Castle.

He climbed back aboard Cap's Rose on the seaward side and dripped into the cabin, muttering something about freezing to death. With hands that had turned an interesting mixture of blue and purple, the colonel fumbled at pouches on his weighted belt and dropped two black objects

onto the table. A stiff tot of Uisge Beatha brought healthier colour back to his round face.

"That explains a lot," he beamed. "I was rather puzzled about how they managed to intercept your ships so cleanly."

"Don't keep it to yourself," prompted McAndrew.

"These two ships, and possibly all the others, were bugged. It's as simple as that."

"You mean our underwater friend was planting them?"

"No, I don't think so," said Colonel McFee. "I think all he was doing was checking them. Less chance of being spotted if he has to do it in broad daylight. No, he probably planted them one dark night, over at the trawler park. When he went for his swim on Tuesday, it must have been to deactivate the device on Pete's Rose."

"How come you didn't pick the bug up?" asked McAndrew.

"I'd have to take them apart to find that out, but I don't think they're transmitting at the moment. I'd say our friend activates and tests them when he goes swimming. The brief signals we picked up would be the tests. Then when the trawlers are at sea, the Icelanders could switch them on with a transmission on the right frequency. In much the same way as NASA and the JPL people switch on devices in their robot spacecraft. Then, all they have to do is home in on the bleeps. He must have deactivated the device on Pete's Rose on Tuesday to save the power packs."

"Bugging, buggers!" snarled Cap, giving the black box a baleful stare. "It's so simple, isn't it?"

"The best plans usually are," remarked the colonel. "Now all we have to do is find out how they know your destination. These things are fairly useless if you can't get close enough to make the interception."

"I've been giving the matter some thought," said McAndrew. "Cap, make out a list of trips your lot have made in, say, the last couple of months. Names of trawlers and their destination. Including today's trips."

Cap sat down at the table and began to write, stimulating his thought processes with the odd swig from a glass of Uisge Beatha.

"I thought that was it," McAndrew said when Cap had finished. "Look at this. Every trip to Norway was made by one of the Roses. Denmark, it's the Castle Line. And it's the same thing again for the Sweden run – a Star every time. What we have, in essence, is three independent fleets operating from the same base but to their own contacts in different countries."

"All the mob up the hill have to do is read the name of the boat when it comes to the landing stage to load, and they know where it's going. That's why they included the name of the trawler in their first transmissions."

"Shit and shell-shock," groaned Cap. "Isn't it all so bloody obvious?"

"It is when you get it into the right form," said Colonel McFee. "All the information may have been right under our noses, but don't forget all the hard work that went into assembling it."

"Next time they have one of the Army's recruiting commercials on the box, I'll stand to attention and salute all through the whole bloody thing," vowed the skipper of Terry's Castle, who had brought the wetsuit and the air tank.

"Aye, and if you see someone standing next to you," said Cap, "it'll be me."

"Right," said McAndrew with a beam of pleasure draped across his features, "we're a hell of a lot further on now. Plans. As far as the two trawlers are concerned, nothing has changed. These little buggers can go aboard the Ned Kelly and the launch." He picked up the black boxes. "That should make things easier for us. We won't have to look for the opposition – they'll be doing their level best to find us. Do you remember which is which, Archie, in case there's any difference?"

"Yes, I scratched the one I took off this boat with my knife," nodded Colonel McFee.

"Good!" McAndrew took a notebook from a pocket and wrote: 'Scratch = Ned'. "That about wraps it up for the moment. No one with any sense goes into battle without first securing his rear."

"Who said that?" invited Cap.

"I just did," replied McAndrew.

"Oh! I thought it might have been someone famous," said the trawler captain.

"Infamous, more like," chuckled Colonel McFee.

"Come on, back to work," said McAndrew, fighting against an infectious grin. "We still have the final phases of the operation to see through."

"I'll tell you something you've forgotten," remarked Colonel McFee, stropping him dead in his tracks.

"What's that?" McAndrew developed a worried look.

"You haven't thought up a name for the operation. I thought that was the first action of every commander worth his salt."

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

"So we haven't," agreed McAndrew in relieved tones. "Any ideas? Or is that a daft question?"

"I thought you'd never ask," grinned Colonel McFee. "How about *Operation Icebreaker*?"

"Sounds just perfect, laddie," approved McAndrew.

24. BREAKING THE ICE

The shareholders of Skanda Exports and their allies felt much happier once the secret of the opposition's success had been fathomed. They could admire their enemy's ingenuity, and they felt spurred on to prove that they could go one or two better.

Sunset came at 16:12 hours on that Friday evening. As their shadows stretched out to infinity, two trawlers cast off and set course for Scandinavia, watched by friendly eyes from the top floor of the Dirty Duck, and by hostile ones from the housing estate on the hill.

Ten minutes later, Colonel McFee reported that the observation posts had sent their messages of departure. "Right, lads, off we go," said Major McAndrew.

The Bellsiders shut down the radio equipment, telephoned Lieutenant-Commander Smith to tell him that they were on their way and hurried downstairs to join the convoy of cars and small vans for the trip up the coast to the Navy's hideout.

In the cavern of an empty shed at the boatyard, they sat through a final briefing and ate doorstep sandwiches and drank coffee – the staple diet of Smith's crew when they were at battle-readiness. Modest tots of naval rum and Uisge Beatha were served, and one of the two Surgeon-Lieutenants announced that a very effective anti-seasickness pill was available to anyone who doubted the strength of his stomach. His remarks were directed mainly at Major McAndrew's unit, but they had been to sea before on Ned Kelly, and they knew that they could face a naval battle without artificial aids.

Ned Kelly and the launch, wearing fresh midnight-blue paint over their armour-plating, sailed at 19:10 hours. Conditions on board the two vessels tended to be cramped due to the presence of a dozen burly trawlermen and a Surgeon-Lieutenant apiece in addition to the normal crew. The

Bellsiders were travelling on Ned Kelly with Lieutenant-Commander Smith.

Almost immediately, the two vessels parted company. The Motor Torpedo Boat followed the course of Cap's new Rose and the launch, under the command of Lieutenant Newton, set a more easterly heading, following the Denmark-bound trawler.

A black night swallowed Ned Kelly. A light swell gave the MTB a mild corkscrew motion. Sub-Lieutenant Bronski reported that he had picked up Cap's Rose on the radar. He was wearing the bright orange baseball cap which was his traditional headgear on an operation. Soon, the Motor Torpedo Boat overhauled the trawler, which was proceeding at reduced speed, as per instructions.

Cheerful insults flew between the two crews as Ned Kelly took up station alongside the Rose. Cap turned command over to his number two and leapt across a stretch of dark, killingly cold water to the narrow deck of the fighting ship. He was determined to see some action. His vessel turned to a more northerly course on the first part of a dog-leg, which would take it well to the north and west of the danger zone.

At 21:20 hours, the RAF reported the locations of the trawlers which had detached themselves from the Icelandic cluster. They had split into three groups. Four trawlers were heading for Grimsby. The other two groups of three were following the expected interception courses.

