

MERCHANT SUBMARINE



"Dunkirk, 1940, eh? Oh, I got mine in '76 - Denis Healey."

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ANOTHER 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 second approach offers distinct advantages – the most significant of which is a lack of outcry by 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 *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.

Success in some businesses needs an investment of time as well as money. You have to accept a period of no money coming in before you get drowned in the deluge – or you have to abandon the idea and try again with something else.

Politicians, looking for a quick-fix solution, don't like projects that need time to develop and they know that taking risks can end up making them look bad. When a project needs some funding from the government, therefore, the best idea is to go round the politicians and just get on with it.

Major George McAndrew.

27. THE DREADED SMITH RETURNS.

Christmas and Boxing Days had fallen on Tuesday and Wednesday, splitting up the week nicely. Any prudent members of the working population who had saved up four days' leave were able to build an eleven-day holiday around two weekends and the pair of bank holidays. The Friday of Christmas week was a time of reunion at the Bellside Country Club in Sussex. Major George McAndrew and his two freebooting colleagues, Captain Arthur Fairclough and Lieutenant Norman Birky, had returned to the club to celebrate Lieutenant Birky's birthday.

The remaining co-owner of the club, Lieutenant Hank Newton, RN, gave Fairclough a puzzled stare when they met in the lounge bar on the ground floor of the west wing.

"How's the leg?" asked Newton. "I see you got rid of the stick."

"Amazing what a bit of concentrated attention from a pretty physiotherapist can do," chuckled Fairclough, who had stopped a bullet six weeks earlier during *Operation Icebreaker*.

"I suppose it seizes up then it's going to rain? The leg?"

"It doesn't like snow, that's for sure," returned Fairclough, looking out through the double-glazed french windows at the white blanket which had fallen on Boxing Bay. "I suppose you've been out on the golf course with radioactive balls and a Geiger counter?"

"And snow shoes," grinned Newton, a dark-haired twenty-five-year-old, who was the club's senior golf professional. "You know, there's something different about you, but I'm buggered if I know what it is."

"Just shows how observant some people are," laughed Fairclough, a thirty-year-old Northerner in an expensive business suit, which had become the standard travelling gear of the modern British Army. He had short, blond hair, and at five feet eleven inches tall, he was an inch taller than Newton.

"Your glasses!" Newton realized. "You're not wearing them."

"Right!" mocked Fairclough. "Give that man a banana. I've invested in some permanent-wear soft contact lenses."

"You vain bugger," laughed Newton. "Hello, Knocker."

"Hi, there, Hank," drawled Lieutenant Birky, a diminutive Londoner, as he strolled into the lounge. "Art reckons his glasses steam up when he comes in out of the cold and then he trips over things."

"And I've got the bruises to prove it," added Fairclough in an injured tone.

"Sounds more like too many glasses of the sort you drink out of," observed Newton. "Here's the boss."

"Ah, you're all here," said Major McAndrew, a stocky Scot, whose dark hair was starting to acquire grey strands and become thinner. "Anyone had lunch yet?"

The time was just after one o'clock. His colleagues shook their heads. The quartet retired to the dining room in the east wing for lunch and to catch up on any news. Major McAndrew had been in Scotland for three weeks, and Fairclough and Birky had been absent on leave for a fortnight. There was nothing much going on, but the group was ready to leap into action when a good reason turned up.

New Year's Eve fell on the following Monday. Portsmouth-based Lieutenant-Commander Donald Smith and the crew of his personal Motor Torpedo Boat *Ned Kelly* arrived for the Bellside for a party. McAndrew had brought Smith and his crew into *Operation Life-Preserver*, and Hank Newton had been Smith's regular second-in-command until the Bellside's golf course had seduced him away from Portsmouth.

The naval party stayed on until Thursday to give the holiday traffic on the roads time to subside. The following morning, McAndrew received a telephone call from the Ministry of Defence Experimental Station at Berelogie, near Montrose in Scotland. The caller was Lieutenant-Colonel Dan Porter, who used the experimental station as a cover for his private distillery. They chatted about general matters for a while, then Colonel Porter came to the point.

"I suppose you've been to the Isle of Wight in the not too distant past?" he asked.

"Aye, we used to stroll across occasionally when we were stationed at

East Saltby," returned McAndrew. "We were only about ten or twelve miles away."

"Did you ever get to the Reynolds Hotel at Jacford?"

"No, I don't think we've ever been there. No, the only Reynolds Hotel I know is in Saltby on the Hampshire coast."

"This place must be another of a chain, in that case. It's on the south coast of the Isle of Wight, in Brighstone Bay. Does that ring any bells?"

"I don't think so. But carry on anyway, Dan."

"Well, we've had a roundabout inquiry about our product from the manager of this hotel. His name is Browne with an 'e'. As far as I can tell from his signature. I wanted to know if he's okay or up to no good. Part of some sort of Customs and Excise revenue-collection scheme. So you can't give him a reference?"

"The only Browne with an 'e' we know in that part of the world is our old friend George Jackson-Browne with a hyphen. You remember, the manager of the Reynolds hotel in Saltby, where we had a couple of *Operation Life-Preserver* conferences."

"Ah, yes! I remember the conference I attended as an observer. What a weekend! Hang on a minute."

McAndrew doodled on his blotter through a longish pause.

"Hello, Mac? You know, it might be the same chap. It looks as though the letter is signed G. Jack-something Browne. It could easily be Jackson, and there could be a hyphen too."

"How much product does he want?"

"Just a minute. Yes, here it is. A hundred gallons of blended and fifty of single malt."

"No, it can't be him," McAndrew decided with a laugh. "Our friend George would need his brown trousers to go near just one bottle of your product. I can't see him taking that much."

"It can't be him, then," agreed the colonel. "Pity. I was going to ask Commander Smith to have a look at him, but he's not at home. Off on a business trip somewhere, according to his people. I just called you on the off-chance, knowing you used to be stationed in the area."

"Well, I suppose I could go and have a look at him," McAndrew offered, taking the hint. "It won't take more than an hour or two, and I've got nothing better to do."

"That's very good of you, Mac," said Colonel Porter, as though Mc-

Andrew's willingness to undertake the mission had come as a welcome surprise.

"Aye, isn't it?" chuckled McAndrew. "No, you've made me curious. Could it be we've actually corrupted poor old George by example? It doesn't seem possible – not with that dragon of a wife keeping an eye on him. Still, there's only one way to find out."

"I look forward to your report," said Colonel Porter. "Speak to you later."

At around one o'clock that afternoon, Major McAndrew, disguised as a civilian businessman, strolled into the lobby of the Reynolds Hotel, which was tacked on to the western limits of the town of Jacford on the Isle of Wight. Lieutenant Birky, also having nothing better to do, had gone along for the ride. He had no idea of the purpose of the mission – McAndrew liked to keep intentions secret until a plan had come together – but Birky was confident that all would be revealed in due course.

"Looks just like the hotel they've got in Saltby," Birky remarked as they approached the reception desk.

"They must have got hold of a job lot of cream paint and red velvet wallpaper," agreed McAndrew. "I'd like to see the manager, please," he announced at the desk.

The receptionist assumed a practised smile and replied, "I don't think he's available at the moment, sir. Do you have an appointment?"

"An appointment? No," McAndrew replied in a tone which suggested that nobody needs an appointment to see a mere hotel manager. "When do you expect him back?"

"One moment, sir. Mrs. Jackson-Browne!" The receptionist moved to the other end of the counter and gave his best gigolo smile to a small, tough-looking woman.

Birky nudged McAndrew. "Don't we know that name?"

"That's what we're here to find out," smiled McAndrew. "If it's the same bloke."

"There can't be two of them managing Reynolds Hotels in such a small area," Birky decided. "Unless it's his brother."

The receptionist returned. "Mr. Jackson-Browne should be back in about five minutes, sir." He made a rapid decision. McAndrew looked respectable enough, but the receptionist distrusted all Scotsmen and he didn't much like the look of Birky, either. No, they were not a pair to leave

in the manager's office unattended.

"Five minutes," repeated McAndrew.

"If you would care to take a seat in the lobby, I'll tell Mr. Jackson- Brown you're here when he gets back." The receptionist extended an arm to offer the well-padded armchairs near the lifts. "What name shall I give, sir?"

McAndrew passed him a card bearing the name G.R. Smith and an address in Whitehall. "By the way," he added, "the lady you were just talking to. Her name wouldn't be Ethel?"

"You know Mrs. Jackson-Browne?" A touch of surprise crept in at the edges of a poker face.

"I'm not sure, laddie. Only of her, if she's the right one," McAndrew added with a smile.

He led Birky over to the seats, leaving the receptionist wondering first about his identity, and then about the Whitehall address. The lobby of the Reynolds Hotel was maintained at a comfortable temperature on a cold day. Rain had washed the snow away, but there had been a heavy frost during a night of clear skies.

McAndrew and Birky tracked Mrs. Jackson-Browne with their eyes several minutes later, when she crossed the lobby to the revolving door. Could this be the woman who had the ability to terrify George Jackson-Browne from a range of a couple of hundred miles when he was up to no good. She was not at all as the then Sergeant McAndrew had visualized her during January and April of the previous year.

In his mental picture, she was a gigantic, fire-breathing dragon of a woman. In reality, the present Major McAndrew judged that Ethel Jackson-Browne would have to be packed fourteen to the dozen to satisfy the Trades Descriptions Act.

She was small and she had a half-starved look, which told McAndrew that she had the sort of metabolism that allowed her to eat like a horse without putting on an ounce of excess weight. A challenging look in her eyes betrayed the presence of an Amazon trapped in a pygmy's body. Here was a warrior of the tongue, not the rolling pin.

A familiar figure pushed though the revolving door ten minutes after the visitors had taken their seats. He ran a brief gauntlet of acknowledgements from the guests, sharing a professional smile with each of them. The receptionist handed him McAndrew's card, exchanged a few words, then directed him to his visitors.

Jackson-Browne approached the encounter with a confident tread and the professional smile. The terrible effect that the name Smith normally had on him seemed to have faded with time.

McAndrew observed that his hair had gone completely grey, but no more of it had fallen out in the eight months since their last meeting. George Jackson-Browne even looked a little plumper, as though he had given up worrying in favour of eating. He had been living mainly on brandy and nervous energy the last time McAndrew had seen him.

The sight of the men waiting for him knocked the smile off the manager's face. He stopped dead in his tracks in a ludicrous pose that was half welcome and half horror.

McAndrew shook his limp hand and took his arm in a friendly fashion to pilot him to his office. "Nice to see you again, laddie. I didn't know you'd been moved. We'll know where to come for our summer holiday now. I think we have a spot of business to discuss. This is just like old times."

George Jackson-Browne began to long for the end of the world.

While Lieutenant Birky took care of organizing three reunion drinks, Major McAndrew guided the manager to the desk and dumped him into his chair.

"There you go, squire." Birky thrust a well-filled glass into Jackson-Browne's limp hand.

"Here's to old friends and old times," toasted Smith alias McAndrew.

Having brought his glass to his lips, Jackson-Browne continued tilting and made gulping noises. He set the empty glass down on the desk with a resolute thump. "And to what do I owe the . . .," he left a short pause, ". . . pleasure of this visit?" he asked, riding a brief wave of Dutch courage.

"As a matter of fact," smiled McAndrew, "you wanted to see us."

The sheer impossibility of the statement blew Jackson-Browne's alcohol-generated cool into a million fragments. His mouth opened and closed like that of a stranded goldfish. His left eye seemed to be winking furiously, fluttered by the return of his twitch.

"If you remember," continued McAndrew, "you were in touch with a firm in Scotland. About a hundred and fifty gallons of whisky."

"Huh?" said the manager, playing dumb as much through bafflement as design.

Birky refilled his glass and dumped the bottle in front of him. "You know, this stuff."

"No!" said Jackson-Browne quickly, refusing to look at the bottle of Ballantine's whisky. "Not me. You've come to the wrong place, Mr. Smith."

"Relax, laddie," chuckled McAndrew. "We happen to know the chap who owns that firm. He sent us down to take a look at you. He wants us to give you a reference. Well, we'll be able to tell him we've known you for years."

Jackson-Browne finished his second drink and peered at McAndrew suspiciously. The combined effects of shock and rapid consumption of alcohol were intermingling.

"Just out of interest," remarked Birky, who had been amusing himself by opening the safe with a piece of bent wire, "how long's it going to take you to use up that much stuff?"

"What stuff?" asked Jackson-Browne. The sight of Birky opening and relocking his allegedly high-security safe had pushed the subject under discussion right out of his mind.

"The Scottish Magic," Birky reminded him. "All a hundred and fifty gallons of it."

"Well," said Jackson-Browne, deciding rapidly that the Dreaded Smith had such a hold on him already that revealing one more major sin would make no significant difference, "as an economy measure, and to improve the efficiency of our service to our clients, a great many hotels are installing drinks dispensers in many of the rooms and in upper corridors.

"The idea is to save on staff for room service, particularly at night, when it becomes even more costly. The customer puts a one pound coin into the machine, and receives a miniature bottle of the hotel's own brand of whisky, gin, vodka, or brandy. And a speciality, such as a single malt whisky.

"A number of us, the managers of the hotels for the pilot project, were given the responsibility for purchasing supplies and dealing with the bottlers and the suppliers of the dispensers. Naturally, we were looking for a blend of whisky that met our standards at the most advantageous price to maximize profitability." Jackson-Browne paused for well-earned breath.

McAndrew stared at him in open admiration. "So the lot of you are out to make a few bob for yourselves on the side, right?"

Jackson-Browne shook his head in vigorous denial, but his expression admitted the crime. McAndrew beamed at him, surprised and delighted that some of his own brand of original thinking had rubbed off on the manager. He reached into his briefcase and drew out a sample bottle of

Uisge Beatha malt and another of the blended whisky.

"Here you are, laddie," he announced. "A wee something for you to try. Test the quality of the goods."

Birky put two clean glasses on Jackson-Browne's desk and motioned for him to take the tops off the two bottles. McAndrew made himself comfortable in an armchair. The manager realized that there was no getting rid of the visitors until he had tasted their wares.

"Tell me," said McAndrew, "how did you manage to get moved to this place? It's certainly a step up for you. I bet a room here costs twice as much as the hotel at Saltby."

"Around that," said Jackson-Browne with quiet pride. "I must say, this whisky is excellent," he added, trying to change the subject. "I don't know how your friend does it at the price. If it's not . . . I mean, there are other people involved in the scheme . . ."

"Don't worry, laddie," smiled McAndrew. "It didn't fall off the back of a lorry. How did you swing it? Getting this place?"

Jackson-Browne sighed. It was confession time again. "Do you remember when you wanted to hold one of your, er, conferences at my hotel last April? And you went to see the group manager to persuade him not to raise any objections? Well, he dashed round to the hotel babbling about the Ministry of Defence and the government. Obviously impressed by their choosing to use one of our hotels.

"When the manager of this hotel retired soon afterwards, and my wife thought it would be nice for me to take on the responsibilities of a larger hotel . . . Well, to cut a long story short, I sort of hinted to Mr. Trevellyan, the Group Manager, it might be to our mutual benefit to have someone as well-connected as myself in charge."

"I like your style," grinned Birky.

"Well, the family that runs the Reynolds chain, the Carter family, see themselves as pillars of the Establishment. And you can't get more Establishment than the Ministry of Defence."

"A little creative moral blackmail?" suggested McAndrew.

"It's no worse than anything you've done to me," protested Jackson-Browne. "I suppose I did also hint that his secret is safe with me."

"You know about that?" grinned Birky.

"Well, no," admitted the manager. "But I assumed he'd have one And someone from the Ministry of Defence would know it."

“Creative bluffing too, eh?” approved McAndrew. He looked at his watch. “Okay, we’ll leave you to it, Mr. Browne. I’ll let the supplier know you’re someone we can trust, and you should be getting a quotation pretty soon. And you can let your partners-in-crime, if you’ll pardon the expression, try out the single malt and the cooking whisky. Goodbye now, Mr. Browne.”

George Jackson-Browne pushed himself to his feet to shake hands. “Goodbye, Mr. Smith.” He gave McAndrew’s hand what he hoped was a firm, determined squeeze. Birky extended his hand. “Goodbye, Mr, er, Smith?”

“Browne, actually,” said Birky, despite having registered on more than one occasion as *Smith* at the Saltby Reynolds. “Also with an ‘e’.” He was growing quite fond of the alias which he had acquired when working with the film company on Dartmoor the previous autumn.

George Jackson-Browne clasped his hand, then escorted the visitors to the door of his office. He watched them descend the dozen or so shallow steps from the mezzanine to the ground floor, and then head straight for the front door.

When they had revolved out of his life for the moment, he returned to the security of his desk, his mood changing from residual terror to deep thought. The sign of the bottles on his desk prompted him to pop a mint into his mouth to conceal the whisky smell. Some people, his wife included, did not know the difference between tasting a new product and secret boozing.

He had survived yet another encounter with the Dreaded Smith, he told himself. But it had gone off very well for a change. For once, his leg had not been chewed. He had always been very proud of his simile, which compared the Dreaded Smith to a tiger.

Following the move from Saltby, he had assumed that he had seen the back of the Dreaded Smith. But a cruel fate had thrown them together once more. Yet, looking back objectively, he seemed to be coming out of their dealings better and better. Or was it just that he was gaining the confidence necessary to take advantage of the opportunities that arose in the presence of someone like the Dreaded Smith?

With that cheering thought in mind, he returned to work. His first job was to arrange a meeting of the managers who would be participating in the dispenser project so that they could sample two of the products to be offered to customers and give their approval to the deal.

28. THE HOOK

Major McAndrew and Lieutenant Birky emerged from the Reynolds Hotel into half a gale.

"Where now?" said Birky.

"How about trying that pub down the way, there?" suggested his companion. "We might be able to get a decent pint instead of the rubbish they serve in hotels. What's the time?"

"About half one. We could try the grub as well," Birky added.

The pub was called *The Three Horsemen* and it lay two hundred yards up the coast from the Reynolds Hotel. It was surprisingly empty for a wet Friday lunchtime, which allowed Birky to order immediately.

McAndrew spotted the telephone and decided to call Colonel Porter at the distillery in Scotland. Ten minutes and a lot of loose change later, he rejoined Birky, having supplied Jackson-Browne's reference.

The pair made themselves comfortable in a corner and began to refuel. Suddenly, McAndrew found himself sitting in shadow. He looked up to see two men standing over them.

They were wearing white submarine jerseys under very dark blue anoraks, trousers in a similar shade of blue and sea boots. They looked rather too smartly dressed to be working fishermen.

"You wouldn't be Mr. Smith?" inquired one of them.

"I might," returned McAndrew suspiciously. "Who are you?"

"Fellow Smiths," answered the other stranger. They dumped their pints on the table and sat down uninvited.

"I thought I recognized you," added the first Smith. "I was at the second *Operation Life-Preserver* conference, but you probably don't remember me."

"Fraid not," said McAndrew, still on his guard.

"Do you want a lift?" asked Smith Two.

"Where to?" frowned McAndrew, knocked off balance by the strange question.

"You mean you're not meeting up with Smithy?"

"Smithy who?" asked Birky.

"You know, Don Smith from Pompey. Ned Kelly's skipper."

"He's here, you mean?" asked McAndrew.

"Yes, 'course he is. Didn't you know?" said Smith Two.

"Obviously not, twit!" said Smith One. "Yes, we're in a spot of bother and he's come to see if he can help and give us some advice."

"Which is why his lads said he was out when I called him this morning," nodded McAndrew.

"Let's drop in on him and surprise him," urged Birky. "Is it far?"

"Less than a mile," said Smith Two. "But carry on with your meal. Don't let us stop you."

"What's this problem?" invited McAndrew as he returned to his steak and kidney pie.

Smith and Smith fished out identity cards to prove that they were inspectors on a roving commission from the Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department, the Whitehall department which Lieutenant-Commander Smith and his naval colleagues had infiltrated and taken over.

The strangers became Sub-Lieutenants Buck Lindsay and Rolf Hillier. They enjoyed the doubtful distinction of having been members of the crew of *Arc Royal* on the final voyage of the 'last' of Britain's traditional aircraft carriers.

Fortunately, for the honour of the nation and the security of its remote outposts, the navy had chosen not to abandon the idea of aircraft-carrying ships. The navy had sneaked the concept of through-deck cruisers in through the back door, and developed them into the ski-jump Harrier aircraft carriers which played such a significant part in the Falklands War.

In the interim period, Lindsay and Hillier, along with other members of *Arc Royal's* navigation and signals staff, had been transferred to a shore station on the Isle of Wight, to one of the ground-breaking *Project Hyperion* weather stations.

McAndrew remarked that he had never heard of *Project Hyperion*.

Lindsay and Hillier were not surprised. The project had failed to get off the ground – literally. Six out of the ten projected weather stations had

been built around the British Isles. The plan called for providing them with satellite links, and they were intended to give British and NATO forces up-to-the-minute weather information and very accurate short-range forecasts.

Unfortunately, *Project Hyperion* had become a victim of its own secrecy. Some Westminster Wonder, looking for ways to reduce Defence costs, had realized that so few people knew about *Project Hyperion* that it could be axed safely without loss of face.

Six sets of buildings had been constructed and provided with the usual services – power, water, links to the sewage system and telecommunications facilities. Staff had moved into the living quarters and made them habitable. Then they had waited for the expensive weather forecasting equipment to be installed – the computers, the satellite communication dishes, plotting tables for weather systems and special communications equipment for distributing their forecasts.

They had waited, and waited, and waited – in vain.

Hyperion became the forgotten project, Reports were shunted to the backs of filing cabinets and left there to rot. No one would suggest disbanding the crews of the six stations because that would have involved discussing a painful error of judgement. Even the Ministry of Defence's Central Supply Computer seemed to develop an increasing abruptness when responding to requisitions for provisions and equipment.

The staffs of the six stations, Hyperions Two and Four to Eight, lived a pleasant, relaxed life at first, drawing their pay and not doing too much to earn it. But eventually, they became bored. The personnel of H-4 on the island of Lewis were the first to crack. They didn't want to spend the rest of their lives stuck in the Outer Hebrides. Discreet lobbying produced the first of a series of unobtrusive transfers.

All but one of the officers of H-2 on the Isle of Wight joined the exodus. Only Lieutenant Nugent, a navigation officer, had no desire to return to the mainstream of the Royal Navy. He had gone into business for himself, and he was doing very nicely. So had a group of the men, and they had no wish to leave Hyperion Two either.

The two businesses complemented each other. While the men reconstructed and refitted vessels of all types at their boatyard, the navigation officer gave classes for local yachtsmen at his own version of the Royal Navy's school of navigation, which is known affectionately as the *Wreckers'*

Retreat. Lieutenant Nugent hired a room on the top floor of the pub in which McAndrew and Birky were sitting, and he acted as an agent for two firms which sold electronic navigational aids.

It was to this sole survivor of *Project Hyperion* that Lieutenant-Commander Smith had sent the vessels captured in the first quarter of the previous year during *Operation Blackbird*. The boatyard had also carried out the conversion work on his Motor Torpedo Boat, fitting *Ned Kelly* with armour, more powerful engines and larger fuel tanks.

After a period of prosperity and tranquillity, the staff of Hyperion Two had run into trouble. They had been 'discovered' by a Member of Parliament who was trying to make a name for himself and seeking advancement in his own party – preferably all the way up to ministerial rank.

Although the answers to his probing questions had not included the name *Hyperion*, and he was not aware that six out of the project's ten planned weather stations had actually been constructed, he was certain that the Navy was running at least one functionless shore station on the Isle of Wight. And, he had decided, where there is one source of waste, there had to be others.

The MP was planning to agitate for an investigation of naval spending on useless items, and he wanted to start the ball rolling by demanding that H-2 be closed down forthwith. When he had gathered enough information to place before the media, he was hoping to establish himself as a guardian of the public purse and worthy of a place in his party's next government.

Seeking to make the biggest splash possible, as far as personal publicity was concerned, he had decided to carry out all ammunition-gathering without assistance. He had a talent for asking apparently harmless and roundabout questions from which he could extract damaging information. But the twin flags 'inactive naval station' and 'Isle of Wight' had set off an alarm in a computer in the Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department of the Ministry of Defence. H-2 had received a warning that it was under investigation. What the personnel did next was up to them.

The staff of Hyperion Two had considered various options. As it had been the troublesome MP's own party which had authorized *Project Hyperion* and pushed it through Parliament as part of their *Technology In Action* scheme, there was scope for embarrassing the trouble into vanishing.

One possible approach was to have a quiet word with the party's leaders and nudged them into warning off the ferret in the party's interests. This approach carried the risk that if H-2 were brought to official attention, there was a distinct possibility that it would be closed down quietly as quietly as possible when the dust died down.

Such a softly-softly approach ran contrary to the spirit of the naval private enterprise groups. Along with similar groups in the other armed services, they were expected to sink or swim by their own efforts, and to strike back at their enemies. Having had no experience in that field Lieutenant Nugent had turned to Lieutenant-Commander Smith for advice.

At the conclusion of the short history of H-2's troubles, McAndrew and Birky drained their glasses and exchanged glances. Each knew that the other had decided to visit Hyperion Two. They left the pub and strolled to Sub-Lieutenant Hillier's navy-blue Jaguar. The wind seemed worse than ever. Pieces of grease-proof paper and plastic trays, debris from the chip shop up the road, raced among the vehicles in the car park on their way down to the wintry sands of the beach.

After a three-minute drive, Hillier turned off the coast road at a gate set in a rusting wire fence. As if by magic, the gate swung away from him. McAndrew spotted the eye of a miniature television camera behind a panel of armoured glass in one of the concrete posts. The gate closed as soon as Hillier had cleared it.

He drove on to a collection of low buildings and into a capacious garage. The long, low cavern contained four other vehicles, including a motor caravan, and it had plenty of room for more. The staff of Hyperion Two had no problem with finding somewhere to park.

"I wish I'd put on something a bit longer than this car coat," McAndrew remarked as they left the garage. "The wind certainly finds its way up it."

"Just be glad you're not wearing a kilt," remarked Birky with a cheeky grin.

"We could have used the underpass that connects all the surface installations," said Lindsay, "but it's quicker this way."

"Watch out for this next bit," warned Hillier. "Some of the paving stones have started to tip up when you tread on the edge of them. You can get your ankles squirted. We've been waiting for some dry weather so we can tack them down again."

McAndrew and Birky played follow-the-leader's-footsteps along the final

stretch of the path, assuming that their hosts knew where to tread in safety. The building that they entered turned out to be nothing more exciting than a store room for oil drums.

"This way," said Lindsay, pulling the familiar credit-card-size rectangle of a plastic security card from a pocket. "Here's the lift."

He pushed the card into a slot on the wall. A whining noise rose from the depths.

"Not another bloody coal mine," groaned Birky. His reaction puzzled his hosts.

"Ignore him," advised McAndrew. "It's just that a lot of the people we know seem to prefer to live underground."

"We don't," said Hillier as the lift doors opened to receive them. "We live on the surface. The reason we're going down here is some silly sod through we ought to have a fallout shelter and command post with an exit at beach level. We converted that into the boatyard when we got disowned. Our mutual friend Smithy is down there."

The lift doors parted to reveal what could have been a man-improved natural cave. An abundance of light swept all shadows away.

"I wouldn't like to have to pay your electric bill," remarked Birky.

"Me neither," agreed Lindsay. "This way." He led the visitors past two half-painted racing yachts and an untenanted dry dock.

"He's brought his battleship with him," observed Birky, pointing to the sinister form of Ned Kelly. "It looks like a floating zebra!"

"Watch it!" warned Hillier. "Smithy's dead proud of his brand new camouflage scheme. It's his own personal design, so he reckons. They should be in the office."

A blast of warmer air surged out of the door into their faces, making the visitors realize that the interior of the cave was a little on the chilly side. Two faces turned towards the source of the thermal smash-and-grab.

"Visitors," announced Lindsay. "Mr. Smith and Mr. Smith from the CSSSU."

"Bugger me! It's Mac and Knocker!" a well-known voice roared from an unshaven face.

"Is that you behind that stubble, Don?" grinned McAndrew.

"After Captain Bird's Eye's job?" added Birky.

"Long time since I last had a full-set," said Smith, replacing his pipe and applying a match to the bowl.

"This is our fearless leader, Mr. Nugent," said Lindsay, introducing the visitors to the owner of a proper set of whiskers.

When it grew out, Smith's beard would be thick and jet black. Lieutenant Nugent had a pale blond moustache and gingery whiskers which merged with darker blond hair.

"Major McAndrew and Lieutenant Birky from the Bellside Country Club," continued Lindsay.

The new guests received handshakes and chairs. Lieutenant Nugent was wearing a submarine jersey, dark trousers and boots, just like his men, but the coffee mug at his left elbow wore two gold rings to confirm his rank.

"Drink, gentlemen?" offered Nugent.

"Please," nodded McAndrew. "We're not driving."

"How did you get over here?" asked Smith.

"Hitched a lift on a chopper," explained McAndrew.

"We've been telling Major McAndrew about our problem," Hillier volunteered as he poured coffee and brandy for the visitors.

"All help and ideas gratefully received," said Lieutenant Nugent.

"We ought to do an *Operation Plank* on this MP bloke," decided Birky. "Dump him somewhere with no passport and no fare home."

His naval colleagues laughed, wistfully.

"We've split the problem into three areas," said Smith, blowing a stream of smoke at the ventilation fan. "Firstly, we need a short-term smoke-screen to cover us while secondly, we work out a permanent way of getting this interfering idiot off H-Two's back. Something similar to *Operation Plank* would be great – if he wasn't so well known and likely to be missed. Phase Three involves plugging up the holes to make sure no one gets as far as he has, and to ensure the long-term survival of H-Two."

"What we really need is some useful dirt on him," mused McAndrew, finding the problem an irresistible challenge. "Who do we know in his part of the world?"

"Cap and Skipper, those trawler captains who called us in for *Operation Icebreaker*," said Smith. "We've already got the pair of them coming down here at the beginning of next week."

McAndrew began to laugh.

"What's funny?" invited Smith.

"Oh, just a thought. You know who's the manager of the swankiest hotel on this stretch of coast?"

"Go on, then," frowned Smith, trying to work out what hotels had to do with the business in hand – and failing.

"Our old friend George Jackson-Browne, that's who. From Saltby. I was just imagining the look on his face if we booked Cap and Skipper in there and got them to turn up in their smuggling gear. But we can't mess him about at the moment, I suppose. He's about to buy some of Dan Porter's whisky. Why don't we think about the problem over the weekend and drop back on Monday?"

"Feel free," invited Lieutenant Nugent. "As I said, all brilliant ideas gratefully received."

Sub-Lieutenant Kurt Bronski, Ned Kelly's navigation officer, looked into the office. He offered surprised greetings to McAndrew and Birky, then he raised a query about how a new piece of equipment was to be operated. While their naval colleagues conferred, the Bellsiders had a chance to inspect the office.

It was transparently obvious that it had been constructed by chopping an area of rectangular section into the rocky wall of the cave. A lining of clear plastic panels on three of the walls allowed the structure of the rock to show through, providing a neat solution to the problem of decoration. The floor, ceiling and front wall presented a varnished wooden contrast.

"It has a pleasing originality, don't you think?" remarked Nugent, having answered Bronski's questions.

"Aye," agreed McAndrew. "In fact, it's so real, it looks artificial, if you see what I mean."

Smith finished his coffee and tapped out his pipe. "I think I'll invite myself over to your place for the weekend," he announced with the air of an emperor bestowing his patronage on a deserving servant. "We can do some planning in the odd free moment."

"That's very decent of you," grinned McAndrew.

"Does that mean we're getting a ride on your boat over to Pompey?" asked Birky, remembering that Ned Kelly's bar closed only when the Motor Torpedo Boat was on active service.

"Nothing like a nice sea voyage to work up an appetite for dinner," nodded Smith.

