

# **The Molten Glass Sea**

**By**

**David Lowder**

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## Acknowledgments.

To Keith Sanders who served on HMS Arrow in the Falklands campaign and helped correct my errors. However, if there are any further historical or grammatical mistakes, they are solely mine alone.

David Lowder 2013

***This book is dedicated***

***To the men of the Task Force who went south to fight so far from home, and the Islanders who helped them.***

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This book is not dedicated to such people as Denise Healey and David Owen. Who due to their over inflated arrogance and incompetence in saving pennies during the sixties and seventies. Later condemned young men to be burned, mutilated, and die in the vastness of the South Atlantic.

Nor should Margaret Thatcher rejoice, because in words and deeds, she sent a clear message to the Argentinean Junta. Telling them her government simply did not care about the Islands or its people.

To John Knot, who wanted to sell HMS Invincible, and HMS Hermes, and make the Royal Navy incapable of defending anything south of the Isle of White?

To the BBC News coverage team for telling the Argentine air force their bombs were not armed correctly, and then told them in so many words how to solve the problem.

Nor is this for Max Hastings who condemned Admiral Sandy Woodward as nothing less than a coward, for not putting at risk where possible, the only assets that could win the battle or lose it for the task force. The two aircraft carriers.

To Prince Andrew who should have remembered secrets are just those. For no war is the last, when telling the world how the Royal Navy used helicopters to decoy Exocet missiles.

To the Admiralty who even today have not learned the lessons of the Falklands Campaign in the design of their latest warships. Like the Type 45 Destroyer.

Finally closing the circle from Doctor David Owen, to Doctor Liam Fox. Both who wasted billions of tax payer hard earned money whilst along with the bullion sleeves helped trash the Royal Navy.

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## **Author's notes**

***This book is about the crew of HMS Cougar not just the Captain and the officers. There are no Jack Hawkins of Noel Cowards on the bridge at midnight fighting the Hun. These are real men who will pick their nose, scratch their crutch, and fart in the most inappropriate places. Who will swear, think of sex, and hate the bloody Navy. They are Jack created by generations of their kind who are only happy, when being miserable and moaning about their lot in the Andrew. Yet in the South Atlantic in 1982 facing the***

***entire Argentine Air Force. They still are the only people you would want to be with in a fight.***

***Before reading this book, please remember this is 1982, the Royal Navy was men only, and reflected certain attitudes, and language. No longer tolerated today in our Political Correct media.***

## **Preface**

HMS Cougar was old even by Royal Navy Standards. Twenty-four years since her launch, and twenty years since she left the Falklands. Now she was going back, the last of the Gun Diesels. A left over from the countless defence cuts, she had been quietly forgotten by all. Fifties technology, in a shallow draft, and a slow speed, but in this 'can do Navy' she could be useful in the first line of defence against the Exocet missile, simply because she was expendable.

## **Prologue**

The dream had come again from the deep blackness of oblivion. The dull light of an ethereal dawn, swirling away the darkness inside his mind. He was back again in the cockpit of his Israeli built Dagger. Outside along the canopy pearl droplets of water ran across the clear Perspex in crazy spidery web formations. Inside the cockpit the orange glowing instruments, showed the altimeter, the blue and orange of the artificial horizon, and the engine gauges, all were reassuringly normal. On the yoke his gloved hand seemed to have a life of its own, maybe it did. In this dream world the aircraft knew where it was going. It really didn't need him to pilot the plane, only take him back over and over again through his nightmare.

Suddenly the dream changed, and he was looking through his head-up-display at the scattered silver wave tops forming for a

moment in random flashes. Before they whipped past and disappeared beneath his racing aircraft.

There was no need to look at the compass for headings or the chart on his leg for the waypoints. The targets were always the same.

This was another straight there and back mission. The eight hundred and sixty miles round trip leaving his Dagger with very little fuel to spare for loitering or for dog fighting the 'La Muerte Negra.' The nickname the Argentine Air force had given to the British Sea Harriers with their deadly sidewinders.

His targets as always was the warships and transports in San Carlos waters. Only this time the rubber streaked runway he had climbed up from, belonged to the Rio Grande airbase, on the island of Tierra del Fuego, the legendary 'Land of Fire and Ice.' South of the Magellan Straits, and not San Julian 300 miles to the North, were his outfit the 10th Fighter Bomber Group was normally stationed. The reason simply to hide the mounting losses from the pilots. Could Lieutenant Garcia be operating out

of Comodoro Rivadavia? No he had been seen at Rio Gallegos, and then someone had heard he had been sent to San Julian for special operations. However, in the dream Lieutenant Mario Ricardo Garcia was always on his right wing, his number two, a close friend from his days at the academy, and just last year the godfather of his son.

Out and below him the cold South Atlantic spread out in front of him, a vast expanse of watery desert ready to erase him from the world as though he never existed. Here he was safe and yet at his most vulnerable if he was damaged or he had miscalculated his fuel consumption. Hamstrung from the start he should have had drop tanks and sidewinders like the British to take on the Harrier not run away from them. But the mission was always the same bomb the ships in the bay first.

Repeatedly he checked his meaningless compass and instruments; for even in the dream he was still the consummate pilot.

Quickly he looked down at the on-route chart, inside the clear pocket on the left thigh of his G-suit, and glancing at his watch, he mentally calculated he was less than eighty miles from the *Las Malvinas*. Twelve minutes flying time to the targets, and all quite irrelevant in a dream

Skimming over the sea, he suddenly saw something small and dark leap out from the gloom. He jumped seeing it instantly materialize into a boat with a single mast, and tiny wheelhouse. Then abruptly it vanished under his wings. Of course he had no problem recognising the trawler *Narwhal*. Probably on an intelligence gathering mission. Now he knew it was time to concentrate to become part of the aircraft again, one with his plane an extension of the engine, wings and avionics, the complete weapon system.

Suddenly his dream panned left and right, to open up the perspective inside his mind. The dull gleaming outline of his wingmen filled his vision. Below their wings, the four dull mat green British made 500-pound bombs hung from their pylons.

Ironic they should be taking them to drop on the British navy, but this war should never have taken place, the Isles de Malvinas belonged to Argentina, not a group of settlers left there by a quirk of history, and quietly forgotten by their own countrymen.

Around him the dawn seemed almost reluctant to brighten the slate grey sky.

Suddenly the dream jumped and he was once again above the rock littered beaches, skimming up and over the contours of the hills. In his dream his eyes flickered between engine instrumentation, the head-up display, and the forbidding rock strewn tussocks of grass whipping past him to be blasted by his jet exhaust. His altimeter reassured him the ground was a scant fifty feet below his clenching buttocks.

Banking the Dagger hard to the left he went hugging the delineations of the valley floor, all the time hoping the high jagged escarpments on either side would hide his flight from the Harrier's Blue Fox radar.

A flash in his mind and the scene changed, and he was through and into broken clouds.

Below him was the amphitheatre shape of San Carlos Water. There for a moment his Dagger hovered. A prowling condor floating up on the thermals. Then he was dropping towards the sea. His aircraft a sleek shiny dart surround by dirty smudges of flak. A missile fired from a ship streaked across his path, a long white finger pointing to him.

There the altimeter needle spun winding off the height, until suddenly he was skimming over the sea looking through his head-up-display at the shiny grey target filling his view.

A moment later he saw the nose of the Dagger lift over the target's mast, and he was crossing the bay turning in a sweeping left hand curve towards the rolling hills of the West Malvinas, and the final race for home. They were through, he had almost screamed out loud in relief.

Suddenly his canopy was illuminated by a brilliant white flash. Instinctively he knew it was not the target exploding. He looked over his left shoulder; and there Lieutenant Marquez and his Dagger disintegrated into a shower of glowing metal confetti. Slowly drifting down to splash in thousands of plops on the sea below.

His instincts told him to climb out of the danger, but he knew the blue fox radar of the harriers could not look down over land, however above two hundred feet, he would be missile fodder.

His starboard wingman moved in close almost as though for comfort and security.

His departure for home would be *Isla Bourbon* to mask him from the Harriers. Finally clearing the Islands to the North West, and Banking around the headland, the channel opened ahead of him. Suddenly he saw the solitary ship silhouetted against the blue green sea. A single tiny dot, turning into a toy ship floating in a giant's bath. But already at this speed it was too late to jink away. The twin sparks from forward and aft blinked in unison.

The puffs of black cotton wool, floating past. Hiding the invisible steel splinters flying outwards to rip the entrails out of his aircraft. Glancing quickly around the cockpit, and out over each wing he felt the relief of sustaining no damage. Intuitively he opened up his gaze to his right wingmen, and in horror saw the starboard wing of the Dagger, slowly fold like wet cardboard. Twisting like a fish caught on a hook, the aircraft in an instant hit the water, and cart-wheeling across the waves exploded in a fireball of flame and smoke. The funeral pyre for Lieutenant Roberto Garcia.

It was too late for anger, ahead of him the dirty brown smudges formed a ring of lethal jagged shrapnel, which he knew he had to fly through. Alone in the cockpit he was sweating and cursing, trying to line up the gun sight on the ship ahead. The twin four-point-fives, forward and aft turned their cavernous muzzles towards him, ejecting smoke like spent dragons.

Now he could see the squat centre line superstructure, no funnels and the tall mast supporting the latticework for a slowly moving

air search radar. There was no time to correct; he had wasted those few precious seconds looking back at the final resting place of his friend. Now he was too far forward to hit the key parts of the ship like the Bridge or Operations Room. Still in his anger he could do some damage; the gloved finger flicked off the gun's safety guard and he squeezed the trigger hard. In the dream he could not feel the fuselage shake violently, only ahead of him the marching column of water spouts, closing on the ship and finally the 30mm cannon shells punching through the thin metal of the hull. Then his Dagger was over the deck, and he turned, gazing for a moment at the light reflected back from the dark windows of the bridge. Clear now and jinking across all three dimensions of the sky, he gave up a silent pray.

Without warning he vision became blurred the instruments unreadable. Along the top of the cockpit red lights flashed warnings of imminent failure.

Between his legs the yoke swung forwards, backwards and to the sides, he tried to grab it, but his uncontrollable hand kept missing

it. He was choking, blinded by sudden darkness. Instinctively he reached above his head for the ejector seat release handle, and immediately fell out of bed entangled in his bed clothes.

Capitan de Corbeta Miguel Alvarez awoke from his nightmare, struggling and tearing at the sheet and blankets, gasping for air, and knowing from the soreness in his throat he had been screaming aloud with fear.

Stumbling and sobbing in the pitch darkness he groped his way across the room, crashing into unfamiliar furniture, almost falling, until he had found the window. He needed to breathe the fresh air, the open spaces. Thrusting back the heavy curtain for the black out, he opened the window and let the rain sluice across his face and chest soaking his hair and pyjamas until he was shivering both from chill and sheer panic.

The sky was lighter, and he thought he saw the outline of the airfield buildings. It was impossible to tell what time it was, or how long the dream had lasted, or for that matter when it had begun.

Wearily he closed the curtains and groped back to the bunk where he switched on the bedside reading lamp. The sheet was damp, but not only from his rain-soaked body. He, had been sweating as he had re-lived it again and again.

He felt his breath slowing down and pulled his dressing gown from a hook. He was ice cold and shivering badly.

Faraway he could hear the muffled noises from one of the hangers, as the mechanics prepared his Dagger for the dawn, and his return to the islands.

## **Book 1**

### **1.**

***Turn Left after Gibraltar.***

Third Officer Helen Patterson slowly closed the door behind her, and Commodore Julian Howard watched her pert arse disappear once again. Picking up the coffee mug she had placed on his desk. He looked at the chipped scared door and wondered after three days. What she might be wearing under her tight skirt. Stockings and suspenders. At his age he could easily be classified as a dirty old man, still things stirred below, to reassure him he was not quite dead.

Getting up from the desk after reading the last two signals again. He turned and lighting a cigarette continued to look out through the window.

Seventy two hours ago, Howard had been lowering his head and avoiding deep puddles left by overnight rain. It was nearly dawn and the air no longer carried the biting hardness of winter. Just like now seventy two hours later, he looked up at the departing clouds.

Plymouth Dockyard in the dull grey light of dawn was almost a black and white image. Only the bright yellow of the sun casting

colour as it scurried between the many shades of white grey and black clouds. There looming shapes of fewer and fewer vessels now lying quietly spread along the jetties protruding above nearby wharves and basins. Just a few had the boxes stacked beside them like discarded toy bricks, and men forming chains to pass the smaller versions of the ones being lifted by cranes.

The infamous group of scroungers, as Howard called his team. Kept alive with mugs of stewed tea, black coffee, and packs of cigarettes. Where probably right now in Plymouth dockyard trying desperately to find the right machine parts, ammunition, toilet paper, and the last tin of Argentine corn beef, for the ships waiting to sail south to the Falkland Islands.

Howard stretched his arms and yawned, tasting the dampness, the smells of salt, oil, wet metal and discarded waste. The true smells of any naval dockyard, anywhere in the world.

Then there had been the afternoon summons, and the train journey. The midnight visit to the ornate office in the Admiralty in London. The small rear-admiral sitting behind his desk turning

the well-worn pages of a document. The simple hand gesture to take a seat and opening the silver cigarette box, offering him *HM ships only* duty frees, whilst he continued reading.

For a moment something held his attention, then he signed the chit attached to indicate he had read it. Placed it in the out tray for his flag lieutenant, and with a smile looked up.

The meeting took less than ten minutes. The instructions were minimal, with the aid of third officer wren Patterson, the Admiral's car, and a RAF Hercules. Howard was to get himself to Gibraltar, and with his many contacts help the ships heading south with anything they may need. With a hand shake and an even shorter smile, he was ushered back into the young dapper flag lieutenant's office, and handed a buff folder. If the job's worth proof a little difficult in achieving his objectives, here were some numbers and names that would help. One of the names made Howard look up in surprise.

"Yes sir, it goes all the way to the top," said the flag lieutenant with a smile.