Sub-Lieutenant Logan, who manned the galley when he wasn't at one of the machine guns, celebrated the news with a batch of his special doorstep corned beef sandwiches and a fresh brew of naval cocoa. He too had taken his operational headgear out of cold storage and he was wearing his black balaclava.

Kurt Bronski stuck his head into the wardroom six minutes later to tell Smith that the submarine had made contact with its group of trawlers, which they were using as unwitting targets for attack exercises. Bronski returned to his radio cabin aft of the bulkhead – to reappear almost immediately with the news that the second submarine had also assumed a shadowing position behind the hunters of Terry's Castle, the Denmark-bound trawler.

"How did you get submarines into the act?" Cap wanted to know, his respect for the Navy leaping upwards.

Smith chuckled evilly. "They don't know what's going on. They think it's all part of a routine exercise. Defence against an enemy swanning round

our oil rigs with evil intent. As a matter of fact, they don't know who they're reporting to. They're just following Admiralty orders."

Cap sipped cocoa and wondered at the power of moonlighting Service personnel. Smith and McAndrew had to be masters of the system if they could arrange for RAF aircraft to rescue stranded trawlermen, persuade Army Intelligence to spy on their enemies and bluff a pair of submarines into working for them. A remark made by the diminutive Lieutenant Birky popped into his thoughts.

If Cap paid his local taxes, Birky had said, he could expect the local council to empty his dustbins and repair potholes in his street. If he paid his national taxes – income tax and VAT – was it not reasonable to expect the Armed Services to clean up pirates and keep the seaways safe for him? The logic seemed flawless.

The weather continued neither good nor bad. Solid cloud blotted out the stars and created a total darkness which isolated the speeding MTB from the rest of the world. Ned Kelly seemed to have been travelling for an age. There was only the night-cold if the passengers and crew ventured out of the warmth below decks, the silky roar of the engines and the constant uneasy motion of the vessel. And the bar was closed for the duration.

Those who could, slept the hours away. Those who couldn't and had no duties to occupy them played cards in the wardroom or watched the action, gravitated to the engine room to talk shop, watched the green arm of the radar screen turning endlessly or lurked in the wheelhouse and tried to spot something, such as a point of light, to tell them that they were not completely alone in the black hole of a night.

Captain Spinner soaked up sandwiches and cocoa at a rate that suggested that he had not eaten for a month. Captain Fairclough's grim warnings of the perils of being shot with a full stomach received a broad grin and an assurance that Spinner had no intention of standing in the way of any flying lead. Major McAndrew told Fairclough to shut up because he was tired of his horror stories. While McAndrew's attention was distracted, Spinner succeeded in twitching the last sandwich away from his descending hand, allowing McAndrew's fingers to close on thin air.

"Too slow, mate," Spinner told the indignant Scot. "Besides, we bigger people need to take on plenty of fuel to keep the cold out." He rattled off a series of statistics on energy expenditure related to body weight during cold weather combat. "What I can't understand," he concluded, "is why

you always have to go sailing in the middle of winter. Why can't you pick your fights when the weather's decent?"

"It's the other bloke who always picks the fights with us," countered McAndrew, helping himself from a newly-arrived plate.

"Come on, Spin," grinned Fairclough. "It's not bloody winter yet. And the weather's not that bad, It's only a bit chilly and damp."

Spinner laughed scornfully. "I suppose you're going to tell me if it wasn't night, the sun'd be shining?"

"Well . . .," said Fairclough.

"Don't bother," laughed Spinner. "That was a bloody daft thing to do!" He began an argument with Birky about the way he had played his last hand. It was only nerves.

Captain Fairclough produced a box from under the bench seat and pulled out what looked like a motorcyclist's crash helmet with a visor – except that it was made of steel rather than glass-fibre.

"What's that?" asked McAndrew.

"It's my latest invention," said Fairclough proudly. "It's for people like me who wear glasses. It's to stop them getting blown off or covered in rain when you're on the deck of an MTB in a gale. Keeps your head dry and stops it being shot off as well."

"Terrific!" said McAndrew, more in amusement than amazement. "I'm sure the world's crying out for something like that. How do you see out of the visor when it gets covered in raindrops?"

"It's specially treated with a chemical so the rain wets it instead of forming droplets," explained Birky.

"How do you know that?" frowned Fairclough.

"I heard you telling Hank," grinned Birky.

"Oh!" said Fairclough, let down by a simple explanation. "Well, I think I'll wander topside and try it out." He slipped the helmet on and headed aft. Birky nudged Spinner and whispered something. Spinner broke into an enormous grin and passed the joke on to McAndrew.

Captain Fairclough climbed up to the flying bridge and lowered his visor – only to find that some kind person had been playing noughts and crosses on it with a greasy finger, destroying its surfactant layer. If he looked straight at the MTB's running lights, which were about all that he could find to focus on, he found his right eye squinting through the hole in the middle of a nought, but his left eye looked straight at a raindrop

cross. He returned to the wardroom to clean the visor.

Birky looked up from the card game as he entered. "How did you get on, mate?" he asked innocently, looking ready to duck in case Fairclough threw the helmet at him. Special helmets were fair game in the search for a means to release the tension before the shooting started.

The first Icelandic bug, began to transmit irregularly spaced pairs of bleeps three hours before dawn. Colonel McFee had provided a small receiver tuned to the correct frequency to provide a warning. One of the submarines reported that its group of trawlers had made a slight course change. Sub-Lieutenant Bronski decided that the opposition would reach the interception point in just over two hours.

Lieutenant-Commander Smith came below, looking wet and windswept. He didn't seem to mind the rain. Rainstorms show up on radar screens as a sort of mushy splodge, and they are good places to hide when one is sneaking up on an enemy.

Smith's yachting cap had slipped to a decidedly rakish angle, which directed the drips down his right side. Fairclough noticed that his colleague had developed a curious habit of looking at people mainly with his right eye while tilting his head to one side and half-closing his left eye. It was almost as if Don Smith were rehearsing the loss of his left eye, which would allow him to wear a piratical black patch over the empty socket. Fairclough mentioned his observation to Al Logan as the cook was brewing more cocoa. Logan told him that it was a sure sign that Smith was expecting trouble – and plenty of it.

Major McAndrew had also undergone a subtle change. Although he seemed indifferent to the prospect of coming under the simultaneous fire of three well-armed trawlers, an edge to his voice and a hardening of the lines at the corners of his mouth told an experienced eye that the leader of the Bellsiders was starting to feel the tension winding up inside him. McAndrew had not been shot at since the beginning of the year, and the idea always took a little working up to.

Captain Fairclough, on the other hand, was looking forward to the fight. He belonged to the warrior class, who believe that they must have bullets whistling past their ears – but definitely past – every so often to confirm that they are still alive. Spinner and Birky fought the tension by indulging in long and often heated criticism of each other's card playing ability. Their

verbal tussles served a deep and devious secondary purpose. Having two of the gamblers constantly at each other's throats unsettled the other players and put them off their game, allowing Spinner and Birky to bluff shamelessly with rubbish hands.