Ned Kelly slipped out of the boatyard to find a calm sea and a setting sun. Two huge, cunningly camouflaged doors closed behind the Motor Torpedo

Boat, preserving the secret of H-2 from all but the hundred or so people who were in on it. The strong winds had blown themselves out for the day. Ned Kelly circled the Isle of Wight to the east on the twenty-six mile run to Portsmouth, attracting curious and admiring stares from those who happened to be on the coast at the right time.

As an exercise in perversity, McAndrew, Birky and their guest decided to take a taxi to the Bellside. None of them felt either sober enough or keen enough to drive, and they were in a mood to push their luck. Smith had changed into his number one travelling suit and he was looking as respectable as the Bellsiders.

They were lucky enough to catch a taxi unloading at the dockyard gates. The driver assumed that he was picking up a trio of naval gentlemen on a short run ashore. Smith told him that he would give directions to their destination, implying that he didn't know the exact address.

As he left the city behind, the driver became increasingly insistent on an estimate of the length of the journey. Smith kept assuring him that they didn't have much further to go, keeping to himself the fact that the Bellside Country Club was forty five miles from Portsmouth.

When they reached Havant, the driver decided that he had had enough. He stopped the cab and refused to go any further. Smith paid him the amount on the clock and the excess for two passengers. The matter of a tip was not raised – not that Smith had any intention of rewarding the driver for an incomplete journey.

Birky phoned for a minicab, which took the trio as far as Chichester before the driver decided that he was getting too far from home. McAndrew picked up another taxi and directed the driver inland.

At around Billingshurst, the driver stopped the cab and demanded to know their destination. McAndrew decided to try a new tactic. He led an exodus from the vehicle and told the driver that he wouldn't receive a penny unless his passengers received an immediate and sincere assurance that they would be taken to their destination.

The driver thought about it, then he restarted his engine. He had made too big an investment in time and petrol to strand his awkward passengers and, as the Scottish one had remarked, if it was his business to drive people around in his cab, it should make no difference to him there they were going as long as he was paid for the journey.

An artistic and obviously genuine sigh of relief poured from the cabbie

when he came to a halt in front of the Bellside Country Club, ten minutes later. McAndrew reached into an inside pocket and drew out a crumpled note.

"This is going to cost you, mate," warned the driver.

"Really!" replied McAndrew, looking suitably impressed.

The driver unfolded the note and stared at it. "I can't change this," he said automatically, reading the words 'One Hundred Pounds'. "'Ere, what is this?" he added a moment later.

"Real money," said McAndrew, swapping his Scottish £100 note for two English fifties. "I suppose you'd better keep the change."

"I hope you enjoy the drive back," Birky called over his shoulder as he followed McAndrew and Smith into the club.

The driver stared blankly at the retreating back of his passengers and wondered about eccentric millionaires. Then he decided to head for home immediately in case they changed their minds about the change.

29. A LINE TILL THE SINKER

Smith and McAndrew spent the weekend plotting and using the telephone to contact various people and rummage in computer filing systems. On Monday, they returned to the Isle of Wight for the meeting with Cap and Skipper. McAndrew promised to send for the rest of the Bellsiders at the appropriate time, and advised them to keep an eye on the newspapers.

The meeting took place in the mess at Hyperion Two. Cap and Skipper had flown down to Sandown and travelled the final ten and a half miles by car. Smith and McAndrew had travelled by helicopter. They began the proceedings with an account of their activities over the weekend.

"We started off by doing something towards achieving our final objective, plugging holes," announced Smith. "Mac has been on to our old friend Colonel Blackshaw at the MoD, and he's promised to do some digging for us in various interesting places to see what readily available dirt there is.

"I've also been in touch with Captain Drake, Hector Blackshaw's opposite number at our CSSCPD, and he's agreed to lay a false trail in the files to side-track our MP friend for a while. And as a trap for anyone else who tries the same game in the future as a career-booster.

"As for the first objective, putting a smoke-screen around this place, we've come up with a thoroughly devious scheme that's guaranteed to scare the hell out of any investigators. But let's hear from our allies first. We need some idea of how easy it'll be to get at our MP friend so we can plan the duration of our smoke-screen."

"Very well," said Lieutenant Nugent, fighting his impatience to hear the master plan. "It's very good of the two of you to come all this way, just for a relatively brief chat, as it were," he added to the trawlermen.

"Our pleasure," smiled Cap. "We owe the Navy plenty, and besides, your hospitality is world famous."

Nugent responded to the heavy hint by pushing a bottle of naval rum closer to the trawlermen.

"Besides," admitted Skipper, "we had to come down to this part of the world sometime soon. We've got to deliver a cargo to a bloke near here, and this gives us a chance to find out whether we can land it at Jacford, or if it has to go to Ventnor with the rest of the load."

"A cargo from Dan Porter?" asked McAndrew. "Not a hundred and fifty gallons of whisky for a laddie called Jackson-Browne?"

"We might have known you'd be in on it," chuckled Skipper.

"One tip," cautioned McAndrew. "Don't call yourselves Smith when you meet Mr. Browne. It makes him nervous. But we seem to be getting off the subject. What d'you know about our MP friend, lads?"

"He's fairly clean on the surface, as far as we can tell," replied Cap. "But there are whispers. Some of the people he's done business with in the past are only as honest as they have to be. And he always seems to have that little bit more money than you'd expect him to have. We've made a list of possible places to look for dirt." He passed a folded sheet of paper to McAndrew. "I suppose you'll be getting your counterspy people to do some photographing?"

"Could be," smiled McAndrew.

"What are you going to do with this dirt if you find any?" asked Skipper.

"*When* as find it," stressed Smith. "Most of these characters have a naughty secret or two. It's knowing how much they've got away with that convinces them others are at it too. Strange how they think their secrets are safe."

"One thing we could do," said McAndrew, answering the question, "is to spot some keen young reporter, someone who's eager to expose corruption in high places, and arrange for him to trip over some of the evidence. And make him work hard enough for more to make him believe it's his reporting skill and good luck opening doors for him."

"Or we could do something completely different," said Smith, keeping the options open. "It all depends what Hector Blackshaw can come up with."

The conspirators studied the trawlermen's list and raised subsidiary questions. When they were satisfied, Cap glanced at his watch.

"We'd better be off," he decided. "If we're going to sort out somewhere to drop the cargo when we deliver to the hotel."

"Why not use our boatyard?" suggested Lieutenant Nugent.

"Good idea," said Smith. "If the weather's okay, you can sail right in and unload without attracting any unwelcome attention. We do that with our MTB all the time."

"We'll take you up on that," nodded Skipper, an ancient mariner whose weather-beaten face sported an impressive grey beard. He looked about pensionable age – about twenty-five years older and a few sizes smaller than his large companion. "Very co-operative bunch, the Navy."

"I'll get one of my lads to show you round." Nugent opened the office door and shouted, "Buck! Here a minute."

"In a minute," replied a distant voice.

Someone indulged in a short burst of hammering, a brief spasm of chain rattling, and then a semi-shouted conversation with someone else even further away. Footsteps approached.

"Right," said Sub-Lieutenant Lindsay, "what's to do?"

"Two of our guests are thinking of unloading some cargo here," explained Nugent. "I'd like you to give them the tour and show them the approach to the sea door. They've got to get a trawler in here."

"As long as they don't try when the tide's out and it's blowing half a gale, there's nothing to it," said Lindsay.

"It might be useful to know how much you want to unload on us," realized Nugent.

"Sixty five boxes, the same size as cases of a dozen whisky bottles, is what we were told," replied Cap.

"No problem, then," said Lindsay. "This way, gents."

"Right," said Smith when the civilian visitors had left the office, "now we can get down to business. We'll turn Cap's list over to the Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department and get them to plan some investigations. Which you'll have to pay for."

"Yes, we realize that," nodded Nugent. "A realistic price for labour and materials. Just another business expense."

"Good," said Smith, tucking the list into an inside pocket. "We've called the smoke-screen part of the operation *Operation Mist*. If you know what that means in German, it becomes very apt."

Nugent selected a volume from the bookshelf beside his desk and turned pages. "Mist – dung, manure, and fog in a nautical context."

"We've called torpedoing this character *Operation Fan*," added Smith.

"If all goes well, our MP friend will be standing right in front of the fan when the 'mist' hits it." He paused for an evil chuckle.

"One thing the people at the MoD came up with," offered McAndrew, "is that our boy knows some fairly suspect people. Members of Eastern European trade missions – the sort of character MI-Five and Special Branch keep tabs on. That gave us the idea of mentioning his name in the same breath as, say, some dodgy characters from the Middle East – Israelis, Syrians, Palestinians, that area of country. If we can get the CIA and the KGB making five out of a pair of deuces, we might be able to hang the Yanks and the Russians around his neck."

"Which should set our own Security people wondering why there's all the interest in him without getting any prompting from us," added Smith. "And when the genuine dirt starts sticking to him, our boy's going to have far too much on his plate to worry about Hyperion Two. Or any of the others, for that matter."

"Don't you sods feel guilty about doing the dirty on an elected representative of the people?" asked Nugent, half-seriously.

"I didn't vote for him," smiled McAndrew. "And it's only self-defence. If you're trying to scrape the jam off someone else's bread, you have to be prepared to risk him nicking yours."

"I suppose we're only doing unto him as he wants to do unto us," agreed Nugent. "And it's not our fault if he's bent. I suppose we're doing the country a favour by showing him up."

"Always assuming his successor is any better if he gets the push," remarked Smith. "Now then, back to the business in hand. *Operation Mist*. Mac and I have come up with a fairly elastic plan, which we should be able to stretch out as long as necessary. This is what we've worked out for you . . ."

The visitors headed for home, having enjoyed lunch on the staff of Hyperion Two. Cap and Skipper dropped in at the Reynolds Hotel to tell the manager that he could expect delivery of his miniature bottles of whisky in a couple of days, weather permitting. Smith and McAndrew spent an hour at the Bellside Club putting their colleagues in the picture, then they travelled on to London to do something about *Operation Fan*.

Four days slipped by, during which specialists in the art consulted files in offices and private homes and photographed items without the consent

of the owners. A more complete account of the inquisitive Member of Parliament's elastic business morals began to appear. His standards were no worse than those of many respected members of the business world, but he had fallen below the levels of integrity which he demanded in others, and that made him vulnerable.

For the parliamentary ferret, it was a week of pure delight, during which he spotted a new area of military waste. His persistent inquiries met a carefully calculated degree of resistance, which crumbled gradually as he applied pressure. He kept running into tantalizing hints that led him deeper into a maze and encouraged to press on even further, taking him further and further away from his original target – Hyperion Two.

Odd things began to happen at the end of the week. Fishermen working the south coast of the Isle of Wight discovered strange objects in their nets. Locals found various unusual odds and sods on the beach near Jacford, all apparently washed ashore by the tide.

Sub-Lieutenant Hillier filled and refilled the air bottles of his heated free-diving suit. Underwater operations in British waters in January are never fun, but modern technology had made Hillier's job bearable. The collection of bits and pieces that Smith and McAndrew had despatched to Hyperion Two disappeared rapidly from the base.

A bearded treasure hunter had arrived in Jacford a couple of days before the first of the discoveries. When not limping up and down the beach with his metal detectors, the visitor had suffered a fairly recent injury to his right leg, he held court in the lounge of the *Three Horsemen*.

Arthur Greene, who was staying at one of the best suites at the Reynolds Hotel, had been boring the locals to death with yarns of the marvels that he and his metal detectors had found over the years. It seemed quite natural for less experienced metal-detector-users to bring their strange discoveries to the expert.

Apparently by accident, blond and bearded Mr. Greene happened to put a geiger counter on the table next to one set of artefacts. The background tick of the audio signal became a high-pitched scream and the needle of the meter leapt right across the dial to the stop on the other side.

Panic reigned as customers fled. The landlord telephoned the police before following the expert's advice to stay out of the main bar of his pub. Finding themselves unable to cope with the situation for lack of protective clothing, the civilian authorities called in the army.

Both army and navy responded with truly astonishing speed. They could not have appeared on the scene faster, the leader of the local council remarked to a colleague, had they been waiting on the sidelines, ready for such an emergency. It was a very heartening display of military preparedness and efficiency.

The group of army specialists, under the command of a Major Smith, organized a collection of all mysterious objects that had come from the sea. Anyone who had handled the objects was taken to an improvised medical centre for precautionary tests.

A team of Service doctors and attendants scanned the victims with sensitive geiger counters and took blood samples for analysis. Their clients were allowed to watch as a ten-millilitre sample of their blood in a small bottle shuffle into the analyzer, which had flashing lights, a chart recorder with three pens loaded with blue, green and red ink, and a pulsing oscilloscope. Empty sample vials emerged from the machine just before it constructed a multi-coloured chart, which a technician labelled with a reference number and passed back to the doctors.

When they were satisfied that the punters had received their money's worth, the doctors released them as uncontaminated and of no further interest. It was a performance calculated to dispel anxiety and leave the finders of the strange objects feeling slightly guilty at having wasted the time of dedicated doctors.

Armed men in what looked like military overalls threw a cordon around the area of beach on which the mysterious objects had been found. The Dreaded Smith, dressed as an Army Major, arrived to inform George Jackson-Brown that he intended to requisition the Reynolds Hotel for the duration of the emergency which would keep the local group-manager off Jackson-Browne's back.

The hotel manager had watched the barriers being erected across the coast road between the Reynolds Hotel and the Three Horsemen. He had wondered what would become of those who worked within the danger zone. But when the Dreaded Smith had walked into his office, his reluctance to remain and keep his employer's property safe had just evaporated.

He firmly believed that George Jackson-Browne had become fireproof suddenly. If the Dreaded Smith held one of his conferences and wrecked the hotel, no blame could fall on the manager of the establishment. The

responsibility belonged to the Ministry of Defence. Jackson-Brown decided that he would be all right as long as he didn't inquire too closely into Smith's activities.

On the brighter side, when the Dreaded Smith was up to no good in his Hotel, Jackson-Browne had done rather well out of the affair. Only feelings of guilt and the storm troopers of his conscience had prevented him enjoying his rewards to the full in the past. This time, he vowed, it would be different.

McAndrew sat in an armchair in the manager's office and watched a fine display of emotions chase across Jackson-Browne's face. It was like watching a program being loaded into a computer. Suddenly, Jackson-Browne put on a limp smile and he seemed to rediscover the visitor.

"I'm sorry, I seem to be forgetting my manners," he remarked. "Could I offer you a drink?"

"Just a small large one," nodded McAndrew. "I take it your supplies came through all right?"

"I just managed to get them distributed to the other hotels before all this happened," nodded Jackson-Browne, pouring from a bottle of Uisge Beatha single malt, which was part of a supplementary order for the personal consumption of the managers concerned. He made a mental note to add the price of a full bottle to the bill when the Dreaded Smith left. "Cigar?"

"Thanks," McAndrew selected one from the box which had come from the bottom drawer of the desk. He made a mental note to keep a close eye on Jackson-Browne. The manager's normal reaction to his presence was panic, but he was behaving more like a man who had been led into the vaults of the Bank of England and told to help himself.

The news media descended on the area, drawn by rumours of a nuclear accident involving either dumped power-station waste or a submarine. Newspaper and television reporters ran into the outer cordon, which was defined by the coast road and anchored in the east by the Reynolds Hotel and by Hyperion Two in the west. The natural demarkation line kept potential spectators three to four hundred yards from the 'contaminated' beaches.

Some intrepid reporters tried to approach from the sea. Their boats were turned back by a pair of naval minesweepers. Two men managed to

swim ashore but they were picked up on the beach by soldiers dressed in what looked like spacesuits. McAndrew had requisitioned an issue of aluminized fire-fighting suits, which looked appropriate. In all cases, the reception parties did not seem pleased to see intruders.

All questions and protests were ignored. The scuba-diving journalists were marched to a pre-fabricated structure on the cliff top. Men in spacesuits fitted with armbands bearing the word DOCTOR in red on a white background prodded at the infiltrators. Eventually, they decided to decontaminate them as a routine precaution.

The prisoners were taken to a tiled room and ordered to strip. They were covered with an evil-smelling soapy substance, then subjected to a series of chilly showers. Pronounced free of contamination, they were allowed to dress in their decontaminated wetsuits. Then they were driven under guard to the perimeter of the exclusion zone and released with a warning to keep going and not to come back. To underline the official message, a synthetic oil of skunk had been included in the decontaminant. It was said to wear off in about two days.

Despite relentless pressure, the Ministry of Defence refused to discuss the activity at Brighstone Bay and government sources would say only that an investigation was proceeding. A spokesman stressed that there was no danger, and that all civilians had been removed from the investigation zone as a routine precaution. But a story of sorts did leak out. As the source of the leak was a certain Captain Greene, the officers in charge of the exclusion zone were not unduly perturbed by the breach of security.

The investigation team had arrived on Monday. They had repelled the journalist scuba-divers on Tuesday evening. On Wednesday evening, an alert sentry at the entrance to the grounds of the Reynolds Hotel noticed a woman in a nurse's uniform wandering along the coast road. She looked as though she was returning to the hotel after a short walk along a stretch of windswept, freezing cold road on a dark January evening.

The woman was in her late twenties and very attractive. The sentry found plenty of good reasons for taking special notice of her. When he failed to recognize her, the sentry's initial reaction was surprise. He thought that he had met all of the female personnel in the area – in fact, he was sure that he had. His next reaction was to trigger the silent alarm to issue an intruder alert.

Captain Fairclough 'happened' to be limping across the lobby when the

'nurse' entered the hotel. He remarked to her that it was a cold night, and he took the opportunity to invite a good looking woman into the bar for a drink. The 'nurse' decided that a captain had a high enough rank to know what was going on she and she turned her most captivating smile on her victim.

While she was sitting at the bar, a concealed camera photographed the nurse. Her picture was wired to the mainland. A contact in London identified her within minutes as a reporter. Her name was Shirley Burlington, and she was known as Shirl Birl on Fleet Street. Major McAndrew had been counting on just such a penetration of their defences so that he could release a story through channels other than official ones.

He had a plan – in fact, he had two plans, one for either sex of intruder. Captain Fairclough was plan B.

Fairclough played the role of genial victim of a pretty face. Soon, Captain Greene and Nurse Shirley Smith were lounging together in a secluded corner, deep in conversation, each laughing inwardly at the other's gullibility. Fairclough told a tale of mysterious instruments and pieces of machinery found on the beach and in fishermen's nets – all objects that could have come from the wreck of a submarine.

The nurse turned pale when she realized the potential danger of the situation that she had walked into. A quick swallow of brandy restored her equilibrium. With great difficulty, she controlled rising excitement and forced her memory into overdrive. The headlines would read: 'NUCLEAR SUB WRECKED OFF I.O.W.', followed by something like: 'One Of Ours Or One Of Theirs?' But the most important line would read: 'by Shirley Burlington, our reporter on the spot'.

"Do we know who it belongs to yet?" she asked, having 'conned' Fairclough into showing her the collection of the mysterious objects, all of which looked incredibly harmless when seen through the leaded glass window of a display cabinet. "I mean, is it one of ours?"

"Hardly," laughed Captain Greene. "We have so few submarines, it's very easy to keep track of them all, and we could hardly cover up the loss of one of them. Not to mention losing the crew. Their families would ask awkward questions."

"So it's Russian?" asked the nurse.

"Or American," countered Fairclough. "We get quite a lot of theirs swanning around. But Russian is most likely. Some of their *Whiskey* class

boats are getting rather past it. And their navigation isn't always all it should be."

The infiltrator stared at the objects in fascination – but remembering to take a series of photographs with the miniature camera concealed in her upside-down watch. She did not suspect that a device similar to an airport metal detector had fogged the film as she had entered the conference room, and would give it another blast as they left.

Having surrendered the cover story, Fairclough beat the 'nurse' to the punch by making an excuse to abandon her. The intruder had to force herself to walk out of the security zone instead of running. She told the sentries at the barrier between the hotel and the pub that she had been asked to look at a child who was running a fever. They appeared to believe her and let her through.

The nurse turned a corner and moved out of sight of the sentry post. She started to run to her hotel at the other end of Jacford. She dialled her editor's number while she was getting her breath back, unaware that less imaginative colleagues had learned about her mission and had bugged her telephone. Her audiences in London and adjoining hotel rooms listened to her story in shocked silence, staring at the flickering volume meters of their tape recorders. Some of them would have preferred to believe that their ears were deceiving them.

A flood of telephone calls to London followed Shirl Birl's. The only exclusive part of her story that remained, the fogged film, was sent speeding to the capital on a chartered jet. Excitement gripped Fleet Street. Then things started to go wrong.

There was a rush to challenge official and unofficial spokesmen for the Ministry of Defence with the submarine story. None of them knew anything about a missing American or Russian submarine. Known CIA agents on the staff at the US embassy had a similar tale to tell. Similarly, Soviet contacts knew nothing about a crashed American submarine.

Captain Fairclough ran a gauntlet of nudges and winks for about an hour after the departure of the infiltrator. Then Lieutenant Birky strolled into the lounge bar. Having fixed himself up with a drink, he dropped onto a bench seat beside Fairclough, gave him a suggestive nudge and asked loudly, "Well, did you leg it, mate?"

"No!" roared Fairclough, hoping to end speculation on the subject. "*She* legged it."

Shirl Birl's film came out of the fixer tank a uniform and uninformative black. The darkroom technician was threatened with a violent death, but he had a witness. He was not the one who had overexposed the film. Shirl Birl's editor and the other vultures of Fleet Street saw an arresting shock-horror-drama slipping away from them for lack of corroboration. They began to look elsewhere for Thursday's lead story.

A lack of concrete information aided speculation. Rumours spread. People talked about a disaster on the Isle of Wight and thousands in hospital with radiation sickness, even though the television news showed unprotected troops guarding the exclusion zone, and the only space-suited men in the helicopter shots were on the beach.

An MP from the North East of England decided it would not be in the best interests of his constituents to pay a call on a useless naval shore station in Brighstone Bay. He was on the track of a similar waste of the taxpayer's money, unaware that the projected Hyperion Three had been cancelled before building work had begun at Trevoze Head in Cornwall.

Grosvenor Square became the scene of yet another anti-American protest which developed into a riot. The so-called peace movement preferred to attack the country's allies because the Soviet Union had not established any missile bases in the United Kingdom, and it was more fashionable to be opposed to a nation which shared the English language because the targets would be able to read the protest slogans and understand the abuse hurled at them.

The Americans just shrugged and went about their business behind the armoured glass of their embassy. They just diverted their comings and goings to the rear entrance and a series of tunnels which connected the embassy with adjacent, politically neutral buildings.

Some of the younger and more idealistic elements of the embassy staff crept up onto the roof in the evening to bomb the besieging horde with materials smuggled into the building in their briefcases; mainly thin plastic bags filled with red paint and powerful stink bombs. Uncle Sam was returning a few lumps. Then the rain which had been threatened all day came lashing down to dampen the ardour of all but the most persistent demonstrators.

Wet and fed-up policemen were able to clear Grosvenor Square, leaving it full of the debris of protest – bricks, broken bottles, food wrappings,

cigarette ends and discarded, soggy banners. The demonstration achieved nothing, but it gave Fleet Street something to put on Friday's front pages.

As the rain was drenching London, the trawler *Cap's New Rose* chugged through the naval picket a couple of hours ahead of the weather front and slipped through the sea doors into the Hyperion Two boatyard. The trawlermen had brought further supplies of Colonel Porter's *Úisge Beatha* to the decontamination squads.

"This is a hell of a way to clear the area so we can unload some smuggle," remarked Cap, watching cases of blended and malt whisky being transferred to the waiting vans. "Like cutting your fingernails with a circular saw. And about as dangerous if anything goes wrong."

Lieutenant-Commander Smith released one of his blood-chilling cackles. "There's a bit more to it than your smuggle."

"This is part of you plan for this place?" asked Cap. "On second thoughts, don't tell me. It's probably safer not to know. I had a bit of a job persuading my crew there's no danger here."

"I don't know why they're worried," returned Smith. "They know we're here."

"Aye," nodded Cap. "And the last time some of our lads saw you and your mates, there was enough lead flying around to sink a battleship."

"There's no shooting going on here," grinned Smith. "We're a long way from Iceland."

"Just about done now, Cap," reported one of his crew.

"Okay." Cap reached for a yachting cap which was considerably older and more battered than Smith's. "I'd better get down to that hotel and screw my money out of the manager."

"I'll give you a lift," offered Smith.

George Jackson-Browne watched his own personal whisky loch form in his stockroom. The men from the Ministry of Defence were a thirsty bunch, and he expected to make a huge profit out of them. Having counted the cases, he handed an envelope of money to Cap, following the pattern established on television for clandestine payments.

To his great disgust, Cap discarded the envelope and the bank's paper bands, tapped the notes together into one large wad, secured it with a rubber band, and stuffed it into his hip pocket. Such cavalier treatment of a large amount of money wounded Jackson-Browne's sensibilities. New notes were rare enough to command a certain degree of respect. Next

time, he vowed, he would pay the shipping agent in the scruffiest, oldest notes that he could find.

That he could dare to think about another shipment almost before the present one had been loaded into his stockroom spoke volumes for the current state of his morale. Anyone with the Dreaded Smith on his side, Jackson-Browne had assured himself earlier, can kick danger in the teeth with impunity.

30. MANTRAP

The area immediately to the west of Jacford remained relatively quiet during Friday. Had the locals been allowed into the exclusion zone, they would not have noticed much disturbance of the normal winter conditions.

Space-suited figures potted about on the beach, waving metal detectors and occasionally transferring metal objects to plastic boxes or planting red marker flags. Out in the bay, naval divers plopped in and out of the icy waters. Thanks to Smith and McAndrew, the navy had an excuse to train men in the use of a new heated diving suit which was self-contained and did not require an umbilical cable carrying hot water. The divers were making the most of the opportunity and also salvaging useful scrap from a series of wrecks.

The spacemen returned to their base – the canteen at H-2 – at frequent intervals to empty their plastic boxes. Most of their discoveries were harmless metallic refuse but some of them were taking the opportunity to collect interesting-looking shells and pebbles, and they were pocketing an interesting amount of loose change.

Most of their finds ended up in the plastic dustbins in their robing room. But the junk served a dual purpose. It gave the spaceman an excuse to come in for a rest and it allowed someone else to try to make his fortune in coins lost by holiday-makers, and the collection process maintained the illusion that something was happening for the benefit of distant spying eyes.

And spying eyes there were in abundance. An interesting selection of aircraft managed to stray over the Jacford area, giving the RAF an excuse to join in the fun by buzzing intruders. Several civilian pilots received nasty shocks. The turbulent wake of a jet fighter streaking past at a just-subsonic charge can shake a light aircraft nicely and make the task of taking sequences of clear photographs quite impossible.

One of the Soviet Union's infamous trawler fleet arrived to potter about, its web of aerials deployed to catch any available electronic intelligence and carrying human watchers who peered at the beach through binoculars. The navy responded by lining up a transmitter dish on the trawler's aerials and firing off a massive pulse of microwaves to blind the Russians' equipment.

Then a minesweeper wallowed out to the vessel. Its captain had been ordered to find out what sort of silly story the intruders had concocted to explain their presence, and to warn them not to attempt to fish in British waters. The Russian skipper obligingly stopped his engines and invited the minesweeper's captain aboard to deliver his message over a glass of vodka.

As he was being escorted to the Russian captain's cabin, the young British lieutenant noticed an interesting smell of scorched insulation seeping out of one of the instrument rooms, and concluded that the naval 'death ray' had achieved a useful effect.

Having listened attentively to the lieutenant's message, the Russian skipper assured him that he wouldn't dream of fishing in British waters. He explained that he had come so close to shore only because his East German-built compass had developed a fault. He promised to leave the area immediately, But when he attempted to do so, the gremlins struck again. The trawler's engines refused to start.

The Russian captain paraded his chief engineer on deck. The engineer delivered a detailed explanation – in Russian. Then his skipper assured the lieutenant that it was a relatively minor problem which could be cleared up without assistance. The trawler needed only time and permission to drop anchor for a while.

Grinning inwardly, the lieutenant and his minesweeper resumed their patrol. When he reported the position by radio, the lieutenant was ordered to keep a close watch on the trawler, but leave it alone otherwise. Major McAndrew and Lieutenant-Commander Smith were delighted to see the visitors.

They were running an expensive operation, and they had been counting on a Russian involvement. It was a relief to see their expectations fulfilled. They were so pleased that they decided to allow the Russians a night's sleep.

One of the trawler's engines came to life after several hours of hammering and banging, allowing the vessel to creep along at about one and a half knots. Just past the eastern end of the naval picket, the engine failed again. The Navy offered assistance again but once again the Russians assured them that the problem could be cleared up in a couple of hours.

By Sunday, two days later, the trawler had established itself as part of the scenery. On Smith's orders, the navy appeared to take no more than a token interest in the vessel while it swung at anchor. In fact, an observation post had been established on the cliff opposite the trawler to keep a twenty-four hour watch on it and deliver a warning when the Russians made their move.

Civilians felt free to indulge their curiosity when a few probing expeditions failed to provoke the British minesweepers into chasing them away. Photographs of a genuine Russian spy trawler joined the ranks of holiday postcards on sale in the area.

Sunday night fell. The hammerings and clankings which had been seeping across the sea at irregular intervals ceased. The Russians had taken a break for their evening meal. Clouds swallowed a thin sliver of Moon and refused to release it again. Misty rain, like a waterlogged fog, descended on the area. McAndrew and Smith reached a common conclusion – if the Russians were going to try anything devious, the weather was perfect for it.

Lieutenant Birky took their new toy out for a run along the sands. He was driving an electric car, which whispered across the wet sand on balloon tyres and made no sound audible more than a few feet away. Instead of headlights, it was fitted with a pair of low-light cameras, which relayed images from a fixed-forward-looking and a steerable camera to flat television screens in the driver's cab and the passenger compartment respectively.

Birky and his passengers arrived at the observation post to find the watchers, all members of Smith's crew, looking decidedly fed up. Kurt Bronski was wearing the orange baseball cap which was his normal head-gear at action stations. Others, assuming that they would have to go out into the rain sooner or later, had opted for something more waterproof.

"Cheer up, lads," ordered Smith. "Things will be happening soon. Boat teams, down to the beach."

His engineers, Jake Millington and 'Nadger' Nadin, and two of Ned Kelly's gunners, 'Cliff' Clifford and 'Tiddler' Barnes, slipped out into the rain, moaning about getting wet but secretly glad of some action at long last. Each pair was carrying a box the size of a rifle case between them.

"How about some coffee while we're waiting," suggested McAndrew, watching the heads of the second boat team bobbing out of sight down the stone steps to the beach. Sub-Lieutenant Logan, who was wearing his traditional black balaclava, passed him a steaming mug.

Five minutes later, an intercom buzzed.

"Cameras on," reported Jake Millington.

"Reception okay," responded Bronski from his post beside a bank of television monitors.

"Ready to launch," reported CPO Millington.

"Very well," replied Smith. "Away all boats!" He had stolen the phrase from an old American war film starring John Wayne, which had been on television the previous week.

A pair of battery-operated model boats, trailing thin control wires, headed out into the murk in the direction of the Russian trawler. Gyroscopically stabilized low-light cameras sent back pictures of sea and rain-filled sky as the boats bobbed across the long swell.

"We can see the target from Boat Two," reported Bronski several minutes later. He slipped on a headset and turned up the gain of the amplifier which was linked to sensitive microphones on the camera boats.

"What about Boat One?" asked Smith.

"Nothing yet, Skipper."

"Where is Boat Two, exactly?"

"Off the stern of the target. They're correcting for the drift now."

"That means Boat One has drifted too. Tell Nadger to turn ninety degrees to port."

"He's doing that now, Skipper."

There was a short pause, which McAndrew filled with soft, tuneless whistling.

"Two on station now, Skipper," reported Bronski. "I can hear noises from the target – but it must be happening on the port side. I can't see anything."

"Very well," responded Smith. "Ah, Boat One's got itself sorted out, I see."

"Yes, at last. So that's what they're up to!"