The bone juddering journey in the Hercules. Quickly followed by a car ride bringing him through the open wrought iron gates and into a deserted dockyard. All this way Howard thought, and who the hell was he going to help here. Finally shown to his office which by the lingering smells of sisal and hemp must have at one time been a cordage store. His desk adding further aromas of varnish, and teak oil from the boat yard. Looking out from his office window, shocked at a once proud dockyard, now just an empty shell. For over an hour he pondered phoning the little admiral.

The phone call to the Admiral's office, had taken another hour of waiting for connections, before he finally heard once again, the condescending voice of the flag lieutenant. Who after asking was the hotel accommodation fine. Indicated in so many words. 'Sir the admiral would prefer you stay there, and establish a good working relationship with the locals, and wait for further developments. What locals he could find in an almost empty

dockyard stripped of everything and unable even to service the six warships of Admiral Woodward's advanced force.

Two days later, HMS Cougar had arrived from Malta, minus her Captain who had been flown home, with a suspected brain tumour. Nothing had changed about the ship's sailing orders, as her first lieutenant brought the ship in too fast alongside the jetty, and added another mark to the many.

An hour later a group of sailors slapped the usual layer of grey paint to cover up another example of poor ship handling.

Normally Howard knew they would have been an enquiry, but not for the old Cougar. In forty-eight-hours she would sail for Plymouth, there to be decommissioned, and finally stripped of everything useful, before being sent to the breakers yard.

For the moment Howard slumped into the old leather cushion chair. Polished he suspected by countless arses, probably all the way back to Nelson's time. There he lifted the coffee and waited

for the moment savouring with a drug addict's anticipation the caffeine jolt to his system.

The commodore continued to look out of the window remembering the cocktail party, he and Patterson had been invited to last night. God the wardroom mess bill was going to make the officers of Cougar poor men.

The moment they had both entered the crowded Wardroom. Patterson's pert bottom had been whisked away by a pair of young subies. God he laughed nothing changed when you brought a pretty girl to a cocktail party. Even if she had been a nun.

So sliding into a corner of the wardroom he had lifted his glass to the countless toasts to the ships heading south. The obvious relief hardly hidden on the faces of the officers.

However, it was funny and somewhat entertaining to listen to the gun-ho rhetoric of Lieutenant Commander Simpson who seemed to have the usual retinue of arse kisser's surroundings him.

If only Cougar could be transposed into HMS Sheffield, he had told his retinue of admirers.

Howard for a moment wondered after watching him handling Cougar that morning. Would the commanding officer's selection board give him anything bigger than a rowboat, he doubted it. The full astern and some large fenders had saved him from a court martial. In truth did it matter in a few months Cougar would be shiny new razor blades. But to him it strangely did.

In war, a ship could fall victim to mine or torpedo, shellfire or missile, all were impartial killers without conscience or memory. Or they could live on, to end their days in some breakers yard, suffering the indignity and the contempt after years of loyal service. Did HMS Cougar deserve the latter, or did it have a soul? After all others would say she was just metal and machine parts with living people inside operating her. Then if a ship has no soul, it can have no say in her own destiny. Something made Howard wonder. Cougar was built in an age where the human

mind could still determine the outcome of a battle, not a bloody computer.

A blue dress flashed towards him and interrupted his melancholy thoughts. A petite brunet smiled with a wide mouth, and deep brown puppy dog eyes. A wedding ring flashed a signal, to everyone in the room, as she turned offering Howard a smile, and moved into the group around Simpson.

Who was she, he had no idea? Howard guessed hubby was not there by the way she quickly fell into flirting with the officers. Then he smiled, in the tightness of the throng. The two and half gold ring sleeve with the hand attached, had quickly found a place on her arse, ruffling her skirt as the fingers squeezed her cheeks. Howard grimaced; he had seen it all before at countless cocktail parties.

The third horse's neck had gone down without a thought to the time. He smiled to himself, nothing changed on the cocktail circuit, where the décolletages, showed a glimpse of swelling breasts, and the skirts were never designed to hide anything

going up and down steep ladders, or the high heels for wooden decks and metal rungs - brandy and ginger, the old drink devil, so easily swallowed. The Stewards, with their trays of nibbles just dry enough to promote a thirst, and a higher bar bill. He had remembered on one ship, the stewards had a book on which officer at the end of the commission would have rung up the highest bar bill. Surprisingly it had been the doctor, after all with a ship full of young fit men. No watch keeping duties, and dealing with the occasional accident, clap and fighting, he was pretty much nothing to do but hand around the wardroom bar.

Placing the empty glass, on the tray he ignored a refill and looked around to inform Patterson he was leaving. For a moment he could not find her, then close to the door he saw a sub lieutenant's arm sliding around her small waist helping her through the crowd and out into the passageway. Another sub-lieutenant had joined them to the disgruntle look from the one who still encircled her with his arm. He wondered and chuckled, the classic tour of the ship, and the forlorn hope those two young

officers in question would not be stupid enough to try and show her the golden rivet. He chuckled remembering his thoughts as he watched her disappear. Patterson could easily take care of herself, and there would be enough fawning officers hoping, to make sure she got back safely to the Gibraltar Rock Hotel and her bed.

She had met him promptly at breakfast. As always immaculately dressed. With a single comment to indicate, yes she had enjoyed herself. Just as the waiter poured filled her coffee cup and left the jug.

Howard had smiled remembering some of the wrens he had tumbled. However with Patterson the sign was clear. 'Keep off the grass.'

Standing now he looked out of the window, feeling the caffeine flow through his body. Out across the bay he could see the Levanter wind from the east, with its sweeping grey rain dulling the stone jetties and white washed buildings. Caught in the overcast light from the sea, Gibraltar's dockyard looked tiny

almost toy like against the backdrop of the massive towering rock. In the dull light it looked like a giant spear point, sticking through the skin of the Earth.

Once not so long ago, Gibraltar had echoed to the bugles blaring out from many quarterdecks. Today's morning colours had been heralded by a single lone pipe and along with the party who called the hour, rung the bell and saluted the raising of the white ensign from the quarterdeck staff nothing else accompanied them.

Out across the ship's deck there had been a few who had walked round checking the usual things, such as guard rails and the bottle screw slips securing the anchor cables. But none seem to linger and all had quickly returned below to the dry.

Now silhouetted against the greying sky the lone warship tied up along the South Mole looked deserted and ethereal in the steady persistent drizzle.

He looked down at the signal brought in by Patterson now resting on his desk. Smiling he took out a cigarette packet from his pocket.

The Cougar was from another age of grey. When ships filled Gibraltar that needed thousands of men to operate them. Where they tugged at their anchor cables, dressed overall with coloured signal flags along wires from mainmast to stern and foremast to bow.

The Navy we band of brothers, we few Nelson had once said, well thanks to the politicians they were even less.

Howard felt the anger, the hypocrisy of politicians who destroyed the Royal Navy far more effectively than any enemy, and then sent it out with what was left to fight the next war. The word fell of his lips bastards. But this always happened. The bloody stupid politician forgot why they needed a Navy, until it was too late.

The commodore stood back for a moment. He was a contradiction in terms, at fifty-five and completely bald. With a face showing in every crease a wealth of experience. However, unlike his contemporaries in the supply branch, who now added inches to their waistline. He was slim and hard. A regular swimmer and scuba diver, he could still wear the same uniform he had worn in his twenties.

Out across the water he heard the four engines of the heavy lumbering Hercules pass over the sea their changing tones a prelude to landing. Somebody else had suffered a bumpy ride.

Howard smiled, despite his uneasiness after reading the signal. Remembering one first lieutenant remarks in the wardroom of a destroyer he had served on. She was like an old Plymouth prostitute. Past her best, but, with a new paint-job and a wealth of experience behind her, she would do.

He looked at HMS Cougar, the rust running from her hawser pipe to the waterline, and wondered if they could do the same for her, without the lick of paint and in less than three days.

## 2.

Able Seaman 'fang' Rathbone, Cougar's quartermaster continued to look out at the 'dog-shit day'. The colour party had long since legged it down below in the dry. Leaving him to hide away inside a small lobby above the open hatch leading down to the longest continues passage in the ship, known as the 'Burma-way'.

Having sent ordinary seaman Collins his 'Boson's Mate', to the gallery with a begging note for a couple of bacon butties and two refills of hot tea, he waited in anticipation, for the greasy food, and the stewed brown liquid.

Rathbone once again looked at his watch wishing the next three hours would go quickly; then twenty four hours off, a run ashore to pick up some 'rabbits' (presents) for his girlfriend Carol. A few be vies in one of the bars, and another read of Carol's near

pornographic letter before blessed sleep took him to his erotic paradise and the use of his hand. No remonstrated with himself save it all up.

He felt his body sag, fuck he was knackered.

After last night's pantomime he could count the sleep on one hand with two fingers missing. He cringed if there was one thing that seriously pissed him off about this job. It was watching rubber legged matelots staggering up the gangway trying to look sober. To tell you in blubbering joined up speech minus any vowels, and almost crying with emotions. You were the best mate in the world, how he loved his wife, or his girlfriend, and thank fuck the Cougar was not heading for the Falkland's Islands, all with a breath that could strip off three layers of paint.

At midnight relieved by 'Ginger' Watts his opposite number he had gone below and straight into bedlam. The mess was heaving with drunks, some in various stages of undress littering in various positions of sleep the benches and tables.

It was never a pretty sight all those beer guts and hairy arses.

Some had fallen onto their bunks fully clothed; others had not quite made it. Whilst the air smelled like a brewery, and the snoring, a fog horn cacophony of flats and sharps echoed of the bulkheads and the deckheads. The Royal Navy at its best, highly skilled technicians ready for anything. He laughed, god they would need all the time sailing back to Plymouth to sober up.

When did he finally get off to sleep, he yawned. Well whatever time it was. It felt like five minutes later he was being shaken for the forenoon watch. Late already, he had given up fighting for the bathroom through the staggering bodies, or the forward heads were the spewing up had already started.

Quickly he dressed grabbed his foul weather jacket and raced up the ladder away from the smell of the perfume-de-toilet wafting up from the stinking mess deck.

Breakfast had been a hastily grabbed egg floating in a sea of grease, and slipped between too heavily buttered slices of hard

bread. Under his foul weather jacket he was wearing his number three suit he had found at the bottom of a bin under a pile of other suits knocked of its coat hanger by one of the drunken arseholes last night. He had no time to get it pressed so putting it on he hoped his own body heat would iron out the creases.

Still it was heavily pissing down, and so with a little bit of luck he would be able to keep on his foul weather jacket and cover up his creased uniform.

Rubbing his stubbly chin he thanked god, sub lieutenant Pearce, was the Officer of the Watch, and not the right horrible, lieutenant bull-shit Padgett RN, HMS Cougar's gunnery officer. Whatever the time he was always immaculate, with razor sharp creases in his trousers and mirror shined shoes.

In the rain Pearce had taken the salute, and ignoring Rathbone's nine-o'clock shadow, had quickly joined the colour party as it headed for the dry, with the customary bale out batman remark. "Quartermaster if you need me I shall be in the Wardroom."

As for the rest of the officers after last nights' blow out, they would be like the ratings, seriously out of it. He looked out left and right along the starboard side, and seeing no one, quickly lit a cigarette, ready at any moment to slip it between the thick wire cables leading to a junction box, now burned black by ash from countless hidden cigarettes.

4.

Commander Howard looked out through his office window, at the motionless reflection of HMS Cougar blended with the dull seascape, as the prismatic water patterned the ship's side in reflected flickering light. It was the moment of tranquillity, he contemplated.

Just before the shit hit the fan.

**5.**

Lieutenant Commander David Simpson, had if his hazy recollections where correct, just in the last fifteen minutes taken

both watches, whilst trying not to make any sudden movements with his head. Now sitting in one of the worn easy chairs inside the wardroom, he continued to try and not move his delicate instrument, whilst he waited for Steward Allyson to bring him a very strong coffee. Eye lids closed he waited for the strong pain killers, to reduce his headache from white hot fire inside his head, to something more manageable like a banging sledge hammer.

Aware of the smells around him from stale alcohol, tobacco, greasy bacon and the constant stink of diesel emanating from the engine room, and wafting as always along the Burma Way to the wardroom forward. God he felt his stomach clench with the added smells, Simpson decided to gingerly walk out, and into the wardroom flat, up the ladder and into his cabin. There to die, or quickly calibrate the four Ponca louvers above his head to spill fresh air onto his face. Simpson slid the cabin door shut and slowly sat down in the steel framed chair. He looked at his bunk, and just below it the small drop down flap he used as a desk. The

paper work from it had fallen and still laid scattered like discarded playing cards across the floor.

Caroline had climbed the ladder ahead of him, knowing full well she was not wearing any panties. God knows how he did it with all that alcohol inside him. No finesse, just bending her over, her hands on the edge of his bunk as he lifted her dress over her head and fucked her. It was pure animalistic pleasure. They were both drunk, neither asking for anything other than cardinal gratification. Afterwards she had pulled down her skirt kissed him on the cheek, smoothed down her tussled hair, and asked him to get her a taxi. No words of endearment, just a cool handshake on the gangway and a thank you for a very lovely evening.

Now Simpson wondered who had fucked who this time?

He had thought for a moment in their frantic groping last night, he should take her to the empty Captain's cabin; after all he was the commanding officer in all but name. But even through his alcoholic addled brain, he could imagine what would happen if he

did just that, especially with Fraser; Cougar's engineering officer and his wicked Glaswegian sense of humour. Then their loathing for each other was mutual. Still just four more days to get the old girl tied up in Plymouth Dockyard, then his next appointment. Maybe a full stripe to replace the thin one, and some scabbled-egg on his hat. Commander Simpson sounded good to him, Captain of a ship would be better

Suddenly he felt his headache bring him back from his day dreams.

For the moment he tried not to think, simply because it hurt. Slowly his head began to nod.

## **6.**

Commodore Howard took the second cup of coffee, with the customary smile and a grateful thank you. And wondered if Third Officer Patterson had gone into 'Civi-Street,' she would have probably made millions with her beauty and her brains. Instead

in this man's Navy she would be just another tight skirt who made coffee, ran errands, filled in the paper work, and finally at the pinnacle of her career, become an officer's wife. What a waste. Then the Navy was good at wasting talent.

God he was getting cynical in his old age, or was it just down to experience.