Cap demonstrated his nervelessness by propping himself in a corner of the tiny wardroom and going to sleep with his yachting cap pulled down over his eyes. Envious insomniacs decided that his slumbers were just the result of old age, but they kept their voices down in case they woke him.

Those of Smith's crew who were not engaged in a vital activity – such as playing cards or even running the vessel – occupied themselves by checking and rechecking equipment, assisted by restless trawlermen. The passengers, who would be safe behind Ned Kelly's armour while the shooting was going on, could not help but absorb tension from the atmosphere and feel the need to shed it in activity.

Position reports continued to arrive from the submarines. Kurt Bronski stuck his head into the wardroom to report that he expected to make radar contact with the opposition in fifteen minutes.

"Time to ditch the bug," said Smith.

Bronski handed it to him. Smith stepped up to the deck and heaved it overboard. With a soundless splash, the black box disappeared into the black waters of the North Sea. The rain had stopped.

Bronski whistled to attract Smith's attention. One of the submarines reported that its pack of trawlers was slowing and converging, then that they were exchanging comments on low-powered transceivers. Unfortunately from an intelligence-gathering aspect, but fortunately from a security point of view, none of the submariners could speak Icelandic.

"Won't they spot the sub if it's that close?" wondered McAndrew.

"Do you fancy your chances of spotting a periscope in that lot?" grinned Smith, turning a thumb towards the night. "Especially if you're not looking for it. Give the submarines the *End of Exercise* signal, Kurt. We can let them go home now."

"Aye, aye, Skipper," replied Bronski.

"They should be well out of range when the trouble starts," added Smith. He noticed McAndrew peering towards the division between the black of the sea and the lightening eastern sky.

"Don't strain your eyes, Mac. You won't see anything for a while yet."

Sub-Lieutenant Bronski reported radar contact with the opposition on

schedule. "All three of them on the screen now. They must be able to see us as well, Skipper."

"Very well," responded Smith. "Port five, Bill."

Ned Kelly moved onto a course which would take the vessel slightly to the north of the Icelanders.

"Action stations, but do it quietly," continued Smith, moving up to the flying bridge. "Gun crews close up."

Al Logan appeared on deck, wearing a steel helmet over his balaclava. A brace of Chief Petty Officers, called Cliff and Tiddler, took over the machine gun turret on the right wing of the flying bridge and the two-centimetre cannon turret, which had been mounted on the deck, just aft of the anchor locker hatch.

"All civilians out of the way, on the double," ordered Smith. "Kurt, have our friends changed course?"

"No, Skipper," Bronski responded over the bridge intercom. "Not a twitch. I bet they're still working out what happened to their bug."

"Very well. Carry on." Smith showed his teeth in a humourless grin to McAndrew and Fairclough, who had joined him on the flying bridge.

McAndrew selected a steel helmet from the rack. Fairclough was wearing his own helmet, having cleaned the visor. Metal slid fluidly on metal all around them as the gunners prepared for action. Fairclough tapped a magazine onto a Heckler & Koch assault rifle and slid the first of twenty rounds into the breech. The weapon was lighter and more compact than the standard NATO battle rifle, and available in the same 7.62 millimetre calibre as well as the inferior 5.56 millimetre calibre preferred by the American military.

Bronski began to call off the range at intervals of two hundred yards. Parts of the navy had not broken with tradition and gone completely metric.

"Range now twelve hundred," issued from the intercom.

Smith pressed the button beside it. "Up and at 'em," he said, as calmly as if he were ordering a horse's neck in the wardroom.

Ned Kelly swept towards the opposition at full speed, its engines bellowing defiance. The targets were silhouetted nicely against the eastern horizon. Confusion paralyzed the Icelanders at first. They could see a fast-approaching trace on their radar screens and hear the snarl of engines built for speed rather than pulling power flying towards them from the

darkness. By the time it occurred to them that the other vessel might be hostile, cannon and machine gun fire were sweeping their radio serials out of existence.

Their problem solved, the Icelanders dived for their machine guns. Answering fire bounced off the armour plating of Ned Kelly's wheelhouse and swept the flying bridge, forcing Smith and company to keep their heads down. Thick padding on the inside of the bridge absorbed any bullets that crept over the top of the armour, eliminating ricochets.

Tracers arced from the MTB's machine gun turrets to the unprotected weapons of the opposition. The Icelanders tried to bury themselves in the deck. Canon fire smashed their fixed weapons to pieces.

"Heave to and strike your colours!" Smith bawled into the loudhailer.

Further machine gun fire rattled against Ned Kelly's armour. Smith's gunners replied in kind. The MTB lurched suddenly, throwing McAndrew into the air. A bullet clipped the top of his helmet on the way down. He began to feel a whole lot safer. He firmly believed that the enemy was allowed just one good shot at him in any battle. This time, it had bounced off the top of his helmet, rendering him fireproof for the rest of the engagement.

"Hang on, Mac," said Smith. "The next one might part your hair."

"If it can find any to part," grinned Fairclough, smashing the windows of the wheelhouse of the nearest Icelandic trawler to give the helmsman something to worry about.

"You wait till you're old," growled McAndrew. "See if your hair doesn't go a bit thin on top. Anyway, there won't be a next one." He went on to sketch his theory about the one good shot.

"Go on, then," invited Fairclough. "Prove it."

"Yes," chuckled Smith, "stand up and let's see how good your theory is."

"I may look bloody daft, but I'm not stupid," McAndrew told them, keeping his head right down.

"Right, let's finish 'em off," decided Smith, returning to business.

Its bow high in the air, the Motor Torpedo Boat sped along the line of trawlers, blasting anyone who dared to fire on it. The opposition began to realize that they were outgunned and they had been outmanoeuvred. One vessel stopped engines and lowered the flag on its stern. Then a second. A further battering from the cannon persuaded the skipper of the third to follow suit.

Armed boarding parties took charge of each of the Icelandic trawlers. All of the prisoners ended up in the hold of the trawler which had received most attention from Ned Kelly's cannon. By design rather than accident, most of the damage had been confined to the weapon posts and the bridge, and the workings of the vessels had not been impaired significantly.

The British trawlermen were in raptures. Their bodyguards had captured vessels which were the pride of the Icelandic fleet. Two British trawlers with full cargoes had been lost, but three Icelandic vessels were adequate compensation. Cap tried to do a victory dance on one of Ned Kelly's torpedo tubes to celebrate. He was restrained before he could fall overboard.

Prize crews of trawlermen took charge of two of the captured vessels. They left the scene immediately to keep a rendezvous with other units of the Oxenbois fleet, carrying homing devices supplied by Colonel McFee so that the home team would be able to find them if they failed to get the radios working. A little face-lifting was necessary before the captured vessels could show their faces in public again.