From its station beyond the bow of the trawler, on the seaward side of the vessel, the camera on spy Boat One relayed pictures of the launching of a rubber dinghy. Boat Two was transmitting images of the starboard side of the trawler as seen from its position short of the stern. Nothing was happening on the landward side of the vessel.

A crew of six trawler crew scrambled down an iron ladder to the dinghy. Two of them, by their uncertain, clumsy movements, were not experienced seamen.

"I don't know what he's worried about," commented Smith, watching one of the landlubbers trying to step off the ladder as a wave lifted the dinghy. "If he doesn't get wet falling into the sea, he's going to get soaked by the rain."

"Ah, but it's all a matter of pride," said McAndrew. "Getting soaked by the rain is fair enough, but only an idiot falls in the drink."

Smith cackled enthusiastically. "I suppose that makes him an idiot, then?"

The Russian's descending foot met thin air instead of rubber. Off balance, he tumbled onto the inflated side of the dinghy and rolled into the water. His companions grabbed convenient limbs and pieces of clothing and hauled him unceremoniously to safety.

With two experienced men paddling at bow and stern, the dinghy circled the trawler. The six figures were dressed in dark clothing, and wearing masks to prevent their faces showing up as white blobs.

"Withdraw Boat One," ordered Smith. "Tell Two to stand by to track them to the shore,"

Bronski repeated the orders into his microphone. McAndrew picked up a field telephone and began to issue orders to his men. The reception committees came to action stations.

"We can see them with the shore cameras," reported Bronski. "How about some coffee, Al?" he added in the same breath.

"Withdraw Two," ordered Smith. "Tell Nadger to make sure he doesn't leave any tracks on the sand."

Bronski muttered instructions into his microphone. "Okay, they're about twenty yards from the beach."

"My lads are ready to go," said McAndrew, finishing the coffee.

Sub-Lieutenant Logan took charge of the empty pot and started a new

brew. "Let's hope you don't have to go somewhere when the fun starts," he remarked to McAndrew.

"No danger of that," said Smith. "It's a well-known fact all Scotsmen have a fifteen-gallon bladder."

The invaders reached the shore. Four of them jumped out and dragged the dinghy above the tide line. Bronski zoomed one of the cameras at them. Bulky goggles gave them an insect-like appearance. One of the intruders ran over to the cliff face, his infra-red torch making brilliant splashes on the monitor screen in the observation post. Three companions followed him, carrying the dinghy. The other two seemed to be unpacking equipment.

Having pushed the dinghy into a convenient cave, the party set off cautiously along the beach. The non-sailors waved microphone-like objects in front of them and consulted shoe box-sized instruments constantly. They kept glancing at each other and shaking their heads. Hidden low-light cameras followed their progress.

"Coming up on Point A," reported Bronski.

"Away ye go, lads," McAndrew said into his telephone.

The Russians stopped. A chugging noise and two headlights turned a corner of the cliff, about a quarter of a mile in front of them. The leader looked along the cliff base frantically, then led his men to the shelter of a handy cave.

To the Russians' great disgust, the tracked patrol car stopped more or less abreast of them. The occupants switched on an interior light, making themselves extremely visible through the clear plastic bubble that formed the top of their vehicle. The Russians' disgust turned to stark envy when the patrol began to eat sandwiches, drink coffee and enjoy a smoke. Leaving one of their number on watch, the intruders settled themselves as comfortably as possible at the back of the cave and settled down to wait for the patrol to leave.

A camera looking straight down the cliff could see a blob, which had not been there before, attached to the back of a sizeable boulder – the invaders' lookout. Another camera inside the cave relayed images of its impatient occupants.

"I bet the poor sods are fed up to the back teeth," chuckled Kurt Bronski.

"Tough," said Lieutenant-Commander Smith unsympathetically. "What

d'you reckon, Mac?"

McAndrew glanced at his watch. "I reckon another quarter of an hour should be about right to get them good and bored."

"A quarter of an hour it is," agreed Smith.

A television monitor in the observation post showed five immobile figures. They had checked their watches at frequent intervals and tried not to kick one another while stretching cramped limbs. Now, the Russians had sagged into a crouch, backs to the cave wall, knees drawn up to their chests and arms resting on their knees. They had given up willing the patrol to finish its snack and go away. They had more or less switched themselves off.

"Right, let them have it," ordered Smith.

Sub-Lieutenant Bronski lifted a safety cage and pressed down firmly on a red button on his control panel.

Nothing appeared to happen in the cave. The Russians remained frozen in their attitudes of despair. Only the regular puffs of vapour from their mouths showed that they were still alive. The man on watch at the cave mouth fell over suddenly and lay limp and immobile on the wet sand.

Colonel Dan Porter had liberated an ample supply of his invaluable knock-out gas before moving from Experimental Station AT-17 in North Yorkshire to his distillery in Scotland.

A light mounted above the cave blinked a green summons to the patrol vehicle. Three men in waterproof gear and gas masks climbed out and trotted up the beach to the cliffs. Five minutes later, one of them made sure that his companions had replaced the Russians' Geiger counters in exactly the right positions, and made sure that they had not left behind any tools or other signs of the presence. Then he gave a thumbs up to the unseen low-light camera at the back of the cave, which ran a good fifteen feet back into the rock of the cliff.

Three shapes walked backwards through the rain, adding to and covering the footsteps left by themselves and the Russians on the way in – but as all of them pointed in the right direction, they were not expecting the additions to be noticed.

"Right, wake 'em up," ordered Lieu tenant-Commander Smith.

Bronski pressed a green button – to administer an antidote this time.

The Russians twitched and darted guilty glances at their neighbours as

the patrol car's engine chugged into life. It was the middle of the night, when most people sleep, but that was no excuse for dropping off on active service. Its task completed, the patrol vehicle rolled a further quarter of a mile down the beach, then it turned and raced back to Hyperion Two. The visitors resumed their careful search of the sands.

A short time later, Kurt Bronski reported, "Coming up on Point B for Bronski."

Half a mile from H-2, and in the main search area of the space-suited men, one of the Russian scientists paused, waved his partner over, then began a search pattern with his Geiger counter. He picked an apparently harmless area of sand as worthy of further investigation and set the sailors digging. A few minutes later, the scientists shooed their escorts away and took over the task of uncovering their find, exercising great care.

"I hope their hearing's okay," remarked McAndrew.

"It's their funeral if it isn't," chuckled Smith.

"How much of a reading shall I give them on their Geiger counters if they test the decoy?" asked Bronski.

"Just a midge's over the normal background," replied McAndrew. "Just enough to make them think it's radioactive right now, but leave them with doubts later." He picked up his telephone. "Are you all set, Art?"

"Ready and waiting," replied Fairclough from his position near Point B. "I hope our friends have remembered to put their brown trousers on."

"Up Force, are you in position, lads?" said McAndrew.

"Like I said ten minutes ago, yes," replied Birky.

"Stand by, laddie, it's nearly time. Down Force?"

"Down Force, ready and waiting," replied Sub-Lieutenant Hillier. "I wish this bloody rain would pack it in."

"A few minutes more," warned McAndrew. "Then we move in."

Leaving the scientists to excavate their find, the rest of the intruders had split up. Two of them, the more senior ones, had sought shelter under an overhang of the cliff. The remaining two had moved in opposite directions along the beach as sentries.

"Time's up," said Smith when zero minute arrived.

"Stand by, everyone," said McAndrew. "Phase One now, Art."

Captain Fairclough pressed a button.

One of the Russian scientists stopped digging in the wet sand and seized

the other's arm in a bruising grip.

"Chto takoye?" said his companion in a 'what's up and let go of my arm' tone.

"Tikayet!" whispered the first scientist, assuming an expression of horror behind his mask.

His companion leaned over and pressed an ear to the metal object in the sand. A deep chill filtered through the cloth of his mask – and also a distinct ticking noise.

The two scientists stared at each other for a frozen, horror-filled moment, then they did the only sensible thing to do under the circumstances.

They ran for it, yelling: "Byeregityes! Eta bomba!"

"Look out! It's a bomb!" Sub-Lieutenant Bronski translated for the benefit of the non-Russian speakers. He had been swotting up useful and relevant phrases.

Confusion reigned in the ranks of the invaders. The sentries hurried towards the scientists at first, intending to tell them to belt up before they roused the whole island. Then the message penetrated and they too turned and ran.

"Stand by, Art," McAndrew said into his telephone, following the action over Bronski's shoulder on a television monitor. "Now!"

Captain Fairclough twisted the handle of his exploder. A column of wet sand raced into the air. The rain leapt sideways, riding the shock front, hitting the runners like a soggy cosh, knocking them onto their faces.

Before they could recover their wits, patrol cars had closed in on them from both sides, the Down Force from the direction of H-2 and the Up Force from the direction of their trawler. Space-suited figures took the stunned and unresisting Russians into custody.

"Hello, Mac?" Lieutenant Birky reported over the field telephone from Captain Fairclough's position at Point B. "We've got them. All four of them."

"Fine!" approved McAndrew. Then "Four? There's six of the buggers, laddie."

"The other two were over by the cliff," remarked Smith helpfully, "Keeping out of the rain."

Birky climbed back into his patrol car and used the infra-red television scanner to examine the base of the cliff for two glowing hot-spots. Fair-

clough picked up the telephone and played out the spool of cable to the patrol car. Birky shook his head and reached for the receiver. "I can't see bugger all there," he reported.

"Look again, laddie," insisted McAndrew. "They must be there somewhere."

"Hang about. I think they've found something."

The search party was moving pieces of rock. One of them turned towards the patrol car and raised a thumb.

"No wonder I couldn't see them, Mac," chuckled Birky. "Half the bloody cliff fell on them! Art must have given his bomb too much thrutch."

The spacemen brushed a covering of sand and small rock chips from the dazed Russians and helped them out from behind a huge slab of rock, which had been deflected by the slight overhang. Loosened by the eroding effects of decades of weather, the explosion on the beach had been sufficiently strong to shake it loose.

"Right," said McAndrew in relief, "take them up to the decon centre. We'll meet you there."

"Okay," responded Birky. "See you."

The patrol cars rushed down the beach towards Jacford. Kurt Bronski began to close down his equipment.

"Are you there, Art?" McAndrew said into his telephone.

"No, he's on the beach, inspecting his hole – if you'll pardon the expression," replied the voice of Hank Newton.

"Tell him to hurry up, will you?"

"Okay." The audio-shadow of a piercing whistle seeped out of the speaker at McAndrew's end of the line. It was followed by a sharp crack as someone dropped the receiver at the other end.

"Bloody rain," remarked Captain Fairclough's voice.

"Did you get them, laddie?" asked Major McAndrew. "Their Geiger counters?"

"Pieces of them," confirmed Fairclough. "Very small pieces. They must have left them behind when they ran for it."

"So we don't have to take out the bits we added. Good! That saves someone a job. See you at the torture chamber."

"Okay, we've nearly got everything packed here."

"Hey, what's all this about *we*, you idle bugger?" asked Lieutenant Newton's voice just before Fairclough rang off.

None of the Russians would admit that he could speak English. In fact, they had nothing at all to say for themselves – not even name, rank and serial number. Their clothes were suitably anonymous and their pockets contained nothing of interest.

Lieutenant Birky had paraded them in an anteroom between the reception area and the decontamination chamber in the improvised medical centre. The prisoners formed a ragged line, dripping onto the wooden floor, unmasked and looking defiant or thoroughly miserable. In contrast, their armed guards looked dry, relaxed and comfortable – as far as the prisoners could tell from the exterior view of a silvery spacesuit.

Smith and McAndrew, also in aluminized fire-fighting suits, attempted a half-hearted interrogation of the prisoners, then they gave up, apparently defeated by the consistent silence.

“What are we going to do with them?” mused Smith.

“Decontaminate them and hand them over to the civilian authorities, I suppose,” replied McAndrew.

The captives seemed untroubled by what fate had in store for them.

“I think something like ‘causing an explosion with intent to endanger life and property’ would be about the best holding charge,” said Smith, hoping that it sounded fairly convincing to foreigners. “The Press are climbing all over our perimeter to find out what went bang.”

“Aye, showing them this lot should get them off our backs for a while,” agreed McAndrew. “And we can include possession of explosives, entering a security zone, loitering with intent . . . Who knows, we might be able to pin that bank robbery on them, the one last week.”

“Good idea,” agreed Smith. “How long do you think they’ll get?”

“Even with a lenient judge, it’s got to be ten years, maybe fourteen. That’s what they usually give the IRA.”

One of the scientists turned paler. The prisoner next to him nudged him when he opened his mouth and seemed to be on the point of speaking. Smith and McAndrew pretended not to notice the incident.

“Right, then,” said McAndrew to the guard commander. “Have them decontaminated, then we’ll question them individually. Bring us, oh, that one first.”

He appeared to select a prisoner at random, but he pointed to the leader of the scientists’ escorts.

“Sir!” snapped Sub-Lieutenant Lindsay, who had taken over from

Lieutenant Birky. He saluted smartly and executed a creditable parade-ground about-turn for a man in a fire-fighting suit. "Okay, you lot," he bellowed at the prisoners. "Let's be having you!"

The captives filed docilely into the next room. They became somewhat less co-operative when they discovered what decontamination involved. Oil of skunk was just as offensive to Russian noses as it had been to the sensitive nostrils of British journalists.

31. THE PAYOFF

Fingerprinted and photographed, four clean but evil-smelling Russians sat in individual rooms, trying to ignore the reek of the pungent decontaminant and a silent watchdog. On the plus side, they were wearing dry clothing, they were out of the rain and they had been issued with a mug of coffee fortified with naval rum. On the down side, they had been caught in the act and they were diplomatic-incident fodder.

A fifth prisoner, the leader of the expedition, found himself in an interview room with Smith and McAndrew for company. Smith had lit his pipe and McAndrew was smoking a cigar as a defence against the prisoner's chemically-induced B.O. The prisoner thought that the smell of the decontaminant ran a close second to Smith's pipe, but he was unable to make the point because of his self-imposed lack of English.

"Name," said McAndrew in a bored voice.

The Russian ignored him.

"Come on, laddie, don't mess us about," coaxed McAndrew. "We can't go on calling you Mr. X. for the next fourteen years."

The prisoner seemed quite content to be Mr X. for as long as necessary.

Next door, Captain Fairclough was attempting a similar interrogation with another captive – one of the scientists. Although unhappy at being treated like a common criminal, the second Russian was also playing dumb. Fairclough went through a short list of questions asking for name, origins, reason for being in a security zone at night and the nature of the object which had been blown up. He repeated the list and found that he had reached his own threshold of boredom. Lieutenant Birky breezed into the room, inspected the prisoner briefly, then cadged one of Fairclough's cigars.

"Phew! What a pen and ink!" he commented, wrinkling his nose at the prisoner. "How's it going?"

"It's not," Fairclough decided. "I think I'm wasting my time with this one."

"Tough!" grinned Birky. "Want a smoke?" he added to the prisoner, offering Fairclough's packet of slim cigars.

"Yes, please." The Russian peeled apart a cellophane wrapper.

"Is it all right to talk in front of him?" asked Birky, giving the prisoner a light.

"Oh, yes. Dr. Porenko doesn't speak English, do you?"

The Russian shook his head automatically, then he did a double-take when he realized that Fairclough had used his name.

"He won't even tell me his name," added Fairclough.

"Yeah, he looks real a tough one all right," commented Birky. He dragged a chair over to the table and sat down with the air of someone who has nothing much to do and plenty of time to do it in. "They've run out of the truth drug, you know," he added casually. "I said they would, but you know that lot. They never bloody listen. They're talking about letting Hank have a go at a couple of them. It's amazing what he can do with those golf clubs of his."

As if on cue, Hank Newton barged into the room, pushing a trolley laden with coffee and a selection of sandwiches. He dumped three cups, jugs of coffee and milk, a bowl of sugar lumps and a plate of sandwiches on the table. After a pointed inspection of the prisoner, as if estimating his threshold of pain, he rattled on his way with the trolley.

"Sugar?" said Birky, offering the bowl.

The prisoner shook his head, staying silent, and attacked the sandwiches, concentrating on the roast beef. He had been relieved of his watch but he knew that the time was around two o'clock in the morning – a low point physically and mentally for the average human. Dr. Porenko had heard that a man with a decent level of blood sugars is better equipped to withstand torture.

"Must be a bit of a bugger, this, if you can't speak English," Birky remarked.

"A bit of what?" the prisoner asked in a flat accent between bites.

"A bugger," repeated Birky.

"I not, er, understand that word," said the prisoner.

"Which is not that surprising if you don't speak English," observed Fairclough.

"Is that English word?" frowned the Russian.

"Maybe it's not in your pocket dictionary," Birky admitted.

After the break, Fairclough ran through his list of questions again and achieved the same result. Hank Newton returned as he was writing a few comments on a sheet of paper labelled *Interrogation Report 5*.

"Finished with him yet?" Newton asked. "Only they want to get the unco-operative ones sorted out," he added darkly.

"More or less, Hank," nodded Fairclough.

The prisoner's head whipped round when he heard the name. With a sinking feeling, he saw that the man in the doorway was leaning on a putter. Newton had been practising long, straight puts in one of the corridors.

"Are you going to cooperate and answer a few basic questions, Dr. Porenko?" asked Fairclough.

"Why should I?" said the prisoner, quaking inwardly.

"If you don't," threatened Birky, "Hank's going to take you to a cold, damp cell. When he's finished with you," he added ominously, looking significantly at the putter. "There's no heating, because they're not proper cells. And you've seen what a filthy, rotten night it is. You'll have a light on all night. And there'll be searches every so often to make sure you're not digging an escape tunnel. And another interrogation in depth to look forward to in the morning. On the other hand, you could find yourself in a nice, warm bed in a hotel."

"That's what I could do with right now," yawned Fairclough.

"With full room service," added Birky, rolling his eyes upwards in mock ecstasy. "You can have a bottle of champagne for your breakfast in this place."

"And what happens when others find out I talk to you?" Dr. Porenko asked regretfully.

"One of your colleagues already has," said Fairclough. "So you'll only be corroborating his story. And we expect most of the others to talk as well. Why be the odd man out?"

Dr. Porenko considered the matter for half a minute, recalling that a truth drug had been used on at least one man, according to the smaller of his interrogators.

"My name is Alexei Fedorovich Porenko," he admitted.

Fairclough produced photographs of the rest of the members of the

expedition and asked the prisoner to identify them. He knew two names already as they had been overheard on the beach. The scientist expanded them to include ranks and he applied them to the right faces, proving that his co-operation was genuine.

When he admitted that he was investigating the possibility that the crashed submarine was Russian, Birky and Fairclough began to laugh. Hank Newton put on a sinister grin.

"What is funny?" demanded the Russian scientist, looking offended.

"You mean you *have* lost one?" spluttered Birky.

"No!" said the Russian automatically.

"No?" mocked Birky.

"You know already, You are making me fool. We have lost two old-type submarines this winter."

Fairclough filed the information away for future reference. "You know," he said with a smile, "the biggest bits we've found have German markings. Our experts think it might be a type VIIc U-Boat sunk during the War. U-Five hundred and something."

"Why did you not say this?" protested the prisoner. "Why do you say submarine is Russian when it is old German?"

Fairclough shrugged. "We didn't know what it was when we found it. And when your trawler showed up, we took that as an admission you'd lost one around here."

"But we found radioactivity," realized the Russian. "We were told, if there is radioactivity, is American boat."

"So the ones you've lost are diesel/electric jobs?" said Fairclough.

"I have told you enough for tonight," decided the prisoner.

"Okay, bang him up at the Reynolds, Hank," said Fairclough.

The prisoner left under escort, not sure whether being banged up involved a battering with a putter, but unwilling to ask.

The other scientist and one of the older and more sensible escorts cracked under the brutal methods of interrogation, and spent the night in comfort at the Reynolds Hotel. Their three colleagues spent their nights in chilly rooms on thin mattresses with the light on – and felt proud of themselves for having resisted their interrogators.

In the morning, one of the minesweepers wallowed out to the Russian trawler. Lieutenant Nugent and Sub-Lieutenant Lindsay climbed aboard and asked to see the captain. They held a conference at the stern, leaning

over the rail and looking at the grey waters, away from unwanted ears.

"The thing is," began Nugent, "we have a slightly embarrassing problem. Some of your men landed in our security zone last night."

The Soviet captain's stern face moved to the proper degree of amazement.

"When they started blowing things up, our security patrols arrested them. Our problem is what to do with them now. If you listened to the news this morning, you'll know what a stir the explosions caused. The question is, do we hand your men over to the civilian authorities and cause a diplomatic incident? Have a show trial and rant and rave about reactionary, imperialist enemies of democracy attacking the peace-loving people of Great Britain?"

"That sounds more like Chinese jargon than ours," interrupted the Soviet captain.

Nugent shrugged. "Whatever. The point is, do you want us to send your chaps to prison until the KGB can arrange a swap for them? And destroy quite a few careers, yours included. Or would you prefer us to keep them out of it and hand them back to you in exchange for your solemn promise to leave the area immediately and never come back?"

"The simpler solution sounds more reasonable."

"We thought so too, Captain. But there's one small complication. The hotel bill for your men. We thought it better to keep them there, out of the way, just in case."

"May I see this bill?" asked the Soviet captain, sensing extortion.

Lieutenant Nugent handed him a folded sheet of paper. A succession of colours and emotions played tag across the captain's face as he studied the sub-totals. "This final total is correct?" he murmured.

"Yes, quite correct," nodded Lieutenant Nugent.

"Is this for six men or the crew of a submarine?"

"The Reynolds is one of our better hotels. And covering up an explosion is an expensive business." Lieutenant Nugent failed to mention that Lieutenant-Commander Smith had converted the cost of *Operation Mist* to dollars at an exchange rate of five dollars to the pound.

The Soviet captain continued to look at the bill, realizing that he had no choice. It would be more politically acceptable for his side to retire with its wallet in a sling than to cause a major diplomatic incident. As the bill was well beyond his own resources, he asked permission to go ashore so that

he could telephone the embassy in London. He didn't want to broadcast the news of his failure for the Americans and anyone else with a code-breaking computer to pick up.

A helicopter landed in the spacious car park of the Reynolds Hotel at Jacford. Armed sentries escorted two men in dark blue business suits to the lounge. One of them went into urgent consultation with the captain of the Soviet trawler, who had been sampling British hospitality with a will, assuming that anything that he consumed had been more than paid for.

The other visitor opened his briefcase and dumped a parcel on the bar. Hank Newton gave him a glass of whisky, which the Russian seemed to enjoy. Lieutenant Birky tore the parcel open and began to count with the speed and efficiency of a bank teller. Everyone else in the lounge pretended to be indifferent to the presence of such a large sum in cash, but eyes kept drifting over to the bar.

"Three thousand light," Birky decided. "These are fakes." He tore three one-thousand dollar notes into eighths and scattered the pieces at the feet of the courier from the Soviet embassy, who looked suitably embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he apologized. "I shall certainly speak to our, er, banker."

"That'll teach you to buy dollars from the Eyetie Mafia," said Birky unsympathetically.

"Looks like it's down to you, old son," Sub-Lieutenant Hillier told the trawler captain. "Think you can raise three thousand bucks from a whip round?"

"We do have a small reserve fund for emergencies," the captain admitted.

The 'small emergency fund' turned out to be two hundred gold sovereigns, which had been captured from British agents over the years. After adding a small extra charge to the bill to cover the inconvenience, Smith and McAndrew settled for fifty of them.

A short time later, the trawler's engines made a miraculous recovery from their affliction. The Russians departed to spy elsewhere, but with a full crew of sailors and technical experts.

The Soviet trawler's political masters received the news that the alleged wrecked submarine was thought to be a wartime German U-boat with

mixed feelings. On the plus side, they could not be blamed for any radioactive pollution of the British coastline, and a major diplomatic incident had been avoided. On the minus side, the probing expedition had cost a great deal in terms of face and money, and they had gained no interesting fragments of an American submarine to study.

The Ministry of Defence issued a press release to the effect that a mine left over from the Second World War, which had been floating loose on the high seas for many years, had been blown ashore on the south coast of the Isle of Wight – fortunately in the security zone – and detonated harmlessly.

The spokesman added one or two ironic remarks about the quality and durability of German engineering, and the reporters were allowed to examine fragments of jagged steel in a box of genuine remains from a German mine.

On the afternoon of the trawler's departure, Colonel Blackshaw telephoned the Reynolds Hotel at Jacford and summoned Smith and McAndrew to a meeting in London. A week of digging had yielded the required dirt on their inquisitive and intrusive Member of Parliament.

The Channel was grey and so was the Thames. A continuous overcast had allowed the temperature to crawl up to the middle Forties on a grey Monday afternoon. Westminster was almost noisier and more congested than the exclusion zone on the Isle of Wight after the press had been allowed into it at the conclusion of the operation. Colonel Blackshaw's office in the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit was both chilly and noisy.

"We can be there in about an hour and a half," McAndrew told Colonel Blackshaw when he arrived at the telephone. "Where do we meet, Hector? Your office?"

"I'd rather not, George," returned Blackshaw. "Our prehistoric central heating system is being replaced, and the noise has to be heard to be believed. And this silly electric fire they've given me wouldn't warm a doll's house."

"Don't you think it's time you moved?" suggested Smith. "To somewhere more modern?"

"Move?" gasped Blackshaw, outraged by the suggestion. "Move into one of the poky little rat traps they call offices these days? Have you seen mine?"

"No, I don't think so, come to think of it," Smith admitted.

"It's huge," McAndrew informed him. "About the size of the bowling green at the Bellside. Which is why it's so impossible to heat in winter." He covered the microphone of his receiver. "Mind you, Hector being the size he is, there's not much room for visitors when he's there."

"I like a little room to spread out," explained Blackshaw, not knowing that he was compounding the slander.

"Sounds like you've got room to explode!" commented Smith.

"Anyway, the place should be all right when they get the new system working, next week."

"I seem to remember they've been saying 'next week' since Christmas," countered McAndrew. "Coming back to business, where are we going to meet? How about the Museum Club?"

"Okay, I'll see you there at about threeish," agreed Blackshaw. "Make sure they have the heating switched on."

The Museum Club on Bromley way, off Shaftesbury Avenue, was said to have been the home of a small private museum until the owner had become involved in a series of messy murders. The club had received a major face-lift six months before, following the rout by McAndrew and company of a group of gangsters with a take-over in mind.

In an attempt to recapture the aura of the club's alleged origins, the decorators had filled alcoves all round the main room with either statues or glass cases holding reproductions of artefacts ranging from prehistoric to modern. A large display case full of drinking vessels through the ages formed the bar counter.

Yellowing dinosaur skeletons made of self-skinning plastic foam decorated the dining room to the right of the main room. This room could be closed off from the rest of the club and it was run as a restaurant during the day. A lavishly-decorated sarcophagus and tomb relics filled the bar display counter in the Egyptian Room, which was licensed for gaming. Figures wrapped in ancient-looking bandages formed an honour guard around the walls. They were cheap plaster dummies, which had once displayed clothes in shop windows, but they looked real enough to the punters.

Former Company Sergeant-Major James Dominic, the owner, was letting the visitors use his office for their conference. His den had once

been filled with junk, but it had been cleared out along with the rest of the discards. Tiger, the cat who shared the office with Dominic, felt rather lost in the wide-open spaces and he kept the visitors under suspicious observation from his basket on top of one of the three filing cabinets.

"Right, Hector, what d'you know?" asked McAndrew when they had exchanged routine greetings and poured drinks, Blackshaw had noticed Don Smith's whiskers and Dominic had gone to take a look at the restaurant.

Blackshaw produced a bulky file from his briefcase. "Have a look through that to start with. Then I'll tell you what we have planned, and were we're up to."

McAndrew and Smith spent ten minutes thumbing through the dossier, exchanging grunts of amusement and expressions of surprise and reproof.

"It just shows you what you can get away with, given the cheek and the right connections," McAndrew said as he returned the final sheet of paper to the file.

"And remain a highly respectable and respected member of the community," added Smith. "Just like us."

"This looks very impressive, Hector," McAndrew added. "It's always easier when these people sink themselves. Now then, where are we up to as regards putting our boy out of the way?"

"Well, we started off last week by talking to different groups of blabbermouths," said Blackshaw. "One with American connections and the other with Russian connections, Then it was just a matter of trying to guess who would be first to have a look at his flat when he was out of the way for a couple of hours."

"And who won the race?" asked Smith.

"It wasn't much of a race. Both sides took a couple of days to think about it first. I suspect for different reasons."

"How d'you mean, Hector?"

"Well, the Americans are terrified of being caught doing something like this again. You remember that mess in Paris last year?"

"I was there, doing a deal, at the time," Smith recalled. "With some Yanks, as it happened. They were so embarrassed at the sheer clumsiness of their mates, and in so much of a rush to get things over, we got the better part of the deal without even trying."

"What's up with the Russians?" said McAndrew. "They don't use their

own people these days. They certainly didn't when they tried to burgle the Bellside, There's too many willing hands ready to serve their cause."

"They're treading a bit wary at the moment too," said Blackshaw. "After all the expulsions of diplomats around Europe, Anyhow, we thought the Russians would be first on the scene, but we had both sets of highly misleading documents ready, just in case we were wrong."

"Both sets?" murmured Smith.

"One for each side. We thought it safer not to have any cross-overs. Friendly correspondence with the various sides in the Middle East and compromising phone numbers from Intelligence sources, The Russians got there first, They were using a new man, a proper crafty sod. Our people didn't spot him till the last moment. Mike Walters reckons our man ducked out of the front door with the stuff for the Yanks just about the same time their man came in the back way, from the fire escape.

"Walters left a couple of men to keep an eye on things and he and the rest of his lads retired to the pub down the road to wait till the visitor had finished. Who do you think they saw in the pub?"

McAndrew and Smith exchanged blank looks. "Not our friend the Westminster Wonder?" suggested McAndrew.

"Arnie Silverman, in person," chuckled Blackshaw.

"Who?" asked Smith.

"Haven't you met him? Oh, I must introduce you sometime," laughed Blackshaw. "He's CIA. Always gets stuck with the dirtiest plumbing jobs the Yanks can find, poor fellow, He's about George's age but he looks mine. He worries a lot. As I said, there he was, in the pub, trying to pour enough liquid courage into himself to be able to do the job.

"Walters and his gang marched in and sat down next to him. When they said hello, in a very friendly fashion, Arnie almost dropped dead of shock. As it happened, it was very lucky they spotted him. It stopped him dropping in on the Russians' man. Walters and his team stayed with him till the coast was clear, then they made a great show of driving away, leaving Mr. Silverman with a clear field. From all accounts, it took him another half hour to scrape up enough courage to leave the pub, never mind slide into the MP's flat.

"Since then, the Yanks have been asking very discreet questions about our boy – not saying why and spreading a lot of suspicion. And our cloak and dagger mob have noticed some dodgy characters with Russian

affiliations keeping an eye on him. They're asking questions about where all his money came from. It's a toss up what happens to him next – prosecution for corruption, done by the Income Tax mob for evasion, or out on his ear with a knighthood and a cushy job as a rumbled but hushed-up spy.

"Or he could decide to do a John Stonehouse and shoot off to Australia under a false name. Concerned friends have tipped him off about all the spy-type interest in him. He's looking very worried at the moment, and all in all, he hasn't got much time for digging into *Project Hyperion* – which is what *Operation Fan* is all about."

"What happens if his friends try to hush things up?" asked Smith. "Have we booted the idealistic campaigning journalist blabbing all into touch?"

"In the first place, I don't think they'll dare try a cover-up," returned Blackshaw. "These things have a habit of leaking out. But we've picked out a lucky lad of a journalist, just in case."

"So our friend's more or less neutralized?" said Smith, touching his lighter to his pipe to improve the flow of smoke.

McAndrew pointed, showing Blackshaw where to find the switch for the extractor fan.

"Yes," nodded the Colonel, "I think we can declare H-2 safe from enemy action as from tomorrow. Our torpedoes are running. No doubt the hoo-haa will drag on for a few months more until everyone's heartily sick of the sound of the target's name, but we're running down *Operation Fan*. We can all retire gracefully now."