He smiled to himself remembering again the comment from his late grandfather, sitting in his favourite armchair looking out across the Yorkshire moors from his study window. An era lost now forever. The Highland Park in the Glencairn crystal whisky glass in his right hand, and the left stroking his beloved black Labrador. The archetype generation now left with only memories, and constantly mixing up what he did in the First World War, with what they didn't do in the second.

"In my day Howard you quickly forgot your dear Mother's tit, when you were handed over to your Nanny; she was the hand that steered you through your informative years. By God sir if we had such women today we would still have the bloody Empire.

Not this intellectual claptrap on the television which keeps apologising to the world, for us giving the bloody wogs the rule of law.”

The commodore smiled to himself, at the thought of Patterson pushing a pram, and wondering for a moment what it would be like to be cuddled by those breasts.

His Grandfather who had lived in the big house, with his old housekeeper, had once been burgled by three young men, one of whom had come into his bedroom wielding a long bladed kitchen knife and with a cringe worthy Birmingham accent had shouted.

“I don’t want to stick you grandpa, so where is the antiques and the cash.”

His grandfather at eighty-four had pulled out his old service revolver from under the pillow, and given his answer in two actions. The first in words referring to removing the young man’s ability to reproduce another idiot like himself. The second coming from the old Webley 38 revolver exploding like a cannon, and the

burglar feeling the wind of the bullet pass close to his family jewels.

He chuckled to himself the hole was still there in the wall.

Something on the Cougar caught his eyes bringing him back with a jolt to reality. The commodore looked out the window noting things were already moving on the upper deck, he looked at his watch, any minute now. Sitting on the edge of his desk he waited whilst events unfolded outside. This was going to be an interesting day.

## **7.**

He was in his bunk, well his mind was, as for his body it was slumped in a very cramped chair.

The second tap at the door brought him out of his dream with a start, 'Come in,' and immediately wished he had not spoken so

loud. The door opened and Simpson winced. Padgett filled the door a smile clearly etched on his face. This meant the omens were not good.

Simpson wondered again how he ever got that gut into the bog eyed monster above the bridge which directed Cougar's main armament. The twin mountings one forward one aft.

Padgett stood rigid, and immaculate as always. The bright silver chain around his neck, the end attached to a whistle, which vanished into the breast pocket of his jacket.

Padgett eyed him doubtfully, and Simpson knew this was going to hurt by the delay Padgett allowed before making his report.

Padgett looked down at the paper strewn floor of McDonald's cabin and with the usual per functionary gesture of congeniality, said "Good morning number one, sorry to interrupt your paper work."

Ignoring the obvious sarcasm in Padgett's voice. "What is it, Guns?" Simpson turned in his chair not wanting to get up.

"The Yeoman here may have something that might interest you sir?"

He was tempted to say where he could put it, but his head still hurt.

"So where is the Officer of the Day?"

"I sent him to check on the gangway staff, and to make sure the area around the gangways, and the lobby were clean and tidy."

"Very well Guns," said Simpson wondering what the hell was going on, just as the pain returned to the back of his eyes.

Padgett's stepped aside like a huge boulder rolling away from a cave mouth to reveal the small figure of the yeoman. Who immediately stepped forward and handed Simpson the clipboard. Chief Petty Officer 'Tugg' Wilson's face showed nothing more than the usual two dimensional expression of any signal man, as Simpson took the signal pad from his hand.

He stared down and began to read. It wasn't possible. He re-read the damp flimsy, Captain Paul Brentwood DSO. His eyes

moved over the signal again. This was bordering on the utter ridiculous. A full blown four ring captain to take the Cougar home. He looked up and saw Padgett's parade ground face blank like the tarmac that covered it.

Maybe someone had reported his bump alongside. He dismissed that immediately. It was a mistake most Captains made bringing in the cantankerous Cougar in for the first time.

Simpson for a moment had watched his twenty five year career disintegrate before his eyes, as the groaning pontoons began to splinter. Suddenly as though the old girl knew, she had turned away and the coxswain reported the rudder answering the helm. God it had been close, still it had earned the ship another mark on her side for her finicky ways.

Padgett burst through his thoughts.

"The Yeoman made them decode the signal again number one, just to make sure. From the bridge list he's close to the top on seniority, so the Yeoman tells me."

"A senior captain guns, it doesn't make sense, just to con the old girl to the knackers yard," said Simpson his headache gone for a moment.

Padgett did not move. "Maybe number one we are turning to port after Gibraltar."

## **8.**

'Rev up' Reynolds the motor bike nut of eight mess, looked down at the white snake of Cougar's head rope and wondered for the umpteenth time why was he standing here, coiling down this bloody rope for the third time and wondering what the fucking panic was all about. Everybody had been happy yesterday with the forecastle. Now he had been dragged out of his cosy mess, so close to the forward heads and the sanctuary of an empty toilet bowl to catch the contains of his run ashore.

Climbing up the two ladders from his beloved bunk to the upper deck, he had asked, what it was all about. The only answer had

come from 'sharky' Ward who told him without any sympathy for his condition, to ask God and work your way up from there.

He stood in the rain, wondering which side he could spew over, port or starboard, and the recurring reasoning that whoever god was, he was a right shit. Why should full in the face enjoyment, always be followed by such pain?

Now slowly passing the thick nylon head rope through his shaking hands for the third attempt at trying to coil it down correctly. He waited for another sarcastic blast from Petty Officer Carter. Known not so affectionately to the men of the forecastle as 'Carter the bloody Martyr.'

God it must be close to stand-easy. Please make it so, for all he wanted now was to die in his bunk.

He shuddered, knowing he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and for all the wrong bloody reasons. His head hurt, his guts were churning, and what was coming out of the rear end, should have a public health warning. For a moment Reynolds looked back again at the closed hatch, leading to his mess, and

dreamed of crawling back in his pit, closing down every bodily function, and disappearing up his own arsehole. In other words rev-up Reynolds wanted to die, for behind the squinting eyes his fragile head was about to explode.

The last run ashore, a blinding flash lost now in the alcoholic haze. Only the comments from the lads about his performance on the table of the London bar, or was it the Soho bar, and the expression on the two Moroccan queers when he dropped his pants to display his quite considerable wedding tackle made him wince. Vaguely aware he had been arseholed out of his mind when he had done the Zulu Warrior strip for a bet. Only went on to confirm he was now standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, and for all the wrong reasons.

Downwind of Reynolds, able seaman 'Spud' Taylor was coiling down the spring, when Reynolds farted with the full presentation of his bowel. Taylor coughed, gagged, and moved away from the fall out.

"Fuck the bastard's got a dead rat up his arse," coughed Taylor.

"No Spud," remonstrated able seaman Ward, sorting out a tangled heaving line.

"You see before you from a forensic point of view that is. The living dead, and therefore mere flesh decomposing," said Ward in tones boarding on the doctoral sermon all mixed with a mid-Glamorgan accent. "Because in life," he continued. "He was a lazy bastard, therefore only as his flesh warms up do we become aware of the smell, and the true state of decomposition." Completing the sign of the cross on his chest he continued in a solemn voice.

"Of course shortly to be promulgated in Daily Orders, will be the time for the clearing of lower deck, to witness the burial at sea of the late able seaman Reynolds. Whose long service and not so good conduct record will be celebrated? His whole way of life expounded by the great Chinese philosopher Confucius. Who said Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life. Of course this lifetime achievement of avoiding the four letter word work, will be honoured when he is thrown over the side along with the ship's gash, directly into the Atlantic." Pausing

for grammatical effect, Ward continued. "An ocean gentlemen. Which may I remind you by its sheer vastness will be just, but only just able to handle such a rotting festering asshole as him."

"Fuck off," moaned Reynolds his head about to burst as he farted again and hoped the breeze did not send the smell back to him.

Taylor gagged his nostrils unable to avoid the full smell of Reynolds run ashore created by the digesting of an *al la carte* kebab, in an alcohol rich fermenting stomach.

"Right you lot cut out the cackle. Reynolds, when you're finished with the third attempt at your master piece, I want you to help Ward wash down the deck," said Petty Officer Carter.

"Jennings fetch the large rattling fender from behind 'A' turret and stow it in the locker.

"Yes P.O." said Jennings in an almost girlish voice

Able seaman "taffy" Jones late of the Ronda Valley looked on, as he finished polishing the brass plate on 'A' gun turret, and watched the rain already dimming it. For a moment he stopped what amounted to his version of pissing against the wind. To turn and see Jennings bend over the locker.

“Christ you know I should have sold that boy’s arse to those Moroccans, when I had the bloody chance.”

“Now what the hell are you going to do with a pair of camel’s taffy,” chided leading seaman 'faulty' Towers the kellick of the forecastle. “There a bit big see, for pit ponies, and you can’t hide them in your locker,” said Towers checking the drums covers had been lashed correctly over a spare wire, and remembering an early morning piss he had in Malta over a week ago.

The girl’s, as the ship's company had in a way silently nicknamed them both, Jennings and Collins, were neither related, although in some respects from behind they were twins. The rumours had run riot through the ship, especially when they went ashore together. Finally Towers had caught them early one morning when alongside in Malta, He had gone for a leak, around 2am after drinking to many ice cold beers in the bars of Valletta.

Coming out of the heads he had heard the giggles behind the door of the forward wash room. Opening it quietly Towers walked in and turned towards the showers.

Both were together in a single cubicle, washing each other, their small cocks erect. He should have reported it. The Andrew did not tolerate homosexuality in any form. Even though everybody knew it took place. Once it had been a hanging offence, now it was instant dismissal from the service. What the hell. The two frightened faces, the water cascading down their almost girlish bodies.

He had turned and without saying a word closed the door returning to his bunk,

Fuck the Andrew and the weak willed politicians, he was going to be made redundant, and so where the girls once this Falkland shit was over, and why should he save their bloody Lordships any money by getting them dismissed from the service with nothing.

He was months away from his square rig and his Petty Officer's cap, now he would never see it only the labour exchange. To hell with the Navy after all it would probably be legal in a couple of years anyhow.

Returning to the drizzly rain he peered down from his gangling tallness at the short fat three badge man with his huge beer

belly; and wondered how anyone could fancy the old bastard. Well at least anyone who did not have a white stick and a guide dog? Still if the picture on the inside of the locker door was anything to go by, his wife of fifteen years and pictured with him at some wedding function, had the face the wrong side of forty and the body the right side of thirty. What the hell she saw in the fat bastard was anybody's guess. He looked again at Evans and wondered who was banging her right now.

"Do you hear there," the voice of the 'jimmy' blared out from the ship's tannoy. "This is the first lieutenant speaking; shortly Captain Brentwood DSO will be joining the ship." Suddenly Simpson stopped, and with his finger still pressing down on the microphone switch. The forecastle party along with the rest of the ship heard a voice in the background mumble something about twenty minutes. The sigh sounded like a rush of air as Simpson continued. "Captain Brentwood will shortly be taking up his new appointment as the commanding officer of HMS Cougar," there was a pregnant pause as though the Jimmy was about to say something and decided against it by saying, "that is all." The click

of the microphone exclaimed the audible full stop, and the end of the announcement, but not the questions.

Suddenly a pipe squealed and the young voice of the boson's mate broke the silence. "Do you hear there? Stocker Clegg, report to the tiller flat."

The forecastle party looked at each other and wondered.

## **9.**

In the small chart room behind the bridge, able seaman 'Judas' Priest, the navigator's yeoman, listened to the broadcast, and then looked down at the large folio on the chart table. Inside were the charts for the transit through the Bay of Biscay, Western Approaches, Plymouth sound, Drake's Island and finally the dockyard. Below the desk he opened a long wide draw and slid the folio of charts inside and closed it. Taking the presents for his wife Julie, and their four year old daughter Sarah, he placed them in the bottom draw of a filing cabinet, closed it and returned to

the chart for the Gibraltar straits. Now corrected and updated on the numerous buoys, lights and sound signals.

Now he chuckled pulling a worn version of the Collins World Atlas from the book shelf above his head. He better start correcting this. Because if the old Cougar was heading south, the charts the ship carried went no further South than the straights.

Just six months ago he had looked at Julie with the draft chit in his hands. The best draft for anyone waiting to finish their time in the Andrew. Blue card and excused watches, it was the ultimate cushy number. Lots of time alongside the wharf, with the odd two week cruise thrown in to show the young trainee officers and reservists what it was like to be at sea. The dream of going home in three days, paying off the ship, and a nice cushy job in barracks, and six months' time an honourable discharge, Civvy Street and Cornwall helping his wife's parents run their cider farm. The small rent free cottage on the farm with views looking out across the bay, and a small boat to go fishing in, the idyllic life now he wondered like the rest of the ship's company what was going to happen to them all.

## **10.**

Simpson stood by the foremast looking out across Gibraltar's dockyard, there was nothing for him to do but wait, his headache was now almost a thing of the past, and two indigestion tablets were taking care of his tender stomach

Simpson winced remembering his still large pile of paper now on his desk and Padgett's words or was it a pronunciation.

"Well in the last war number one, they stuck six inch guns on Ocean Liners and classified them as armed Merchant Cruisers."

Simpson wanted to say not quite the example he had been looking for, however; the chief yeoman's face showed worse was to come.

"Yeoman when does your intelligence service expect the Captain?"

For the first time he saw Chief Petty Officer Wilson grimace, and instantly Simpson intuitively knew his day was going to be ruined.

"A Hercules from Lyneham has just landed, and a blond wren was seen from the control tower, waiting next to an empty staff car. I would respectfully suggest within the next twenty minutes or so sir."

"Thank you Yeo that will be all."

"Yes sir," said Wilson turning and heading back to the wireless office, already now manned for the impending increase in signal traffic.

Simpson felt some one walk over his grave, and suddenly there were thousands of things to do.

"Okay Gun's get hold of the buffer, and check the upper deck, I want everything that cannot be stowed away, flaked, cheesed, or coiled correctly. Then next make sure the bright work is up to standard, especially the bell. Check the side party are in the correct dress of the day, under their foul weather jackets. And for God's sake make sure they can pipe the bloody side correctly.

Oh and make sure Leading steward Fielding is getting the Captain's cabin ready.