Sub-Lieutenant Logan handed over his duties as cook to Cap, who claimed to be an expert in that department, and assumed command of the prison ship and its new crew. Much to his colleagues' surprise, Lieutenant Birky took charge of restringing the trawler's radio aerials – and seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

McAndrew detailed Spinner to guard the Icelanders. They tended to be heavily built fellows and he thought they would be more inclined to take orders from six-feet-one of former heavyweight boxer. The prisoners were in a resigned, docile state immediately after their capture and too busy catching the Surgeon-Lieutenant patching up their wounded to think of causing trouble right away.

Again, mainly by design but with a welcome contribution from accident, no one had been injured seriously. Knowing that he was protected by armour plate, Smith's policy had been to destroy the Icelanders' fixed weapons, then to shoot up non-vital parts of their trawlers in a spectacular display of fire-power to hasten their surrender.

The two captured trawlers were half way to the horizon by the time all of the wounded had been bandaged and issued with naval cocoa to drive away the symptoms of shock. Smith and McAndrew had been wondering whether the British trawlermen would attempt to beat up a few Icelanders

to take their revenge for two British vessels sent to the bottom of the cold North Sea.

Blood-curdling threats had been uttered both before and during the early part of the voyage. But the trawlermen were observing a very professional attitude to their prisoners. They were gloating, yes, and curious about the Icelanders, but breaches of the Geneva Convention seemed unlikely.

"Come on, you lot," Smith roared to his crew. "Stop larking about and get busy."

His men speeded up their efforts to get the prison trawler's radio working and to reload their guns. Smith kept glancing impatiently at his watch and drumming his fingers on the armour plating of the flying bridge. He couldn't wait to move on to the next engagement.

Ned Kelly's crew completed their tasks twenty minutes before sunrise. Uneasy pitching became a purposeful dash as the Motor Torpedo Boat set a south-easterly course to its second act of multiple piracy of the day. The prison ship followed at a more sedate pace.

Cap served a semi-victory breakfast as the sun was crawling over the horizon. With Ned Kelly moving at speed, the meal had to be basic. But the coffee, served in astronaut-type squeeze bulbs to prevent spillage, was hot and drinkable and the thick sandwiches disappeared in double-quick time.

The speeding MTB seemed almost empty, having shed most of the passengers. Miraculously, there was room to move without treading on someone. Like the Blackie Swanne, Ned Kelly seemed to have expanded into other dimensions.

Captain Fairclough was reminded suddenly that it was his birthday when McAndrew presented him with a card signed by all those involved in *Operation Icebreaker*. It was a large one. Smith even opened the bar long enough to allow the company to drink Fairclough's health. After the excitement of the last few tours, time had lost its significance and drinking at half-past seven in the morning no longer seemed even vaguely sinful.

Thick clouds allowed the sun to clear the horizon completely before swallowing it whole. A thin drizzle, more like a soggy mist than proper rain, slicked Ned Kelly's deck, giving the MTB a well-groomed look. Smith expressed grim satisfaction at the reduction in visibility. If it held, the

weather would be perfect for the second and more difficult attack, which would take place in full daylight.

Three hours later, Ned Kelly caught up with the other half of Smith's fleet – the armoured launch. Lieutenant Newton and his crew were delighted with the news of a successful first part of the operation. Smith had been maintaining radio silence, just in case the enemy were keeping a listening watch.

At first glance, it looked as though the opposition had been too much for Ned Kelly. Its paintwork was a mass of scratches with the brightness of armour plate peeping through. Armoured shields on the guns were slightly battered too. The MTB looked as though it had barely survived a nasty accident, more like a loser than a winner.

"What fell on you, then?" Newton called through a broad grin.

"You should see the other bloke," answered Smith with an evil chuckle.

"How's Nadger?" he added to the man standing beside Newton.

CPO Nadin, the launch's engineer, hid most of a huge yawn behind a blackened hand and mumbled, "Fine, thanks."

"You look knackered," observed Smith. "Hank been working you too hard?"

"That's a laugh!" snorted Newton. "He's only just crawled out of his bloody bunk."

"Okay for some, isn't it," remarked McAndrew.

"We can't all be heroes," grinned Newton.

Cap leaned casually against the well-chewed wheelhouse and told Newton's passengers about the battle. His fellow trawlermen revelled in the story of their enemy's defeat. Smith held a brief conference with Hank Newton while the MTB took on more fuel and the other Surgeon-Lieutenant. Then he pushed on ahead in a wide sweep to the north, which was designed to bring him up behind the opposition. Following the battle plan, the launch continued on its way eastwards at the usual speed of a smuggling trawler.

At 11:00 hours, Newton's radio operator, CPO Greg Wakely, reported that the second black box had started to transmit double bleeps. The second shadowing submarine reported an almost immediate change of course by the other pack of three Icelandic trawlers.

25. BATTLE REJOINED

Lunchtime came and went. Then CPO Wakely picked out an apparently innocent remark from the marine radio traffic.

"Message from the Skipper, Hank," he reported to Lieutenant Newton. "He's creeping up on them."

"Very well. Chuck the bug overboard," replied Newton.

"Radar contact in about ten minutes," said Wakely, adding to a long line of pencil crosses on his chart.

A black box sailed through an open window and into the rain. Moments later, the remaining submarine reported that the opposition were converging, then holding urgent discussions on their radios. Smith ordered Bronski to send the second submarine's recall code. The launch appeared on the trawlers' radar screens. Screens of aluminized fabric gave it an echo of about the same size as Terry's Castle, which was following a more southerly course than normal to stay well clear of trouble.

Captain Fairclough took a refill of coffee to Ned Kelly's radio room. He found Sub-Lieutenant Bronski humming an almost-familiar tune, his feet resting on a bright orange box that matched his baseball cap.

"What's that you're kicking?" Fairclough asked.

"The radar scrambler," said Bronski. "Makes us look like a minor rain-storm on their screens. They must be quite happy watching Hank on his tod. Two traces would make them a bit nervous."

A sudden squall of rain slashed across the deck of the MTB with enough force to bounce the drops back into the air.

"Who needs artificial rain?" grinned Fairclough. "We seem to have plenty of the real thing out here."

"Ah, but can you rely on the real thing performing when you want it?"

"Probably not," Fairclough admitted, handing over the squeeze bottle of coffee.

Ten minutes later, a dripping lookout reported that he could just see one of the Icelandic trawlers. Smith ordered his engineer to reduce speed to that of the enemy.

"Tell Hank not to come closer than half a mile, Kurt," ordered Smith. "Action stations, everyone."

Smith settled his steel helmet firmly on his head and took up his station on the flying bridge. The gun crews closed up again, Fairclough and his helmet taking over Al Logan's machine gun turret.

The bridge intercom buzzed for attention. "Hank's turning to run in front of them," Bronski reported.

"Very well. Let's go," ordered Smith.

Major McAndrew took a firm grip on the rail, knowing what was to come. Ned Kelly pointed its nose into the air and raced for the enemy at forty knots. The MTB burst through the fog of rain, throwing misty curtains of spray high into the air. Icelanders began to turn their heads to find out what all the noise was about.

"Engage!" roared Smith.

Men on the trawlers' decks found themselves suddenly tangled up in a collection of splintered wood and wires that had once been their masts and radio aerials. Then Ned Kelly was past the enemy vessels and turning for another run at them, port rails awash.