"The Navy wants us to keep *Operation Mist* running for while longer," said McAndrew.

"We've got a training program running for the diving suits, and we're making a small fortune out of the non-ferrous scrap we're dragging up," explained Smith. "But I suppose we can reopen the road, and nobody much uses the beach in January."

"How are you fixed for the inevitable press conference?" asked Blackshaw.

"We've got some bits and pieces of submarine ready," said McAndrew. "From a genuine German type VIIc U-Boat. Complete with a generation and a half's marine encrustation. And we've got some instruments from wartime aircraft with luminous paint on the dials. They're radioactive, chucking off alpha-particles, one of the boffins said. And apparently there's

some naturally occurring uranium to be found around that area.”

“Is there?” said Smith, looking interested. “Much?”

“Not in commercial quantities, unfortunately,” said McAndrew. “But we’ll probably get a few prospectors strolling around when the story gets out. But if they stay at the Reynolds Hotel, that should do our whisky sales a bit of good.”

“Every angle covered,” smiled Blackshaw.

“And we’ve got hold of a couple of real German mines,” added Smith. “We’re going to tow them out to sea to blow up for the press.”

“Working on the principle if they get a bit of a show, they won’t make trouble?” suggested Blackshaw.

“Something like that,” nodded McAndrew. “Maybe we should strap our MP friend to one of the mines and blow him up too.”

“That would make him a martyr,” countered Blackshaw. “Not a fitting end for a bloke with a file like his. No, it was far better to use the system against him. That way, everyone’s happy. Except our friend, of course.”

“Which serves him right for making waves in our pond,” remarked McAndrew. “And besides, it was fun, wasn’t it?”

Lieutenant-Commander Smith agreed with one of his best blood-chilling chuckles.

The spacemen left the Jacford area and their suits went back to store, ready to be issued for fire-fighting duties. George Jackson-Browne found his hotel full of hungry and thirsty journalists with expense accounts. A spokesman from the Admiralty, a submarine expert whose knowledge of *Operation Mist* was restricted to a short report compiled by Smith and McAndrew, gave the journalists a guided tour of the ancient exhibits and told them a great deal more than they wanted to know about German submarine operations in World War Two.

After a count to make sure that the entire party of naval divers had been recovered from the sea, two German mines were towed out into the bay. Photographers and television cameramen received a brief interval to settle themselves, and then the count down began. Mine number one went up in a satisfying spout of water. Thirty seconds later, the performance was repeated. And then the show was over.

Smith and McAndrew looked through the accounts of the twin operations, *Mist* and *Fan*, and found grounds for optimism. Lieutenant Nugent

and the staff of Hyperion Two had turned pale at the size of an estimate for the cost of the eight-day security cordon and the campaign of disinformation waged by Captain Mike Walters of the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit. But on the credit side, there was the ransom paid by the Russians for their expedition, and the increasing profit on the scrap recovered by the naval divers. When the books were closed, the architects of the operations were confident that there would be a modest profit for all concerned.

Among those who had made a profit was George Jackson-Browne, the manager of the Reynolds hotel. A respectable sum had flowed through the hotel's books during the occupation. Another respectable and tax-free sum had passed into his hands. When the Dreaded Smith and his cohorts departed, Jackson-Browne shook their hands with a feeling of relief – but he also found himself wondering when they would be back. He was learning to live with the tigers.

Perched on various window ledges in the west-wing lounge, the Bellside cats were ideally placed to watch the return of the men who paid their bills. Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins stared intently at the helicopter, knowing that the noisy object couldn't get at them, but on their guard just the same. When it had gone, they resumed their light doze, waiting for the next meal to be served.

Their masters headed for their quarters to unpack. After a week away from the club, they had threads of their lives to pick up – until the next call to arms.

32. HARVE AGAIN

When Lieutenant Hank Newton caught Captain Fairclough's eye, he remarked, apparently out of the blue, "He's back again, you know."

"Is he really?" said Fairclough, intent on reassembling a prototype model of the new NATO battle rifle. "I hope it keeps fine for him. There!" He slotted the bolt home with evident satisfaction and wiped his hands on a piece of oily cotton rag. It was not until he brought his glass up to a drinking position that he noticed that it was empty. "Anyone else want a refill?"

"A nice thought, but it hasn't," continued Newton. "Kept fine for him. It's been raining on him on and off ever since he got here. Yes, I'll have another horse's neck."

Fairclough collected Newton's glass. Lieutenant Birky, who was intent on the racing on the television, waved an upturned thumb without taking his eyes from the screen. The trio had gathered in the L-shaped lounge of the owners' residential suite, on the first floor of the west wing of the Bellside Country Club.

It was Wednesday, the penultimate day of February. Five weeks had gone by since the conclusion of their part in *Operation Mist*. Major McAndrew was in the owners' upper office, exploring possibilities.

"Who is it that's getting wet?" invited Fairclough, depositing a glass on the coffee table beside Newton's armchair.

"Your mate," Newton replied.

Fairclough looked at Birky, who had just thrown himself back in his chair with a grin of triumph. His form calculations had predicted victory for a sixteen to one outsider. The horse had scraped home by a neck.

"Don't ask me who he's talking about," shrugged Birky when he intercepted the look. "He's in a world of his own. Again."

"Harve Wotsisname," said Newton defensively, as though the average

idiot should know what he was talking about. "The bloke who was making that film with the tanks at Jack Medder's piece in Devon."

"How do you know what he's up to?" demanded Birky.

"Jack told me when he rang up," Newton said patiently. "Cheers, and all that."

"When was that? Cheers!" Fairclough placed his glass of single malt Uisge Beatha on the table beside his rifle and collapsed into his chair.

"While you were out, just after lunch. He wants you to call back. I left a message by the Al Capone."

"About twenty minutes ago? Okay, let's find out what's going on." Fairclough heaved himself out of his chair. Perched on an arm of the settee beside the combined magazine rack and bookshelf, which also contained a compartment for a telephone, he inspected the brief note on the message pad. As it told him nothing new, he keyed the number of the REME depot at Buddford in Somerset.

"Special Operations Compound, please," he told the army operator on the camp's switchboard.

"Hello, Spec-Ops," said a throaty voice after a minimal delay.

"Captain Medder, please. This is Captain Smith calling from the Bell-side," said Fairclough, offering credentials.

"I think he's in the Bunker at the moment, sir. Hang on, I'll put you through."

The telephone emitted buzzing and scratching noises for a few moments as the call was transferred to Medder's underground headquarters.

"Hello, Captain Smith," said a voice with a South-London accent. "Which one is it? The one who used to wear glasses?" Medder added in a fair approximation to Fairclough's Northern accent.

"Good guess," said Fairclough.

"I think we'd better have the scrambler on this one," added Medder.

Fairclough switched the telephone to scramble and then added the conference circuit so that his companions could hear what was being said.

"You got the message, then?" resumed Medder.

"Well, yes. Something to do with Harve Walenski, the American zillionaire?"

"Right. Guess what he's up to now?"

"Okay, he's done narrow-gauge railways, and he's made a film . . . I assume he did finish that?"

"He reckons it's going out on American TV in December."

"Which still leaves enough to boggle the mind," Fairclough decided. "It has to be something completely mad, I'll bet."

"You're not far wrong there," agreed Medder. "And it's not costing him much, by his standards. He's panning for gold."

"What, like the old prospectors in the films?" said Birky. "With the frying pan, and the mule and everything?"

"Knowing Harve, it'll be a blend of the traditional and ultra-modern equipment," decided Fairclough. "All mod cons."

"Right," agreed Medder. "And he wants your help, Art."

"Doing what?" asked Fairclough. "And why me in particular?"

"Well, it's like this," said Medder. "Harve has this theory about this river he's working. It runs into a lake and he's sure there must be a bloody great mountain of gold where it does. Swept down over the centuries."

"That doesn't sound so mad," commented Birky. "If he's right, that is. Where is this lake? In the Yukon?"

"No, Scotland. In the middle of a long-forgotten Army training ground. We've not been near the place in years, but the good old Ministry of Defence gave Harve the sign of the twin fingers when he wanted to try his luck there. In fact, they nearly had him arrested when they found out he'd been messing about in one of their rivers."

"I don't see why you need me in on this," said Fairclough. "Can't you put him in touch with our people at the MoD? Let someone in Scotland inspect the lake on behalf of the CSSSU?"

"Harve has got hold of this idea that you're a real big noise in Whitehall and you can fix anything."

"I must have made a pretty good impression on him when we helped him out with his film."

"Or something. So anyway, there's a job going and I thought I'd give you first refusal in case you've got nothing better to do. And your connections with the Navy are pretty solid."

"What's it got to do with the Navy?" asked Fairclough, mystified. "Does he want to borrow a battleship to use as a floating hotel?"

"Nothing fancy," chuckled Medder. "He just wants to borrow one of those mini-sub's the Navy have got on the secret list."

"You're kidding!"

"Straight up, he really means it," chuckled Medder.

"What mini-sub?" asked Birky, striking right to the heart of the matter.

"Harve told me all about them," replied Medder. "They look like underwater spaceships. Smashing little jobs. I wouldn't mind one myself. He showed me some pictures of them."

"Where from?" asked Fairclough. "How did he get hold of pictures of our secret subs?"

"He's got mates in the CIA and he reckons he was at university with some blokes in Naval Intelligence. Not to mention the Defence contracts some of his companies handle. He's well in with what's happening on the military front."

"I heard they're thinking of scrapping the mini-sub project," said Hank Newton, offering a naval insight. "The Westminster Wonders keep changing the specifications then complaining about the costs going up when the contractors have to scrap what they've done and start all over again. Like they do."

"Nothing new there," remarked Fairclough.

"Maybe Harve wants to buy one cheap when they become surplus?" suggested Birky.

"Well, if anyone can afford one, he can," said Fairclough. "So whereabouts is this lake of his?"

"About the middle of Scotland. Harve was a bit coy when it came to map references. Protecting his gold-mine, I suppose. Not that we couldn't find out where it is from what he's told the Min. of D."

"Anyway, it won't hurt to have a word with him," Fairclough decided. "How do we get in touch with him?"

"He's got one of those briefcase phones. The number is R-617-093-442," said Medder.

Fairclough wrote the number down on the message pad. "Right, Jack. We'll let you know what occurs."

"I think he's still in Scotland but not at his gold-mine," Medder added. "Somewhere on the west coast. That's right, it's an island half way up on the left-hand side. I forget what it's called. He's gone collecting shells till he can get back to his gold mining."

"I think you need some geography lessons, Jack," laughed Fairclough. "That was a brilliant description!"

"Never was much good on foreign countries," Medder admitted. "Don't forget to invite me over to your club when I get back. Then you can tell me

how you get on. Assuming he's not totally into collecting shells now and gold is history."

"Going somewhere, Jack?" asked Birky.

"Yeah, I'm off to Germany for a while."

"Okay, enjoy yourself, Jack," said Fairclough. "Cheers!"

"I can just see your mate Harve panning for gold on the bed of a loch," laughed Hank Newton as Fairclough broke the connection to Buddford. "The mini-sub's have got manipulator arms on the front that would be great for the job."

"I fancy a bit of that," Birky decided. "Panning for gold. If it's a good spot. I'll give Mac a ring."

A telephone summons brought Major McAndrew down from the first-floor office to hear more about the gold project. As none of his possibilities for new projects was more than remote, he suggested that Fairclough ring Harve for more details.

Fairclough contacted the operator and asked for the number supplied by Medder. He was interested to discover that a briefcase telephone relayed double burps when the number was ringing.

"Mr. Walenski's telephone," replied a woman with a brassy, New Yorker accent.

"Mr. Walenski, please," said Fairclough, assuming that Harve had taken his secretary shell hunting.

"Who is this, honey?" The question was typically American and very unbusinesslike. And it invited the caller to play guessing games.

Fairclough paused, then he covered the microphone at his end. "Knocker!" he hissed urgently. "Which was I at Buddford? Captain Greene or Captain Browne?"

"I was Lieutenant Browne with an 'e'," said Birky.

"Hello, Miss? Captain Greene of the Ministry of Defence would like to speak to Mr. Walenski."

"Okay, honey, I'll see if he's around."

The distant receiver clattered onto a hard surface and footsteps retreated across a wooden floor. Fairclough switched the telephone to conference and turned up the volume control. The footsteps halted, a door opened and the brassy voice called: "Harve, honey, there's some Green creep from the ministry of something on the phone. You wanna talk with him?"

"You mean Captain Greene? Ministry of Defence?" replied a voice from even further away.

"Yeah, something like that. Want me to tell him to blow?"

"Charming!" muttered Birky through a big grin.

"No way!" said the more remote voice, which was male. "You fix us a drink while I talk to him."

Feet rushed down a staircase. Heavier footsteps approached the telephone. "Hi! Is this Art?" yelled and dwindled from the speaker as Fairclough turned the volume down. Harve Walenski's peculiar, whining accent was unmistakeable.

"Hello, Harve," Fairclough replied. "I hear you want some more help from our people?"

"That's right, son. There's some asses I want you to boot for me." A distant female giggle drifted from the speaker. "I made a perfectly reasonable request and all I got were negative waves. So I thought of you guys."

"Well, your project certainly sounds interesting," returned Fairclough. "We can't discuss it on an open line, of course. But I could explore your two areas of interest at this end. Where are you exactly? Jack didn't say. If I can get some positive vibrations going, it might be useful to meet and discuss things further."

"It's a little place called Ballantyre. That's the name of the island and this no-horse village. And the Royal Air Force base along the coast a piece. And even a couple of the bays here. I guess it used to be owned by the Ballentyre family. Or a guy with no imagination."

"I know the place," said McAndrew. "One helicopter and an Air-Sea Rescue launch. An uncle of mine lived there once."

"Who's that?" demanded Harve suspiciously, hearing an unfamiliar voice with a Scots accent.

"It's okay, Harve," Fairclough assured him. "I'm in my club. One of the chaps is doing a spot of ear-wigging. Sod off, George."

McAndrew elevated two fingers in Fairclough's direction.

"Reckon you can find the place?" said Harve.

"Yes, the RAF should know where it is."

"So I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, right, tomorrow. I don't know quite when. How will I get in touch with you?"

"No problem there," laughed Harve. "It's such a small island, all you

gotta do when you get here is holler. I'll hear you wherever I am."

"Okay, mind you don't fall off it, if it's that small. Cheers for now, Harve." Fairclough broke the connection and recovered his drink. "Do we know anyone at RAF Ballantyre?" he asked his colleagues.

"No idea, laddie," said McAndrew. "We'd better ask Hector." He took charge of the telephone and dialled an inner London number. The switchboard at the CSSSU put him through to Colonel Blackshaw's office on the second floor without delay.

"Hello, Cathy? It's George McAndrew here," he said, recognizing the voice that replied. "What are *you* doing in Hector's office? Has he got you working for him?" McAndrew covered the microphone. "His wife's taking him shopping," he explained to his grinning colleagues.

"Oh!" said Birky in exaggerated comprehension, "How interesting."

McAndrew glared at him. "Could I have a word with the man himself before you drag him away, Cathy? Hector? I'm find, thanks. Yes, right. Listen, do we know anyone at RAF Ballantyre? An island off the west coast of Scotland. Yes, I'll hold on."

"I wonder if we've got any books on prospecting?" Birky remarked. "In the local library?"

"I bet Harve's got a whole load of them," said Fairclough.

"Hello, Hector," said McAndrew. "We don't? Thanks anyway. Listen, we may have something cooking. We'll need some wheels oiled. And we'll want a word with Captain Drake at CSSCPU. Can we talk about it this afternoon? About four? Right. Regards to Cathy and see you then."

"I bet he's going to tell us we don't know anyone at RAF Ballantyre," grinned Birky.

"We can always just *hire* a plane," said Hank Newton.

"No, it just means we'll have to have the right paperwork," said McAndrew. "Another little expense for your pal Harve,"

"I fancy flying up to Scotland," said Birky. "Less hanging around than going by train. So we're back in business again, Art? Browne and Greene, the fantastic fixers?"

"The Skipper might want to be in on this," said Newton. "He's always fancied himself as a U-Boat captain with his cap turned back to front while he looks through the periscope."

"I suppose we could use another naval liaison officer," nodded Fairclough. "A Lieutenant-Commander and his Flag Lieutenant."

“Right, then.” Newton took over the telephone and set about the task of calling Portsmouth and tracking down Donald Smith.

Later that afternoon, Major McAndrew and Lieutenant-Commander Smith climbed out of a taxi and tossed a coin to decide who would pay the driver. The taxi chugged down to Horseferry Road and turned right. Its passengers entered the anonymous office building which housed the Ministry of Defence Combined Services Special Statistical Unit.

The man at the reception desk made a snap decision on the quality of their suits and decided that they had to be senior officers – a high-flier in his early thirties and an even higher-flier a few years older. He turned a receptive expression to the senior officer.

“To see Colonel Blackshaw,” announced McAndrew, offering a plastic identity card.

The receptionist pushed it into a slot in his desk. A picture of the owner, but no information on name or rank, appeared on the screen beside the desk. He repeated the performance with Smith’s identity card, then he called Colonel Blackshaw’s office to warn him that visitors were heading his way in the lift.

McAndrew and Smith turned to the left out of the lift. Four doors along the pastel orange corridor, McAndrew tapped on a door and entered when invited to do so. Colonel Blackshaw and Captain Drake, from the adjoining Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Unit were waiting for the visitors.

Both men were in their mid-forties. Blackshaw was bulky and he had a red face. Drake was tall and lean, and he sported a full set of grey and black whiskers.

“See you got your central heating going, Hector,” smiled McAndrew as they shook hands.

“About a week after we met in your friend’s club,” nodded Blackshaw. “I see the beard finally grew, Don.”

Smith stroked his whiskers protectively. He was proud of the six-week growth.

“Well, what can we do you for, gentlemen?” invited Captain Drake, who came from Hastings.

“The easy part is that we want to charter an RAF jet tomorrow,” said McAndrew. “We’d also like hire some submarines.”

"How many subs is 'some', George?" grinned Blackshaw.

"Just a couple should do us, The new mini-sub."s."

"You know about them?" said Drake.

"Well, not really," McAndrew admitted. "We heard about them from the guy who wants us to hire them. You remember Harve Walenski? He hired all those tanks last year and the range on Dartmoor for his film."

"A joint venture between your lads and Jack Medder, wasn't it?" said Blackshaw. "I suppose his CIA contacts have been talking to Harve."

"You know about them?" said McAndrew. "Daft question, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. Arnie *The Spook* Silverman and his wife have acquired new winter wardrobes. They're looking too smart to escape our attention. So what does your friend have in mind, George?"

"He thinks he's found himself an underwater gold mine." McAndrew accepted one of Blackshaw's cigars as they got down to business. "Unfortunately for him, it's on Ministry of Defence property. That's another thing we'll need. Orders to do a spot of inspecting in the area." McAndrew launched into a summary of as much of Harve's plans and theories as the man himself had divulged.

"It's funny you should be asking about the mini-sub."s at this particular time," said Captain Drake when McAndrew had run out of steam. "They've been built and they're ready for sea trials, the two prototype models, but we've run into the usual problems. We're not sure whether we're going to get the money for the trials. Or if they'll decide to scrap the whole project."

"They're strapped for a few bob, so they're going to chuck away millions," remarked Smith.

"Well, it's only the taxpayer's money," McAndrew said dismissively. "There's plenty more there it came from."

"Naturally enough, there's alarm and despondency in naval circles," said Blackshaw. "They want to play with their new toys."

"And quite right too," said Captain Drake. "This seems like a golden opportunity – sorry, no pun intended – an ideal opportunity to find out how they perform in practice. Admittedly, it won't be sea-trials. But a lake's better than nothing."

"A loch," corrected McAndrew.

"Loch," acknowledged Drake. "I think I can promise you a very good price for the hire of two mini-sub."s and their crews if this deal goes through."

“There should be no problems about getting clearance to inspect his gold mine either,” added Blackshaw. “And I’m sure the RAF can provide transport.”

“So it’s all systems go for a trip to Scotland tomorrow,” said Lieutenant-Commander Smith.

33. THEM THAAR RIVERS!

The following morning, McAndrew, Fairclough and Birky, all wearing their winter survival gear, braved a damp morning on the last day of February to drive to the Bellside Country Club's local airfield. Birky's critically tuned Jaguar and empty roads helped to make the journey shorter than usual. Hank Newton and Lieutenant-Commander Smith had gone to Devonport to look at mini-sub.

Military jets no longer drew stares from civilian pilots and aircraft spotters. They had become a common sight since McAndrew and his group had taken over the Bellside. Any looks at the aircraft bordered on the blasé, acknowledging the presence of the aircraft without getting excited.

The pilot, a compact man with a generous ginger moustache, seemed surprised when McAndrew showed him his identity card to prove that the correct passengers were boarding his aerial taxi. Flying Officer Johann Mansted had been expecting to be a chauffeuring around a bunch of Ministry of Defence civilians, not a trio of army officers, but he made no comment beyond a pair of raised eyebrows.

Lieutenant Birky took over the copilot's seat when they were airborne. He spent most of the journey discussing the fortunes of *The Hammers* with the pilot, who left most of the flying to his automatic systems. Fairclough and McAndrew looked out of the windows for a while. When they had had their fill of clouds and distant countryside and sea, they turned to the day's newspapers.

Having landed safely on the short runway at RAF Ballantyre, McAndrew and his companions left FO Mansted ordering a second breakfast and went in search of Harve Walenski. They found him at the guest house, which lay a quarter of a mile from the airfield. The squat, square building of grey stone also served as the local pub, the town hall, a small cinema

and it had even been used as a church in more religious days.

Harve's female companion was there too. She looked exactly as the Bellsiders had visualized her from her telephone voice. On the small side, she had a froth of very pale, blonde hair and millions of gleaming, white teeth in a mouth well able to accommodate them.

"Going into the sugar daddy business, Harve?" Fairclough asked when the men had retreated to the safety of Harve's room for a conference.

"Kee-rist, no!" said Harve with great feeling. "She's here with some guy in the oil business, but the sum'bitch keeps trying to dump her on me." His pained expression suggested that his plight was like that of an innocent rambler, who had stepped on a man-trap, and who could feel unyielding steel jaws sinking deeper and deeper into his fragile flesh. "You guys wouldn't have a spare seat on your plane, would you?" Harve added with a note of desperation in his voice.

"Aren't you happy here?" grinned Birky. "Besides, what will you tell your friend?"

"Goddam man-eater," snarled Harve. "All she wants to do is marry some money. My money."

"Didn't you tell her you're married already?" asked Fairclough.

"Hell, no!" said Harve. "She'll want a piece of my hide to stop her going to my wife to make trouble."

"I suppose we could fit you in," said Fairclough. "Common decency demands it."

"Thanks a million, Gen'ral." Harve seized his hand and squeezed it gratefully. Then he started to throw expensive clothes into battered suitcases with something of an air of desperation.

"You've not met our boss, have you?" said Fairclough. "Major McAndrew from the CSSSU, Ministry of Defence."

Harve paused long enough to shake McAndrew's hand. McAndrew had decided not to bother with an alias, particularly as Harve would be meeting a genuine member of the Smith clan very soon in the person of Lieutenant-Commander Don Smith.

"We're optimistic about helping you out, Mr. Walenski," McAndrew began. He had been admiring the white stetson and Harve's tooled-leather cowboy boots.

"Call me Harve, son," advised the client, who was as tall as Fairclough – an inch short of six feet – and had a full head of snowy hair, which had

to have involved some transplanting. Harve was projecting an air of urgency which was at odds with his normal state of confident serenity.

"Okay, er, Harve," said McAndrew. "We've got a couple of colleagues checking out the submarines. The Navy are being very reasonable about them. I think we can do business – as long as you remember you're an observer from NATO."

"Yeah, I know the scene," said Harve, winking at Birky.

Birky responded with a conspiratorial grin.

"Been there, done it and got the T-shirt," Harve added.

"All we need to do is have a look at where you're planning to operate," added McAndrew. "So we can plan how to transport the mini-sub and how to protect them. Being on MoD property works to our advantage, from that point of view."

"Great!" enthused Harve. "There's a guy with a chopper at a place called Oban. He can take us. Unless you're in one?"

"It's a bit far from London to come here by something as slow as a chopper," McAndrew pointed out.

"Good point," said Harve.

"Have you got any of your gold on you?" asked Birky, bursting with curiosity.

"Sure enough." Harve locked the last of his cases and pulled a small, dark brown pouch from the interior of his anorak. He opened the drawstrings and tipped a trickle of dark, golden powder onto the front of an envelope.

Birky prodded the gold dust with a finger. "How much is it worth?"

"At the price fixed in London this morning, the bag's worth about two and a half thousand bucks."

"Cor!" said Birky, very impressed.

"How much did it cost you to get it?" McAndrew asked drily.

"About thirteen or fourteen thousand bucks," Harve admitted.

Birky began to look less impressed.

"But everything needs a capital investment to get it off the ground," added the multi-millionaire. "And there's the thrill of digging it out of the ground with your own hands."

"Got a prospecting licence, Harve?" asked Fairclough.

"No," Harve admitted with a worried frown. "Do I need one?"

"I don't know," Fairclough admitted. "But knowing the way the official

mind works, there has to be a rule saying you've got to have one. I can't see the government just letting people digging it up for nothing. All mineral rights belong to the state."

"In Scotland," supplied McAndrew, "you'd apply to the owner of the land. He gives you a licence, but you have to turn over ten per cent of everything you find."

"They're welcome to the ten per cent." Harve shrugged. "I'm just doing this for the hell of it, not to make another million for my ex-wives. Is he right?"

"He should know," replied Fairclough. "Scotland's a separate country with its own set of weird and wonderful laws, known only to the natives."

"Anyway, if the Army owns the land, I can let you guys can fix up my prospecting licence," said Harve.

"I suppose we can," McAndrew realized. "I'll mention it to Hector next time I see him." A gentle smile twitched his lips. If Harve really had found a mountain of gold, then ten per cent of it would be a welcome bonus for Harve's partners.

Harve made a final tour of the drawers and cupboards. "I'm just about finished here. I . . ."

"I'm going out now, Harve, honey," his new friend yelled up the stairs. "See yers later."

Harve turned a shade paler under his winter tan. "Okay!" he bellowed back. "That plane ready?" he added to Fairclough in an undertone, pouring the gold back into the pouch.

"Anytime you are," nodded Fairclough.

It's okay," said Birky from the window. "She's gone the other way."

"Quick, before she comes back," urged Harve.

Everyone picked up an item of luggage – Harve didn't believe in travelling light. Moving with exaggerated caution to achieve silence, Harve led them down the stairs. He banged urgently on the door opposite the foot of the stairs.

"I have to leave, Mrs. McBann," he told the woman who answered his pounding. "Urgent business. Thanks for everything." He thrust a wad of fivers into the astonished woman's hands. "Come on, you guys."

Mrs. McBann stared, open-mouthed, at the procession, wondering what the peculiar American gentlemen had to do with three strangers in what looked like mountain-rescue gear. The spy novel that she had just

borrowed from the local library made her wonder if they were MI5 agents, come to arrest an American agent? But the fact that they were carrying his luggage and following the American's orders exploded that particular fantasy.

Birky pulled the front door shut behind himself. The noise shocked Mrs McBann back to life. For want of anything better to do, she began to count the money in her hand.

As the refuelled jet was whistling eastwards across the winter sea, Harve accepted a mug of coffee and turned to his companions to remark, "You know, you guys have just saved my life. I feel safe again. Next time some idiot stands up and says no one needs a peacetime army, I'm gonna punch the jerk in the mouth." Harve seemed to have shed ten years and the hunted look in his eyes was fading.

"Hit them in the guts," advised Birky. "You can break your hand hitting someone in the face."

Flying Officer Mansted said nothing. The question of the identity of his civilian passenger was burning into him like concentrated sulphuric acid. Something in the demeanour of his military passengers made curiosity seem unwise.

The RAF jet soared across the Island of Mull and reached the mainland in a matter of minutes. It skirted Oban to the south and landed behind the town at a private airfield.

"What was that weird thing on the hill above the town?" asked Birky as the aircraft touched down.

"It's called McCraig's Folly," supplied Harve. "The guy started to build a replica of the Colosseum in Rome, Italy, in eighteen ninety-seven. But then he died in nineteen oh two, the work stopped. It's been standing there, unfinished, every since. The best time to see it is at night. They've got it floodlit – with green lights!"

"Weird!" commented Birky.

The party followed Harve to the airfield's office. Not unreasonably, his helicopter pilot was not to be found without a struggle. Harve had told him that he would be collecting shells for the rest of the week, and he would not need him again until Saturday, two days hence. The pilot was out on another job.

Harve borrowed some small change and commandeered a pay-phone.

He had to make five calls to track down his pilot. His briefcase telephone was still in the aircraft with his luggage. As each call had been described as the one which would find the missing pilot 'for sure', he had not thought it worth asking someone to fetch the briefcase.

"Okay," he announced after his final 'last call', "We've got over half an hour. I'll buy you some lunch. It's the least a guy can do for the cavalry."

"There's a pretty decent pub about five minutes away," McAndrew recalled.

"Okay, Gen'ral, lead the way." Harve settled his cowboy hat firmly on his head and checked that his wallet was fully loaded. He was ready for some lunch himself to celebrate a successful disappearing act.

The helicopter rolled into the air at 13:20 hours and set off in a north-easterly direction. Its five passengers all felt much better for a solid pub lunch and a couple of pints – or a bottle of non-alcoholic lager and coffee in the case of the RAF pilot. Flying Officer Mansted had driven around a fair number of VIPs in his time, but never any like the current batch. He had tagged along for the helicopter ride, not quite believing that a civilian was taking three army officers to see his own private gold mine. Nobody seemed to mind him coming, which made him doubt the reason given for the expedition even more.

Harve's pilot followed the contours of the land, flying at about two hundred feet, which gave the passengers an excellent view of snow-capped mountains. He managed to give a pair of lone skiers quite a shock when he whizzed through a mountain pass and they found themselves looking down on his rotors.

His employer stayed glued to a window, peering out through a pair of binoculars, looking for deer. Harve had a camera at the ready, waiting for the next opportunity to develop for him to take some more of what he thought were stunning wildlife photographs. He was hoping to submit the best of them to *National Geographic* magazine.

"Here we are," called the leader of the expedition as the helicopter circled a rocky crag and entered a long, narrow valley which descended to the north-west, towards the River Spey. "The lake's about two miles along here."

"It's called a loch, Harve," McAndrew told him.

"Sure as hell looks like a lake to me," grinned the American, not pre-

pared to argue about an alien version of his native language. "It's a sort of natural basin, as far as the geology goes. The river flows in at the far end and out at this end."

A proper river did flow out of the loch, but 'river' was hardly the word to describe any of the four tributary streams that fed the oval body of water from the mountains. The helicopter landed in a cleared spot in the bracken at a safe distance from a large, bright-orange tent. Even though the area was below the snow-line, the rotor-wash managed to create a momentary blizzard of unmelted frost Harve had set up camp beside the broadest of the feeder streams.

"Home," announced the American, unzipping the front flap of his tent, which was as large as a family caravan. A forest of pegs and a web of guy ropes anchored it to the hard ground as protection against the power of the chilly winds that roared along the valley.

For some unknown reason, the interior of the tent seemed colder than the unprotected outdoors. Harve solved the problem by switching on a compact generator and a bank of space heaters. Within minutes, the temperature had climbed to a comfortable sixty-eight degrees.

"There's the bar, if anyone's interested." Harve pointed to a cabinet in his reception room. "I'll just get into my working duds." He zipped his way through a room divider into his robing room.

Lieutenant Birky took orders at the bar. No one felt the need for ice, even though the freezer compartment was full.

"What made you think there was gold here in the first place, Harve?" called Fairclough. "I thought it's usually found further north, round Sutherland way."

"Oh, no," countered McAndrew, "you can find it in the south as well. Lanarkshire and Dumfriesshire, for instance."