Padgett came immediately to attention, "Aye! Aye! Sir, and with a grin, "I suspect number one, from the actions of the *buffer*, the other chiefs of departments, and Fields in the Captain's pantry. I would say they were probably tipped off before the last letter had been written on the signal pad."

"Thank god for men like Wilson, and the Buffer," whispered Simpson.

"Sorry, I didn't get that number one."

Simpson stood up, and looked at Padgett, "let's go and get the old girl ready for her new Captain." He winced and whatever the bloody future held for them and the cantankerous bitch.

## **11.**

The Commodore picked up his binoculars and looked through them, chuckling at what he saw. Around the ship, hatches opened and men scurried out with brooms, rags, and polish. The young boson's mate ran down the gangway with a bag to pick up litter and straighten the polished oak stand that held the dress lifebuoy with the gold letters HMS Cougar around its cracked white ring.

Three days ago he had been shaken by the reality. The dockyard at Gibraltar was empty and run down. Now unable to provide the range of materials required to stock even the first wave of seven ships of Rear Admiral Woodward's task force. They had been reduced to robbing Peter to pay Paul from ships not allocated for the conflict.

Howard lit another cigarette and wished he could quit the filthy habit. Maybe after the conflict he would try again to give up. Till then he finally had a purpose for being here. Now he needed to wait till the new Captain had come on board and gone through

the age old Naval Tradition of taking command of a warship, before he would present himself. He smiled the scavenger department was back in business.

## **12.**

Simpson looked at the tiny crystal droplets dripping down from the whaler's keel, splashing on the many layers of dull green paint, covering the boat deck.

Simpson walked slowly down the starboard side of X turret, past the men polishing the bright work. The quartermaster and the bosun's mate testing their calls, and Pearce walking around with the Officer of the Watch's brass telescope under his arm. For the moment Simpson ignored it all, as he looked over the guardrail at the neatly coiled wires and ropes on the quarter deck, and noted the ship's bell shone in the dull wet light, its red letters showing the place where the old girl had been built like her sisters, now

long gone Puma, Jaguar, Leopard, only Lynx lay in Plymouth dockyard waiting for a buyer or the scrapyard.

The words in red H.M.S. Cougar. Govan 1958.

Simpson felt a cold shiver of apprehension. She was twenty-four years old, and older than most of her ship's company. In the wardroom and the Captain's cabin were a pair of paintings, by an able seaman on National Service, who now commanded five figure commissions for his work in New York. The joke in the wardroom was the two paintings had now become more valuable than the old girl herself. For Cougar had been designed in the post war years, from a common strategy that would share the same basic hull and machinery design but could be adapted to suit various tasks: anti-submarine warfare (ASW), aircraft direction (AD) and anti-aircraft (AA), all able to be adapted whilst still under construction. The common hull prefabricated throughout with welded section. In the event of war, this would allow for quick assembly as the mass-produced sections could be transported to different shipyards around the country.

Then the nuclear submarines with their long range torpedoes had come along. With the thirty knot Ships that could carry helicopters to catch them. Now all leaving the twenty-four knot Cougar's with its slow firing guns, and its forward throwing depth charges back in the time it was built.

She was the past, the long defunct South Africa, South American station, based at Simonstown, where range in crossing the vast south Atlantic was more an advantage than speed.

In her twenty-four years of service she had been around to see the politicians deciding how to dispose of an Empire. Their simplistic black and white policy constructed in demarcation lines on an Atlas. East of Suez was a liability so it was lopped off and forgotten. The result over the next few years as Cougar sailed around the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic. Her role as Dartmouth's sea training ship. Simply because she was a diesel she and cheap to run.

Whilst at home the political policy staggered like drunks from one changing position to another. Even in their determination

whatever happens 'everything must go.' Now finally gave way like the Falklands to a fall-back policy of maintaining the influence at minimal expense. The decline and fall of the largest Empire the world had ever seen was done within two decades.

"Sir?"

Simpson turned from his thoughts and looked down at the face of the boson's mate. From the waist up almost covered in the oversized blue foul-weather Jacket. He wondered again about the lower deck rumour, slightly built and wide-eyed with the skin like a girl. Even now he looked only thirteen, with his fresh cheeked face. Yet ordinary seaman Peter Collins was eighteen, and shortly to be rated able seaman even though he certainly did not look the stereo type of a sailor.

"Yes Collins." The boy flushed as he looked at McDonald. "The yeoman has just spotted a Black staff car leaving the main gate, and heading for the ship sir."

"Very good Collins, man the side."

Stepping out of the quartermaster's lobby Chief Petty Officer Haines looked quickly around his eyes falling on the side party. He was Cougar's coxswain who manned the ship's wheel both for entering and leaving harbour and at actions stations.

He was a Yorkshire man who had played Scrum-half for the Royal Navy. Standing by the side party he was an impressive figure towering above them, huge square shoulders, and rock hewed features that would have looked more in place on an American sergeant seen in action comics. His uniform was a perfect fit, the red ship's wheel badges on his lapels, contrasting with the three shiny buttons on each sleeve close to the cuff.

To Cougar's lower deck he was the most important man on the ship, next to the Captain. Responsible to the first lieutenant for the daily routine, and all matters concerning discipline. He was along with a regulating petty officer and a leading hand the police force of the ship.

“Good Morning sir;” Haines saluted, as his gaze quickly checked the side party, and back to Simpson noticing the creases on his shirt and jacket, matching those of the quartermaster’s jumper’.

“Good morning Swain.”

“Just one thing to report from last night, the Gibraltar police found Stocker Marshall in an alley way behind the Soho Bar. With his nose broken a few missing teeth, and a lump on the back of his head. He is in sickbay for twenty-four hours. The doctor thinks he may be suffering from concussion so he is keeping him under observations for twenty four hours. ”

“Very good Swain,” said Simpson.

Haines looked at the poor Jimmy. The crew last night had gone on a bender, and if George Penrose the chief steward was half right it had been a right good piss-up in the wardroom too.

All this and a new Captain, and probably a change of destination. Haines had been in this man's navy long enough to know nothing

was ever simple. First had been the scrap dealers on South Georgia, and finally the invasion of the Falkland Islands.

He had been getting his doubts about another problem. There had been no signal after the old Captain had left, confirming *Jimmy* in temporary command until Plymouth.

Then did it really matter, after all Jimmy was senior watch keeping officer. However he knew, nothing moved in this man's Navy without the inevitable chitty, signed and counter signed in triplicate, stamped Secret, and known to everyone but the person receiving it.

For a moment he saw the doubt in Jimmy's face, the shock and the final realization. Poor bastard thought Haines.

He nodded to the first lieutenant as the side party came to attention, their shiny bosun's calls moving up towards their mouths.

Slowly and almost silently the black Humber staff car approach the brow. A relic like the ship from a time long ago. Haines looked

for a moment at the young blond wren trying not to show her stocking tops as she got out of the car, and went to open the rear car door. How the hell did she negotiate that monster around the small narrow streets of Gibraltar, without those big tits getting in the way? He smiled to himself.

For a moment she paused and looked into the car, what was the delay? Haines wondered. She was not quite HMS Brilliant, still the Cougar was at least one step up from muzzle loaders but only just.

"Here we go, man the side" said Pearce his voice filled with nervous tension.

Haines turned around and went quickly down the ladder to his office; the new Captain would see him after the officers. This was not the time and place for his introductions.

## 13.

Oblivious to her curious stare, Captain Paul Brentwood RN leaned forward to peer through the rain smeared windscreen, his face outwardly devoid of expression.

For a moment Brentwood felt the old emotion touch his eyes. The years seemed to fall away. It could have been yesterday when he stepped onto the Cougar for the first time, in the non-tidal basin in Portsmouth. A young midshipman fresh out of Dartmouth, with his future ahead of him. So much had happened, and yet so little. It was the same old Cougar, only the increased dents along her side displaying the past mistakes of her Captains. Fresh paint he noticed covering another recent one. She was there as if she had waited all these years. The ship which had stayed with in his thoughts through the passing years - like a virgin you always remembered the first time. The memories from his youth came tumbling back. Chief Petty Officer Archibald Ransom, a massive, wintry-eyed old man of the sea. Some said he taught Noah seamanship, others he had served at Jutland. With Nelson at

Trafalagar or was it bowls with Drake on Plymouth hoe? Chief Bosun's Mate of Cougar, commonly known throughout the ship as the *Buffer*. There in pearls of wisdom he would give those lessons in how to avoid the clap to splicing rope. There in anecdotes so easily remembered even now. There he had shown Brentwood the lower deck's perspective on the Royal Navy warts and all. Finally showing seamanship was a not just a profession but a vocation. The common sense references to life. The rabbit going round the tree and down the hole, the mnemonic for tying a bowline knot.

The first time in the Captain's Cabin. There to see God as far as he was concerned. Brentwood remembered very little of the talk. Only the deep blue carpet with the patterns of small white fouled anchors. The jacket casually tossed over the back of the armchair, and the medal ribbons, showing various campaigns from the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and finally the Far East. The only one missing from the Captain's war had been the hardest of them all. What was it someone said? If the sheer cold did not kill

you the enemy would, the dreaded Artic convoys. Their bravery now measured not by what men did, but what politicians ignored.

At Plymouth he had once watched her heading out to sea past the misty outline of Drake's Island, and again in Portsmouth. Next time in the non-tidal basin in Plymouth. Cables and red hoses hanging from her like life-support on a very sick patient. The wet dirty scuffed hardboard protecting the internal deck tiles. The littered scraps of paper, wet oily rags and cigarette butts. A litany for a warship in refit. The cabins had been empty, and the passageways grimy. Outside his old cabin they had stacked tools in boxes. Then in Dockyard hands she smelled of diesel, oil, and paint, her last refit eight years ago. From then on it had been planned maintenance only. Brentwood knew it simply as cost cutting neglect. Back into reserve again, and no buyer wanting her. She had become Dartmouth's sea training ship, there she had spent two thirds of her time at buoys, alongside various wharfs, and barely one third of her time training young would be officers, in seamanship, ship handling, and remembering the old

adage. If you are going to be sea sick lad, eat oranges or peanuts, simply because they will taste the same coming up as they did going down. Another one of Ransom's anecdotes.

Brentwood looked at the wren holding open the door.

It was time to go back to work.

The Wren driver studied his profile and wondered. Her passenger with four rings, none of which were new, must be in his forties. Yet there was something different about this officer, she decided. He had dark hair, longer than regulations normally permitted, and his blue eyes were level and extremely grave. As if he was grappling with some constant problem. Trying to come to a decision, with what he had been given. Yet he had that latent touch of recklessness about him which was appealing to her, but at the same time he seemed withdrawn, almost lost in his own world.

Brentwood with a whispered thank you stepped out of the car straightening his crumpled raincoat, and stood looking up at the ship.

“Attention on the upper deck! All hands face the gangway”

Brentwood stood at the bottom of the brow, staring up at the figures of the side party. Probably wondering what sort of a skipper they were getting. Was he any good? Could he keep them all in one piece, where they were going?

Behind him the wren pulled out his suitcase from the boot, and waited respectfully for him. He stared up and along the grey superstructure; she was like her picture ugly. Nothing curved just straight lines and ninety-degree angles, with paint covering a multitude of sins. She almost looked like a castle. With towers crenels and merlons. But she was his, at least for the foreseeable future.

The old excitement came back from the past.

It had been five years since his last command. Now came apprehension; she was old and almost finished like his career. Slowly he walked across the brow, forcing the despair to the back his mind, feeling the knots in his stomach. Perhaps they both had one last thing to do. He was here with nothing but a suitcase behind him; maybe this was the way for his new command. No excess baggage to look back for. Just like the ship a past gone, and an uncertain future, only the present being relevant.

“Pipe”

The calls squealed. Simpson stepped forward and saluted, Brentwood looked at him. He was finally back.

“Welcome aboard, sir.”

## **14.**

The commodore watched the whole proceedings from his window. The cigarette smoke curling up to the rusty green metal shade hanging from the ceiling.

The Falkland crises.

Right or wrongly it was a dispute created a long time ago and left to fester like an open wound in the back water of nowhere, eight thousand miles from the Westminster village. Most of whom had probably no idea where the Falkland Islands were.

So it had gone on with claim and counter-claim, sabre rattling from both governments, until finally the Junta desperate to take the Argentine people's mind of the dire economic state of the country. Saw in the machinations of Margaret Thatcher, the foreign office washing its hands of the Islands. Followed by John Major's swinging defence cuts to the Navy. And taking the Islands and holding them was on. They had been desperate, and Thatcher's government had been blind.

Now the Royal Navy was going all those miles to put British boots back on the Falkland Islands. With the world watching on at the old colonial power flexing what was left of its muscle once again.

## **15.**

The side party remained at attention as Brentwood began to speak.

"Number one, place Cougar immediately on awkward state one. "I want to see the launch in the water as soon as possible. Please ensure the boat's crew are armed, and fully briefed on what to expect from underwater saboteurs. I suggest you put someone responsible in the boat who knows how to handle primed grenades. Then place armed sentries on the bow, and stern of Cougar, and also a couple on the jetty. Oh and make sure the quartermaster is armed, the weapon displayed in the usual manner around his waist. I want people who come to the ship to see we mean business. Another make sure all weapons are loaded. I don't want see the ammunition locked away in the quartermaster's desk, and everyone waiting for the Officer of the

Day to bring the key. Cougar from this moment on is on a war footing and whilst this state exists. Nobody is to be allowed on board from this moment without the correct identification, and their business known to us. Understood number one?"

"Yes sir," said Simpson his mind reeling from the shock.

"Another thing, get the electrical engineering officer to get his department, to rig flood lights on the port side and the jetty, I want no saboteurs hiding in the darkness." "Yes Sir," said Simpson still in shock.

Brentwood turned towards Pearce.

"Officer of the day." I would be obliged if you would get the quartermaster to tighten the guard rails on either side of the gangway, and also get the Bosun's mate to collect my bags from the wren driver, and when they have done this. Ensure the quartermaster is shaven and presentable when he comes on duty. After all they represent the ship."

"Aye Aye, sir," said Pearce his face turning white.

"May I show you to your cabin sir?" said Simpson.