Answering fire from the trawlers did further damage to the paintwork of the wheelhouse and rattled the length of the torpedo tubes. Icelanders dived for cover as Ned Kelly's machine guns arced tracers past their fixed weapons. From prone positions, they watched helplessly as cannon fire reduced their own machine guns to so much scrap iron.

Smith roared his surrender message to the trawlers. One of them stopped engines immediately. The other two made a break for it in opposite directions. They were not following Smith's battle plan, which called for them to surrender together after a token fight to preserve honour.

"Mac, you take charge of the boarding party. Take Cliff and Bill with you," ordered Smith, giving McAndrew one of his machine gunners and the helmsman. "Kurt, tell Hank to steer for the trawler going due south. That's the next one on the list. Then come up and take over the wheel."

McAndrew's armed party scrambled onto the captured trawler and rounded up the dazed crew. The Surgeon-Lieutenant had a quick look at two casualties while Smith's crew transferred medical supplies, radio

equipment and another of Colonel McFee's homing devices to the prize. Having decided that the Icelanders could patch up their own wounded, the Surgeon-Lieutenant returned to Ned Kelly.

Smith touched his fingers to his steel helmet in a parting salute, then he took off after the southbound trawler at high speed. Three minutes later, his gunners were doing their level best to blast the second member of the opposition into submission.

The Icelanders fought back bravely, greeting the MTB with a storm of rifle and shotgun fire. They had realized that the ambushers were trying to avoid loss of life and were making it impossible for Ned Kelly to expose a boarding party. Hank Newton's launch arrived on the scene and kept well out of range, viewing the battle through binoculars.

Smith, lurking behind the armour-plating of the bridge, kept Ned Kelly behind the opposition and interspersed orders to surrender with blood-curdling threats. Either the Icelanders didn't understand him, or they refused to believe his threats. The firing continued.

"Heave to, or I'll reduce your wheelhouse to junk," bawled Smith, becoming annoyed.

"Go and phuck a duck, Englishman," drifted back to him, proving that someone on the trawler could speak English.

"Right," snarled Smith. "If they won't be told, they'll have to be shown. Target, their wheelhouse. Engage."

Ned Kelly leapt forward, cannon and machine guns spraying. Captain Fairclough felt a numbing blow just above his right knee. He swayed helplessly in the retaining harness of his machine gun, unable to get a foothold on the slippery deck to fight the violent motion of the MTB.

Suddenly, the battle was over, The firing from the Icelandic trawler died away. Its wheelhouse looked like a sieve. Someone at the bow waved a white flag. It looked like a vest. The Icelanders had realized that they stood a fair chance of being hurt while not being able to inflict disabling damage on the MTB. Lieutenant-Commander Smith had achieved another victory.

Ned Kelly came alongside the trawler. Fiddler Barnes left his cannon turret and leapt aboard, waving a Stirling submachine gun one-handed in a menacing fashion.

Kurt Bronski handed the wheel over to Cap and joined him. They began to round up and disarm the crew.

Smith spotted Fairclough trying to unbuckle his harness and leaking

blood all over the deck. "Where's that doctor?" he bellowed. "Wounded man."

The Surgeon-Lieutenant climbed up to the deck, holding his black bag in one hand and a steel helmet in the other.

"Well?" demanded Smith almost as soon as the doctor had cut a slit in Fairclough's blood-soaked trouser leg.

"Ricochet," reported the doctor. "Bullet's still in there. We'll have to get him to hospital for an X-ray and an operation. As soon as possible." He gave Fairclough a pain-killing injection and got busy with bulky dressings and sticky tape.

"Kurt, get on the radio and call out a chopper," ordered Smith. Then he realized that Bronski was on the trawler.

"There's a chopper on the way as part of Phase Three," remarked Fairclough. "We don't need another one."

"So there is," recalled Smith. "There can't be much wrong with you if you can remember things like that."

"I was shot in the leg, not the head."

"How is that, by the way?"

"It only hurts when I cough." Fairclough had been shot twice before – both times in Ulster – and he was beginning to get used to the experience.

"Can we put him on the trawler, Doc?" asked Smith.

"Yes, I think it might be better for him," nodded the Surgeon-Lieutenant. "It'll be easier to look after him if we're not rattling about like loose peas in a pod."

"Stretcher bearers!" shouted Smith.

Nothing happened. Ned Kelly had run out of spare bodies. Apart from the three men on the bridge, the only others aboard were Cap at the helm and Jake the engineer.

"Do you know your blood group?" said the doctor.

"Yes, thanks," replied Fairclough.

"What is it?" the doctor asked in a 'don't bugger me about' tone.

"Oh, sorry. It's ordinary O plus. Sorry, Doc. I thought you were going to tell me what it is."

"We medical men may be lots of things, but psychic isn't among them."

"What's going on?" asked Hank Newton's voice. The launch had arrived.

"I stuck my leg in the way of a bullet," said Fairclough.

"Bloody daft thing to do. Is it bad?"

"No, the Doc says I'll be able to play the violin again."

"Yeah, it can't be bad if you can crack rotten jokes."

"Tell you what, Hank, I'll shoot *you* in the leg and we'll see if you can come up with anything better," Fairclough challenged.

"No, thanks," grinned Newton. "Smashing birthday present, isn't it."

Fairclough looked around for something to throw at him.

Newton and one of the trawlermen produced a stretcher and transferred the casualty to the Icelandic trawler. Smith came aboard as well to sort out a crew for the final battle. The troops had become very thin on the ground.

"Hank, you're coming with me to take command of the first trawler of this group," ordered Smith. "Tiddler, Skipper and three of his lads will take charge of this one and head for the prison ship. Sort them out."

Newton nodded and left the conference.

"Cap will be on the launch with you, Kurt," continued Smith. "I want Greg on the Ned as radar operator. And four trawlermen. The launch will follow us to the third trawler of this group. Cap and the last four of his men are to be the prize crew for that one. Let's go."

With Smith at the helm, Ned Kelly set off in pursuit of the remaining enemy trawler, thirty-three minutes after the second engagement had begun. The launch raced after the MTB on the way towards the final confrontation. Skipper's prize crew started the engines of the battered trawler and began to sail northwards to a rendezvous with the prison ship.

Having done everything possible to make Captain Fairclough comfortable, the Surgeon-Lieutenant attended to the prisoners, none of whom had suffered more than a few cuts from flying glass and wood splinters – trivial injuries to tough trawlermen. The rain seemed to sense that it was no longer needed. It slackened, and stopped completely fairly quickly. Soon, the clouds parted, allowing golden pillars of sunlight to link them with the grey sea.

Ned Kelly took almost forty minutes to overhaul the fleeing trawler. Smith made a brief stop at the first of the second group to offer surrender. He swapped Hank Newton and four British trawlermen for McAndrew, Bill Rogers, the MTB's usual helmsman, and 'Cliff' Clifford, one of the machine gunners, who looked about sixteen years old.