"Right," agreed Harve. "There's a gold belt that goes up through Wales and Northern Ireland, and then through Scotland. A guy in Pasadena put me onto this spot. An IRO with ERESP."

"What's that in English?" invited McAndrew. "E-resp?"

"It's the Earth's Resources Extended Survey Program," supplied Harve.

"Oh, aye. Satellites and so on."

"Right."

"What's an IRO?" asked Mansted.

"Beats the hell out of me, son," admitted Harve between grunting

noises. "One of the guys who pulls answers out of the computers."

"Information Retrieval Officer?" suggested Fairclough.

"What is this wotsit program anyway?" asked Birky.

"Peering down at the Earth from satellites, looking for oil, minerals, crop diseases and the like," said Fairclough. "I have a vague memory of seeing something about it in one of the Sunday papers."

"That's clever," said Birky admiringly. "And gold mines? How do they spot one of those from a bloody satellite?" he added sceptically.

"This guy reckoned he'd spotted some likely gold-bearing regions," continued Harve. "He sold me this place for five grand."

"That was very nice of him, wasn't it?" remarked McAndrew. "One Yank selling another Yank a part of Scotland."

"This guy's English," Harve told him, reappearing in black waders, which came up to his thighs.

"That's even bloody worse!" complained McAndrew.

"Let's have a look outside," laughed Fairclough. "Before Mac explodes from nationalism."

McAndrew muttered a dark, Caledonian oath and joined the general exodus, pulling on his woollen gloves.

Harve carried a wooden tray, a pickaxe, a shovel and a bucket to the stream. He placed the tray in the shallow water near the bank and filled the bucket with mud and gravel from the middle of the stream. He emptied the bucket into the tray and stirred the contents with a wooden rake, which looked as if it had been borrowed from a window box.

Slots in the back wall of the tray could be opened and closed to control the flow of water through it. The larger and lighter components of his bucketful of stream-bed were swept away. Harve was left with a black sludge of mud and grit. He produced a powerful magnifying glass and a pair of tweezers. The audience was less than impressed when he managed to isolate just six, tiny flecks of gold from the heaviest residue.

"It's usually better than this," Harve apologized. "Let's try again."

He collected another bucketful of stream bed. Birky and Mansted took charge of the separation process, watched by Harve's helicopter pilot. McAndrew and Fairclough took the American down to the loch to discuss the main business of the trip.

"This is it," said Harve, keeping his voice down as if expecting the hills to have ears. "Where it all happens. After heavy rain, or when the snow

melts, the water comes flooding down here – I mean really moving, you know? One day in nineteen and thirty-three, a quarter mile stretch of this river was sparkling in the sun after a flood, and three men took half a pound of gold out of it in an afternoon.”

“Impressive,” murmured Fairclough.

“There’s quite a steep shelf of rock there the river goes into the lake,” added Harve. “Sorry, loch. It’s a bit like a flooded waterfall. I reckon over the years, the heavier gold will have collected at the bottom end the lighter stuff will have been deposited further out.”

“Have you actually been down there for a look?” asked Fairclough. “I suppose you’d have to use Scuba gear.”

“The water’s like ice all year round,” said Harve, shaking his head. “My doctor wouldn’t let me dive in those conditions and I’d agree with him. That’s why I thought of your mini-sub.”

“How deep’s the loch, do you know?” asked McAndrew.

“It gets down to four hundred feet in the middle.”

“We could have one digging for gold and the other on deep diving trials,” said Fairclough. “That should keep the Navy happy.”

“We could get them fairly close by road and carry them over the last bit by transport helicopter,” McAndrew decided. “No doubt they’ll want a diving tender boat and a decompression chamber standing by. And living quarters. Just a thought, Harve, but it might be cheaper for you if we fix up some sort of remote controlled dredger where the stream feeds into the loch.”

“I don’t care what it costs,” smiled Harve. “I’m loaded. Money is not a problem. I just want to go down there in one of your submarines to find out if I’m right. I want to see for myself if there’s a golden mountain down there.”

“Well, all right.” McAndrew shrugged. “I just thought I’d better point out the alternative.”

“It’s a bit bloody parky out here,” said Fairclough, trying to disappear completely into the fur-lined hood of his anorak. “If we’ve seen enough, how about some coffee?”

The second batch of mud had yielded a dozen and a half flakes of gold, and Birky had found a flattened nugget the size of a twenty pence piece. Harve dismissed his find as beginner’s luck but he provided the prospectors with another bucketful of stream bed while Fairclough brewed up.

After warming himself up in the tent, Birky borrowed a spare pair of waders and took the pilots out again to the river bank to continue the good work.

"Gold fever," remarked Harve, watching the trio through a plastic window from the comfortable interior of the tent.

"The thrill of getting something for nothing," said McAndrew. "Not counting all the hard work they're putting in, of course."

"So what do you reckon?" asked Harve.

"I'll report back to my superiors at the Ministry of Defence," said McAndrew. "They'll work out the price and we'll get back to you, as they say on the telephone answering machines."

"Okay," nodded Harve. "You've got my mobile phone number?"

"Yes." McAndrew unzipped his anorak. "Phew, I think the heating's a bit on the powerful side."

"You spend any time here, son, and you'll grow to love that heater," grinned Harve.

The prospectors had all found decent souvenirs by the time McAndrew called it a day. They had moved a rock in the river bed and found a rich seam of gold-bearing sand. Harve lent them his prospectors' electronic scales so that they could divide the spoils fairly. Then he closed down his camp again.

The helicopter transported the group back to Oban and the RAF jet. During the journey home, Major McAndrew told Flying Officer Mansted that he had been on a top secret mission. The afternoon excursion from Oban was not to be discussed with anyone. Nobody likes a blabbermouth, he stressed, but silence can have many rewards.

Intrigued, and with a golden souvenir of his trip to Scotland zipped into a pocket, Mansted assured McAndrew that he could keep his trap shut. He also volunteered for any future flying assignments of a similar nature.

Birky's Jaguar gobbled up the miles between their local airfield and the Bellside Country Club. He stopped at the front entrance to allow his passengers to descend, then he drove round to his garage at the back. The travellers had beaten sunset by nine and a half minutes. McAndrew and Fairclough strolled up to their quarters on the first floor of the west wing – and found that they had a visitor.

"Well, how did things go at Devonport?" McAndrew asked while Lieutenant-Commander Smith was taking his pipe out of his beard.

"We had a bloody good lunch," grinned Hank Newton.

"Very neat jobs, those subs," Smith added. "Like little underwater space-ships. But you never saw such long faces. The crews are hanging on by their fingertips, waiting for either the diving trials to be scheduled or the chop."

"If they're as good as everyone says, why all this talk of chopping them?" wondered Fairclough. "I'd have thought they'd be ideal in the North Sea."

"The Yanks are building something similar," explained Smith. "It's all a question of whether it's cheaper to buy from them. Apparently, they could be tied up as an optional extra in a package with the *Trident* submarines. The usual political lash-up. We're waiting for performance figures from the United States."

"It might do our people some good if they had some performance figures of their own," McAndrew suggested.

"They'd like to go a lot deeper than four hundred feet, but the bottom of Loch Transe is a start," said Smith.

"Someone's been doing; his homework?" said Fairclough.

"That was Captain Drake," said Smith. "He had a sniff round to find out which piece of Ministry of Defence property Mr. Walenski has been strolling about on. Hello, here's someone who's had a good day."

Lieutenant Birky had strolled into the lounge, rattling something between cupped palms. He allowed the something to fall with a dry clatter onto the coffee table nearest Smith's chair. "There's gold in them thaar rivers!" he announced dramatically.

"So it's not a silly story, after all," said Hank Newton, inspecting three small nuggets.

"Harve's got a bag full of this stuff," Birky said. "Dust, and quite big bits. The biggest is about the size of a gold crown for your teeth."

"Perhaps it's just as well there really *is* some gold there," decided Smith, taking a folded map from his briefcase. "We've been getting a bit ahead of ourselves with our planning."

"If you're worried about Harve wanting to pay you out of the gold he finds, forget it," laughed McAndrew. "All he wants to do is go down to the loch bed and see if his theory's correct. He can pay for the operation, gold or no gold."

"Gordon Bennett!" said Smith as he spread his map on the coffee table.. "So he's really as loaded as you lot have been making out?"

"And probably a bit more," nodded McAndrew.

"In that case," grinned Smith, "as far as getting the submarines to Scotland is concerned, it's sixty-four miles from Devonport to RAF Milston. We can take them there by road, probably at night to avoid the traffic. And then we can load them into a couple of their big transport aircraft. Your pal Squadron Leader Tommy Doran suggests we fly them to the new RAF station near Aberdeen. They have transport helicopters capable of taking them the additional seventy miles to Loch Transe."

"Sounds good to me," said McAndrew.

"It should be easy enough to get hold of a decompression chamber up there, too," continued Smith. "Not, I hasten to add, that we expect to use it. Captain Drake's looking into the business of a diving support boat. All we'll need then is some pre-fabricated cabins for living quarters, generators, stores and about a million and one other things. But that's in hand."

"The Navy seems to be taking a real charge at this," commented McAndrew.

"It's all toys for the boys," grinned Newton. "The mini-sub mob are prepared to give a hundred and fifty per cent effort on this, just for the chance to paddle around in a freezing loch in winter. But then you have to be mad to go down in a submarine anyway."

"I don't think that new Raf station's open yet," said Fairclough. "I'm sure I read about plans for a grand opening-day in April. With an open day for the taxpayers so they can see what their cash went on."

"Oh, they'll be open when we get there," said Smith confidently, "They've got some VIPs visiting them."

34. A CHANGE OF PLAN

McAndrew and Smith completed their organizational work over the weekend. Their task was mainly co-ordination and liaison. Captain Drake of the Navy's Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department did most of the work

Towards noon on Monday morning, the miniature submarines began the second leg of their journey to the north. They had been taken to RAF Milaston by road the night before, enclosed in cigar-like containers to shield them from prying eyes.

The containers were silver-grey, flattened at the bottom, and they had shallow, domed ends. A broad, navy-blue stripe along each side and across the end-caps was their only external decoration. The articulated lorries which had transported them across Devon and into Somerset had looked so much like petrol tankers that none of the other people out on the roads by night had given them a second glance.

Most of the Bellsiders travelled by RAF jet-taxi to the new station at Woodburn Vale, near Aberdeen. Lieutenant-Commander Smith flew in one of the Hercules transport aircraft with a mini-sub and its crew. Hank Newton, as luck would have it, had a business meeting at the Bellside and he had arranged to follow on in the afternoon.

After a leisurely lunch, Newton was on the point of digging his car out of the garage and heading for the local airfield when a telephone call was put through to his quarters on the top floor of the club. Harve was on the line, asking for Captain Greene, alias Fairclough.

"No, I'm afraid he isn't here at the moment," Newton replied.

"How about his side-kick?" asked Harve.

"Nor Lieutenant . . . thing," Newton had lost the name for the moment. He couldn't remember whether Norm Birky was Lieutenant Browne or Black, and he didn't want to give the wrong name. "They're on their way

to Scotland, You should be seeing them soon."

"I don't reckon so," replied Harve. "I'm in London."

"Oh!" There was a short pause while Newton digested the potentially devastating implications of the news. "Why?"

"Change of plan, son. I'm onto something better."

"That's rather awkward," Newton managed. "We've made a lot of arrangements, you know."

"No problem there, son," said Harve airily. "I'll pay all your expenses and whatever it costs to undo them if you want to call it off."

"I'll have to have a word with Mac about that. Can you give me your phone number? He'll want to talk to you."

"He should have the number of my personal phone."

"That's the one in the briefcase?"

"That's the one. You can tell him i might even have a better deal for him."

"Oh," said Newton sceptically. "Well, I'll get him to call you within the next half hour, if that's convenient?"

"Sure thing, son," responded Harve.

Newton cleared the line and set about contacting McAndrew. The senior partner of the Bellsiders took Newton's bombshell in stunned silence, which came down the telephone line as calm unconcern. He found his voice again when Newton relayed Harve's offer of expenses. The beneficiaries of *Operation Life-Preserver* were prepared to run around endlessly as long as they were properly rewarded for doing so. In this case, most of the running was being done from self-motivation.

When McAndrew passed on the bad news, the only sound in the large, almost empty Officers' Mess at RAF Woodburn Vale the crash of morale hitting the deck.

"This buggers everything totally," sighed Smith.

"It can't be off!" insisted Lieutenant Welkin, RN, the skipper of one of the mini-sub.

McAndrew drew Smith to one side for a conference. "Before we start panicking, we'd better arrange a meeting with Harve," he decided.

"Agreed," nodded Smith. "This character really is good for our expenses, I take it?"

"Oh, yes. He's true blue-chip."

"I wonder if we could pad the bill out enough to see us through the

trials? People keep telling me if these mind-subs do what they're supposed to, there's a hell of a lot of money to be made out of them."

"But it's all a question of scraping the initial investment together," nodded McAndrew. "I suppose if the worst came to the worst, we could always send some divers into Loch Transe to see if Harve's mountain of gold is there. And if we could dig it up easily and sell it."

"It's a thought," smiled Smith. "I think we'd better see this bloke and get his signature on a cheque before we go any further."

McAndrew contacted Harve by telephone and arranged to meet him at the Bellside. Then he instructed Captain Fairclough to hold the fort. Flying Officer Mansted found himself unexpectedly back in the air, ordered to make all speed down the eastern side of the British Isles.

An hour later, they reached the Bellside's local airfield. Mansted was given the rest of the day off. Smith and McAndrew made their way to the club by taxi. Harve was there ahead of them, but he had travelled just thirty-five miles from London.

"Has an American gentleman arrived to see me?" McAndrew asked the porter at the reception desk, unzipping his anorak in response to the infrared heaters in the entrance hall.

"Yes, sir," nodded the porter efficiently. "He arrived about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Whereabouts is he?" added McAndrew, arranging his thinning hair to best advantage with a hand.

"He asked Mr. Bryant to show him around, sir." Footsteps on the arm of the staircase to the right of the reception desk and behind it, plus a high-pitched American accent, announced the return to ground level of Harve and Gordon Bryant, the club's manager.

"This is a great place, Major," beamed Harve, waving to McAndrew and Smith.

"Glad you like it," smiled McAndrew. "Thank you Mr Bryant."

Bryant gave him a brief nod and a half-smile, then he went back upstairs to his office on the first floor.

"I think we can talk in here." McAndrew led Harve to the office on the right of the entrance.

It was the middle of the afternoon of a dull March day. The temperature was stuck in the low Forties. A depressing row of bare-branched trees showed the line of the drive from the office window. Harve was bubbling

inside. "How does a guy get to join a place like this?" he asked, dropping a heavy hint.

McAndrew waved him to a chair and retired behind the desk. He opened a drawer and slid a form across to Harve. "You fill this in and post it to the club. In the ordinary way, you need two members to sponsor you. After that, the committee meets and decides whether you're a fit and proper person to join the club. If they approve of you, they send you a bill for a year's membership."

Harve took a gold ball-point from an inside pocket and began to write. "Does that include the use of the golf course?"

"Of course," nodded Smith.

"How often does this membership committee of yours meet?"

"As soon as you've filled the form in."

Smith moved to and from the cocktail cabinet, and deposited three generous glasses of Uisge Beatha single malt on the desk. Harve thought for a moment, then gave an address in Philadelphia as his home. Then he picked up his glass. "Thanks, ah? I don't think we've met, have we?"

"This is our naval liaison officer, Lieutenant-Commander Smith, also of the Ministry of Defence," said McAndrew.

"Pleased to meet you, son," nodded Harve. "Is that Smith with a 'y', or an 'e', or something?"

"No, just a plain, ordinary, English Smith," said Smith. "Can we get down to business now?"

"Okay." Harve opened a well-stuffed briefcase and pulled out a folder containing several sheets of paper and a sketch map. "This is why I changed my plans. I got hold of a document. This is a Xerox of it."

The photocopy was muddy-looking, and it bore traces of writing.

"I've had some experts at the British Museum look at it, and they say it's genuine sixteenth century Spanish as far as the language is concerned. You can see the date near the bottom here." Harve pointed to a scrawl which could have read 1587 to someone with a good imagination. "This was written by a survivor of a Spanish ship that got wrecked off the coast of Scotland."

"Bit off course, wasn't it?" said Smith. "And I'd have thought fifteen eighty-eight would be likely for his shipwreck. The Armada had to go all the way up round Scotland and Ireland when we chased them off."

"Right," agreed Harve. "But this really is something that happened

before that. The guy writes about one sum'bitch of a storm, which is documented in independent records. It smashed the ship up pretty good and blew them all over the place. Most of the crew got killed or injured, but there was just enough of them left mobile to beach the ship safely. This guy broke his leg on the last day, so he was left behind at the shore then the rest of them went to get help. They thought they'd been wrecked off the north-west coast of Spain . . ."

"Sounds like it was a hell of a storm, then," remarked Smith. "If they were that far off course."

"Sure was," nodded Harve. "And that's why he wrote this – he thought he was home in Spain. My experts reckon he must have given it to one of the guys who went for help."

"But what's it all about?" asked McAndrew. "My sixteenth century Spanish isn't that brilliant."

"It's a letter to his family telling them what's on the ship. I reckon the guy who had it must have run into some of Major McAndrew's ancestors."

"Who butchered them mercilessly?" grinned Smith. "And hung on to the letter, not knowing it could make them rich."

"I think they'd be more likely to help fellow Catholics," commented McAndrew to counter the sassenach slander from his right. "So you're going to salvage this ship?"

"Nope," grinned Harve. "I'm going to Mexico. Right down in the south."

Smith and McAndrew exchanged glances of puzzlement.

"Okay," said McAndrew, "I'll be the straight man. Why?"

"That's there the ship came from. And the guys at the British Museum had never heard of some of the places this guy mentions. I figure they might not have been dug out of the jungle yet. An archaeological expedition could uncover something really fantastic."

"How sure are you this isn't someone's idea of a joke?" frowned Smith.

"If it is, it's a pretty old one," replied Harve. "I got a guy to test the parchment and the ink of the original letter. They're both definitely four hundred years old."

"Where did you get it? The letter?" asked McAndrew.

"On that island. Ballantyre. I met this old guy who thought I'm one of your sucker-Yanks, The guys who'd buy anything old or phoney old. We got talking in the bar and he took me back to his place to show me this tin box. Full of holes, it was. And there was this dirty, ripped thing inside."

"The letter?" remarked Smith, bringing the whisky bottle over to the desk.

"Right," nodded Harve. "According to him, his great-granddaddy found the box. He'd been up to no good somewhere on the mainland, in the north-west. It came on to rain and he found this old, broken-down shack to shelter in. Out in the wilds somewhere. Anyway, it started to get dark, and the rain kept coming down, and the guy figured he was stuck there for the night.

"There was some wood in the shack that someone else had left, so he got a fire going and settled down to get some sleep. Sometime in the night, he woke up. Thought he saw a rat, or something. So he tossed a rock at it and went back to sleep.

"In the morning, he found the rock had bashed a hole in what looked like a solid wall. He made the hole bigger and found this tin box and some money. All the coins were over a hundred years old, but he could still spend them, and he did. The old guy said his great-grand-daddy took the box with him because it seemed like a good idea at the time. He couldn't get it open because it was rusted tight shut."

"Bet he said a few rude words then he got it open and found nothing but an old letter," grinned Smith.

"When did all this happen?" asked McAndrew.

"Eighteen eighty-two," replied Harve.

"So the letter was originally walled up in its box maybe eighty, ninety or even a hundred years before that?" mused Smith. "I wonder where it was for the other two hundred years?"

"A good question," said McAndrew. "About this Spanish ship. Did it exist? I mean, does the guy give its name?"

"Oh, yes." Harve nodded enthusiastically. "That's all been checked out. There was a ship called *Santa Domenica de Cidona* on the run between Spain and the New World, and she was lost in fifteen eighty-seven. And it's all yours if you want it."

"Ours?" repeated McAndrew blankly. "Don't *you* want it?"

"Hell, no! The last thing I need is more money. The more you've got, the more people you've got on your back, trying to grab it off you."

"Money?" said McAndrew coolly, keeping the cash-register gleam out of his eyes.

"Yeah. Didn't I tell you? The cargo's mainly Aztec-sourced gold and

silver bullion, according to the Spanish records.”

Smith and McAndrew exchanged significant glances. Here was another source of finance for the mini-sub trials – if the letter wasn’t a sixteenth-century joke.

“Yeah,” added Harve, “those ignorant Spiks melted all their Aztec loot down and destroyed its value. I wouldn’t mind a coupla cannons, though. If the ship’s there.”

“A very modest request,” remarked Smith.

“How many ex-wives are going to want a cannon?” grinned Harve.

“Just as a matter of interest,” said McAndrew, “how much did the letter cost you?”

“The guy told me such a good story about it, I gave him fifty quid,” said Harve. “I guess I was paying him more for the rights to the story than the letter. Okay, then.” He completed the membership form and looked at his watch. “I have to be back in London in a couple of hours. I’m meeting a guy who fixing up an expedition to that part of the world. We’re going to talk sponsorship and objectives.”

“Your money and your objectives?” said Smith.

“Right,” grinned Harve. He took another folder from his briefcase, “Here’s a map of the area there the Cidona went down. The letter was in four pieces, split along the folds after it was folded into four. I got different guys to translate the top and the bottom pieces. One knows the Cidona was wrecked in a storm. The other knows this Spanish guy was shipwrecked in Loch Incebane. You can see the loch runs inland for a mile and a half, then turns south for another three miles. He reckoned they beached the ship about half way along the sheltered part.”

“That’s not too far from a naval gunnery range,” Smith remarked. “I wonder if it’s on some more Ministry of Defence property?”

“It would be useful if it was,” agreed McAndrew.

Harve produced a large cheque book. “I’ve made a cheque out to the account Captain Medder used last year. If that’s okay, I’ll fill in the amount.”

“Should do us fine,” nodded Smith, producing from his briefcase an invoice prepared by Captain Drake.

Harve wrote a string of zeros with a flourish. Then he raised his glass. “Good hunting, guys.”

“Cheers,” smiled McAndrew, moving the cheque to the top drawer of his

desk. "Rather you than me on your hunt."

"How d'you mean, mean?" Harve invited.

"I don't want to put you off too much, but the old Spanish Empire is not a very nice place."

"Hell," laughed Harve, "it can't be worst than Scotland in February."

"I wouldn't bet on it," grinned McAndrew. "You'll find you have the same survival problems, but in reverse. Instead of heating equipment, you'll need air-conditioning to make the heat and humidity bearable. New York in summer is nothing compared to the hell-hole of a Mexican jungle."

"The heat and the flies and the sand," murmured Smith. "Especially the sand."

"And all that jungle," added McAndrew. "Did you know, you can get hopelessly lost ten feet from your camp? And you could walk past a building the size of this club six feet away and not know it's there?"

"No chance of that in Scotland," admitted Harve.

"Unless the mist comes down," remarked Smith with a ghoulisn chuckle. "And you can't see your hand in front of your face."

"They have mist there as well," said McAndrew. "Only they call it rain. It comes down in such huge quantities, it's like being under the sea. And your skin goes all bleached and prune-like."

"And there's the insects," contributed Smith, warming to the subject. "Killer bees creeping up from Brazil, giant hairy spiders, snakes and lost tribes of natives who'd stick a spear in you, or zap you with a poison dart, as soon as look at you. And jungle fever. A really nice place for a holiday."

"It can't be that bad," protested Harve, worry bubbling up to the surface through his layer of euphoria.

"It's not going to be a picnic," said McAndrew. "Maybe it won't seem too bad then you're acclimatized."

"How long will that take?" asked Harve.

"A few weeks, at least," said McAndrew. "You see, you have to educate your body to sweat more through the arms and legs to keep you cool. Otherwise, you be dead with heat-stroke before you know where you are. I suppose you could do it by spending a lot of time in a sauna before you go. But I should certainly see your doctor first, if you've got a heart condition. Didn't the lad you're going to sponsor tell you all this?"

"I've only met him for a drink," Harve admitted. "We haven't gotten down to cases yet. You guys aren't pulling my leg?"

"Everyone knows that part of the world isn't very hospitable at the best of times," returned McAndrew. "But I have to admit, most of what I know about it came from a book. Plus what I've seen on TV. Hang on a minute."

McAndrew disappeared into the small lift that connected the ground- and first-floor offices. On the floor above, he let himself through the secret panel into the bedroom of his apartment in the residential suite. He made a quick trip to the sitting room of the adjoining apartment, then he returned to the ground floor office carrying a paperback with brown-edged pages from Captain Fairclough's library.

He thumbed through the pages, then he handed the open book to Harve. "Here, read that bit."

The visitor swallowed Uisge Beatha reflectively as he skimmed through several pages. His naturally jaunty attitude vanished behind a thoughtful expression.

"Yeah, well," said Harve, laying the book on the desk. "Maybe it isn't such a great idea after all."

"Still, you might like it there," suggested Smith, his tone saying: 'then again, you might not.'

"I'm not trying to put you off if you've set your heart on this trip of yours," smiled McAndrew. "But there's a hell of a difference between strolling off to Scotland and surviving in a Mexican jungle. I should make sure you've checked all the facts before you buy a ticket. There's no point in having pots of money if you're not around to spend it."

"I guess I'll have to think about this some," admitted Harve. "I might even invite myself back into your party – if it's okay with you guys?"

"Glad to have you aboard," said Smith.

"Yeah, right," said Harve. "I'll go and talk to this guy in London. Maybe he can bring back some videos and I can watch them in a sauna. Okay if I hang onto the book for a while?"

"Help yourself," nodded McAndrew, being very free with someone else's property.

"Okay, I'll get off to London. Maybe I'll still be around to use a membership of this place when I've checked out the Mexican deal." Harve had not repacked his cheque book as a hint.

McAndrew discovered a stamp and an ink pad in one of the drawers of the desk. He impressed 'APPROVED' in a box on the membership application form. Beneath it, he added the initials 'H.L.M.' in red.

"The committee can create Honorary Life Members," he remarked. "People who've made an outstanding contribution to life in this country. I think you're well qualified, Harve. Naturally, there's no subscription for honorary life members."

"Gee, thanks," beamed Harve, who wasn't used to getting something for nothing. He had raised the subject of membership with the club's manager during his tour, and knew that he had jumped a considerable waiting list.

"We'll get a membership card and a copy of the rules to you as soon as," added McAndrew.

Harve had a taxi waiting for him at the back of the club. The driver had managed to scrounge a cup of coffee from sympathetic kitchen staff, and he was watching his meter ticking up waiting time. Smith and McAndrew waved Harve on his way, then they returned to the office.

"So if he knocks the trip to Mexico on the head, that's two shots at funds for the mini-sub," said Smith. "A golden mountain in Loch Transe or a Spanish treasure ship in Loch Inchbane."

"And our new life member pays our expenses if neither of them is there," added McAndrew. "I think we've done a pretty neat job of pulling our nuts out of the fire."

"Yes, pretty neat," chuckled Smith. "Right, I think we'd better get in touch with Captain Drake and see that's involved in setting up at Loch Inchbane instead. And if it's a sea-loch, we might be able to sneak in some sea trials as well. There's some nice, deep holes in the sea bed in North Minch."

35. ABERDEEN, BUT BRIEFLY

Six miles to the south-west of Aberdeen and four hundred and sixty-four miles north of the Bellside Country Club, in a state of suspense, Captain Fairclough had passed the time by getting his command at RAF Woodburn Vale properly organized. The miniature submarines had been unloaded from the Hercules transport aircraft and locked in a pair of garages, which would be occupied by fire engines then the airfield became operational.

Fairclough had posted a guard of submariners around their charges and the transport aircraft had flown back to RAF Milaston in Somerset as a gesture of faith. The expedition was determined to unpack and use the submarines in Scotland.

Former Bellsider Captain James Spinner had flown up to join the prospectors, having managed some leave from his new job at a distillery on the River South Esk, where he was responsible for quality control of Colonel Dan Porter's artificially aged, blended and single malt Uisge Beatha.

Spinner was over six feet tall, powerfully built and of West-Indian stock. As Lieutenant Birky had remarked once: getting him into a mini-sub would involve a shoe-horn and a lot of pushing. Spinner was more than willing to make the attempt.

Lieutenant Hank Newton arrived, having made his way north independently, just as Fairclough was taking an optimistic but uninformative call from McAndrew, who was noted for keeping vital details secret from his colleagues. Newton took a stroll over to the garages to renew his acquaintance with the submariners, then he gravitated to the officers' mess to raise the question of what sort of night life was on offer. Captain Fairclough told him that the matter was in hand.

Lieutenant Birky had borrowed a motorbike from one of the small holding force at the airfield. He had roared into Aberdeen to take a look at

a booming oil-town. He had returned three-quarters of an hour later to find out whether his colleagues had brought any money with them.

Birky had fallen in with a bunch of American and Scottish oil-men, who were fresh ashore with money burning a hole in their pockets. He had been invited to join a poker party in the evening. After a quick check of wallets, and an even quicker sneer at the bunch of paupers that he called friends, he had jumped back onto his borrowed motorbike and charged back to the city in search of a friendly bank.

After dinner, Fairclough, Spinner, Birky and Newton took a taxi through an inky Scottish night to the home of one of the oilmen. The submarine crews, under the command of two young and conscientious Lieutenants called Welkin and Ivor, had been left behind on guard duty.

Birky hopped out of the taxi first when it reached its destination, allowing a slower colleague to pay the driver. He gave the doorbell one long ring, two short ones, and then two more long rings.

"That the secret code ring?" asked Spinner.

"Nope," grinned Birky. "I just felt like doing it."

The house was one of a terrace which curved gently with a wide street. It was faced in whitish-grey granite, which picked up the yellow of the street lights. A light went on in the hall and feet pounded down stairs. A man with the reddest hair that any of the visitors had ever seen opened the door.

"Hello, mate," said Birky. "This is Iain," he added to his colleagues.

Iain inflicted a bone-crushing handshake on everyone but Spinner as Birky introduced his friends. Spinner gave Iain's bones a light crushing. Iain inspected Spinner's chocolate brown frame with respect, then he offered him a job on one of the oil rigs.

"Thanks anyway," replied Spinner in his Midlands drawl, "but I'm quite happy with what I'm doing."

"I didn't know they paid soldiers that well," commented Iain. "You are in the army, I suppose?" He knew that Birky was a soldier because he had taken off his anorak in the pub and revealed pips on the epaulettes of his dark green jumper. The visitors were all in unrevealing civilian clothing.

"Apart from Hank," nodded Birky. "He's Navy."

"The Senior Service," added Newton.

"Senior Service? Aren't they fags?" said Birky innocently.

"Go on through, lads," Iain invited as Newton gave Birky a reflex snarl.

Iain turned back to the stairs. "Oh, aye, if you see a disgusting mess in there, it's okay. He's an Aussie."

"I bet he's called Bruce," remarked Birky.

"Or Michael," added Spinner.

"That's right," said Iain, looking surprised. "Everyone calls him Aussie Mike. That was a good guess."

"Not really," grinned Spinner, tuning a thumb towards Birky. "His uncle's got a pub in Chelsea, and we went on a safari down Earl's Court Road once."

"Once was enough," added Birky, heading down the passage beside the stairs.

A pale yellow door opened into the dining room, which was fitted with a settee and a large colour television in addition to a table and a set of chairs. A cheerful coal fire burned behind a copper guard, and subdued lighting came from a pair of wine-bottle lamps, one on either side of the television.

The visitors found a lean, bronzed, headless body stretched along the settee. The corpse completed itself by lifting a cushion from its face to see who was making all the noise. A pair of bright blue eyes and a pointed nose aimed themselves at the troops. The rest of Aussie Mike's features were obscured by a mass of all-over blond and ginger hair.

"Evening," said Birky, claiming a dining chair.

"How's she goin'?" drawled Aussie Mike.

"Flamin' alright, cobbler," replied Birky, imitating his accent.

"Like a train," added Spinner.