"No need number one, I served on the old Cougar as a midshipman. Give me a few hours and I'm sure I will become acclimatised to her again." He paused before continuing "However I would like to see the officers in the wardroom", Brentwood said, looking at his watch, "in say fifteen minutes time. Afterwards I would appreciate the lower deck being cleared?"

Simpson could only stare and nod.

"It is a bit of a shock I know, but the Cougar as only seventy two hours to get herself ready for operations in the South Atlantic.

"Yes Sir." Simpson looked in astonishment at Brentwood.

"Oh and number one," Brentwood smiled.

"Next time I suggest when you bring her alongside you take into account that twisted keel. It's something the old Cougar likes to remind us of occasionally that she is still wild." Brentwood winked at an astonished Simpson.

## **16.**

Leading Seaman Fletcher turned the tiller on the seaboat for another circuit around the dockyard. In the bow able seaman Bates with his self-loading-rifle looked out across the flat water. On the centre line thwart, Midshipman Riley sat with the box of six primed concussion grenades.

Fletcher turned the boat slowly and began another run down the port side of Cougar.

This was a fucking farce, Fletcher thought.

Padgett had lost his cool, how the hell was he to know how to load a bloody 9mm Browning automatic, he was an RP for Christ sake. They didn't wear side arms in the operations room only chinagraph pencils.

Petty Officer Gordon, Cougar's armourer had brought up the pistol, along with the Self Loading Rifle from the small arms magazine. Neither he nor Bates had touched a Belgium FN rifle

since training at HMS Raleigh. Bates had even forgotten how to fit the magazine, and Fletcher compounded the problem, by sliding an empty magazine into the butt of the pistol, then releasing it, and nearly losing it over the side. Padgett had been beside himself, when it came to issuing ratings with loaded weapons, and especially midshipmen with primed hand grenades.

Padgett had turned to PO Gordon saying load the magazines each with just five rounds and put them in the Quartermaster's desk and lock it. He was off to see the Captain. If he didn't stop this, someone was going to get hurt or killed.

With empty weapons they had boarded the boat and began to searching around the dockyard for tell-tale bubbles, knowing if he saw a diver with a spear gun, he would probably shit himself or throw the fucking useless gun at him.

## 17.

Outside Brentwood could hear Padgett's voice raised in anger. He should go out there, but that would make matters worse. It was Padgett's problem and he needed to sort it out. A few minutes later there was a knock at his cabin door.

"Come in," Brentwood said

Padgett stepped in, his cap under his arm.

Brentwood closed the folder and turned in his chair stayed seated.

"Yes Guns? Seeing Padgett trying to keep his voice under control

"Sir it's about arming the boat crews, someone is going to get hurt or even killed if we do that."

"Why, guns, are the boat's crew not familiar with the Belgium FN rifle or the Browning 9mm. After all they do they not belong to a branch of the armed services that should be fully trained and conversant with their use, safety procedures, and rules of engagement?"

Padgett felt uneasy.

"Fletcher told me he has never fired a Browning and Bates has not touched an SLR since his training days."

"May I ask guns how long have they both been on Cougar?"

For a few seconds Padgett had to think.

"Both ratings joined on the second phase of this particular commission and have been on the ship's books, I think for about nine months sir."

"You think guns, and they have had no small arms drill no refresher course. What about Cougar's boarding and landing party I assume they are familiar with these weapons."

"Yes sir," Padgett felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"When did they last go on a shooting range?"

Padgett felt the rug pulled from under him.

Brentwood thought for a moment, allowing his own anger to cool. This was not the time for him to be venting it, no it would be better if Padgett got a reality check. Although the Admiral who gave it to him, had told him it was for his eyes only. If he was going to get Cougar up and running he needed his officers to understand this was not an exercise. There were no umpires to compare how you did in the exercise. In this, if you did badly you were not coming home.

“Guns you better read this?” said Brentwood handing him a buff folder marked Most Secret, “it may help you with your priorities from now on.”

Brentwood watched Padgett read the file and studied his reaction. It was an intelligence report on an Argentine, named Maximo Nicoletti. Whose father having been part of the crack Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Flotilla MAS diving team, during the second world war, had in the 1960 set up the Cressi sub company to train divers and sell underwater equipment in the Patagonian city of Puerto Madryn. In the early seventies he had joined the Montoneros, an

Argentine leftist urban guerrilla group, and in 1973 trained in subversion and sabotage in Cuba. On the twenty second of August 1975, as part of a group of Montoneros, he had help blow up the Argentine navy Type-42 destroyer the *Santisima Trinidad*, then under construction in the Rio Santiago shipyard.

Captured in a coup in 1976 Nicoletti spent a year under arrest at the Navy's notorious Escuela de Mecanica detention centre in Buenos Aires. Released in 1978 he set up a specialist underwater unit working for the Argentine Navy targeting Chilean ships. Now along with two ex-members of the Montonero guerrilla group, they had flown to Madrid, and were now believed in the La Linea area. Ready to slip into Gibraltar harbour and place limpet mines on the side of any British ships including the Cougar.

Padgett handed back the file, shock clearly on his face.

"Now you want to put unarmed men, against these professionals.

Padgett stood there silent.

Brentwood sighed, the sullen look Padgett was giving him, showed all he needed to know. Getting this ship ready for war, was never going to be easy, now it got just lot harder. This officer did not want to use his initiative only obey orders.

“Very well guns, this is how you want it. Ring this number,” Brentwood passed a note. “It’s the commodore in the dockyard, ask him if he could arrange for Cougar to use the rifle and pistol range on Europa Point, and hire a coach to be exclusively available to Cougar for transporting the boat crews, and the landing parties with their weapons to and from the range. I don’t care how many rounds of ammunition you use, but you have three days to get every man jack of them, able to load and fire their weapon, and hit what they are aiming at. Understand guns?”

“Yes sir,” said Padgett feeling the responsibility fall away, he was back to simply just obeying orders.

“Until then get the armour to give the boat crews for tonight a crash course, and tell them to keep the safety catch on. Let’s

hope, Nicoletti and his motley crew, stay on the Spanish side of the border tonight.”

## **18.**

Reynolds looked up at the deck-head from his bunk; this was a bad dream a fucking nightmare. In four days' time, he should be catching the train for Portsmouth and fourteen days leave. His dear old mum welcoming him home, and the Lenox pub offering him his favourite bar to lean on.

Now just half an hour ago he stood on the quarterdeck in the pissing rain, listening to the new Captain. First telling them all leave was cancelled until further notice, and the ship was to go on a war footing. For Christ sake how many thousands of miles was Gibraltar's dockyard from the bloody Falkland Islands?

Someone was having a laugh. This would be all over long before the old Cougar chugged and spluttered its way to the total exclusion zone. Fucking Argentine Junta, bugging up a guy's leave. It was really not on.

## **19.**

Brentwood drank his second coffee and wondered how fielding had known exactly how he wanted it, black two sugars and very strong, almost Italian espresso. He looked around his quarters the memories coming back.

The captain's quarters aboard Cougar were spacious after HMS Hull a Type 12 anti-submarine frigate, almost as large as the whole wardroom. A sign of less democratic days, when a captain was expected to entertain, to be seen for what he was. It was all fifties memorabilia when her sister ships, Puma, Jaguar, Leopard and Lynx, were the SASA Station (South Africa, South America),

and Admirals needed a cabin when being ferried across the Atlantic from Simon's town Naval Base to Rio Carnival, and onto Mar del Plata for conferences as part of the now defunct South Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

The cabin ran down the port side from the wireless office just below the bridge, to the main boat deck. Compartmentalised into separate sleeping, and day cabin, it was also functional because of its closeness to the bridge, as a sea cabin. Directly outside his door, was a passage way which led through the operations room and up a ladder to the bridge. To the right the boat deck, the doctor's cabin, and the small sick bay, whilst along the starboard bulkhead was a metal locker that supported a huge wooden glass frame containing a threadbare stuffed Cougar, the last of the taxidermist's art for the Royal Navy. It was pure nostalgia and totally irrelevant in the eighties.

Brentwood heard his steward, murmuring something to one of the mess-men in the pantry, had it only been eight hours since

he had arrived on board. He looked down at his paper strewn desk.

The last Captain's personal effects had been removed, wiped clean, so there was nothing to give a clue. Who was he? The Admiral had referred to him only as "your predecessor". The navy's way: no comparisons, no looking back. Taking Command, even joining a ship for the first time, was always a testing time. The last seventy-six crazy hours, the extraordinary meeting with the small Admiral who even tried to make light of it for his sake, had made it worse. Now sitting behind this desk he still could see their faces today, as he had been introduced to the officers. Their lives would depend on him, especially now, as he told them of their sailing orders. The silence all-pervading around the room, no questions just shock, they had been a hint, with the news of his coming. A nightmare rumour not to be taken seriously, until he had brought reality on this quite Sunday just before lunch, he wondered now how many would eat it, or simply drink their dinner.

The wardroom was typical enough. Battered chairs, racks of tattered magazines and paperbacks, and a much used bulkhead sideboard, above which hung the ship's crest, and a framed portrait of the Queen; opposite had been the painting, its twin stared out now above his desk. HMS Cougar her stem slicing through green and blue angry waves whilst X and Y turrets fired a broadside lighting up the dark forbidding sky.

The wardroom its self was a mixed Dartmouth and lower deck, surprisingly with an older age group in their thirties and forties - unusual for today's Navy, with its cut back in ships, matched by early retirement, and the savage redundancies policy concerning individuals caught further up the promotion ladder with its slower progression and those coming up from below needing to push them out of the way. Caught between the rock and the hard stuff, the surplus of senior officers, in this shrinking Navy meant simply the bowler hat of Civi Street, and a very uncertain future. Just like himself thought Brentwood, too many Captains and not enough ships.

Here however, time had literally stood still for Cougar's wardroom. The oldest was the engineer officer. The Chief as he was called. Lieutenant Commander (E) Donald Fraser who had taken Brentwood on a tour of the engine room, and the eight Admiralty Standard Range Diesels in twin banks of four. On paper they could give him fourteen-thousand-four-hundred brake horse powers. However today he wondered, like he did about the small almost delicate looking man with iron-grey hair, a sardonic smile, and a very dry sense of humour. Brentwood had liked him immediately. Leaving the rank smell of oil and diesel, Fraser had simply said "Sir she is old, and they have skimmed on the refits, and there is no way I can give you twenty five knots like the book says, but I may be able to manage twenty. But if you want more I'll do what I can," He had grinned, showing uneven teeth, "Even if I have to blow the bloody cylinders."

Lieutenant Padgett he already knew.

Sub Lieutenant Pearce was a special duties officer, meaning he had come up the hard way from the lower deck. Pearce was

Cougar's sonar officer, and head of the TAS department, and from what he had already seen unsure of himself. Out of his depth in the Wardroom he needed some confidence. Lieutenant Tony Beale, was Cougar's Navigator an old seaman, the archetype old sailing Master in Nelsons time. He was stout, a pot-bellied man with red cheeks and bright blue eyes. The ginger hair on top had long gone, only at the cliff face of his skull, and the eyebrows did it cling to life. Like so many officers he had been passed over, and no longer concerned himself over one more senior officer's thoughts on him.

Lieutenant Porter Cougar's Principle Weapons Officer had shown him the modern Navy. The future reliance on high technology that may work or wouldn't when you needed it most. Brentwood wondered what Porter must be feeling to be going to war with a steam driven operations room, where the only computer was a speed and distance slide rule. His record had shown he had been transferred from HMS Bristol to Cougar on loan whilst the ship, which had taken so long to be built and be fitted out, was now

effectively obsolete. Brentwood wondered, there had been talk of her being in the next wave of ships to replace those damaged or sunk. A command and control ship, able to warn the fleet what was coming whilst unable to do anything about it.

He could laugh now, passed over because he was old Navy. Where the gun was king not a complicated missile. If they had only spent more money in the gun turret, targeting, and gun direction instead of expensive missile.

Now how ironic they gave him two of the old Mark6 4.5 inch twin barrelled turrets. Along with the ancient bog-eyed 285 fire control radar. To prove his theory. In close the gun was far more reliable and cheaper than any complicated missile. He shrugged. He knew the nickname around the lofty corridors of the Admiralty they gave him. There goes 'old muzzle loader' they whispered.

Still he had a full complement for Cougar, thanks in part to the Grimsby. Many of the specialist skills and arcane trades. The two shipwrights, the weapon electrical artificers, even a blacksmith who was also a plumber. On divisions they would be in their pale

collars bleached to show the years the sailor had not done. The milk churn hats bent around the edges to give individuality when everyone else did the same. To a layman's eyes Cougar's divisions would appear to be a standardised body of men. But Brentwood was sensitive to departmental differences and jealousies which separated each of the branches in Cougar's crew. There were the cooks and the stewards, the office writers and the stores ratings. The engineer mechanics and engine room artificers. Separated not only by specialist skills but by decks, from those of the signalmen and telegraphist. The seaman branch itself was divided and subdivided and included gunlayers, quarter's armours, underwater weapon and control ratings, and finally the radar plotters who manned Cougars operation room. Non he knew wore any war medals. Those men had left the service some time before, and although as a crew they were going together. It was still the unknown to all of them.

Brentwood shook his head, the caffeine was wearing off, to be replaced by a sagging tiredness.

Just a quick cat nap but he shook his head.

He went back to remembering the wardroom. The other eight officers and the two midshipmen that completed the wardroom, he would get to know like the rest of the crew as the ship sailed south.

Finally Brentwood had found inside the Captain's safe, a sealed manila envelope addressed to the new Captain only, and sealed with an embossed letter C in red wax, and a note on the bottom right hand corner to be shredded if no Captain was appointed. Brentwood began to read.

*To the new Captain,*

*If you are reading this letter, then Simpson's is not taking the Cougar back to Plymouth, and neither I suspect are you, if the news is anything to go by. I'm sorry I will not be here to pass over command, so here are a few turn-over notes which might be useful for you.*

The jottings contained comments on ship's life since he took command. The details and appraisals of some of the problem his predecessor had faced, and some of the solutions. It was all pure gold to Brentwood starved of the normal change-over to a new ship.