They received the news of Fairclough's injury without anger when Smith began by telling that he was in no immediate danger. The new crew members were glad that Fairclough had not been killed, and rather sur-

prised that no one else had received as serious an injury. There had been a great deal of lead flying around. And in the background, there lurked the secret, very personal relief that someone else had copped it.

Lieutenant-Commander Smith fumed inwardly during the final chase, hanging onto the rail and staring at the horizon through clouds of spray. Fortunately, the opposition had just kept going in a straight line and they proved easy to find. Smith's scowl became a wolfish grin when CPO Wakely reported that he had picked up a trace on the radar.

Soon, they could see the enemy. Smith had decided not to waste any time. There would be no British casualties in the final minutes of the war. Standing off the starboard quarter of the trawler, clearly visible but safely out of effective rifle range – assuming that inexperienced trawlermen were firing at moving targets from a moving platform – Smith bawled an order into the intercom.

“Torps, load up!”

CPO Wakely abandoned the radar set and Cliff Clifford unstrapped himself from his machine gun. Smith edged the MTB closer to the trawler to make sure that the Icelanders had a good view of his men loading the port torpedo tube. McAndrew stood by the port machine gun turret, ready to discourage any snipers.

“Are you sure that tube's still in working order?” McAndrew asked as he swept his sights backwards and forwards across the trawler. “After the pounding we've taken. We'll look a proper bunch of idiots if we blow ourselves up.”

“Don't panic,” chuckled Smith, full of confidence. “It's all show. If we really have to sink them, we've got a couple of pods of wire-guided anti-tank missiles. That's what we were busy with it the beginning of the week.” He took the microphone of the loudhailer from its clip and turned to face the opposition.

“Right, you lot,” he roared. “You've got one minute to heave to and surrender. In sixty seconds from now, I'll put a fish in your tub and sent you to the bottom. It's a long way to swim home.”

“What if they don't speak English?” McAndrew remarked.

“In that case,” replied Smith with a gentle smile, “their ignorance is going to put them in a whole lot of trouble.”

Smith's little white lie sounded very convincing to the lone trawler. The skipper knew that his colleagues had sunk two English vessels during the

course of earlier encounters. The crazy Englishman in charge of the fighting ship seemed quite capable of carrying out his threat, just to go some way towards levelling the scores.

Certain that he was sparing his crew the danger of exposure in the cold waters of the North Sea, the Icelandic skipper gave the order to stop his engines. Ned Kelly and the launch sauntered over to the trawler to put a prize crew aboard. Just over five minutes later, a floating disaster area arrived out of the murk to the north. The battered state of the prison ship convinced the Icelandic skipper that he had made the right decision and spared his crew the possibility of severe injury or even death.

The trawler under Hank Newton's command joined the growing squadron a quarter of an hour later, at 15:00 hours. Lieutenant Birky propped himself against the rail of the prison ship, a sandwich in one hand and a coffee cup in the other.

"How d'you like the improvements, Hank?" he called.

"Looks like someone dropped a bomb on you," Newton decided.

All evidence of battle had disappeared, along with a fair amount of the superstructure. The funnel of the prison ship leaked smoke at odd intervals up and down its length. Polythene sheeting had been draped across the glassless wheelhouse windows to keep the weather out. The masts looked ready to topple overboard at any moment, taking their spider-web of home-made rigging with them.

"Storm damage," grinned Birky. "Not that you've got much room to talk." He assumed a horrified expression and scanned the other trawler's bullet-scarred exterior.

"Hear about Art?" asked Newton soberly.

"It's something to show the birds," said Birky. "Come and see my bullet hole, love. Excuse me while I take my pants off."

"I bet he's not thinking that at the moment," laughed Newton.

British trawlermen took charge of two of the Icelandic vessels and set course west-south-west for Oxenbois, waving endless farewells. Ned Kelly, the launch and the prison ship turned southwards, making for a rendezvous with Tiddler Barnes' trawler. Smith sent Wakely and Clifford over to the prison ship as extra guards. The Icelanders were becoming restless. Some of them had been rattling around in confinement for eight and a half hours.

Phase Two of *Operation Icebreaker* was declared completed when Smith and McAndrew boarded the most damaged Icelandic trawler to visit their casualty. Appropriately enough, Captain Fairclough was sprawled on the captain's bunk, looking a little pale and a lot cheesed off.

"How's our wounded hero?" McAndrew asked cheerfully.

"Bloody thirsty!" complained Fairclough. "That idiot doctor won't let me have one lousy drink in case it reacts with the stuff he's pumped into me."

"Keep smiling, Art," chuckled Smith. "The chopper should be here in twenty minutes. It's nine hours back for us. Just think, while we're being chucked about by the merciless ocean, you'll be in a nice, warm bed with a pretty young nurse to tuck you in."

"My heart, not to mention my leg, bleeds for you," grinned Fairclough. "I hope you both drown."

There was a discreet knock at the door.

"Come in," invited Smith. "Hello, Cap. How are you getting on with the inspection?"

"Finished, thanks." Cap and Skipper had been assessing the damage to the remaining vessels. "Just dropped in to see how Captain Fairclough's doing."

"Nice to have a visitor who shows a bit of genuine concern," remarked Fairclough. "I'm fine, thanks."

"I don't think it's worth keeping this one," Cap told Smith after nodding appreciation of Fairclough's condition. "The refitting's going to cost a packet. They bugged the engines while they were running away. And it's not as if we're short of trawlers these days."

"Right," decided Smith, "we'll make this one a present to Davy Jones. They'll be a bit crowded sailing back to their cluster in the north on the one boat, but that's their hard luck. Put together a working party of prisoners to transfer any stores they'll need and we can pump some fuel over to them."

"Aye, aye," nodded Cap.

"Feel like a spot of gentle abandoning ship, Art," Smith added to Fairclough.

"If you think I'm going down with this sod, you've got another think coming," retorted Fairclough.

As soon as he learned of Lieutenant-Commander Smith's intentions towards the most damaged trawler, Lieutenant Birky took advantage of the

situation by opening a book on how long the vessel would take to sink. He even went aboard with a committee of scrutineers to start the stopwatch section of his wrist watch at the precise moment that the sea cocks were opened.

The Icelanders aboard the prison ship looked at one another apprehensively when they heard the string of cheers that announced the disappearance of the trawler, wondering whether they would be next to be introduced to Davy Jones. Much to his surprise, one of the doctors found himself £150 richer.

Half an hour before sunset, an RAF transport helicopter arrived on the scene, dangling a large crate beneath it. Having deposited the crate on the prison ship, the helicopter winched aboard Captain Fairclough and the Surgeon-Lieutenant who had not won the sweep, and headed for the hospital at RAF Mitton.

Smith's crew returned to their stations on the launch and Ned Kelly to prepare for the return journey. When both sets of engines started, Lieutenant Birky looked over the rail of the prison ship and yelled, "Ere! I hope you buggers haven't forgotten *us*."

"It's all right, Knocker," said Smith from right behind him. "They wouldn't dare go without me."

Birky nearly fell overboard from the shock. "Don't do that!" he gasped, clutching the region of his heart.