"Bloody oath! A Pommy bastard who speaks my lingo." Aussie Mike had shifted up a couple of gears to race the words out in a single stream to find out if Birky could keep up. "How about a grog, sport? The bloody eskie's over there." He turned a thumb in the direction of the room's other door.

"What did he say?" Fairclough murmured to Newton.

Newton shrugged in bafflement. "Don't ask me. *This* Pommy bastard doesn't speak the lingo."

In response to Aussie Mike's invitation, Birky went into the kitchen and opened the door of the refrigerator. He stopped to stare.

"Bloody hell!" he gasped. "I didn't know you could get a hundred gallons of beer into a fridge!"

He enlarged a gap that someone had made in the top shelf and handed icy cans around in the living room. Iain joined them as the visitors were sitting round the table, risking frostbite of the throat and waiting for something to happen.

"The place is about ten minutes' walk away," Iain announced, helping himself to Birky's reserve can. "If we leave in about half an hour, we should get there when everyone else does."

"Any rubbish on the telly?" asked Birky.

Iain took the party to a scruffy-looking pub on the fringes of the city. The large room on the left of the front entrance was in semi-darkness and half full. The pub looked as though it was in the process of being 'done up'. Fibreglass beams and horse brasses seemed to be the theme of the face-lift, which had not yet touched the exterior. Birky reminded Spinner that it was his round. The beer proved to be quite drinkable.

One of the group of American oilmen was in the bar in the role of receptionist. He lurked in the background until Iain and his party had bought drinks, then he told them to go through the door marked 'PRIVATE' on the left of the gents. A steep staircase doubled back on itself. One of two doors of the landing stood invitingly open.

Another American just inside the room relieved the newcomers of twenty pounds apiece to pay for drinks and the hire of the room. Coffee and tea, and an impressive array of open sandwiches under plastic domes to protect them from tobacco smoke, were also available. The organizers had clearly made an effort to provide a decent night out as well as an opportunity to gamble.

Seven more players arrived. One of them, who was wearing a black bowler hat and showed no signs of wanting to take it off, was carrying a box full of sealed packs of cards. He dumped the box on one of the circular tables and suggested that they play poker.

Fourteen players cut a pack of cards and divided themselves between the tables in high-cut and low-cut groups. Play began. The number of players at either of the tables fluctuated between five and seven as men took a break or dropped out to try a change of luck at the other table. A blue haze of tobacco smoke fought a duel to the death with the large extractor fan.

Money changed hands and tension began to rise.

By about three o'clock on Tuesday morning, the number of players had dropped to ten. The other four men had dropped out – broke or in search of sleep. Something that had begun as a friendly game had turned decidedly sour. Lieutenant Birky was wearing a frown of deep concentration as he played to masked deeper suspicion.

The hand went against him. He flipped his cards across to the dealer and pushed away from the table, announcing that he was going to attack the food to keep his strength up. A Scottish oilman in a pair of brown knee-books took over his place.

"Not going that well, is it," remarked Captain Fairclough through a mouthful of salmon and cucumber sandwich.

"This game's not straight," asserted Birky in an undertone, attacking a sausage roll.

"Yeah, we're all down," admitted Fairclough, "and I've been looking for funny business. But I can't spot any."

"Look harder," returned Birky. "They're getting a bit bloody careless now."

"Look for what?"

"Take the hand before last. I stacked a busted king flush. But the bloke with the specs showed a king flush, and three kings won the pot. How many straight packs of cards have five bloody kings in them?"

"I see what you mean," nodded Fairclough. "What are we going to do about it? Call them out and see that happens?"

"Nothing as obvious as that!" Birky's natural cheeky grin returned. "I'm going to suss it out a bit longer. Then I'm going to cheat like these other buggers and see how they like it."

"Okay, but watch what you're doing. Accusing someone else of cheating isn't going to do you any good if you've been caught doing the same. And there's more of them than there is of us."

"No, I don't think they're all in it. Find out what the others have lost, Art. I've got an idea how we can get it back."

"Okay, but I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I," replied Birky, but his grin had become even broader.

Fairclough, Spinner and Newton had lost nine hundred and fifty pounds, to the nearest tenner. Birky's losses pushed the total over the two thousand mark. Fairclough told Newton what was in the air, but he wasn't quite sure how to break the news to Spinner. There was always the chance

that the former regimental heavyweight boxing champion would just wade into the oilmen and start World War Three. The odds were more or less even, but Fairclough he felt that he owed Birky a chance to try something more subtle.

Half an hour later, Birky dropped out of the game again to stroll down the landing to the gents. He returned and inspected the remaining sandwiches.

"Well?" remarked Fairclough, who had surrendered his seat to Aussie Mike.

"It's the bloke in the lumberjack shirt and the one with the hat," replied Birky.

"No one else?"

"No, the rest are losing like us. They win a pot every so often so it doesn't look too bad, but there's only those two ahead. They keep stashing their winnings, too."

"How d'you mean?" frowned Fairclough.

"They keep stashing the bigger notes in their pockets. See the lumberjack? He's only got ones, fives and tens on the table in front of him. What's happened to all the twenties he's won? And the bloke with the bowler hat's won at least a dozen fifties, not the three he's showing. What's happened to them?"

"Interesting. So what are you going to do about it?"

"You'll see," grinned Birky. "Just get everyone ready to back me up. The signal will be when I ask you to get me a drink. But don't tell that mad sod Aussie Mike. He'll just duff them up right now and spoil everything."

Birky returned to the game and hovered on the sidelines, watching the hand in play and apparently in no hurry to get back into the game. The Lumberjack, Bowler Hat, Spinner, Newton, Iain and the American with the brown knee-boots were sitting at the table.

Aussie Mike had retired, broke, and he was perched on an ancient upright piano, getting through his twenty pounds' worth of food and drink and muttering darkly about Pommy Noah's. Birky had been forced to explain to his friends that *Noah's Arc* is Australian rhyming slang for shark.

Fairclough had a quiet word with the other drop-out, an American called Callum, whose mother was Scottish. Then the hand reached a natural conclusion. Hank Newton had been allowed to win for once. Bowler Bat retired to the gents – partly to smooth the crumpled notes in his pockets

into a less bulky wad.

Birky asked the man in the lumberjack shirt about life on the oil rigs while the others retired to the bar, giving Fairclough a chance to warn them that Birky had something planned. He threatened to flatten Spinner if he jumped the gun – which had the desired effect, and took the edge off Spinner’s instant anger with laughter.

Fairclough and Birky took over from Spinner and Iain when the game resumed with a new pack of cards. Birky lost three hundred pounds to a slightly superior hand right away, but he didn’t seem too bothered. The next hand cost him another hundred before he decided to stack. Iain raked the notes towards himself at the end.

Bowler Hat and the Lumberjack dropped out in the early rounds of the next hand, allowing Birky to relieve Hank Newton of four hundred pounds by means of some outrageous bragging. Then the deal passed to Bowler Hat.

Birky’s angelic smirk took on a predatory edge. Fairclough suddenly remembered that the dealer had brought the box of cards. Birky looked at him, then flicked his eyes away.

“Guess I’ll go and water the horse,” Fairclough announced, pushing away from the table and allowing Iain to take his place.

Birky examined his cards as they slid across the table to his position opposite the dealer, just lifting a corner. He pushed the first two to his left, rejected the next one, then stopped to think as two more cards arrived. After the initial round of betting, he changed two of his cards. His grin remained but Fairclough thought it looked a trifle forced.

The pot rose in value and height as notes moved to the centre of the table. Hank Newton and Iain threw their cards in. Then the American with the boots decided that the hand was too rich for him. Fairclough hovered near Birky, hoping for a look at his hand, but Birky had left his cards spaced out on the table top and he didn’t seem to feel a need to turn them over to refresh his memory.

“Your two hundred and up a hundred,” said Birky when it was his turn to stack or raise.

He counted notes onto the untidy pile. The Lumberjack began to count notes to cover the bet. Birky passed a glass over his left shoulder. “Get us a drink, Art,” he remarked.

Fairclough found himself clutching a glass and several cards. He slipped

them under a discarded sandwich plate while pouring a little whisky and a lot of ginger ale into the glass. Bowler Hat looked at him suspiciously when he placed the glass on the coaster next to Birky. But Fairclough had taken the precaution of filling his free hand with a sandwich. And as Birky was using both hands to light a cigar, and his cards were in plain view, well away from the glass, it was clear that no skulduggery could be taking place.

Birky, the Lumberjack and Bowler Hat continued to stare menacingly at one another, and to throw money onto the heap at centre of the table as if they were glad to get rid of it. Having achieved the object of the exercise and worn Birky's fortune down to pocket money, the Lumberjack stacked his ace-high. Everyone knew that the last hand was being played. The pot had crept up to around seven thousand pounds.

"Your five hundred and up five hundred," said Bowler Hat.

Birky fumigated the pot with his cigar, then stayed with his opponent. Bowler Hat added another thousand to the pot.

Birky had almost exhausted his collection of fifty pound notes. He counted up to ten slowly. Bowler Bat took out a well-stuffed wallet and repeated the bet.

"Two fifty," said Birky, counting his notes again in an attempt to make them multiply. "Lend us a grand, Art," he added casually.

"You play with what you've got, buddy," rumbled the Lumberjack, who was still at the table even though he was no longer playing.

"Cash us a cheque for a grand, Art," said Birky. "Is that okay?"

"Well, I don't know," said the Lumberjack.

"Non-players off the green," interrupted Iain. "It's up the bloke left in."

"Right," nodded Bowler Hat, scenting more blood. "And I say it's okay if he's got the cash."

"I haven't got a grand," admitted Fairclough.

"Is it okay if he has a whip-round to cash my cheque?" asked Birky.

"We're playing cash on the table. I don't care where it comes from," said Bowler Hat accommodatingly.

Fairclough had four hundred pounds. Newton added another three hundred. Spinner could manage only seventy. Birky tore a cheque from his book, signed it and passed it to Fairclough.

"I'll trust you to fill in the right amount," he announced. "One grand to you, mate."

"One grand right back at you," grinned Bowler Hat.

"I suppose you think that's funny?" said Birky.

"Get out of that, as you Limey's say," smiled Bowler Hat.

Birky reached into a side pocket of his anorak, which was draped on the back of his chair, and took out a neat, chamois pouch. He opened the draw-strings and tipped six gold nuggets onto the green baize table top.

"Hey, what's this?" demanded Bowler Hat suspiciously.

"It's gold. What's it look like?" returned Birky.

The Lumberjack picked up one of the nuggets and peered at it. Then he bounced it on his hand. "Sure feels heavy enough," he admitted.

"Might be lead," said Bowler Hat.

Birky pulled a penknife from his trouser pocket. "Here, chop it open. If you can find any lead, I'll show my arse in Lewis's window." He showed his teeth in a hostile smile. "But if you can't, you arse goes on show."

Bowler Hat declined the challenge. "Okay, I believe you," he admitted.

"This is gold dust," added Birky, producing another chamois pouch. "Together, they're worth a grand."

He let Bowler Hat open the second pouch and examine the contents under the light to confirm that the small flakes were indeed gold.

When Birky had moved the two pouches to the centre of the table, he counted out another thousand pounds in notes and waited for more gold to appear.

"What time to the banks open?" Birky asked no one in particular.

"Ain't you got no more gold?" said Bowler Hat in dismay.

"Nope, that's the lot for the moment," confirmed the prospector.

"Half nine," said Hank Newton, answering Birky's question.

Birky looked at his watch. "I wonder what we can do for the next five and a half hours?"

"What the hell is this?" demanded Bowler Hat.

"I need to get some more money," said Birky in a very reasonable tone.

"If you ain't got no more dough, you're out."

"I've got plenty of dough. I just don't have it on me at the moment. The rules are cold cash. Okay, I can live with that. But if you're going to stick to the letter of the rules, I don't remember hearing anything about time limits for producing the cash."

"Oh, for chrise sakes," groaned Bowler Hat, who knew that Birky had three inferior queens, having dealt them to him.

The Lumberjack tapped his ankle under the table as a signal for him to get on with it. "Tell you what," said Bowler Hat, realizing that the well was dry, "forget the last raise. I'll see you."

"Yeah, what a bloody good idea," approved Spinner, taking up a strategic position behind the crooks.

"Can he do that?" protested Birky.

"Shee-it, man, you got no choice. He's done it," said the Yank with the boots.

"Oh, all right." Birky turned his cards over. "Full house, kings on queens." He scooped the cards together and tossed them in front of his opponent, stopping him dead in the act of reaching for the pot. "I think that puts the tin hat on it," he added. "One of us has got to be a bit broke now."

The crooks gazed vacantly at three kings and two queens, frozen to their chairs. The oil men were snickering at the looks on their faces, or just from the relief of tension.

"What did you have, pal?" Iain reached over and turned Bowler Hat's cards face up. "Oh! Three Kings and nothing. Isn't that too bad?"

Bowler Bat tried to stand. Spinner planted a large hand on the crown of his bowler and forced him back onto his chair, jamming the hat even more firmly onto his head in the process.

"Hold up!" yelled Aussie Mike, who had not been let in on the secret. "I can see six bloody kings there."

Bowler Bat and the Lumberjack began to look sick as Fairclough organized a search of their pockets to retrieve the rest of the profits syphoned off during the evening.

"Hold up! Who brought the bloody cards?" realized Aussie Mike, sliding off the piano.

"I think we've got some questions to ask these lads," decided Iain.

"Right!" agreed Callum.

The crooks were looking even sicker as the oilmen rushed them out of the pub. When Iain, Aussie Mike, Callum and Brown Boots returned, rubbing their knuckles, they found the final pot counted and stacked in neat piles on the card table.

"How much is everyone out?" asked Birky.

"I got done for three hundred," said Aussie Mike, opening a can of German lager.

"The bastards took me for a grand," growled Brown Boots.

"Four hundred," said Callum.

"Only two fifty," added Iain.

"They must have like you," grinned Birky, counting notes into four piles.

"How the hell did they do it?" wondered Aussie Mike. "They weren't wearing glasses, so they couldn't have marked the backs of the cards. And they couldn't have been marking the cards as we went along. We kept changing packs." He nodded to the box, which contained a jumble of discarded cards – in theory, four hundred and forty of them, including jokers and the bridge contract score cards.

"Right. And you always watch any guys you don't know in a game. Even you guys," he added apologetically.

"And we were watching you," said Fairclough. "And them. And him." He looked at Birky. "And I didn't see anything dodgy going on."

"You must have seen these guys on TV," explained Birky. "The ones who do close-up magic. They sit right down at a table with a couple of people and they do magic right in front of their noses. They make things appear and disappear – coins, cards, all sorts. So if you're playing with cards like these," he showed two unopened packs, "with blue backs or red backs, when you chuck a pack away, you keep back a few useful cards. You notice there was two of them? The one in the Bowler hat was doing the red cards and his mate was doing the blue ones. That's what threw me at first."

"But how did you know he was going to have three kings against you?" asked Iain.

"Observation," grinned Birky. "They were fond of kings and he'd given me three queens. Good enough to play on, but not quite good enough to beat him. And if he didn't have kings, Hank was going to find a couple on the floor, weren't you?"

"That's right," nodded Newton, producing two red-backed kings – spades and diamonds – from a trouser pocket.

"I tell you, it's a bloody good job we met you," sighed Iain.

"When evil foreigners try to take you for a ride, your Army is always ready to leap into action," said Fairclough.

"And your Navy," added Hank Newton.

"Suppose they'd said the kings on the floor had come from another pack?" suggested Brown Boots.

"I'd have insisted on looking at the pack we were playing with," grinned Birky. "I know for a fact there was no ace of spades in it. And the three, five and seven of hearts had become diamonds. 'Cause I swapped them myself."

"Suppose they'd said you were doing all the cheating?" persisted Brown Boots.

Birky shrugged. "They could have searched me. But they wouldn't have let you search them. If you'd done that instead of duffing them up, you'd have found cards stashed the way a magician does it with the budgies he produced from strange places."

Hank Newton covered a mighty yawn. "Me for a kip after all that excitement."

"I've got the number of an all-night taxi firm," said Fairclough. "Let's find out if they really are."

Birky had three thousand five hundred pounds left over when he had made full restitution. Some of it had been lost by the four who had retired early, and the rest was the crooks' stake money and profits from previous games. He shared it out among the survivors. Then the party broke up.

The night had not gone the way the Bellsiders had expected but it had been interesting and different – and they had made a profit out of it.

36. THE SCOTTISH MAIN

McAndrew and Smith rejoined the submarine party the following morning. Much to everyone's surprise, they brought a NATO observer with them – an American gentleman called Walenski. After some discussion in London with the leader of the archaeological expedition, Harve had written out a cheque and given him a copy of his translation of the section of his letter which mentioned the previously unknown Aztec cities.

Harve had done some research, and he had deepened the doubts raised by both McAndrew and the book that he had borrowed. Harve had been further put off by the fact that several months of preparations remained before the expedition could even think of crossing the Atlantic. He wanted to be able to jump into an adventure right away, and the treasure hunt in Scotland seemed the best bet.

Having received an assurance that he would be sent a complete set of videos of the South American expedition in due course, Harve had telephoned McAndrew at the Bellside to book his place on a venture in a foreign country which didn't require a period of acclimatization.

An informal briefing session was held in the room which would become the pilots' briefing room when RAF Woodburn Vale was commissioned. As senior naval officer, Lieutenant-Commander Smith pinned a map of Scotland to the board and took charge of the pointer.

The two submarine commanders and four of their six crewmen were looking alert enough, despite having stood guard duty two hours on and four hours off through the night. The eyelids of the Bellsiders and Spinner had a tendency to droop, however.

Smith extracted an account of their adventure the night before, then he got down to business. He and McAndrew intended to borrow two Hercules transport aircraft, which would be landing soon to deliver equipment to the new RAF station. The aircraft would carry the miniature submarines on to

RAF Strathcall, on the northern coast of Caithness. The mini-sub's would then be suspended beneath transport helicopters and flown fifty-five miles to the west to Loch Inchbane, where the diving and sea trials would take place.

Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor were well pleased with the change of plans. Diving trials in the sea would yield more useful results than trials in a fresh-water loch. The Bellsiders and Spinner took the news calmly, assuming that they would be looking for something as worthwhile as a mountain of gold. Only Lieutenant Birky was disappointed, but he had invested a great deal of time and effort in planning a bigger and better washing tray for the stream that fed Loch Transe.

Leaving Harve to tell their colleagues about the treasure ship, Smith and McAndrew left with the submariners to the next leg of the journey. Harve showed off a copy of his letter – the original was locked safely in a deposit box of a London bank – and told the story of the tin box. His audience offered cautious acceptance, realizing that the treasure ship offered as remote a prospect of getting rich as the alleged mountain of gold in Loch Transe.

The two Hercules transports arrived and were they unloaded, refuelled and prepared for the extra round trip of two hundred and twenty miles. As the others were packing, Spinner approached McAndrew doubtfully.

"I suppose I'd better be getting back to the distillery," he said reluctantly.

"You can come along if you want, laddie," chuckled McAndrew. "You're still part of the team, the same way that other deserter, Hank, he's still part of Don's crew when the fun starts. Not that there's going to be an awful lot happening at first."

"Oh, well, I can always shoot home if I get bored," Spinner decided. "I'd better tell Dan there I'm going to be."

The main runway at RAF Strathcall looked barely long enough to accommodate model aircraft, never mind a four-engined transporter loaded with a miniature submarine and assorted humans. Harve took one look out of a window during the landing approach, then he returned to his seat, strapped himself in and pulled his cowboy hat over his eyes. If the aircraft did crash on landing, as he firmly believed that it would, Harve didn't want to know about it.

In the event, both aircraft touched down smoothly and slowed to a

taxiing pace with plenty of room to spare and without having to resort to panic braking. They taxied over to a collection of low huts and halted on a rust-stained square of fairly new concrete. The fading whine of engines was replaced by the rumble of a lowered cargo hatch.

"You can come out now, Harve," chuckled Birky, reaching over to lift the cowboy hat.

"The engines have stopped," whispered Harve.

"That's because we've landed and we're here."

Harve peered out of the window beside him – to see sky and ground in their appointed positions. The ground was stationary. He trusted jets but he considered aircraft with propellers to be old-fashioned and dangerous. No one had told him about the advantages of a modern turboprop engine.

"Everyone out," said McAndrew. "Come on, lads, let's go."

"Looks a bit miserable out there," commented Fairclough through a yawn.

"At least it's not raining," encouraged McAndrew.

The lowered tailgate of the aircraft admitted a chilly breeze. A continuous grey overcast filled the sky, but the temperature had crawled up to the low Fifties. A party of airmen, supervised by a loud flight sergeant, attached a tow rope and began to ease the container for the minisub out of the Hercules.

"Tight squeeze, but we made it, eh?" remarked a fruity voice behind the 'Inspectors'. Squadron Leader Kinney, a compact, thirty-year-old acquaintance from RAF Milston had joined them.

"Some of us were laying bets you wouldn't make it, Dennis," grinned Fairclough. "But we couldn't figure out how the winners would collect."

"Eternal pessimists, the bloody Army," chuckled Kinney, twirling an end of a bushy moustache. "Anyone feel up to some lunch? They have a particularly good mess here. Compensation for being at the back of beyond, I suppose. Isn't it grey! The sky, the sea, every-bloody-thing."

"It's called rugged, unspoiled charm in tourist brochures," remarked Spinner with a glance at McAndrew.

"You can say what you like about this part of the country," McAndrew shrugged. "I disown it completely. Let's eat."

After lunch, three helicopters took off on the final fifty-five-mile leg of the journey. One of the helicopters was carrying fifteen passengers. The other

dangled blue-striped containers on flimsy looking cables. Fins had been attached to the containers to stop them spinning in flight. Their destination proved to be what would eventually become a small bay with a large island in the centre of it. Due to an increase in hardness of the rock at the southern end of the loch, the sea was making very heavy weather of separating the island from the mainland.

The site looked vaguely like a cross-section of a human head, as seen from the air. The sea loch formed the down-turned mouth, and there was a rocky promontory to the north of the entrance that resembled a hook-nose. A slight indentation of the coastline opposite the southern end of the loch could have been an overweight chin.

In a flurry of sand and spray, the helicopters lowered the containers to the beach at the landward end of the loch and cast the cables free. The tide was out, exposing an inviting stretch of pale golden sand. Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor and their crews were out of the transport helicopter and running for the containers almost before their pilot had touched down.

Hank Newton cast a seadog's eye over the view and announced that almost all of the sand would be under water at high tide. Rotting seaweed, pieces of slimy wood and a dead jellyfish marked the tideline. After a further ten yards, the sand gave way to spiky grass, which developed into a wild lawn that was almost flat for about one hundred yards, and then rose with increasing steepness to the level of the surrounding cliffs.

The submariners gathered around one of the containers. Long hinges just above the navy blue stripe allowed the top to open like an inverted bomb-bay. Harve watched the unveiling with interest. The others turned their attention to the mountain of equipment and supplies which had been unloaded on the flat stretch of grass.

Raising miniature sand storms, the helicopters headed for home to fetch a final load of supplies. The submariners dived into the containers to release the maze of bracing bars. They assembled wooden decks on the grass and provided them with walls and a roof. The next priority was to install a gas-powered range in the mess hut and get a brew on.

After afternoon tea, the party turned its attention to the railway, which would be used to launch the submarines – and also take them out of the water, if required. By 16:00 hours, a Y-shaped prefabricated track led down from the grass to the water.

When two of the helicopters returned, they were carrying flat trucks,

which they lowered onto the railway lines. The helicopters unloaded a supply of frozen food for transferred to the camp freezer. Then they hovered over the mini-sub while their carrying cables were attached to ring-bolts welded to the hulls.

Amid much arm-waving and shouting, the helicopters pick the mini-sub out of their containers and lowered them gently onto the trucks. Having made sure that the wheels of the trucks had been properly chocked and the brakes were on, Lieutenant-Commander Smith called a time-out for another brew.

The helicopters departed. Those left behind buckled down to the task of making their camp habitable before nightfall. A nameless stream that flowed into the loch became their water supply. While the army laid a maze of pipes between the stream and the washing water tanks, the drinking water purifier and the high-speed biowaste destructor, the navy assembled an all-plastic, super quality field latrine.

Four four-man huts, and a mess hall attached to the kitchen and food store, completed the camp. Two generators thudded gently to supply power, and a reserve was standing by. McAndrew had established a fuel dump of drums of diesel oil at a safe distance from the huts.

Lieutenant Birky dropped in at the kitchen to everything was working satisfactorily. He found a collection of naval officers watching Hank Newton slicing onions at high speed and apparently putting his fingertips at severe risk.

"So! That's that you lot are up to," Birky remarked.

"Still hard at it?" grinned Lieutenant-Commander Smith.

"It's all right for you, mate," said Birky aggressively.

"That's no way to speak to a senior officer," snapped Lieutenant Ivor automatically.

"Senior officer?" Birky looked pointedly at the bars on Smith's epaulettes. "Two and a half stripes? He's not even a sergeant. Everything working, Hank? Apart from the audience."

"Yep, it's all okay," nodded Newton.

"Right, I'll go and tell Spin to get the wine out."

"Relax," Smith told an indignant Lieutenant Ivor then Birky had gone. "Our friend and I are part of a rather special outfit and we don't stand on ceremony. And don't forget he's one of the people organizing this party. He's partly responsible for giving you a chance to try out your mini-sub."

“So you see,” added Newton, “the Army do have their uses sometimes.”

“Yes, sir,” murmured Ivor, acknowledging Smith’s point. He was feeling a little out of his depth among so many informal strangers. He wasn’t used to being so close to Ministry of Defence types.

High tide came at 20:20 hours, two and a half hours after sunset and an hour and a half after dinner. A battery of lights powered by one of the generators chased away the thick darkness and gave the spectators a good view of the submariners’ antics.

There was no Moon and clouds hid the stars. Ripples of light fanned out across the dark waters of the loch. Gentle surges and ebbs lapped up the steel tracks to within a foot of the front wheels of the trucks on which the submarines were perched.

Watched by safety crews in two inflatable dinghies, Lieutenant Ivor and his three crewmen climbed into the left-hand mini-sub and ran a check of all systems. Then the Tool Operator, the chief petty officer who operated the manipulator arms at the front of submarine, and the CPO in charge of communications climbed out again. They retrieved the chocks, and ‘Tools’ released the truck’s brakes.

The submarine squeaked forward, taking up the slack in the winch cable. More wire cable unrolled from the reel. The submarine squeaked slowly into the water. When small waves began to break over the truck, an arm appeared at the mini-sub’s hatch and a torch blinked towards the winch crew.

The drum stopped turning. Sucking, gurgling noises – similar to those made by a loud soup-drinker – filtered back to the spectators.

“What the hell’s that?” wondered Lieutenant Birky.

“Taking on ballast,” explained Hank Newton.

“Noisy buggers!”

“Right!” yelled a voice from the mini-sub. The torch flashed again.

“Carry on,” Lieutenant Welkin told the winch crew.

More wire unwound from the drum. Another stop signal flashed towards the shore. Bubblings and rumblings issued from beneath the waterline as the submarine blew off ballast. There was a gentle frothing at its stern. Suddenly, it was moving under its own power inching cautiously across the dark waters.

“Reel in the truck,” ordered Lieutenant Welkin.

The submarine moved out into deeper water and made itself fast to a buoy, which no one but the naval members of the party had noticed during the hours of daylight.

"Tempo, tempo, meine Herren," encouraged Sub-Lieutenant Deston, Welkin's helmsman and 'pilot'.

"Didn't know they allowed foreigners in your mob, Don," Fairclough remarked to Smith. "Come to think of it, that phrase sounds vaguely familiar."

"It does to me too," agreed Smith.

"He picked it up from an old film on the telly, sir," offered the TO of the other submarine. "Thinks it makes him sound knall."

"You what?" said Fairclough.

"NATO slang for 'dead military'," explained Hank Newton. "Ve in ze Nafy speak ze sleng of many lands, zes days."

"Whatever happened to good old British slang?" said Fairclough.

"The Krauts are using it," laughed Newton.

"There's progress and international understanding for you," said Smith.

When the truck had been reeled to the end of its branch of the railway, one of the winch crew applied the brakes and pushed the wheel chocks into place. Then he waded out into the shallow water to throw the switch of the points.

During the launching, the spectators had learned that the two mini-sub had been named *Moby* and *Dick* by their crews. They had rejected the official code names *One* and *Two*, which were short for MSX/318948/1 and MSX318948/2 respectively.

A repeat of the performance just witnessed put Dick in the water and took the mini-sub out to the buoy.

Coloured lights, one red and one green, powered from the camp's generators, were attached to the submarines and they were wired into the electronic picket, which would scream a warning to the duty officer if any intruder approached closer than fifty yards to the camp.

Worried about having to find six and a quarter million pounds if the mini-sub were spirited away, their captains insisted that a man had to remain aboard one of them at all times. Lieutenant-Commander Smith drew up a guard roster and Captain Fairclough issued a thirteen-shot FN automatic pistol in a waterproof holster to the first sentry so that he could do something about intruders.

Knowing that they faced an early start in the morning, the submariners posted their first guard and retired to huts One and Two in the north-west corner of the camp. Fairclough, Spinner, Birky and Newton had managed about three hours' sleep the night before and they decided to try out the beds in hut Four, in the south-east corner of the camp. McAndrew, the duty officer for the night, Smith and Harve were left to sample the available entertainment. They settled for a few drinks and a couple of the films on videodisc.

Sunrise came at 06:46 hours. Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor had roused their off-duty submariners a quarter of an hour earlier. The bustle of activity and the sound of enthusiastic and excited voices woke the others, but only Hank Newton bothered to get out of bed to discover that all the row was about.

The camp came alive a second time around a quarter to eight. Sheltered from extremes of wind by the surrounding hills, the site was a modest sun-trap, remaining a consistent four or five degrees warmer than the rest of that part of the coast.

The visitors made pilgrimages to the latrine in the south-west corner of the camp, then the seven later risers assembled in the mess hall in the opposite corner to decide who would tackle the job of making breakfast.

"What's happened to that lot?" asked Birky, nodding in the general direction of huts One and Two.

"Hank left this note," said Spinner. "I found it propped against the coffee pot in the kitchen."

"Gone submarine-ing, H.'," read McAndrew. "He doesn't believe in wasting words, our Hank."

"Your mob are dead keen, aren't they, Don?" said Spinner. "Up and away at the crack of dawn."

"Well, it's like Christmas for them," said Smith. "They've been hanging around for four months waiting for a change play properly with the mini-subs."

"You could hardly call them the *Silent Service*, though," said Fairclough.

"Dead bloody right!" agreed Birky. "If they're going to make a din like that every morning, I'm putting in for a soundproof hut."

"I dare say they'll calm down in a week or so," laughed Smith.

"A bloody week!" complained Birky, turning over one of the cards on the

nearer of the two mess tables. The message on the other side was 'TODAY', which made him the duty cook.

"Have you thought about sleeping pills?" asked Spinner, pouring corn-flakes into a bowl. "For them, I mean."

"You lot behave yourselves," grinned McAndrew. "I think I'll have bacon and two fried eggs."

"Me too," nodded Harve. "When do you expect to start looking for the ship?"

"You can try trailing a metal detector from a rubber dinghy for starters," said Smith. "I don't think the novelty of the mini-sub's will start to wear off much before tomorrow."

"Reckon they'll let me have a ride in one?"

"What, in a Top Secret submarine?" said McAndrew in a shocked tone.

"Hey, I'm on your side. And don't forget I'm a NATO observer," Harve pointed out.

"And he probably knows more about them than we do," added Smith. "Does the name Arnie Silverman mean anything to you?"

"I think I'll take the fifth on that," grinned Harve.

"When questioned, the witness refused to admit that he was well acquainted with a notorious CIA agent," remarked Smith.

Pleasantly full of breakfast, the treasure hunters took a stroll down to the beach. The tide was in and about to go out again. About two hundred yards away, in fifty feet of water, one of the submarines was cruising slowly round and round in a circle, looking like a whale with a flat back and a funnel, and towing a brace of rubber dinghies.