The notes went on to say the first lieutenant although a competent officer, had too high an opinion of himself. Padgett was by the book, following every order to the letter, and the Navigator who could put Cougar anywhere in the world within five minutes of the estimated time of arrival, would then say the bloody rest is up to you. Pearce was a good officer who was the whipping boy for Simpson, and therefore he had lost his confidence.

The truth was the unflinching words in his assessment of the first lieutenant, both in his arrogance, and his self-confidence. Brentwood wondered about his predecessor, the pain as his mind was being destroyed by the tumour. Simpson was he the type of officer who would take some of the pressure of his Captain's

shoulders, or would he stand back do the minimum required, and wait to step into dead man's shoes. Brentwood picked up his half empty coffee cup. It was not good, but it might have been a worse beginning. A whole lot worse.

## **20.**

In the quite of the sonar room, next door to the operations room, able seaman Sharpe went through the user checks on the 174 search, the 170 attack and the 162 target classification sonars, all of which were pure World War Two vintage. The squid a three barrelled mortar on the quarterdeck, could throw three depth charges a distance of 275 yards ahead of the ship. It was better than rolling them of the back but only just.

It had been said the squid mounting on Cougar had been taken from a Loch class frigate just before it was scrapped. The story was it had sunk a U boat in 1944. Sharpe now wondered thirty

eight years later could this antiquated system sink an Argentine Unterseebooten. He doubted it.

## **21.**

Brentwood looked again at the papers piled on his desk, and Cougars sailing orders, the passage intentions to follow a covert track through the Canary Islands, and anchor off Ascension and wait for the arrival of four STUFT (ships taken up in trade) and escort them down to a position determined by the Task Force Commander.

On the problems of the four Argentine Submarines, Intelligence had one around the Falklands Islands, one off the Argentine coast and the other two in their home Port. But like any newspaper that was yesterday's news, and now only fit to wrap the fish and chips in.

However, if the Argentine Junta wanted to win this conflict they would need all their assets to go after the carriers. If they could

sink or severely damage the Invincible, this would seriously compromise the British operation to take the Falklands, sink the Hermes and the task force might as well go home.

## **22.**

The Commodore, watched the armed sentries patrolling the Jetty and on the upper deck. The launch manoeuvring around the enclosed harbour, and the flood lights now finally rigged. At least their Captain was taking security seriously. With a sovereignty problem between Gibraltar's and Spain, and Argentina with its close ties with Spain, somebody in Madrid could be turning a blind eye. To visitors from a faraway land.

The phone rang on his desk, and he picked it up, "Commodore Howard speaking. The voice on the other end sounded hollow,

“Good evening sir, this is lieutenant commander Simpson. We meet last night. May I come over and discuss with you Cougar’s requirements?”

Smiled to himself, “come on over I will have a coffee waiting for you.”

“Black with two sugars sir.”

“Will be waiting for you commander.”

He put the phone down and went towards the office door. The Scroungers department had just gone international.

## **21.**

Brentwood looked out of the scuttle at the jetty and beyond, imagining the Moroccan coast and the Atlas Mountains beyond. There was something in the atmosphere, he had felt it coming on board, fear maybe apprehension, no there was something else.

The crew had crowded themselves on the small quarterdeck, as he had stood above them on a box between the barrels of X

Turret - first had come off caps, and the formal reading of himself in as Cougar's new Commanding Officer - a tradition going even further back than Nelson. The crew had looked at him as one, stone faced and silent. Not even screeching sea-gulls could no break the mood surrounding the ship. They knew a few minutes later, they were going to fight a modern war, with the oldest ship in the Task Force. The sullen silence and mood had been depressing. He was sure they were blaming him for all this. Still would they be that eager on the Task Force to get to grips with the Argi's? Maybe, but he suspected the more realistic commanders would be planning how to carry out their orders effectively, and also how to survive.

He thought of the first part of the orders.

Protect the merchant men and deliver safely them safely to the Task Force Commander. After that it was suck it and see. In war things changed so rapidly. What might be the right role for HMS Cougar now? In eighteen days' time it could be something

completely different. He needed to get the ship and its crew ready for anything this war might throw at them.

Brentwood stopped his racing thoughts and brought them back to the present. That was the future, this moment counted more.

It was there, his responsibilities, the reality of the men under his command their lives in his hands. Some would be writing last letters home. The British Forces Post Office, BFPO ships, had been told to hold the letters till the Cougar had sailed. The media were already telling the world what was happening, only the final operations would be kept from them until they had been completed. Still he had already seen the so called experts, and politicians making their appraisal of the situation, and their solutions and criticisms, from the safety of a warm studio. Brentwood looked down at his papers, his anger returning, especially for the politicians who never understood the Royal Navy, but went on to crucify it for nothing more than political dogmatism.

Whatever role Cougar was given, wherever the ship was sent, things were going to be hard. A warship, he did not need to be told, is only as strong as her crew. In this from a quick scan of the records and ages of the men, in the lower deck it was around twenty, in the Wardroom a surprising thirty five. The reality was he had probably the most experienced crew in the task force. However; this ship had the nickname throughout the fleet as the P-an-O Cougar, even to the point someone had put a sign over the wardroom, stating this was now the cocktail lounge. If the old Cougar was going to survive, the crew needed to understand they were going to a shooting war, where some of them might not be coming back.

Stretching over he picked up the black Bakelite telephone, and looking at the list of numbers and names on the bulkhead opposite began to dial.

## **16.**

The commodore felt the heat from his flattened ear, as he finally put the telephone back on its cradle, and yawned. Another box ticked on the biblical list of requirements. In the adjoining office he could hear Patterson cajoling with her sexy pleading voice some faceless bureaucrat to check again.

Turning to look outside he could see HMS Grimsby alongside Cougar. The men from both ships in long lines forward and aft, passing boxes and objects, whilst others ticked them off lists on clip boards.

He pulled the last cigarette from the packet and assigned the empty crumbled box to the pile accumulating in the galvanised bucket he called a litter bin. The truth in the last twenty hours he had been fuelled by nicotine and caffeine.

However there was one problem no amount of cajoling and pleading solved. Even after trying numerous alternatives including Patterson's sexy voice, and finding both were banging

their heads against a brick wall. He had finally used the number of last resort at the top of the list. The voice on the other end had not been hers, just another faceless civil servant being polite almost courteous, with a smattering of condescension, as though he was noting the commodore's failure to acquire the two items asked for personally by the Captain of Cougar.

'Somebody will be in touch Commodore to assist you,' said the Oxbridge voice, ending the short conversation, with a click of the receiver. That had yesterday evening, now other things superseded it. Like new motors and servos, for the transmitting station.

## **17.**

The two ships ground against their fenders. The type 12 anti-submarine frigate seemed to dwarf the Cougar, its single funnel giving it more bulk against Cougars lack of any. Across both

decks men in lines passed boxes of all shapes from one to another in a fast flowing current.

In one line of dry stores Able Seaman George Braithwaite towered both length ways and width ways over the snaking line. He was the archetype idea of the bone headed gunner. For just under three hours, he had passed boxes and crates through his huge shovel like hands, down the line of sailors, stretching from the hatchways on the Grimsby, to the hatchways on Cougar. Nobody read the labels anymore, or commented on which box contained the dog meat, or horsemeat, and the last song, about an engineer, a large steam driven phallus, and a willing maiden, had long since died away. To be replaced with monotonous silence interspersed, with pay attention, as the occasional box fell from tired and bored automaton hands.

Twice having played for the Navy, Braithwaite's promising rugby career had been finally cut short in the Old Vic pub in Portsmouth. When on the Friday night just before the game against the Army. He had laid out two marines and a bone

crusher. (Military Police) There to be given later his reward of twenty eight days in her Britannic Majesty's Detention Quarters. (DQs) A place where degrading and meaningless task were performed with the zeal of an American Midwest Methodist preacher on speed.

Missing his three good conduct badges and heading for another tour of duty in DQ's he had joined Cougar, awaiting discharge with the first batch of redundancies. There as a gun aimer, he'd been given the responsibility for the 40mm Bofor, just aft of the main mast, in a circular sponson, now nicknamed by the weapons electrical department, as the 'Bonehead's roundabout.' The Bofor last used in anger in the Pacific against Japanese Kamikazes, had been bolted to the mid-section of a six-inch Colonial class light cruiser. Later assigned at wars end to the breakers yard, the gun had been transferred to the Cougar to save money. It had stayed there, passed over for replacement with the inevitable Seacat short-range surface to air missile. The antique ignored as just something to paint occasionally like the

rest of the ship. Now to everybody surprise had been lovingly restored by Braithwaite and his huge hands.

Because of the ship's final destination, the whole crew had thought him barking mad, but with fists like shovels and a record for jaw cracking. Nobody was going to tell him. Least of all the small gunner's mate, who came eventually to admire Braithwaite's work.

In truth it was the first time in his naval career he had been given sole responsibility for anything that required his full and surprising range of skills. At home living with his Mother in Gosport, he had begun to restore an old MG sports car. In the navy he was given bulkheads to chip down to bare metal, and the side of a ship to paint. With the occasional brass work to polish, simply because it was assumed by his superior, that he was probably thicker than two short planks.

Now his pride and joy, Braithwaite looked up at the Bofor, covered in a white plastic tarpaulin he had made himself, and smiled. Remembering the spare locker where he kept all his

cleaning gear, and the oily rags for the gun. He thought of the small tins of paint in a battered wooden box, and the delicate paint brushes he had bought to repaint the ship's crest on the gun's wooden tampon. Now they could be used to paint the aircraft kills, his gun would inflict on the Argentine air-force.

## **16.**

Thirty six hours since joining Cougar, Brentwood slumped in the armchair for a moment allowing his heavy lids to close. His mind still remembering the inevitable list of spares needed to get the ship ready for war, and the thousand and one tasks he knew still waited for him. On the starboard side HMS Grimsby had come alongside in the dawn light to be ransacked by Cougar's crew,

Two big evolutions had been carried out successfully after a lot of shouting cursing and bruised fingers. The first had been unbolting Grimsby's 978 radar transmitter and receiver; because

Cougar's was so unreliable. However the biggest, had been the swapping over of the twin gun barrels from Grimsby to replace the two worn out in Cougar.

Padgett had mentioned almost off hand in their first walk around the gunnery department. The barrels on the 'A' turret were original and by now almost smooth bor. Brentwood had looked at Padgett. The comment made in an almost casual manner. Brentwood had sighed knowing it confirmed the last Captain's appraisal of Padgett. He did everything by the book. Even down to reporting the gun barrels were almost useless when it came to accuracy. Leaving the Captain with the problem and no solution. Only if anything happened that required a court martial, he would be there to say he had informed the Captain of the problem, not once mentioning the fact he had not even contributed an idea for the solution.

In this Padgett had the true Guinness Bottle shoulders, everything including responsibility slid from them. Well not anymore thought Brentwood.

"Guns, I suggest you talk to your opposite number on the Grimsby, and work out how you could swap over the gun barrels on their 'A' turret with ours. I'm told by CPO Rankin they are in better condition than ours.

"Aye Aye sir," replied Padgett, his face showing surprise tinged with anger.

Brentwood looked at him for a moment and saw why Chief Petty officer Rankin one of Cougar's weapons electrical engineer artificer had made the suggestion to him when he had visited 'A' Turret, and not Padgett. The old chief network and you owe me a favour. Chief to Chief with the officers being left little choice. Contrary to what the media and public believed. The bullion sleeves did not make the Royal Navy work. It was the three buttons of the Chiefs that made this man's navy float and fight.

For a moment he wondered was the chief going to get it in the neck from Padgett for what amounted to going over his head. No, Brentwood chuckled, Padgett knew the sizes of the cog wheels within his department.

“Guns, just remember what a one-thousand-pound-bomb would do to this ship if it exploded in the engine room.”

Padgett looked at him with blank eyes.

“You will not have to worry about the gunnery department sir.”

Something in his tone, the hint of challenge or aggressiveness, made Brentwood reply coldly, “We shall have to see?”

## **14.**

Fletcher, looked at his watch under the flood lights, it was like being on the bloody stage. Now that Grimsby had sailed for Plymouth, minus a few stokers, electrical and weapons ratings and about everything that had not been bolted down. The crew he suspected would probably be on bread and water rations for the trip home to Plymouth. Still being on that was fucking better than where he was going, even if he had steak all the way there.

On board she carried back Cougar's wardroom silver. But not the lucky cat. Well a few thought that. To him Cougar's mascot was just a moth eaten old moggy. The wooden partitions put up in the junior and senior ratings messes to give an individual more homely feel to the stark metal of the mess deck had been ripped out, along with the various wooden bars leaned on by so many crew over the years. Surprisingly this had included the wardroom bar, with its rows of ship's crests - varnished over the years to a glass like shine. But it was all about the dreaded fling splinters. The seat covers, the chintz curtains even in the Captain's cabin, the wardroom and the sick bay now were stowed on Grimsby.

Inside the ship looked stark grey, and grim.

Outside the paint parties had started to tone down all the bright work with the inevitable grey paint. The fancy white bollards and the red and green capstans on the forecastle were now dull grey, and lastly the pendant numbers would be totally gone after another coat tomorrow.

A Constant reminder of where they were going.

Fletcher turned the boat on the next leg of his patrol around the dockyard, and his continuing search for something he did not want to meet. Argentine Special Forces, spear guns and divers knives. The rumours had flown around the ship. So called intelligence reports from Britain had indicated the possibility of a group of professional underwater demolition experts, who may have landed in Madrid from Buenos Aires, and moved to Algeciras, just across the bay from Gibraltar with specialist diving gear and Italian limpet mines to blow up any warship inside Gibraltar's Harbour. Of course till last night it had been boring going round and round the harbour trying to disappear up ones asshole trying not to think of what lay under the water.

Still thought Fletcher with a smile, Midshipman Riley had caused a panic at three in the morning the previous day. When half a sleep he saw bubbles coming up to the surface, and panicked. Fletcher had tried to tell him it was probably the local crabs farting. But by then he had pulled the pin and dropped a grenade over the side.

The resulting underwater detonation was heard reverberating along the ship's side. At this point Fletcher now was quite undecided what came first. The stunned fish floating on the surface, or the ship's alarm and the pipe to assume Awkward State 1.