"Are we ready for off?" Captain Spinner called from the other side of the deck.

"Ready and willing," confirmed Smith. "Get me one of the captains, will you, Spin."

Smith moved towards the recently delivered crate, which was six feet square and four feet high. Birky followed him. Spinner pointed his Stirling at one of the Icelandic skippers and beckoned to him. The trawler captain approached reluctantly. Smith saluted smartly and solemnly presented the Icелander with a crowbar. The captain stared at it blankly. Birky tapped the crate with his Stirling.

"Get cracking, mate," he ordered.

Unenthusiastically, the captain poked at the lid of the crate. He had just loosened it when the engines of the launch and Ned Kelly revved up, distracting his attention.

“Bye, bye, Sunshine,” yelled Spinner, catching sight of a figure staring at the departing vessels. More of the Icelanders clustered to the rails when they realized that their guards had deserted them.

The victors gave them an ironic cheer and waved caps, steel helmets and anything else that came to hand. Cap and Skipper lined the British trawlermen up on the deck of the launch for a last look at the Icelanders. After giving Ned Kelly three well-deserved cheers, they all disappeared below. Hank Newton had opened the bar.

26. WINDING DOWN

It was Sunday night, the end of the week and the end of the last phase of *Operation Icebreaker*. The trawlermen of Skanda Exports and their allies had gathered in the private bar on the top floor of the Dirty Duck for a final celebration. A delegation from RAF Mitton arrived just as the party began.

Ned Kelly and the launch had reached Oxenbois at twenty-past midnight on Sunday morning. The second pair of captured trawlers had sneaked into a friendly boat yard just before 10:00 hours that same morning. One of the worst aspects of naval engagements remains the time taken to steam to and from the battlefield.

A line of photographs pinned to the wall above the fireplace in the Blacke Swanne's upper bar measured the success of the operation. An RAF photo-reconnaissance aircraft had taken a sweep out beyond the Shetlands during the afternoon to make sure that the opposition had got the message.

They had. A ragged group of eight trawlers could be seen in the photographs, steaming for home. Above the photographs, a large, hand-lettered banner gave the final score: Great Britain 5, Iceland 2.

The group proposed repeated toasts – to the navy, to the army, to the RAF and to British trawlermen. Initially, a chair in a choice position by the fire had been left empty in honour of the absent Captain Fairclough, the only British casualty apart from Cap, who had cut his thumb while making a batch of sandwiches.

As the party progressed, however, the position of Fairclough's chair became a matter of opinion. So many opinions, in fact, that McAndrew had to step in and put a stop to the arguments. He judged that an appropriate gesture had been made and that Captain Fairclough wouldn't mind if one of his friends sat in his chair. Then he dropped into the chair himself and proposed a seated toast to the complete success of *Operation*

Icebreaker. This drew immediate protests from the trawlermen, who believed that it was inviting bad luck to claim success before the end of the operation.

"What d'you mean?" asked McAndrew, wearing a puzzled look and frozen with his glass in the air. "It's all over."

"No, it isn't," protested Cap among others. "What about Phase Three?"

"That went off yesterday," said Lieutenant-Commander Smith from the depths of his armchair. "You saw the chopper yourself."

"You mean that was all there was to it?" said Skipper in a hurt tone. "No bugger told us."

Spinner and Birky burst into laughter and collapsed onto handy chairs. "We know who's to blame for that!" spluttered Birky. "Eh, Mac?"

McAndrew realized that his passion for secrecy was the cause of the problem. "All right, grab chairs and I'll tell you about it," he said.

There was a scramble for chairs and unoccupied areas of the long conference table.

"Not that there's much more to tell," McAndrew continued to a hushed audience. "It all seems such a long time ago after that long sea voyage back home . . ."

"Get on with it," called Smith.

"Phase Three," said McAndrew. "Well, there was a bit more to it than the chopper. Essentially, it was the tidying up part of the operation. Something to leave the opposition in no doubt we were on to them right down the line.

"About an hour before we intercepted the second group of trawlers yesterday, around half-twelve, just when they were thinking about lunch, the spies here in town had some visitors. It was Colonel McFee's men in civvies, looking very official and wanting to inquire into their immigration status.

"While Archie was looking out their passports, his people zapped them with a spot of harmless knock-out gas. Then they drove them to the boat house where we've been keeping Ned Kelly.

"They loaded them into a nice, padded crate with their luggage for company, except for the special radios, of course, slung the crate under a chopper and had it flown out to the prison ship by our friends from the Raf.

"While the opposition were busy opening the crate, we buggered off and

left them to it, as I've no doubt anyone who wasn't there must have been told by now. Over and over and over. Inside the crate, we must assume, the blokes from the trawlers found their four spies and a note. Written in their own language and warning them off."

"And what did the note say?" Young Mick wanted to know.

"Something like this, as far as I remember." McAndrew began to mispronounce Icelandic.

"In bloody English!"

"It was short and to the point," offered Smith. "It said if they interfere with British ships again, including giving cheek to the Royal Navy, we'll blast their ships out from under them and not be too bothered if any of them get really hurt in the process."

"Did you say we'd keel-haul the survivors?" asked Hank Newton. "Like we did to that other lot?"

"Anyway," continued McAndrew, "I think you'll all agree they got the message. The photos show that."

"I'm bloody sure they got the message," said Smith with an evil chuckle. "In more ways than one. The whole pack of them."

"What's this? More secrets?" said Birky.

"Just something I was saving for the proper moment," returned Smith. "As you know, the Navy has had to put up with a hell of a lot of cheek from the Icelanders. So we arranged an exercise, just to show them who's boss. A submarine took a team of divers out to the cluster off the Shetlands last night.

"They fixed rather fiendish devices to them, which were set to go off about zero three hundred last night. I'm told they give the effect of having a very large alarm clock strapped to your hull."

"I bet that's another of Colonel Archie's inventions," decided Birky.

"Perhaps one of his naval cousins," said Smith. "We've had them for ages. We've used them on Russian spy trawlers if they make too much of a nuisance of themselves. The only way to shut them up is to dive for them and chip them off the hull. Or wait six hours till the power pack runs out. I'm willing to bet none of the sods got much sleep last night."

A roar of laughter threatened to blow the roof off the pub.

"Well, that's about it, I suppose," said McAndrew when the noise had died down. "No," he held up a hand to restrain the flood of questions from the trawlermen, "I can't tell you any more. Every business has its methods

and its secrets. I'm afraid you'll have to be content with what you know now. Who's hogging all the booze? My glass is empty."

"Maybe it's best to keep quiet about the second part of the note," Cap murmured to Smith. "For the moment."

"Well, they must be impressed by your goods if they're ready to try hijacking to get hold of them," nodded Smith. "It does no harm to suggest a trade agreement when the dust dies down."

"If we can trust them."

"You've got history on your side," said Smith. "They started a war with the British Lion and they got a bloody good thrashing for their trouble. But it's fairly traditional for us to start trading with our former enemies eventually. Maybe they could unload their fish here instead of going all the way down the coast to Grimsby. And maybe they could take part of the price in goods so they can make a run across the North Sea to Scandinavia."