The two men in the dinghies were dressed in bright orange, heated, free-diving suits of the type that the Navy had been testing off the Isle of Wight during *Operation Mist*.

A froth of bubbles erupted from the deep. The other mini-sub bobbed to the surface and erected its funnel.

"What are those things on their backs?" asked Fairclough, beating his colleagues to the punch.

"It's a splash-guard," said Harve. "To stop waves slopping down the hatch. Some guys don't like getting their feet wet. They can raise it as high as four feet, if they want."

"I told you he knows all about them," remarked Smith.

Harve just grinned.

"Okay, let's get to work," said McAndrew. "We'll have lots more opportunities to stare at submarines over the next couple of weeks."

With the usual groans and moans, his colleagues returned to their camp, some to unpack the metal detectors, and others to tackle the washing up, including the dishes kindly left for their attention by the submariners. Their generosity prompted Birky to add the following note to the luncheon menu: 'To the Navy – except Mr. Smith – just to tell you the dishwasher works. OK?'

At nine o'clock that morning, two visitors were spotted approaching the camp. A cabin cruiser had rounded the right-angle bend in the loch from the sea and it was zipping down the final three miles. As it did so, a helicopter approached through the dip between two hills, following the course of the stream which supplied the camp's water.

"That'll be Joe," said Birky as McAndrew was telling Harve that the boat had arrived.

"Joe who?" asked Spinner.

"Baron von Mansted, the pilot. You haven't met him yet."

"I didn't know he could fly a helicopter," said Fairclough.

"He reckons he can fly anything," Birky told him. "He's been assigned to us as our transport."

"He's okay, is he?" said Spinner.

"Anyone who supports *The Hammers* must be okay," said Birky firmly.

Mansted landed behind the camp and tossed a polythene-wrapped bundle out of his machine before jumping to the ground.

"Today's papers," he explained. "Two of each. We even managed to get hold of some of yesterday's American ones for your pal Harve from NATO."

"That solves the problem of what to do next," remarked Birky. "A gentlemen can't be expected to do any work till he's read his paper."

"And had an eyeful of page three?" added Spinner.

"The big bloke with the dirty mind is Jimmy Spinner," Birky told Mansted. "Known as Spin. This is Joe Mansted. Who reckons he can fly anything."

The new acquaintances shook hands and exchanged the usual pleasantries. Just like Birky, Mansted found Spinner's eye level a long way above his own.

McAndrew, Smith and Harve moved down to the beach to meet the cabin cruiser. The others retired to the mess hall to unpack the papers and drink another cup of coffee. Mansted unzipped a pocket of his flying suit and produced a well-folded wad of paper. "This is the local rag," he explained. "For Strathcall. Have a look at page five."

"'FLYING SAUCERS SPOTTED ON COAST'," read Birky. "Very interesting, but that's so special about it?"

"Read on," invited Mansted.

Birky muttered to himself, then a broad grin spread across his face. "Long, silver cigars with a dark blue stripe on them. Yesterday afternoon between about two and three. That mean anything to anyone?"

Fairclough and Spinner exchanged puzzled stares. "That can't be us," insisted Fairclough. "What about the choppers?"

"No mention of them." Birky shrugged. "Just the flying saucers. Reports from all along the coast. Even Wick. We weren't anywhere near there, were we?"

"Not within twenty miles," said Spinner.

"Come to think of it," mused Fairclough, "it might not be as daft as it sounds at first. I heard something similar on a course once. Under conditions of extreme stress, such as the excitement of spotting a UFO, or sheer panic, people can lose their peripheral vision. Because the brain's concentrating so hard on that they're looking at, it's got no spare capacity for anything else happening around the main focus of their attention."

"That's right," agreed Spinner, delving into his phenomenal memory. "I went on that course too. It's called STV."

"What, Scottish Television?" scoffed Birky.

"Stress Tunnel Vision," continued Spinner, ignoring his colleague pointedly. "They gave us all sorts of bullshit about things like blokes watching the position of a sniper, ready to have a go at him, and getting run over by a tank because they just couldn't register it coming up on them. I didn't really believe it till now."

"I'm still not sure I do," said Mansted. "I find it very hard to believe people could see one of the Navy's mini-sub containers and not the chopper that's holding it up in the air. Unless the choppers was lurking about in some very low cloud, practising instrument flying."

"The sub boys would have had heart attacks if they'd tried that," laughed Birky. "Funny old world, isn't it?"

Two men in their mid-twenties wearing thick, dark blue jumpers, jeans and boots showed McAndrew, Smith and Harve over the cabin cruiser, then they offered a clipboard to Smith to obtain the usual collection of signatures. Then they retired to the mess hall for coffee and anything else that they could scrounge.

The cabin cruiser was a mile and a half away down the loch, moving slowly and purposefully about ten yards out from the bank, when the men who had delivered it climbed into Mansted's helicopter for the flight home.

By the time the stay-at-homes had worked their way through the morning papers, it was lunchtime. Birky and Mansted, who had returned from his taxi mission within twenty minutes, disappeared into the kitchen.

They had no sooner prepared four meals than Smith, McAndrew and Harve chugged back to the camp in the cabin cruiser. They had been exploring the bed of the loch with an echo-sounder and a towed metal detector. They had not found the treasure ship, but they had managed to eliminate a piece of territory.

Hank Newton and eight submariners arrived minutes later. The cooks resigned themselves to a further five minutes of slaving over a microwave oven and an infra-red grill. Assaults on a bottle of cooking wine kept their spirits up until they could sit down to their own meal.

Birky found his annotated menu at his place. The navy had added 'What dishwasher's that?' to his original comment. When he had finished his meal, Birky paraded the submariners in the kitchen, gave them a demonstration with a single plate, and left them to get on with it.

Harve got his ride in a submarine in the afternoon. Smith and McAndrew went along to keep him company, and to ensure that he made no unfortunate remarks. Birky had other plans for Fairclough, Spinner and Mansted. They, he had decided, were going to help him erect the serials for the radio telephone and the television to improve communications and the entertainment prospects.

"Where d'you want it?" asked Fairclough when he had opened the case that contained the components of the mast. "And are you sure we can get a picture here?"

"Sure," nodded Birky, "if you put it there." He pointed to the area behind the camp.

"Why not next to the mess hut, there the TV is?" said Fairclough.

"No, I mean up there."

Fairclough suddenly realized that Birky was pointing to the top of the hill behind the camp.

"Pull the other one," said Spinner. "There isn't that much cable."

"Want to bet on that?" smiled Birky. "Come on, let's stop nattering and get cracking."

"He's getting to be a proper bossy-boots in his old age," commented Spinner. "It looks a bit windy up there. I'm going to put my sheep on."

The quartet took almost half an hour to climb the hill, trailing and pegging more than half a mile of cable behind them. Fairclough found a likely looking crack in the rock at the top of the slope and set up the base of the mast.

"Stand back, you lot," he warned.

"What's he going to do?" asked Mansted.

"Blow himself up, with any luck," chuckled Birky.

"It's got an explosive anchor," explained Spinner.

Fairclough checked that the tripod support was firmly anchored and that the base of the mast slid freely in its support rings. Then he stepped away, trailing a black box and a tail of twin cable. He touched a button. There was a muffled 'Whuff!' and the pole sank over a yard into the crack.

"They hang up sometimes," Fairclough explained. "Then they blow sideways. It's not a good idea to be standing too close, just in case."

Birky bolted aials to the top section of the mast, and directed an operation to secure it in position. Then he produced a map and a compass. After a little manoeuvring, he seemed satisfied with the alignment of the aials.

"Right," he announced, "all we have to do now is see if it works."

"How?" said Fairclough.

"Spin," Birky waved an arm towards the collection of toy huts at the foot of their hill, "jog down to the camp and switch the telly on."

"Like you do?" remarked Spinner, giving Birky a look of amusement and staying put.

"Someone's got to do it," said Birky logically.

"Why not you?"

"Me? I'm in charge. I'm giving the orders. Joe?"

"Don't look at me, I'm a flying type, old boy," drawled Mansted. "We're

excused all this walking nonsense.”

“Why don’t you let him do it?” asked Fairclough, solving the problem by pointing down the hill to one of the submariners, who had just rowed a dinghy to the shore.

“Good idea,” said Birky. He jammed two fingers into his mouth and released a piercing thistle. The man ignored him. The wind was against him.

“Are you going to whistle to him in Morse?” laughed Spinner.

“You got a better idea?” demanded Birky. He began to wind himself up for an even louder blast.

“I have, yes.” Fairclough pulled a radio transceiver from a pocket and pressed the call button.

The small figure stopped, then he changed course away from the latrine, heading for the mess hut.

“Someone calling?” said a voice from the transceiver.

“We’ve rigged up an aerial for the TV,” explained Fairclough. “Switch it on, will you?”

“Okay, right. It’s on.”

“Got a picture?”

“Yes. looks like Beeb One.”

“How’s the quality?”

“Great. It’s better than what we get in our mess back at Devonport.”

“Try the rest of the channels.”

After a short pause: “Yes, it seems to be okay on ITV. I don’t think Beeb Two’s on the air at the moment.”

“Okay, thanks,” said Fairclough. “You can switch it off and go for your slash now.”

“Just there the hell are you?” asked the submariner.

“Top of the hill behind the camp,” chuckled Fairclough. “Where we can see all.”

“Right,” said Birky importantly, “I think we can go down for a brew now. With any luck, there might be some racing on the telly.”

37. MARINE ARCHAEOLOGY

The search for the treasure ship continued in the morning. Testing of the mini-sub continued in deeper water. Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor got down to practising manoeuvres in preparation for the real thing.

Flying Officer Mansted delivered the day's newspapers and some fresh food, and stayed for lunch. After lunch, he wangled a ride in one of the submarines, and discovered that the 'pilot' operated a set of controls very similar to those of an aircraft. He had a long conversation with Birky and Harve when he reached the shore again, and then he headed back to his base at RAF Strathcall.

A very large blip appeared on the chart recorder connected to the metal detector as the light was going at the end of a dull afternoon. Harve got his assistants to set up a series of reflectors on the bank and link a laser range-meter to the chart recorder.

The cabin cruiser throbbed backwards and forwards across the object, moving parallel to the bank of the loch and increasing the distance from the bank on each run. By the time Harve called it a day, he had covered the area three times. He didn't need the camp's miniature computer to tell him that he had found a metal object, which made an angle of about seventy degrees with the bank of the lock. The source of the signal was inclined away from the camp and a good sixty feet long.

Harve was all for rushing the submarines to the spot and starting operations immediately. Less impatient heads advised him to wait for the new day and better visibility.

On Friday morning, the tide was half way in when Moby and Dick began to examine the area of sea bed opposite the reflector poles. Almost immediately, Dick rose to the surface with a spherical object clutched in one of the four mechanical grabs at the bow. The crew transferred the

object to a dinghy and brought it ashore so that a committee of self-appointed experts could examine the find. They soon determined that the object was made of stone, but they couldn't decide whether it was natural or man-made. Spinner insisted that he had read somewhere that Spanish ships had used granite cannon balls, but Harve was sure that all canons fired the traditional iron balls in the sixteenth century.

When Moby found five more of the granite balls in a clump, Harve began to waver. A team of divers pegged out a grid on the loch bed, starting from the strong metallic signal and working outwards. Harve seemed to be expecting to find a ship-shaped object lying there, waiting for him to board it in triumph.

Lieutenant Welkin took him down in Dick to show him the reality of the destructive effect of four centuries under water. Just like the *Mary Rose*, he warned Harve, a greater or lesser portion of the upper part of the ship would have been eroded by the forces of decay and the currents moving in the loch. The rest would be choked with sand, silt and weed. Harve emerged from his survey mission still convinced that there was a lot of the ancient ship left, and plenty of very interesting, historical finds waiting to be uncovered.

The cabin cruiser headed for the camp to arrange delivery of another generator and an air compressor to power an airlift, which would remove sand and silt from the working area. While the mini-subbs prowled the area of the reference grid, looking for interesting objects, the group ashore held a discussion on whether to move the camp a mile and a half along the bank of the loch.

As the ground was steeper and rougher opposite the wreck site, and there was no convenient source of drinking water from a well-oxygenated stream rather than the loch, McAndrew and Smith decided to acquire a set of vehicles which could handle the terrain. They would use them to ferry men and materials between the main camp and a couple of huts built to house the generator and compressor, and provide a refuge when the rain came down.

When the light began to go again, Harve and his group transported the day's finds back to the main camp. More discussion followed. A fascinating collection of bits and pieces had turned up just lying on the loch bed, but no one could say for sure whether the finds were natural or artificial objects, and if they were artificial, what they had been before Nature had

rolled them about for four hundred years. The debate revolved endlessly into the black night in a whirlpool of opinions.

"What we really need," McAndrew decided eventually, "is an underwater archaeologist. I've been doing a bit of reading on the subject and some of the everyday bits and pieces from the ship could be worth considerably more than their weight in gold. Something like a simple astrolabe from the navigator's tool kit could be worth fifty grand." He laced his after dinner coffee liberally with Uisge Beatha and passed the bottle on to Harve.

"That's a good idea," agreed Harve. "Or maybe we could borrow one of the guys going to South America."

"I wonder if Captain Drake can come up with anyone?" mused Smith. "I think he has access to just about every filing system in Whitehall. He should be able to find us a talented amateur."

"That's a point, Skipper," offered Hank Newton. "Do you remember old Wotsizname? He used to go in for that sort of thing. He used to spend a fortune on books, and he was always strolling off to The Solent to dive onto Mary Rose."

"Randy sods, the Navy," observed Birky.

"Miner Marsh!" exclaimed Smith. "Of course! Well done, Hank."

"The right sort of bloke, is he?" asked McAndrew.

"Ideal," nodded Smith. "He spends all his leaves digging holes or diving. He'd murder his granny for a chance to take a virgin wreck apart."

"Which would make for good security?" suggested McAndrew.

"Oh, yes," grinned Smith. "We've lost touch with him recently, but the Admiralty computer should know where he is."

"If you can get anyone to push the buttons," observed Fairclough. "All that lot in London will have buggered off for the weekend by now."

Smith peeled back the sleeve of his jumper and looked at his watch. "Oh, yes, It's Friday night. The days have become something of a blur this far from anywhere."

"I think the best thing to do is suspend operations until we can get hold of this guy Marsh," decided McAndrew. "We might break something interesting, or just chuck it away not knowing what it is."

"Does that mean we can carry on with our trials?" asked Lieutenant Welkin with cautious optimism.

"Trials?" repeated McAndrew. "Just what have you been doing all week if not trying your boats out?"

"Yes, but we'd like to do some deeper dives than the loch allows, sir," said Lieutenant Welkin. "At sea."

McAndrew raised an eyebrow at Smith, who, as senior naval officer, was in charge of submarine operations.

"Yes, that seems a good idea," nodded Smith.

One or two of the submariners groaned – offering the standard British reflex to weekend work – but on the whole, they seemed quite pleased at the turn of events. The navy had a prescribed sequence of tests for new vessels and they would feel safer when they knew that the mini-sub could endure them.

"Permission to call up the support vessel, sir?" asked Lieutenant Ivor.

"Carry on," nodded Smith.

"So there's nothing much going to happen tomorrow?" said Birky, half to himself, as an idea struck him forcibly. He pushed away from the table and joined the queue for the radio-telephone.

Flying Officer Mansted showed up with Saturday's newspapers and some mail. His helicopter fluttered away half an hour later, just as the submariners were returning from pre-breakfast checks on their vessels.

"Where is everyone?" asked Lieutenant Welkin, looking at the empty places. Spinner, Birky, Newton and Harve had disappeared.

Fairclough shrugged. "No idea. They had a quick bite and vanished. They've not gone fishing in one of the dinghies?"

"No, they're all on the beach, the dinghies" returned Welkin.

"I saw them, sir," volunteered the duty cook, Chief Petty Officer Muir, the pilot of Dick. "They went off with that Raf pilot, Joe, in his chopper."

"I wonder what they've got cooking up with Baron von Mansted?" wondered Smith.

"They took two sets of diving gear, sir," offered Muir. "And they said something about coming back rich."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" McAndrew asked Smith with a grin.

Smith nodded wisely.

"What are they thinking?" Welkin asked Fairclough.

"You know there's gold in Scotland?" he replied. "They've gone prospecting."

"Oh, yes?" said Lieutenant Ivor sceptically.

"Oh, I know it sounds like a silly story," chuckled Fairclough. "But you wait till they get back before you make your mind up."

The looks on the naval lieutenants' faces told him that they had made their minds up already.

Birky and company landed in triumph just before sunset. They connected empty air bottles to the compressor, and strolled into the mess hut to spread a newspaper on one of the tables. The entire population of the camp gathered around them to see that they had found. The expedition had grown in numbers since the morning. Two more huts had been assembled to accommodate the rest of Lieutenant-Commander Smith's crew, who had arrived with the diving support vessel.

"Look at this lot," gloated Birky.

The five prospectors produced small plastic freezer boxes and removed the tight-fitting plastic lids. Each of them had collected a respectable layer of small flakes of gold dust and larger nuggets.

"How about that for a day's work?" added Hank Newton.

"I owe you an apology," Lieutenant Welkin admitted to Fairclough, "I really didn't believe you this morning."

"That's okay," laughed Fairclough. "I wouldn't have believed the story if you'd told it to *me*."

"We got this from the bed of the loch where the stream goes into it," said Spinner. "We're hoping to get even more tomorrow."

"Permission to desert to become a gold prospector, sir?" asked CPO Orme, Moby's TO.

"And me," added CPO Wright, the pilot.

"You can't all desert," laughed Birky. "The chopper's not big enough to take a crowd."

"And there's work to be done here," added Lieutenant Ivor, putting an end to thoughts of desertion.

Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor counted their crews when Joe Mansted's helicopter had left for the golden loch the following morning, and they were surprised to reach the right number. The naval party seemed in unusually high spirits as the submarines and the diving support vessel were prepared for the day's trials. Everyone had been promised a visit to the site of Harve's other bonanza.

Two dune buggies, drums of petrol and two huts had been unloaded from the converted trawler that was the diving support vessel. When two more huts had been unloaded at the probable site of the wreck, the trawler's crew was able to gain access to the orange bulk of the decompression chamber.

Captain Fairclough had gone along for the ride in Moby. Both mini-submersibles were being towed by the trawler to the diving site to save their batteries and fuel. Fairclough had taken over Moby's second Tool Operator station at the bow. He had been surprised by the amount of room in the vessel when the entire crew was sitting down. Both he and CPO Wright could operate the grab controls without jostling elbows.

Behind them, in alcoves, sat CPOs Wright and Evers, the pilot and the radio and communications officer. The captain, Lieutenant Ivor, sat at the periscope and navigation station, behind the main hatch. Moby and Dick were forty-two feet long and fourteen feet from keel to deck. A battery of lights and steerable television cameras connected to large, flat television screens at the tool operator stations helped the TOs to control the mechanical arms.

The helmsman's controls, on the port side of the vessel, resembled those of an aircraft. A short joystick, operated by the right hand, controlled the pairs of bow and tail hydroplanes, and there were foot pedals for the rudder. CPO Wright set the twin throttles with his left hand, and he was surrounded by a mass of dials and switches. The most immediately recognizable instruments were the globe of the attitude indicator – the spacecraft equivalent of an artificial horizon – and a prominent depth gauge.

Even though *Pilot* is the usual naval term reserved for navigation officers, that name had stuck to the helmsman/hydroplane officers of the mini-submersibles because, in a very real sense, they were flying their vessels under the sea.

CPO Evers had to handle conventional radio, surface radar and sub-surface sonar equipment. Electronic navigation aids performed ninety-nine per cent of the work of fixing and plotting the vessel's position. The captain also had a bank of instruments to watch. They reported on air reserves and atmosphere quality, and fuel and battery power levels. He was the nearest man to the escape compartment and the escape hatch at the back of the boat.

When the trawler and the two submarines reached the 'diving tank', a

deep hole in the ocean floor, Captain Fairclough crossed to the support vessel. Dick was to make the first dive at sea. Both crews made final checks, then the mini-sub released the tow lines, leaving a long telephone line plugged in to Dick.

Lieutenant Welkin and his crew completed another round of checks and tested the telephone line yet again. After a few words of optimism from the skipper, Dick made its first plunge into deep water. Even though everyone had complete confidence in the mini-sub, tension mounted as the vessel sank deeper and deeper.

Ominous reports of creaks and groans came up over the telephone line, but there was a background of increasing euphoria. The mini-sub reached the target depth and reported no leaks and no problems with the controls. A quarter of an hour later, a wild cheer burst out across the grey waters when Dick returned to the surface.

The tension returned just as strongly as before when Moby went down on its first deep dive. One square metre is a relatively large area, but the mini-sub was being subjected to a pressure of twenty tons per square meter of hull area at the bottom of the 'diving tank', and that sounded a hell of a lot to all concerned.

The diving trials were a complete success. Both vessels performed as expected and, unusually, all of the equipment worked without flaw. The prospectors had enjoyed a good day too, which cheered the submarine crews even more. Sunday was to be a day of rest for the crew of Dick.

When the mini-sub reached the inshore end of the loch, they were positioned over their trucks and hauled out of the water. Camouflage nets were draped over them to conceal their identity from a distance – disguising the shape but not hiding the fact that someone on the bank of the loch had something to conceal.

When Flying Officer Mansted showed up the following morning with the Sunday newspaper, mail and further supplies of fresh food, he was flying a larger than usual helicopter. Moby's crew watched enviously as heated diving suits and air bottles were loaded into the helicopter for the ninety-mile flight to Harve's underwater mountain of gold.

Encouraging the prospectors fell in nicely with McAndrew and Smith's plans. The scheme kept the eager Harve occupied while his more cautious partners made preparations to identify and conserve artifacts from the

wrecked Spanish treasure ship. Their American sponsor wanted to see things happening. After his extensive open-heart surgery, his doctors had assured him that he was good for at least another twenty years – and possibly another ten after that to take him up to four-score. But Harve had developed the impatience of a man who had been let down badly by his body once and he wanted to get things done before it could happen again.

Retrieving gold from the bed of a Scottish loch satisfied his original reason for visiting the country, and the diversion allowed proper preparations to be made before treasure from Harve's *Big Idea Number Two* saw the light of day after four hundred years.

When the prospectors returned, Captain Spinner was not with them. He had returned to the distillery at Berelogie on the River South Esk, but he had threatened to rejoin the party the following weekend. He had a fascinating tale to tell when he reached his place of work. The first action-packed week at Loch Inchbane had been a great success for all concerned.

38. COLD CASH

Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor learned from overheard scraps of conversation that the prospectors had established a co-operative. They felt secretly envious of the small fortune that their crews were making at the gold-field. Neither of them had been asked to join in the venture, and they rather resented being left out. Natural reserve had prevented them from realizing that they were free to become members of the co-operative just by jumping in and joining in.

Much about the whole venture still puzzled the submarine captains. As far as they could tell, two independent groups were in action. Lieutenants Browne, who was sometimes called Birky, and Newton were the leaders of one group with the American NATO observer, who wore a cowboy hat most of the time and insisted on being called Harve. Lieutenant-Commander Smith, Major McAndrew and Captain Greene who was sometimes Fairclough led Group Two.

Group One, which included the helicopter pilot and the crews of the submarines and the diving support boat, was recovering a fortune in gold from somewhere in Scotland's mountainous heart. The second group, however, seemed more interested in something in Loch Inchbane. They had been talking about navigational instruments worth tens of thousands of pounds from a sixteenth-century wreck.

The initial search had turned up a metal object sixty feet long and perhaps twenty wide on the bed of the loch. Assuming it to be lead ballast, the commodity prices in Saturday's *Daily Mail* and their calculators told them that it would be worth one hundred thousand pounds per foot of thickness. It was a thought unworthy of officers and gentlemen, but Welkin and Ivor couldn't help but think that Group Two was planning to divert a part of the treasure for their own devious purposes when they managed to raise it. If the exact value of the find was whatever they chose to report to

the Ministry of Defence, they had considerable room for manoeuvre.

Fishing for information, Lieutenant Welkin approached Captain Greene (or Fairclough) as he was watching Moby's crew leaving by helicopter for the gold field on Monday, which had also been declared a day of rest and maintenance.

Very casually, Welkin asked, "Not going with them? Or haven't you been invited."

"Oh, they don't issue invitations," returned Fairclough. "You just tell them when you fancy doing a bit. But it's too much like hard work for me. I suppose you and Ivor have been a bit too busy to take your turns with new subs to commission?"

"Something like that," said Welkin, filing the information away for future reference.

"No doubt you'll feel like putting your names down next weekend. I should think they'll welcome a pair of experienced divers."

"The rewards certainly seem to justify the efforts," probed Welkin. "Or are the Army on higher pay scales than the humble Navy?" he added, questioning Fairclough's reluctance to make his fortune.

"Oh, there should be a fairly decent operational bonus," smiled Fairclough. "That'll do me."

"Operational bonus?"

"I suppose you've worked out this is a salvage operation as well as operational trials of the mini-sub? Well, everyone's putting in so much effort on the project, we're all going to be rewarded with an operational bonus."

"I suppose it's just going to be a token amount? Enough to pay for a couple of rounds of drinks?"

Fairclough shrugged. "Depends how much you drink. It should be a few thousand for Lieutenants, RN."

"A few thousand?" repeated Welkin weakly, conjuring up visions of a new car.

"Of course, that's as confidential as the operation."

"Of course. Well, the morning papers call." Lieutenant Welkin hurried away to confer with the other mini-sub captain. The operation had more angles than they had suspected.

Lieutenant 'Miner' Marsh, RN, arrived in the late afternoon. He was twenty-eight years old, an inch above average height and he had crewcut ginger

hair. He cultivated a studious expression and he looked as if he was developing a mild professorial stoop. Marsh was still feeling slightly dizzy from the speed of his posting.

He exchanged cautious greetings with Lieutenant-Commander Donald Smith. His dizziness was not helped by finding himself outranked by a man who had been a fairly humble Chief Petty Officer at their last meeting.

After introducing the new arrival around, Smith took him to the hut in which the submariners' discoveries had been stored. Much to the surprise of all, he rejected the items which the non-experts had agreed were the most interesting. They were just junk.

Marsh became wildly excited about the most grotty and horrible of the finds but he refused to commit himself about what could lie inside the ball of solid accretion. He concluded his first evening at his new posting by writing out a long list of necessary equipment. Smith added three more generators and half a dozen huts to the list and let someone else read it into the radio-telephone.

On Tuesday morning, Marsh travelled down to the probable wreck site in Moby. He returned to the surface bubbling with enthusiasm for marine archaeology in the dry comfort of a mini-sub instead of the clammy embrace of a wetsuit. Guided by Marsh and the metal detectors, the team positioned air-lifts to clear away loose material from the site.

Soon, the geography of the wreck became clearer. According to Marsh, it had been run up onto the narrow bank at the side of the loch, and it had toppled over onto its side when the tide had gone out. The wreck had been severely battered by the elements and Marsh expected to find its contents distributed over a relatively wide area. But the heaviest items had tended to remain in a tight group. To prove his point, a cannon was brought to the surface in the closing stages of the day's excavation. Marsh was a little disturbed when Harve, the alleged NATO observer, laid claim to it.

"I'm surprised you're not hip-deep in civvies," Marsh remarked to Smith as Harve was gloating over his encrusted cannon.

"Why's that?" invited Smith.

"Well, I'd expect the local Receiver of Wrecks to be lurking about. Not to mention a shoal of academics and the press."

"This is Ministry of Defence property, me old Miner," laughed Smith. "We can't have swarms of civvies batting around."

"You mean you haven't informed the local Receiver of Wrecks?" said

Marsh in a shocked tone.

“Should we have?” asked McAndrew, who had been eavesdropping.

“Certainly!” insisted Marsh. “All such finds have to be notified to the proper authority. Then the owner has to lay a claim it. If the wreck is still unclaimed after a year, ownership reverts to the Crown. I’m surprised you don’t know any of this.”

“Just like lost property,” commented Smith.

“Just a minute. What are *we* if we’re not agents of the Crown?” invited McAndrew.

“It’s not the same thing,” protested Marsh.

Smith shrugged. “Cuts out a lot of red tape.”

“As for the owners,” added McAndrew, “some of the cargo belongs to long-dead Aztecs, and the rest to the long-dead Spaniards who nicked it. I can’t see any of them coming forward.”

“And the way we see it,” finished Smith, “anything found on Ministry of Defence property belongs to the MoD. We have to pay for the trials of these very expensive mini-subbers somehow. Or would you care to go back to swanning around in scuba gear, me old Miner?”

“Oh, well,” admitted Marsh, “I suppose you can’t fight the Ministry of Defence.”

“Certainly not!” said McAndrew piously.

At the end of the week, the first blocks of a soft, blackened metal were raised and loaded into the diving support vessel for transport down the coast to Ullapool. The blocks were about a foot square and eighteen inches long, and they weighed about half a ton each. Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor calculated that they were about as heavy as lead.

The mini-subbers were taken out of the water for maintenance over the weekend, which gave Lieutenant Marsh an opportunity to catch up on his cleaning and cataloguing work. A dozen ship’s guns of assorted sizes had been raised, and there were boxes and boxes of nameless bits and pieces.

Welkin and Ivor put their names on the list for a trip to the golden mountain, where they were introduced to the rich pickings on the bed of Loch Transe. Birky and company had set up an improvised dredger, which dragged litter-bin-shaped buckets through the richest area of the loch bed. The contents of the buckets ended up in washing trays in the stream. A whole series of them had been placed end to end to allow lighter material

to be swept quickly clear of the heavier, gold-bearing fractions.

On Monday, a grimy coaster took over the job of transporting the ballast from the wreck. The submarine captains kept independent counts of the numbers, and both arrived at totals in the region of four thousand blocks. They worked out the value of the salvaged lead at half a million pounds, which would more than pay the cost of the trials.

Lieutenant-Commander Smith had let slip a remark about the modern navy having to become self-financing in difficult times. The idea made sense to Welkin and Ivor. If the government refused to fund the trials, all of the tax-payers' money invested in the mini-sub's would be wasted. But if the navy raised the money, the effort would help to secure the jobs of the people who built the vessels, and they would do the country a lot of good when export orders came in based on the trial data.

The submarines spent a further week picking through the grid system on the bed of the loch, retrieving objects from the wreck of the Santa Domenica de Cidona. Officially, they were conducting exercises in station keeping against the pull of the in-coming and out-going tide, and the pair of Tool Operators were gaining practical experience in manipulating the arms.

At the weekend, their three-week training period was up. Lieutenants Welkin and Ivor handed their charges over to another pair of officers who might have come from the same mould. Mini-sub captains seemed to be five feet nine and slim, and have dark hair and an air of dashing elegance. As Lieutenant Birky remarked once, you would almost expect them to have a crease in their wellies.

After the formal handing over ceremony, while Lieutenants Frazer and Gaskin and their crews were inspecting Moby and Dick, Lieutenant-Commander Smith paraded the departing submariners in the mess hut. Under the approving eyes of the Bellsiders, he went down the line shaking hands and issuing bulky white envelopes containing the promised operational bonus.

The ballast of the Santa Domenica de Cidona had been silver, not lead. Smith, McAndrew and their companions knew that they had become millionaires, but they were awaiting a final figure from their colleagues at the Ministry of Defence.

The pattern continued as before. Birky and company signed on the new party of submariners as partners in the prospecting venture at Loch Transe. The mini-sub made deep training dives and they worked on the wreck site, casting farther and farther afield. Boxes of artefacts filled their storage huts to overflowing. Lieutenant Marsh was in his element. Although he lacked the pieces of paper that license an official archaeologist, he was well read he had a great deal of practical experience. He could also temper his enthusiasm with boundless reserves of patience.