It later transpired back on board after his watch. A half-asleep stoker in his panic had reported an explosion forward. This resulting in what could only be described as a debacle which eventually sorted itself out into an utter shambles.

With half the crew lining up on 'X' Turret in the various states of undress some with their lifejackets partially inflated, and displaying some bizarre underwear.

To Fletcher as he came alongside the quarterdeck having been summoned by Padgett whose face was turquoise red. Neither the fat gunner nor the men lined down the side of X Turret could in no way be described as a pretty sight. In the unflattering flood light it showed a reason to wonder why homosapiens should have ever achieved being top of the food chain.

## **15.**

Since getting the immediate shopping list from Simpson followed four hours later by Cougar's supply officers'. The Commodore tried not to remember the single sleep period of six hours followed by a luxurious shower and one full in your face English breakfast taken over twenty hours ago. Outside if proof was needed of their achievements, were the mountain of crates, some yet to be opened whilst others lay discarded like empty packaging around a Christmas tree.

In the office the Commodore listened though the half opened door at Patterson putting on her husky sexy voice to persuade some hapless jobs worth on the phone to look again just for her. The Commodore leaned back the chair to rest his head on the wall, his eyes closing for a moment just listening to the little girl

lost voice of Patterson. Howard smiled to himself she should have gone to Rada.

They had played the help me I'm just a girl in need of assistance, and him the hard nose bellicose officer who did not take no for an answer. For ninety-nine percent of the time it had worked. Almost a bad cop good cop scenario from the television.

He had talked, intimidated, or simply like the Mafia mentioned a certain telephone number to ring. The demands for this and that numbered part. Victuals-fresh, tinned, dried, and frozen, thousands of individual stores and spares seemed without any problem to fly out from storerooms in Plymouth, Portsmouth and the underground caverns near Bath arriving on the jetty, sometimes in a matter of hours.

For a moment he had felt almost godlike, the full realization in his long career, he had the entire Royal Naval procurement team just waiting for him to shout jump, and them to ask how high.

However on two items they had failed.

In between phone calls he had watched the crew of Cougar like ants; strip the old Grimsby of everything not bolted down, the spanners came out. The large brass cartridges, the shells themselves, and the boxes of direct action fuse for surface targets, and proximity fuses for anti-aircraft. The next big evolution had been manoeuvring a portable vintage crane, and swapping over the twin gun barrels from Grimsby's 'A' turret with Cougar's forward gun battery.

The real problem for him as he occasionally watched in between phone calls had been the hours ringing around trying desperately to acquire two general-purpose machine guns for the ship. None were available, and so it would appear the final phone call to the top had yielded nothing.

He looked for another packet of cigarettes, and wondered if he could requisite another couple of hundred, and have them flown out, by fighter jet. He probably could do just that. He smiled to himself, he felt so powerful, and yet in this one insurmountable problem of the machine guns, he was totally helpless.

So deep in the problem and despairing of a solution he almost jumped as Patterson knocked and opened the office door, allowing a tall elegant man to enter and hold out his hand to Howard

His grip was both firm and dry.

“Allow me to introduce myself; Commodore” In an accent you could only acquire from Oxbridge, yet still showing in his dark skin dark eyes, his middle east ancestry. He pulled out a card from his jacket pocket. The identity card had showed the Commodore his name was Alexis, and the surname not normally found in Anglo Saxon registers. Below this were some very famous letters, which the Commodore knew probably cleared him for almost anything.

The immaculate suit Howard noticed not only concealed a powerful body, but he was sure a pistol too. The man waited for the office door to close, before he continued. “Commodore Howard I’m told you have a problem that I may be able to help

you with?" The voice soft and reassuring, and yet it made him tense.

Howard looked at him with incredulity, what could this man from the intelligence service help him with, he had no idea?

The man sat down across from the desk without asking and the Commodore decided to follow in silence.

"A pair of point five calibre machine guns with a large supply of ammunition. Is this correct?"

Howard could only say "yes," wondering what the hell this man's title, official or unofficial was, and the hell was he going to help him acquire these illusive machine guns.

"If you want them for Cougar then please be at the end of the mole at midnight. Dressed in dark clothing and no insignia's of rank. There a group of gentlemen similarly dressed like yourself, will pick you up in their boat for a trip across the straights," said the man pausing to pull out from his jacket pocket a battered gunmetal cigarette case. Opening it and offering it to the

commodore. The strong smell was pure Turkish, and Howard politely declined knowing his throat was already far too raw for one of those.

The man without asking lit one. The strong aroma filling the room.

“Now commodore, on arrival along the coast, you will be taken to a beach house belonging to a man called Kassim. It’s not his real name of course but he will answer to it in your presence. Inside Commodore you will be shown some open packing cases. Look into them and if you think they will be of any use to the ship, simply accept them, with the usual handshake of a gentleman.”

“What about the payment for them,” asked Howard?

“It will be of no concern to you Commodore. That has already been taken care off” said the man, with a smile that held no warmth.

“Then please enjoy the hospitability of Kassim’s house, although he is a devout Muslim, and does not drink alcohol, he as other

diversions that you may enjoy. Please remember not to insult him by declining, he is a friend who is offering to help you and the ship." The man chuckled.

Alexis if that was his name paused took in the smoke and relaxing continued.

"Later the same men who brought you to the beach house Commodore will return and pick you up and the weapons for return to Gibraltar"

"Will they not be staying with me," asked Howard?

"No they should be away for no more than two hours, they have other business further inland."

The man stood up.

The Commodore was about to start asking around a thousand questions, but the man held up his hand to stop him.

"That Commodore is all you need to know."

He turned for the door, and for a moment looked back at Howard.

“Oh and one final thing Commodore do not bring any form of identification it will not be required.”

## **16.**

Brentwood sat in his armchair looking at the picture of the ship over his desk. Strictly speaking it should have gone with the rest on HMS Grimsby, but strangely he needed it. The argument with Padgett about the issue of live ammunition to the boats crew had summed up the problem with Cougar. She was painted Royal Navy grey, with gun turrets fore and aft. On her stern she flew the white ensign, and to all intents and purposes was governed by Queen's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. Nevertheless as a warship, a fighting ship she was not even close to being ready for a

shooting war. Tomorrow morning at 0800 she would sail first for the Ascension Island, and then South towards Operation Corporate and the Falklands Islands. But Brentwood, even after much heart-searching, could not find much to like about any of his officers. Most ships' engineer officers were men apart, from his experience, defending their private worlds of roaring machinery from all comers, including captains, to the death. Fraser, on the other hand, was almost insulting about his trade and about Cougar. There was a total lack of commitment; even now he felt the crew were going through the motions. Knowing it will be all over before they got there. The Awkward fiasco had proved all that. Constant drills could do it, but for that he needed at least six weeks even two months. But even that would turn them all into automatons and that would be too slow.

The Argentine pilots he knew were both professional and courageous. They had probably practised intensively on the

two Type 42 destroyers of their own Navy. The ARA Hercules and Santísima Trinidad. So they knew all the blind spots of the 965P band air search radar, carried by most of the ships in the task force including Cougar. And the same with the sea dart missile system. Brentwood knew they would be coming in low on the deck. Which would make them blind to the 965, and only detected on the old 3cm 993 target indicator radar at around ten miles. Flying at four-hundred knots plus it gave the Cougar seconds to react, and the crew were nowhere near that reaction time.

## **17.**

The bloody thing came silently out of the night like a wraithlike ghost. Leading Seaman Fletcher nearly shit himself as curled his fingers around the butt of the 9mm Browning, his thumb on the safety catch his other hand on the tiller ready to get the fuck out

of it. In the darkness a cockney voice came across the water. "No need for that sailor we are the good guys."

The sound had been a low murmur, alerting midshipman Riley, Fletcher, and Bates, they were not alone. Towering over the Cougar's launch, it came into the edge of the flood lights, black sleek and huge. Almost from another world. The glossy hard chime shape catching the flickering light on the water as it slowly came alongside the mole. Two men in black, their heads covered in balaclava's jumped from bow and stern with ropes to bring the boat into the side.

Fletcher felt his heart rate slow down to a less painful pace, as he felt his sphincter relax. He looked up and watched another figure in black jump on board and the men follow. It was a single fluid motion with hardly any noise as the large speed boat turned and headed back out into the straights.

Fletcher gripped the tiller it had taken less than a minute. Some bastard knew about this, and never bothered to mention it. Here it was again the old naval tradition of treating the junior ratings

like fucking mushrooms, keep them in the dark and feed them bullshit.

He knew that boat from his time in Poole. When he went fishing in his brother's small boat inside and around the harbour. Even in the distance and in daylight it looked large and menacing. Tonight it had just scared the crap out of him.

He thought of Padgett just the type of trick that bastard would play on them. If one thing came out of this he was going to shove a four-point-five shell up that fat bastard's arse and fire the fucking cartridge.

Suddenly Fletcher felt cold hard fear. This was not some poxy exercise at Portland defending half a dozen old wooden huts, with a bang your dead end to the game. This was for real and it was scaring the shit out of him.

## **18.**

Two black shapes on the foredeck of the boat helped Howard on board, and without a word showed him down to a cabin lit by red light to preserve the occupant's night vision. Secured by a shoulder harness to a padded seat, he looked at the ten silent men all dressed in black, and wondered what the hell he had got himself into for just two machine guns.

Then for some strange reason he smiled to himself. Just as the speeding boat hit a wave and literally became airborne for a moment before crashing back with bone shattering impact back into the sea. My god he thought I'm enjoying this. For the first time in three days he was finally free of the telephone and the jobs worth brigade.

The trip across the straits of Gibraltar was the ride from hell, in the dim red light of the cabin, he could only guess at the speed the boat was doing by the bouncing sensations he felt through the seat of his pants. He was flying more than skimming across

the Med. In the air, his stomach wanted to come up into his throat. The crash landing back onto the sea made him feel his stomach was punched back into place. Finally, after what seemed a lifetime of simulating a pea bouncing about inside a drum. The boat began to slow. Quickly the men released their harnesses, and began taking various weapons from gun racks, and lockers. White phosphorus grenades, were easy to spot they were cylindrical with WP written across it. Splaying the pins, they coiled masking tape around the handle as another precaution for holding it in place. In one he saw the Heckler and Koch MP5 with a large cover over the protruding barrel he guessed it was a silencer. Another soldier pulled down the slide on a Remington pump action shotgun, and one turned to show an Armalite with a grenade launcher below the barrel. The huge man they called Rhino carried a light machine gun. All had shoulder holsters each with various butts of pistols protruding from them. Quickly they passed a small tin of black face paint and began to daub the skin with random lines.

Now to the Commodore's astonishment the men jumped up and down to check that everything was comfy. Finally checking each other's harness they loaded their weapons with various clicking and slapping sounds of hands on bare metal.

Silently they stood swaying with the boat as they waited for the order to go topside

One of them men moved up to him and smiled his white teeth shining against the black.

"Commodore we are going to drop you off at the gates to a villa. Go right on in, you are expected. There you will meet a man called Kassim; he is a merchant we do business with from time to time. He will show you some items I'm sure the Captain of the Cougar would appreciate. If they look just the ticket shake hands, do not ask the price that has already been taken care of. Enjoy his hospitality, for it maybe a few hours before we can pick you and the equipment up."

“Will I need to be armed?” asked the Commodore totally now out of his depth.

The face smiled.

“No commodore you carry the only weapon you will need tonight.”

A Jordy voice murmured to chuckles of laughter inside the cabin.

“Please ensure you keep the British end up sir.”

## **19.**

The arched doorway took his breath away, an Arabian night’s fantasy. Huge golden curved Arabic scripts festooned across blue and green tiles. In the centre a fountain played creating a relaxing tinkling sound. Above the elaborately tiled floor were beautiful Arabesque archways leading off into the closed door of other rooms.

A slim six foot Kassim came out from one doorway dressed in an immaculate white suit. The formal greeting over, the commodore was shown into a small ornate room. Intricate gold Arabic script adorned the deep blue walls, long cool white silks hung across the windows, gauzy and filmy they hid the starless night. Silk cushions lay scattered in a semicircle, around an oriental red carpet of geometrical gold patterns. In its centre stood two gilded Louis XIV chairs quite out of character with the rest of the rooms design.

“Commodore please, take a seat,” Kassim pointed to the left hand chair.

“First to business, for time I’m afraid is running away from me.” Kassim said with a disarming smile.

He clapped his hands, and two burly men brought in a long wooden crate held on either side by two rope handles. Stencilled on the sides were the letters US Army in fading black. They laid them down in front of them and lifting of the lid stepped back in silence.

“This commodore is the M2 Browning belt-fed recoil-operated, air-cooled machine gun. The weapon is capable of single shot, as well as automatic fire, and operates on the short recoil principle. The rate of Fire, from single shot, to multiple short bursts, is based on a total cyclic rate of around five-hundred rounds per minute, Maximum Range 7,440 yards or if you prefer 6800 meters, and the maximum effective range around 2000 yards, or again if you prefer 1800 meters. Please feel free to exam the weapon, as you can see it is still in its original packing and factory grease. The pair comes with the standard mounted M3 tripod which I’m sure the engineers on the ship can adapt, and of course both weapons come with a spare barrel. Also included is 40,000 rounds of ball ammunition, and 10,000 rounds of tracer. The M2 machine gun provides high-volume, long-range, automatic fires for the suppression or destruction of soft skinned targets. Commodore after seventy years’ service it’s still a very formidable weapon.

The Commodore looked down at the long box, and the machine gun crated inside, he had never seen one this close, the weapon looked lethal. For a moment he stared and then returning his gaze to Kassim wondered what else this man knew, that had secret stamped in red at the top of the page.

“Now Commodore these are not on your list, but never the less, I thought the ship could use them where it is going.” Kassim chuckled, “I understand your special forces are equipped with the very same.”

The door opened again, and a huge man came silently in carrying a long black box, marked General Dynamics and underneath the address of Falls Church, Virginia. Placing it on the floor in front of the Commodore’s feet he lifted the lid and stepped back.

“May I show you the man portable shoulder fired supersonic Stinger missile. This launcher weighs in around about 30 pounds. Relatively compact at 1.5 meters long and 70 millimetres in diameter.”