"Anyway, that's a long-term prospect," said Cap. "It's going to take a while for tempers to cool. On both sides."

The party began to break up at around two o'clock on Monday morning. Many of the participants found themselves overcome by fits of yawning. The excitement of the closing stages of *Operation Icebreaker* had kept them riding high during the previous night, and some had managed very little sleep. Reaction was beginning to set in.

Lieutenant-Commander Smith staggered to his feet to propose a final incoherent toast before being hauled off to bed by his crew. The trawlermen left for their homes and the party from RAF Mitton headed for the town's only largish hotel, which lay just down the street from the pub. As a thunderstorm edged in from the sea, McAndrew and company staggered down to the first floor to recharge their batteries in sleep.

Major McAndrew and his colleagues took their time about getting up and packing later that morning. When they looked out of windows with a sea view, they could see a rowing boat taking some poor, unfortunate diver around the trawler park to remove redundant Icelandic transmitters. They were still enjoying the feeling of total relaxation that comes at the end of an operation.

All of their tensions and worried had drained away, and they soon cured relatively mild hangovers with shots of McAndrew's patent restorative. It

was an effort to do anything other than just sit, knowing that there was no real need to get up again. Spinner had actually abandoned the Times crossword partially finished. He had toyed with it through a late breakfast, and then he had decided that completing it involved too much effort. He had dumped the newspaper under his chair, out of sight.

When the rain stopped for a while, Cap and Skipper escorted the Bell-siders and Spinner to Ned Kelly's boathouse to say goodbye to Smith and his crew. A coat of paint had hidden the MTB's battle scars, and they had replaced cracked wheelhouse windows.

With a certain feeling of relief, which neither would have admitted under torture, the trawler captains watched Ned Kelly and the launch glide out to sea. They had been keeping dangerous company, which had been exciting for a while, but they preferred a quieter life.

The next stop for McAndrew and companions was RAF Mitton. Captain Fairclough had been imprisoned in the hospital there for observation. His arrival had caused something of a sensation. The personnel at Mitton were not used to receiving what looked like a blood-stained fisherman for patching up.

In the absence of concrete information, they assumed that the mystery casualty was a member of the SAS, or the SBS, or some other shady organization of the sort usually known only by its initials. A rumour even started to the effect that he had been run over by a tank and was about to become Britain's first bionic man.

Just to add a touch of mystery to their visit, McAndrew and company turned up at the hospital in uniforms which lacked insignia of any description. They admitted only that they were three Army officers and a gentleman of the Royal Navy.

A doctor in a white coat was watching a nurse take the patient's temperature when the visitors arrived.

"How is he, Doc?" asked McAndrew.

"Pretty fair, considering," replied the doctor. "The bullet just clipped the bone. There's some cracking but not a complete fracture. We're keeping him here for the rest of the week, then he can be transferred to a hospital nearer home, wherever that is."

"Good news," beamed McAndrew, ignoring the hint.

"The leg will be stiff for four to six weeks after the plaster comes off. But there's no danger of any permanent loss of function."

"He's going to look pretty odd with his leg in a sling, isn't he?" remarked Birky.

"You're right," agreed Spinner. "It might be worth a trip south to see it when he gets out."

"You know," Fairclough remarked to the nurse, "the thing I hate most about hospitals is the way everyone talks about you as if you weren't there. Or deaf, or something."

"We thought you'd be too busy to bother with us," grinned Newton.

The doctor wrote comments on Fairclough's chart, then he followed the nurse to the next room, leaving the Bellsiders to talk in private. Fairclough attempted to obtain a coherent account of the small part of the operation that he had missed. He had more or less succeeded when a messenger arrived to tell McAndrew that their transport was ready.

The time had come for the group to go their separate ways – Spinner north to the distillery, McAndrew, Birky and Newton south to the Bellside Country Club. The rain came down again as their aircraft took off. It was the time of year for a lot that sort of weather in that part of the country.

A lazy week passed at the Bellside. George McAndrew played host to a succession of friends and casual acquaintances, all unashamedly sponging off him but unknowingly giving him potentially useful information. Hank Newton and his girlfriend had not seen each other for just over a week, and consequently they had a lot of lost time to make up. As for Knocker Birky, he divided his time between Beverley, a friend of Annabelle's, and a plot to bring the country's bookmakers to their collective knees before Christmas.

Captain Fairclough arrived home to a quiet reception and kept out of sight to avoid having to think up a cover story for his injury. He was rather subdued for a while. There is nothing like being shot to remind a soldier of his mortality.

After a further week of socializing, McAndrew grew tired of it and packed his bags. At the beginning of December, he left to spend Christmas with some cronies in Scotland. Birky followed his example a week later. His favourite uncle, his father's brother Eric, had taken over a pub in Chelsea and he had written to 'Young Norm', asking him to drop in if he happened to be passing.

Arthur Fairclough decided to spend Christmas with his physiotherapist, a shapely blonde of about twenty-eight. Hank Newton invited Annabelle

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

over to the club for Christmas. It had been a very busy year, a time of dramatic changes for the private enterprise groups of both Army and Navy.

With his colleagues elsewhere, Newton knew that the year would end quietly, but that could only mean that the new year would begin with a bang. If Major McAndrew was not planning a new adventure, then fate would have one in store, just waiting around the corner.

END OF VOLUME TWO

Author's Notes

26/06/1977.

I had so much material left over from *Sergeant Enterprise* that there had to be a second volume of the adventures of McAndrew, his Group and their allies. This is it. Perhaps the bits left over from *Major Achievements* will develop into a Volume 3.

It's strange how events catch up with you when you're indulging in a spot of near futurology. Sometimes, it's only to be expected. At other times, well . . . For instance:

I have a collection of newspaper cuttings from December, 1976 that say similar things to the opening chapter of *Sergeant Enterprise*. In fact, had my crystal ball been working better, I might have pitched the doom and gloom a lot stronger and written a different and more serious novel.

Similarly, months and months after I wrote what became the opening chapter of this novel, I was able to add an article on artificial ageing of whisky to my collection of cuttings. I also noted with interest that the inventor of the process, a certain Mr. Lucien Landau, proposes calling his product *Glen Kella* because the law won't allow him to call a product made in the Isle of Man 'whisky'. Shades of *Uisge Beatha*, or what!

If events run true to form, the navy should be unveiling their new mini-sub to the world's press fairly soon [see *Merchant Submarine*, the third volume of the trilogy].

I find it renews my faith in the oddity of the human race when I can invent something, or make an outrageous statement in one of my novels, only to find someone doing or saying the same thing for real, just a few months later.

27/02/1998

This version of the book is more or less just a paged-up a final revised version, which was completed on May 17th, 1983 – which explains the inclusion of all the 1980s stuff in a book originally written in 1978!

Further copies of the PDF editions of this trilogy may be obtained from the *Downloads* page of the **Romiley Literary Circle** website, which is hosted by the **Farrago & Farrago** website:

www.farrago2.co.uk