Sea water and marine life had distorted some artefacts beyond recognition. Others, buried deep in the silt of the loch bed, looked almost new. Marsh stored wooden items in plastic boxes filled with water from the loch. They would have to be stabilized, he explained, by filling the pores in the wood with supportive carbowax before they could be allowed to dry out.

As his mountain of treasures piled up, Marsh began to despair of receiving the resources to salvage the finds. No one had told him about the silver, and the former submarine captains had mentioned something about lead ballast, which Marsh thought would be fairly worthless.

In the end, he began to divide the finds into three categories – those with a high intrinsic value, such as coins and gold plates, which could be restored easily, items requiring a great deal of care and attention, which would become very valuable after restoration, and bits and pieces, which were either more trouble than they were worth or unidentifiable.

As private Marsh's problems grew, Smith and McAndrew decided to accompany a shipment of restored Category One items to their destination to find out what happened to them. Their journey took them and a strong-box to RAF Strathcall by helicopter. A civilian Learjet flew them down to Norwich. There, the strongbox was loaded into an unmarked van, which drove down the A140 to the heart of the city and the underground car park of a modern office building.

At the foot of the ramp, the van driver handed a security card to the man in the guard hut. The passengers were also required to identify themselves. Then the van drove along a line of cars. Smith and McAndrew exchanged glances then they noticed that there were no parking spaces and their vehicle was approaching the wall at the end of the car park at speed.

To their relief, the apparently solid section of wall lifted into the ceiling

at the last possible moment, and the van continued down another ramp to a sub-basement.

"You know," remarked McAndrew, "I have this theory that more people are living underground in places like this than on the surface these days. I'm sure the history books will call this the *Mole Age* rather than anything else."

"Maybe they're getting in training for when some idiot drops *The Bomb*," suggested Smith.

The large figure of McAndrew's friend Colonel Hector Blackshaw of the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit of the Ministry of Defence was waiting for them when the van stopped. He issued the visitors with name tags, which they pinned to their jackets.

"Don't take them off," warned Blackshaw. "There are all sorts of sensors implanted in the walls. One false move and you're liable to find yourself up to your eyes in Security."

"Sounds very serious," commented McAndrew.

"It is," nodded Blackshaw. "This is our Fort Knox."

A motorized trolley arrived to collect the strongbox. The van had parked in a square bay, which sprouted a corridor about nine feet wide on the right. A gleam of bars could be seen at the end of the corridor, about twenty yards away.

"Some of us call this place *The Hedge*," continued Blackshaw as he led the visitors down the corridor after the trolley. "Against inflation. We invest spare cash in tangibles – good paintings, precious stones and jewellery, even port and rare wines. It's also a little like a bank. If someone needs cash in a hurry, he can raise it from either another customer or the Ministry of Defence. His security for the loan is then moved to the appropriate vault, and moved back when he repays the loan. Hardly anything ever leaves here."

"But the stuff we're bringing in is an exception?" McAndrew paused at a recess in the beige wall.

"A Titian one of our noble families couldn't afford to keep," explained Blackshaw, nodding to the painting behind a protective screen of armoured glass. "We bring things like that out occasionally because we think it's better someone sees them from time to time rather than leaving them to fester in a dark vault."

The trolley made a right turn. A faint humming from its electric motor

died away as the driver brought it to a gentle halt in front of a section of wall bearing the number 17. Smith and McAndrew carried on to the next set of bars and peered at their mountain of silver and a collection of black strong boxes. Blackshaw inserted a plastic security card into a green-edged wall slot beside the painted number. The bars parted and slid into the walls.

"I see the mice have been at the silver," commented Smith.

"Some of it's gone for recasting into more conventional bars," nodded Blackshaw. "We have to unload it gradually, of course, in order not to depress the market."

The trolley driver drove into the vault and slid his load onto a ledge at just the right height. Blackshaw nodded to him and told him to carry on. The trolley driver reversed with practised skill and sped away to carry out another assignment.

"We've also got rid of some of the other stuff," continued Blackshaw. "We've presented some to the British Museum to fill holes in the collection or to improve on the range of existing exhibits. We're also selling to foreign museums. Quite a few bids are coming in on the more ephemeral items. And some of your colleagues are buying the odd item."

"You know, when you look at all this, the silver and the paintings and so on, it just becomes incomprehensible," remarked Smith. "You can understand a wallet full of money. But millions, stacked up in big piles, are too big for ordinary chaps."

"Could be why Knocker and his gang are working their guts out at Loch Transe," observed McAndrew. "They can carry their gold dust around in a pocket."

"Are they still doing that, prospecting?" grinned Blackshaw.

"Oh, yes," nodded McAndrew. "The wee man's even got the mini-sub captains diving in the loch for him."

"He seems to be showing rather more initiative than I ever gave him credit for," said Blackshaw.

"That's right enough, Hector," McAndrew said with a thoughtful nod. "Perhaps thinking big and big projects bring out the best in him."

39. RECRUITING DRIVE

The camps beside Loch Inchbane became very quiet after the second weekend in April. After a noisy party, the mini-sub and their crews departed. Inspired by the recent venture, the powers behind the powers that be had decided that there would be more trials, more training and more miniature submarines. Details of many more treasure ships lay buried in the nation's archives. All that was required was a suitable tool for recovering them – plus the necessary will and the all important finance.

Harve left too with his pair of cannons. He had had enough of buried treasure for the moment. Business had called him back to Philadelphia. He had to make occasional personal appearances there. If Harve had his way, it would be possible to keep his empire running by telephone. But he was resigned to having to confront his managers occasionally and make the personal decisions required to finance his pleasures.

Lieutenant Marsh's sanity became a subject for debate during breaks in the winding-up operation. He had retained a collection of bizarrely shaped objects and he insisted that they would be worth many thousands of pounds if they could be cleaned up. He had even made a series of drawings to show what he firmly believed lay under the crud of centuries.

But he maintained, equally firmly, that he was not qualified to restore them to their former glory. His colleagues suspected an elaborate leg-pull. Smith and his crew, having known Marsh the longest, were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Flying Officer Mansted had taken a couple of the objects to the hospital at RAF Strathcall at Fairclough's suggestion. The staff there had taken X-ray pictures at a variety of orientations, but they had managed only to confuse the issue more. No two people could agree on a common interpretation of the collections of vague shadows on the X-ray films.

"I reckon we should call this geezer's bluff," remarked Lieutenant Birky

during a beer break on the day after the submariners had taken their leave. "I reckon we should make him put up or shut up."

"How are you going to do that?" asked McAndrew. His deck chair creaked alarmingly as he shifted to a more comfortable position. The temperature had shot up to the middle Sixties after a few days of short, sharp thunderstorms.

"Perhaps he's going to get Superman to look at the objects with his X-ray eyes," suggested Hank Newton. He aimed a beer can away from his body and heaved on the ring-pull.

"We all know how good X-rays are," scoffed Birky. His empty can flew in a high arc and landed in one of the cardboard boxes that served as beach dustbins.

"Basically, getting the X-rays done wasn't a bad idea," protested Fairclough.

Marsh and Smith joined the loungers, and helped themselves from the bucket of ice and beer cans.

"I reckon the best way to find out what's in them is to saw one of the buggers in half," said Birky with an evil grin in Marsh's direction.

"Barbarian," murmured Marsh, looking suitably horrified.

"Or find someone to scrape the muck off it," added Birky.

"Strange as it might seem," commented Smith, "that thought did cross our minds. The main problem is finding someone we can trust. To keep his mouth shut, I mean, as well as do a proper job."

"You would always threaten him with the Official Secrets Act," murmured Marsh.

"My Uncle Eric might know someone," Birky realized. "You know, the one with the pub in Chelsea. The Colonel and him were interested in old junk once."

The Colonel in question had recruited Birky into Army Intelligence before coming to his personal sticky end.

"Bloody barbarians," sighed Marsh in response to the comment about old junk.

"For 'interested in old junk', read 'other people's antiques'," said Hank Newton. "If the few things he's let slip about this famous Colonel are anything to go by."

"Okay, laddie. It can't hurt to have a word with your uncle," decided McAndrew. "A cautious word, mind. Open lines on the phone."

Birky allowed Smith to take over his deck chair and strolled over to the mess hut. He returned five minutes later, grinning broadly.

"Well?" asked McAndrew warily.

"We're in luck. There's this bloke," said Birky.

"But?" said McAndrew.

"Uncle Eric reckons he's a genius. The Colonel and him used the bloke once or twice."

"Ah, but can we persuade him to give up that he's doing at the moment?" asked Fairclough.

"Oh, I'm sure he'd jump at a change," replied Birky, struggling to keep a straight face. "He might have a bit of a job getting away, though."

"Why, what's he doing at the moment?" asked Newton, falling into the trap.

"Seven years," Birky replied before he fell about laughing.

"Just a minute," said Marsh slowly. "You don't mean Otto Brunner, do you?"

"Know him, do you?" Birky stopped laughing long enough to open another can of beer.

"I know *of* him. He's quite famous; or should I say infamous. He's definitely one of the top ten restorers in the business. I don't think you could get anyone to touch him for this particular job."

"But that's he in for?" asked Fairclough.

"Stupidity, basically," replied Marsh. "He trusted some obviously bent people – mainly because he gets so involved in his work, his sense of judgement just flies out the window."

"Sounds the sort of bloke for us," grinned Smith.

"He's the only one who was picked up then the whole thing went wrong," finished Marsh. "The rest got clean away, and they're supposed to be doing very nicely, thank you."

"Interesting," mused McAndrew, putting on a thoughtful expression.

The following morning, as the expedition was about to leave the site of their camp, Major McAndrew turned to his colleagues and remarked, "Nobody's asked me there we're going next."

Lieutenant-Commander Smith and the crew of his Motor Torpedo Boat had gone already. The Bellsiders and Lieutenant Marsh were engaged in loading the last of their equipment into a cargo helicopter. They were

expecting to be on their way after a final check to make sure that they had left nothing vital behind.

"I think we more or less assumed we're going home," replied Captain Fairclough.

"Where are we going, Uncle Mac?" Lieutenant Birky asked with exaggerated interest.

McAndrew just grinned at him. It was a smirk that his colleagues had seen many times in the past. The grin meant that he was plotting something – but also that McAndrew was not yet prepared to share the something with his companions.

Lieutenant Newton shrugged. "There you are then. You never tell us anything, so we've got out of the habit of asking."

Half an hour later, the helicopter rose into the air and followed the stream away from Loch Inchbane. Its passengers climbed into Flying Officer Mansted's passenger jet at RAF Strathcall. They landed at Humberside Airport and collected a pair of Range Rovers. A small convoy drove to the north and crossed the river at Hull. Then it turned east, towards the coast.

McAndrew's destination turned out to be a collection of weathered buildings on the Humberside coast, between Flamborough and Spurn Heads. The whole place looked very depressed.

A sagging, rusting fence surrounded the site. The sole function of the fence seemed to be to support large signs which proclaimed that intruders were about to enter Ministry of Defence property, which would make them liable to severe penalties.

Two brick buildings had been broken open and partially demolished, demonstrating a marked lack of regard for law and order on the part of certain locals. The remaining three buildings were solid, concrete structures with scarred steel doors and heavy steel shutters on the windows.

"What a dump this is!" said Birky, expressing the thoughts of his companions.

"This, gentlemen, is Hyperion Five," announced McAndrew. "We'll be seeing quite a lot of the place over the next couple of weeks. And it's going to become home for some of us."

"Oh, yeah?" said Birky, giving the dump a less than enthusiastic inspection.

With difficulty, McAndrew unlocked a padlock and removed the rotting

chain from the main gate. He stopped in front of one of the undamaged buildings. Hank Newton parked the other Range Rover behind him.

"It should be a bit more wholesome inside," McAndrew decided, unlocking a steel door to reveal an inner door made of wood. "Let's have a look and I'll tell you what the score is."

Thanks to efficient mothballing, the interior of the building had remained quite clean. Lights blossomed when McAndrew clicked a switch. The front door gave onto a short corridor leading to the right, which led to the glass door of a long room with waist-high shelves along every stretch of wall. Apart from numerous power points and covered ventilators, the walls were bare. A second door led into the office beyond the corridor wall. It contained a dusty telephone, a modest collection of empty filing cabinets and two desks. There was a third door in the larger room, opposite the one leading to the front entrance.

Apart from a light sprinkling of dust, the building looked and smelled remarkably clean. The telephone had been reconnected and it gave a dialling tone. A lift beyond the third door from the main room gave access to a spacious basement, and from it to tunnels leading to the other two concrete buildings. One of them contained a kitchen and living quarters. The other looked very much like the first.

A truck full of naval ratings and cleaning equipment arrived as the visitors were concluding their tour of inspection. A service engineer looked over the machinery of the ventilation system and pronounced it to be in good order. When the covers had been removed from the grills, he switched the system on to test it. Then the men with the vacuum cleaners were sent in like storm troopers to clear the evidence of several years' neglect. McAndrew got them to start with the Officers' Mess.

Large flasks of tea appeared when the cleaners had moved on. The Bellsiders, Marsh and Mansted assembled for a briefing.

"As you might have gathered, the Navy is going to reactivate this place," McAndrew announced. "Lieutenant-Commander Marsh is to be the CO."

'Miner' Marsh nearly fell out of his chair. "You what?" he squawked.

McAndrew grinned and took a sheet of paper from his briefcase. "I'm jumping the gun a wee bit. Your promotion is with effect from 09:00 hours tomorrow morning. But a bit of notice gives you a chance to sew some new rings on your sleeves."

"Congratulations. Sir," grinned Hank Newton.

"Thanks, Hank," said Marsh in a far-away voice. "I was beginning to think I was stuck with two rings forever."

"Nothing wrong with being a Lieutenant," Birky remarked as he rummaged in an airline flight bag. He produced a bottle of Uisge Beatha single malt. "Celebration, anyone?"

Six cups of tea received a transfusion of whisky.

"That's better," sighed McAndrew after sampling his fortified tea. "Now then. Back to our plans for this place. The idea is to create our own institute of marine archaeology. Hyperion Five will become a centre for preservation and restoration of odds and sods brought up from the sea. Starting off with the stuff from the Cidona. I think you've got plenty of room to move here."

"More than plenty," nodded Marsh.

"And you can have a pretty free hand then it comes to ordering specialized equipment."

"Sounds great," approved Marsh. "I could do with some really expert help, though. Some of the stuff is too valuable to experiment on, or too fragile."

"Oh, that's in hand," McAndrew assured him.

Otto Brunner was to play a vital part in the navy's plan for the reactivation of Hyperion Five. Captain Drake, on the advice of Smith and McAndrew, was preparing to serve him with call-up documents. Otto Brunner would become a naval Lieutenant attached to the Ministry of Defence's Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department. It was not thought wise to visit Brunner in prison to get his views on the matter, but those planning his release felt confident that he would not object.

Having served two years in a secure prison to show him that criminal activities were not to be undertaken lightly, Brunner was due to be transferred to an open prison to serve out the rest of his sentence – thus freeing his bunk for occupation by a considerably harder case. Once the details of the transfer were known, Brunner's release would be planned in detail.

"And that's where we're up to right now," said McAndrew, concluding the briefing. "It's going to be a nice, straightforward job. No punch ups, nothing heavy. When we're ready, we'll just go out and lift him, and then bring him back here."

"You'll never get away with it!" protested the future commanding officer of H-5.

"Don't you believe it, Miner," Hank Newton advised him. "What chance have a bunch of screws got against a trained military force?"

"And don't forget, we have Ministry of Defence approval," McAndrew reminded Marsh.

"I don't see why we can't just, well, requisition him," protested Marsh.

"That sounds almost reasonable to me," offered Mansted.

"Too much red-tape involved, laddie," countered McAndrew. "And Her Majesty's Armed Forces can't be seen recruiting convicted felons before their sentences are up."

"But they can be seen kidnapping prisoners in transit?" said Marsh weakly.

"No one," stated Captain Fairclough, "is going to see anything. That's the whole point."

"Okay, now that's settled, you won't be needing us till tomorrow?" said Birky, indicating himself and Mansted.

"I don't think so," said McAndrew cautiously. "Don't tell me. West Ham wouldn't be playing tonight?"

"Okay," grinned Birky. "We won't tell you."

McAndrew gave his team the rest of the week and the weekend off. When they reassembled on Monday morning, Hyperion Five had changed out of all recognition. The old wire fence had been renewed completely. Both partially demolished brick buildings had also been restored to completeness. There was a sentry post at the brand new gate and members of the new service staff could be seen restoring order to the paths between the buildings and the grass around them.

The steel shutters had come down, revealing gleaming panes of armoured glass and closed venetian blinds behind them. Wet paintwork shone. H-5 had come back to life and self-respect.

Lieutenant-Commander Marsh, in a new and stiff uniform, showed the visitors over his new domain. A message had been passed from the guard post at the main gate to warn the staff that a gang of Ministry of Defence types had arrived to look them over. Wherever the visitors went, they saw a bustle of activity.

'No Entry' signs and warnings of restricted areas had been posted.

Security doors controlled from a central point and operated by plastic security cards were being installed. When the work had been completed, a vast amount of material from the wreck of the Santa Domenica de Cidona would be flown down from Scotland.

Marsh assured the visitors that the work would be completed and the workmen out of the way by the weekend. The plan was to issue Otto Brunner with his commission in the Royal Navy on the following Monday. McAndrew felt that a margin of two days was sufficient allowance for unexpected hold ups.

The visitors returned to the Bellside Country Club to continue planning the gaol break. Flying Officer Mansted tagged along with them as he was still officially attached to McAndrew's group as an aerial taxi driver. He didn't want to be amazed at finding a group of Ministry of Defence Inspectors living at a country club, but he couldn't help himself.

He made great efforts to suspend his disbelief while he was being briefed, and he took part in rehearsals of the liberation of Otto Brunner with a sense of sitting in a car that was being driven towards the edge of a cliff. Mansted could see the drop approaching, and he knew that 'I was only following orders' had been discredited as a defence, but he felt compelled to carry on just to find out how things would turn out.

Lieutenant Birky was whistling a hymn, which was appropriate because it was Sunday. But the words flowing through his mind with the music would have had him thrown out if he ever tried to sing them in a church.

He was dressed in well-used coveralls, and his face was decorated with a set of beautifully casual grease marks, which also served as camouflage. Nobody challenged him when he strolled into an almost deserted Public Garage. It was not a place for the general public, rather a service and repair centre for public-service vehicles such as buses, council vans, police cars and prison vans.

Under the incurious eyes of a pair of mechanics, who had retired to a corner office for a cup of tea and a smoke, Birky lifted the bonnets of several police cars before making check marks on his clipboard. His whistling became slightly muffled when he slid under a prison van for a few moments.

Still whistling, he wandered into the office and helped himself to a cup of tea from an enormous urn. After a brief discussion with the mechanics

about the rubbish shown on TV the previous night, he finished his tea and whistled his way out again.

Otto Brunner breathed a sigh of enormous relief when the dark blue van left the prison yard and drove away from the forbidding, stinking mass of stone. He had not enjoyed his two-year holiday away from the cares of the world. In his eyes, the prison was full of perverts and dangerous psychopaths, who would kick a man's head in for the fun of it.

And the rules! Brunner had never been very good with rules. By the end of the first week of his stay, he had become convinced that he had broken every regulation in the book – and most of the unwritten ones as well. His counsel had told him that he could expect remission of one-third of his sentence for good conduct. Brunner had wondered whether anything was added on for bad conduct. A year one way or the other was of vital importance to a man of forty-two.

The possibility of early release on parole filled his thoughts as the van left the city. Given more reasonable surroundings, and relief from the paralysing boredom of a closed prison, Brunner felt confident that he would be able to blend into the background – become just another con doing his bird quietly and gain release as soon as possible. An open prison sounded like a convict's version of a holiday camp – even if it was structured as a farm and Brunner was afraid of getting close to large domestic animals.

Out in the awakening April countryside, the van turned off the main road to follow a B-class road between fields and patches of woodland. Brunner's morale had improved to the point where he felt the need to hum a pointless little tune, much to the annoyance of the driver and his escort.

"Belt up, Otto," pleaded the escort, "you'll have it raining again."

"Right," added the driver through the wire grill between the cab and the body of the van. "Put a bloody sock in it."

Brunner shut up. He had learned very quickly that the word of a screw is law. But his increasing sense of well-being made it only a matter of time before he forgot and started humming again.

Lieutenant Birky, camouflaged and merged with the dark trunk of an aged oak tree, was watching the road through binoculars. Major McAndrew and Captain Fairclough were propping up adjacent trees, waiting for the fun to

start. In a culvert which carried a small stream under the road, a pair of naval kidnappers were waiting to pull stocking masks over their faces and slip mirror sunglasses into place.

Flying Officer Johann Mansted was sitting in his helicopter, half a mile away, wondering whether he was doing the right thing.

"Action stations," warned Birky as a dark blue van came into view. "Yes, this is the right one."

"Action stations, Don," McAndrew relayed to Lieutenant-Commander Smith in the culvert over a low-powered radio transceiver.

"Stand by, Hank," Smith told Lieutenant Newton, pulling his stocking mask down.

"They're coming up on the marker," said Birky, dividing his attention between the van and a pink and white striped traffic cone. "Now!"

McAndrew pressed the red button on his control unit.

BANG!

The van's engine made crunching noises and died.

"Now see what you've done, Otto," moaned the driver, coasting to a stop. "We're miles from bloody anywhere."

"You'd better report in," said the escort.

"This had to happen to us," groaned the driver, pulling the telephone out of its retaining clip on the dashboard. "Two Five Two to Control? Hello? This is Two Five Two. Can you hear me?"

"Oh, terrific!" remarked his companion to break the silence. "Bloody great! The bloody radio's packed in and all."

"This is all your fault, Otto," groaned the driver.

Otto Brunner just sat and looked across the body of the van at his escort. He was used to people blaming him for things that weren't his fault. That was how he had ended up in prison in the first place. Life was just one long round of injustice, as far as he was concerned.

"The driver's getting out to see what happened to his engine," chuckled Birky.

"Go, Don," McAndrew told Smith.

Fairclough slid his unused rifle back into its case. Although official wheels tend to grind in predictable patterns, there had been a chance that the vehicle booked would not have been used to transfer the prisoner to his new home. Shooting a hole in a tyre was riskier, but it would have stopped the van on the approach to a sharp bend and ensured a slow-

speed crash at worst.

"What is it?" called the escort hollowly from the back of the dark blue van.

"I don't know," returned the driver. "Looks bad, though, There's oil all over the road. 'Kin'ell!" he added at a squeak.

"What?" called the escort from the back of the van.

"Do nothing foolish and you will be perfectly safe," said one of the men with huge, silenced pistols. He had a thick, Eastern European accent.

Russians! thought the driver, shocked dumb.

The men were wearing stocking masks and sunglasses above dark blue coveralls and boots. One of them waved the driver to the back of the van.

"What's going on?" demanded the escort.

He soon found out. It was the work of moments to unlock the van, substitute the driver for Otto Brunner, and relock the door. The released prisoner was marched away across country.

Three more of the desperate characters joined his new escorts on the way. Then a helicopter dropped out of the sky to pick them up.

"What's going on?" asked Brunner, almost apologetically, as the helicopter zoomed over the countryside at low level.

"You've been liberated, Otto," said Smith, removing his stocking mask and smoothing his black beard.

"What do you want with me?" asked Brunner fearfully.

"We have a job for you, laddie," McAndrew told him with a sinister chuckle. "Put that on."

Brunner began to pull on a dark green flying overall.

"Your country needs you," added Birky.

"Oh," said Brunner weakly.

He lapsed into silence and eyed his rescuers covertly. The six of them were aged between twenty-five and thirty-five, and they all exuded a dangerous confidence. They looked like gangsters, but there was something different about them. There was a new breed of criminal abroad and Brunner could only shiver in horror at the thought of what he might be ordered to do.

After a flight which seemed to last an eternity, the helicopter reached the coast. Brunner watched the grey waves unenthusiastically. A sky lowered by heavy clouds made everything grey. The day on which he escaped from Her Majesty's custody should have been full of bright sunlight and birds

singing. Brunner felt himself sliding deeper into dark depression.

The helicopter landed on a stretch of grass near a group of low buildings, which were closed off from the rest of the world by a high fence. Brunner was hustled across to one of the concrete buildings, into a lift and down to the basement. One of his rescuers, the bearded one from a country in the South-West, told him to take the flying overall off. Brunner obeyed reluctantly.

He was in a light and pleasant room, which lacked windows because it was below ground level. It reminded Brunner of a gentleman's club of the sort favoured by television. The carpet was a mixture of warm reds and it cast a friendly glow onto the white skirting. One of the walls was panelled in light wood around the bookcases. The rest were papered with designs in red velvet that matched the carpet.

"Sit down, Otto," invited the rescuer with the Scottish accent.

Brunner dropped into an armchair, revealed in his prison denims, noting, in an attempt to fence off hysteria with normal observation of his surroundings, that no two chairs were alike.

"Drink?" asked Hank Newton from the bar in the corner.

"Brandy, please," said Brunner cautiously.

Newton poured generously. McAndrew brought the glass over to the visitor, and also issued him with a full packet of his usual brand of cigarettes and a disposable lighter.

Brunner tasted the brandy – it was smooth and expensive. He balanced the glass on the arm of his chair and lit a cigarette. Then he looked round for an ashtray. There was one on the low table beside him.

"Well, Otto," said Smith, turning a chair to face the visitor, "you're probably wondering what all this is about. We have a job for you." He gave Brunner an encouraging smile – which met a blank wall of suspicion. "Have you any idea what this is?"

Smith handed Brunner an object from the lower shelf of the table.

Brunner examined it closely, raising his glasses to take advantage of the extra magnifying power of his myopic eyes. He turned the encrusted object over and over. Then he shrugged.

"It could be anything. Where did you get it?"

"From the wreck of a Spanish ship. Fifteen eighty-seven, it went down."

"Could be a tinder box," hazarded Brunner. "But I'd have to clean it up to be able to tell."

"That's what Miner said," remarked Newton. "A tinder box."

"He didn't exactly say that," countered McAndrew. "It was only a best guess."

"The point is," interrupted Smith, "could you do a decent job of restoring it?"

"Oh, I should think so," said Brunner cautiously. "If I had the time and the proper equipment."

"That's the job," said McAndrew. "There's plenty more where that came from, and there should be lots more to come. Are you interested?"

"I might be." Brunner kept his tone carefully neutral. His spell in prison had taught him to be very wary about accepting jobs from strangers.

"We could always take him back to his mates in the prison van if he's not too keen," suggested Birky. "A successful escape should knock his remission on the head nicely."

"Dead right! I'm sure they'll be glad to see him back," added Hank Newton.

"Give the fellow a chance," said Smith, playing the good guy. "If you agree to work for us, Otto, you get a new identity and a well-paid job. There will be a few restrictions on your movements at first, until the public's memory of you has been given a chance to fade. Then you can come and go as you like. In short, Her Majesty's Navy is offering you an alternative to the miserable existence offered by Her Majesty's prisons."

"Navy?" squawked Brunner. "What's this about the navy?"

"We're your prospective employers," said Smith. "I think you'll find we're an organization you'll be proud to be a part of."

"But if the navy wanted me, why couldn't they have just asked for me instead of kidnapping me at gun-point?" protested Brunner.

"My dear Otto," said McAndrew, "you don't think Her Majesty's Royal Navy would have a convicted criminal in its ranks, do you?"

"Perhaps I didn't make that clear," said Smith. "You have to join up and sign the Official Secrets Act because we don't want you talking about your top secret work. But if you behave yourself, do a good job and generally keep your nose clean, the potential rewards are, well, very rewarding."

Brunner sipped at his brandy cautiously. "How long do I have to sign on for?"

"When you get started, I think you'll be asking us how long we'll let you carry on with the work," grinned Smith. "Suppose we say until you reach

the ripe old age of fifty? That's eight years. Well, nearer seven and a half."

"Then I retire on a pension?"

"If you want to. And if you serve us faithfully, it should be a very generous one and inflation-proofed."

"And I get a new identity?"

"A cast-iron solid one."

"Here, listen to this." Captain Fairclough turned up the volume of the transistor radio beside him. "They're talking about us."

". . . well-planned, with all the precision of a military operation," said the newsreader. "The two armed men were believed to have German or Polish accents. Despite strong rumours, the Home Office is still refusing to comment on Brunner's possible involvement with a foreign spy network. He is believed to have been named as long as five years ago by Anatoly Greskin, the Bulgarian Air Force officer who defected to the United States."

"The Leader of the Opposition has called for a full investigation of into the escape and the reason why a prisoner of Brunner's obvious importance should have been transferred in such a casual manner. The Prime Minister is expected to make a statement on the affair later this evening."

"Four vehicles crashed on the M62 in heavy rain earlier this morning. It is believed . . ."

"Is that really you, Otto?" said Fairclough as he switched the radio off.

Brunner gaped at the radio, unable to speak.

Smith was wearing his evil grin again. "Well, what's it going to be?" he asked. "The navy or the cruel, hard world outside these walls? And inside a lot of high ones with barbed wire on top."

"He might not be in gaol that long," Birky remarked to Newton. "The Russians might do a swap for him if he's that important."

"I don't think I have much choice," sighed Brunner, looking trapped. "Where do I sign?"

"Everywhere I've marked." Smith produced a clipboard and a ballpoint from the lower shelf of the table. "Sign it George Tailor. That's your new name."

The newly-created George Tailor practised his signature a few times on the sheet of scrap paper provided, then he added it to the forms.

"Good!" said Smith. "You've also signed the Official Secrets Act among that lot. Here are your identification and other necessary documents." He handed over an envelope. "You'll get your uniform as soon as we can get

you measured up.”

“Welcome to the Navy, George,” said Newton, extending a hand.

“Thank you,” said the newly created Lieutenant Tailor weakly.

“Your quarters are across the corridor,” added Smith. “In the other half of this level. When we get you changed into your uniform, I’ll take you to see your commanding officer.”

“I think we’ll be heading for home now,” announced McAndrew. “This is strictly a Navy show from now on.”

“No doubt we’ll see you back to have a look at the bits and pieces when Otto’s scraped the crud off them,” said Smith.

“No doubt,” McAndrew agreed with a smile.

April became May. Invitations to a gathering at the Bellside Country Club went out. The ninth of May was Hank Newton’s birthday. Captain Spinner flew down from the distillery at Berelogie, bringing Colonel Porter with him. Lieutenant-Commander Smith and his crew reported from Portsmouth. They arrived just ahead of Colonel Blackshaw from the CSSSU.

Flying officer Johann Mansted was still at the club, partly because he was still attached to McAndrew’s command and mainly because he liked life at the Bellside.

When the coffee was served after a belt-bursting meal in the private dining room, Major McAndrew rose to his feet and managed to overcome the combined conversation of fifteen voices. “If you lot will belt up for a minute, I have a presentation to make,” he announced. “Right, lads.”

Spinner and Birky struggled to the table with a huge parcel and dumped it on the table in front of Hank Newton. Amid a buzz of interest, Newton ripped away the paper and found a new set of golf clubs. He had been dropping heavy hints for a month, but he managed to look decently surprised.

In response to demands for a speech, he rose to his feet and said, “Thanks very much, everyone.” That was Hank Newton’s idea of a speech.

“I’ve got something more to tell you,” said McAndrew before the noise could begin again. “In fact, I’ve got two things to tell you. A promotion. Lieutenant Birky to Captain with effect from tomorrow morning.”

“Well, bugger me!” said Birky.

“Before anyone takes him up on the offer,” continued McAndrew. “I have some figures from our colleagues at the Ministry of Defence on the

projected sale of the silver ballast we recovered from the Cidona. Hector and his people confidently expect to clear four hundred and eighty million pounds.”

A deathly hush descended an the room. Mouths gaped open.

“Four hundred and eighty *million* pounds?” gasped Birky.

McAndrew smiled and nodded.

“But Mac, we’ll never be able to spend all that lot,” Birky added.

McAndrew and Smith exchanged evil grins of contradiction.

“Oh, we’ll think of something to do with it,” McAndrew assured the gathering. “You can depend on that!”

THE END?

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