The Commodore looked up his face unable to hide his genuine surprise, he had heard of the weapon and its formidable accuracy in Afghanistan in the hands of trained Mujahedeen operators, especially when used against Russian Helicopters and aircraft.

To fire the weapon, the operator merely aims the missile at the target. When the seeker locks on, it makes a distinctive noise. The soldier pulls the trigger, and two things happen.

A small launch rocket shoots the missile out of the launch tube and well clear of the soldier who is firing it. The launch engine falls away and the main solid rocket engine lights. This rocket propels the Stinger to approximately 1,500 mph or mach2.

The missile then flies to the target automatically and explodes.

The Stinger missile can hit targets flying as high as 11,500 feet (3,500 metres), and has a range of about 5 miles (8 km). This means, in a general way, that if an airplane is visible to the operator not just a dot or vapour trail, then it is likely that the Stinger can bring it down.

He waited a moment before continuing what Howard thought was his sale pitch.

“This man portable air defence system, will provide close in surface to air weapons defence, for the ship against even low flying aircraft. With its infrared guidance system compatible with the latest sidewinder Mk2, it can take targets head on. It is commodore a fire and forget weapon and extremely accurate.”

How did this Arab with immaculate taste in suits, and houses, know exactly what the old Cougar needed, and how the hell did he get the missile everybody wanted. The queue for this weapon in legitimate countries was staggering never mind the black market. He had heard the Captain had wanted Stingers as another layer of defence, but they had been told it was like fairy dust. Then this man who certainly was an arms dealer seemed to know everything. But then that was his trade to sell to the highest bidder whatever or whoever the buyer was. A country terrorist groups or just an individual. The dockyard had spies, they had seen what was going on around the ship, and this man

knew exactly what the ship wanted and what the value of those goods was. However was it that simple, the Commodore doubted it? No men like Alexis were not into Royal Naval procurement. This operation he knew was not just for him, he had been attached because probably a voice from Downing Street had asked a favour.

Kassim interrupted his thoughts.

“There are ten of these Commodore. However, if I had been given another twenty four hours, I could have acquired a further two more, but I understand the ship sails in less than twelve hours. Then that is the speed of war,” he looked at his watch. So I’m afraid ten will have to do. ” Kassim smiled.

Howard looked up from the interior of the box, and seeing Kassim with his hand extended, took it.

“So Commodore we have a deal,” he smiled with no warmth in his eyes.

“This concludes our business and I must leave you Commodore with my sincere apologies. Now until your friends come to pick you up. May I offer you a drink, as a devout Muslim I have no alcohol in the house, but maybe a soft drink or tea perhaps. He clapped his hands and the door opened

The girl came silently into the room and stood by Kassim’s left heel, her thick copper-bronze hair cascading in waves down her back. Her perfect oval face highlighting the down cast blue eyes, the petit nose, the full glossy red lips, and around her slender neck, a gold filigree collar. The emerald green top intertwined with patterns of gold thread enclosing yet displayed full firm breasts, rising high on the rib cage to thrust out their dark hard nipples. Below them her naked belly was concave and palpitating like a small bird’s heart, in her navel a green stone shone, bringing his eyes to the intricate green pantaloons shimmering over her naked flesh.

“This is Aisha, she will look after you every need, till you are ready to leave Commodore.” Kassim smiled with a wink.

The Commodore could only stare as the girl came to his chair, and slid down in a single fluid motion to her knees, her thighs parting wide, the translucent silk pantaloons stretched taut hiding nothing of her open hairless sex.

## **20.**

Simpson looked at the officers around the wardroom table, and up at the clock. It was close to one-thirty in the morning, and they looked exhausted. They were Cougars heads of departments, and the middle management in the ship's organisation. He looked down at the sheets of paper in front of him. This was the fourth time he had gone over the list of defects. God knew how they had done it, but the defects list had been reduced to a page, most of which would be waiting for them on Ascension Island. To Simpsons surprise Cougar was ready for

operational duties, well at least as much as was possible for the old girl.

Thanks in part to the Commodore, his pretty wren assistant, and the dockyards back home. The supply depots throughout the UK, and what was left of Gibraltar's dockyard. They had taken the almost empty ship waiting for decommission and the breakers yard, and filled her up with everything she would need for operations in the South Atlantic.

Why, thought Simpson did it always take a bloody war to unite the country and get things done?

## **22.**

The Commodore sat on the bouncing hard benches inside the truck, still trying to come to terms with the shock of the bullet riddled vehicle.

The girl had gone and he had hurriedly dressed looking at his watch and realizing the men were forty minutes late. Quickly he

walked around the ornate house feeling fear creeping into his mind, the place was empty.

Ten minutes later he heard in the distance the screech of tires and the crunch of gravel. Stepping outside the porch he saw the crates stacked neatly by the fountain. He watched the lorry brake by his feet. When he looked up. He saw to his horror the bullet holes, and the smell of leaking diesel.

In the back he saw the men on the benches. The wounded soldier laying between their feet. Even with a large field dressing over his stomach it was not thick enough to soak up all blood. Quickly two men jumped down and began passing the heavy crates into the truck.

“Fuck me Commodore you are going to war big time,” said a Geordie voice from inside the darkness of the truck. Moving silently into the porch the last man opened a pouch on the side of his Bergrin. “Got to make it look good for the local, Gendarmerie,” he laughed throwing empty spent cartridges into the hallway and tossing a couple of prosperous grenades in.

Leaping on the truck the man slapped the side. To the meshing sound of gears and racing engine, the truck skidded for a moment and sprayed gravel into the porch just as both grenades went off in a blinding white flash.

The commodore looked on in silent horror, and the man who tossed the grenades chuckled. 'All part of the devious plan the intelligence services and Kassim thought up.

Howard looked lost, "tell you about it later, now I need to concentrate on hanging on to my arse I suggest you do the same sir. The mad Scotsman driving this truck went to the Kamikaze school of motoring." He laughed and gasped as the truck hit a pothole. "He makes Jeremy Clarkson look like grandpa on a mobility scooter. Trust me sir and hang on, we can't stop to pick you up if you should fall out." Howard gripped the hanging strap. Just as everybody in the truck shouted 'Fuck'.

The vehicle moved fast along the potholed road, and every time a wheel sank into one the suspension groaned and screeched. The truck had sounded in a bad way but the driver kept the speed up

as best he could along the winding coast. The men pressing one foot on the edge of the bench opposite in an endeavour to stop themselves from being thrown about, whilst all the time wedging the other foot against the sides of the wounded man to try and stop him bouncing around. At this speed and with this road it was hopeless. The fantasy of the girl had turned into a nightmare, and for just a moment the Commodore wanted to close his eyes and take a deep breath, and maybe he would wake up in his soft bed back at the Gibraltar hotel.

The truck bounced and he knew from the jarring pain in his spine this was all for real.

The truck skidded throwing up dust, and stopped. Instantly the men started dropping out of the back, and carrying the wooden cases towards the water's edge of a deserted sandy cove

"Are you coming Commodore, the Jumblies, can't be too far behind,"

"Jumblies?" Said the commander, noting he was the last in the truck except for the wounded man.

"Yeh! The bloody Argentine Special Forces who had come to take possession of five extra air-launched AM-39s. Believe you me they are not a set of happy bunnies. Now if enough cackle and let's get the fuck out of here."

The Commodore his body shaking, looked into the truck. "Are you just going to leave him there?"

"No point in taking him, he's already back at Pool, well in spirit that is. Take this it was Cloggie's' he won't be needing it. It has ten rounds in the mag one in the chamber. The soldier handed the Commodore a 9mm Browning.

"Have you ever fired one of these sir?"

"Yes but it was long time ago."

"Remember then to pull back the hammer from half to full cock, and push the safety catch next to your thumb forward to release, and the pistol will be ready to fire"

The Commodore took the gun and jammed it in the waist band of his pants.

Now let's just give Cloggie a Valhalla funeral, and fuck off."

Pulling two grenades from the outside of his Bergan, he pulled the pins and releasing the handles tossed them both into the back of the truck.

"Let's go sir."

The Commodore turned as the two white prosperous grenades went off lighting up the beach for a moment in a blinding flash of white light, a few seconds later the petrol tank of the truck exploded.

The Commodore felt the sand began to erupt, in small fountains, around their running feet. To his left a bullet whined in a ricochet of a rock.

"Fuck the Jumblies have arrived, and where the hell is John Wayne when you fucking needed him." On the boat, guns erupted and the Commodore suddenly felt bullets whipping over

his head. For a moment he staggered on the sand as the SBS man cried out shit, and collided with him sending them both face down in the sand. Instinctively the Commodore rolled onto his back pulling out the Browning and going through the drill, safety catch forward cocking back the hammer to full and looking for a target. Smoke from the phosphorus and the burning petrol tank left a swirling mist of smoke. The Commodore saw a burly man in camouflage fatigues, running towards him screened by the rocks and the burning truck from the boats guns. A bullet cracked into the sand close to his head, and the Commodore realized he was firing at him. Thinking was not an option only reactions. Two further shots banged into the sand close to his right ear.

The Browning jerked with the recoil. The man kept firing getting ever closer. The Commodore adjusted to try and hit what in the dark and smoke, was almost a shadow. Behind him he heard a whoosh from the 60mm rocket, and the truck exploding into fragmenting white hot showers of burning phosphorus metal. The shadow staggered for a moment and levelled his rifle. The

Commodore fired twice and the man spun and fell into the burning sand.

Strangely calm the Commodore looked around, nothing only now the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh. He looked at the marine on the ground clutching his thigh trying desperately to crawl towards the boat. Grabbing him by the arm and with what was left of his strength he helped pull the man up. The commodore let the man use him as a crutch and correcting their balance started three legged stagger towards the boat. Suddenly a white hot fire, burned across his right arm, and the crack of the gunshot a moment later confirming he had been hit. He wanted to drop the soldier and turn to shoot back, but the staccato sound of the Armalite on automatic brought a grunt from behind him, and silence. Now almost exhausted he waded into the water to helping hands on the bow and side of the boat.

Inside the cabin he heard the muffled roar of the engines, as the boat went full astern.

## 23.

The telephone above Brentwood's bunk rattled tinnily, and without switching on his overhead lamp he reached up and clamped it to his ear.

'Captain?'

"It's the Officer of the Day sir, we have had a phone call from the Governor's house asking for our doctor to standby on the mole. Apparently there is boat coming in with casualties."

"As the hospital been informed?"

Marsh sounded unsure almost guarded, "The Governor's office would like our doctor to assess the situation first."

Brentwood rubbed his eyes, why all the secrecy, what was going on? He looked at his watch, just three hours sleep. He stood up and taking his dressing gown heard Fielding in the pantry.

"Boat approaching sir," said the quartermaster his binoculars never moving. "There seems to be no one on deck sir?"

"Very well," said Brentwood his own binoculars giving him the same view.

"Officer of the Day?"

"Yes sir," said Sub-Lieutenant Marsh a thin angular officer, who was Padgett's number two in Cougar's gunnery department.

"Appraise the situation and tell me how you would deal with it?"

Marsh felt his heart rate double.

What the hell would he do?

"Sir?"

"Yes Rowlands," said Brentwood.

"Leading Seaman Fletcher told me about that boat last night sir."

Brentwood looked at March and then at the young bosun's mate, "what about it Rowling's?"

"He said it came in last night to pick up the Commodore, and nearly scared the shit out of him."

Brentwood chuckled.

"Sorry sir," stammered the young bosun's mate.

"Continue Phelps, and thank you for the descriptive prose, I think it would probably do the same to me, if it suddenly came out of the dark."

"Well sir, he said he had seen it in Poole harbour, and reckons it probably belongs to the special boat service sir."

"Ah how the plot thickens," said Brentwood, for the first time someone in his crew had assessed the situation correctly, and it was the youngest sailor on the jetty, maybe he should give the boy Marsh's job.

He had waited enough time for the Officer of the Watch to give his answer.

"Officer of the day, get the sentries from the ship and those on the jetty, and throw a cordon by the bow of the ship across the jetty, get them to use the empty packing case as a makeshift barricade. Go with them and stop anyone getting past you. I want

no sightseers. If this is the SBS, I suspect no one should know they are here.”

“Bosun’s mate, shake the first lieutenant, the duty petty officer and the buffer, and tell them I require their present right away, then make a start shaking the duty watch.”

“Yes sir,” said Rowling’s running up the gangway to pick up the duty watch bill, from the clip board inside the desk, showing names messes and bunk numbers of all those who needed to be woken.

Why the Officer of the Day had not got the duty watch out of their bunks and standing by on the jetty baffled him. Dam they were still in peace time mode. This ship was far from prepared, and he had maybe eighteen days to get Cougar ready, and the omens were not good.

## 24.

"I'll take that sir?" The Commodore still coming down from his adrenalin high wondered what the marine wanted, and then his over stimulated brain realized he was still carrying the 9mm Browning.

He looked at the gun and placing his thumb firmly over the hammer with the point over the "V" between the hammer and the firing pin, applied a slight rearward pressure on the hammer. Depressing the trigger he allowed the hammer to travel forward very slowly. In the half cock he removed his finger from the trigger, letting the hammer travel forward to the half cock position. Without a conscious thought he went through the drill of drawing the hammer slightly rearward and depressing the trigger until the hammer moved forward, cleared the half cock position. Easing the hammer against the inert firing pin. He handed the weapon, to the surprised soldier. These young men would not have known ten years ago he had shot at Bisley for the Royal Navy.

The commodore winced, lucky for him all the SBS men were trained in Battle field, first aid, and with an apology in a midland's ascent, for not wearing suspenders and stockings under his uniform, and a reply from one of the others, that in fact he really was wearing his girlfriend's knickers as good luck charm skidders and all. The SBS soldier began to cut away the Commodore's jumper. The banter continued with further enlightenments concerning his carer, and the other men's sexual deviations. All this the commodore understood was good humoured, and for most of them, a way of reducing the tension. To put it like Wellington famously did, it had been a close run thing. One young man dead, and two others not including himself were injured. Was it the right price to pay for five of those dam Exocet missiles, one of which could either seriously damage or sink any modern warship? How many lives had these men saved in the cold wastes of the South Atlantic?

The stinging swab brought the Commodore's thoughts back to the present. The prognoses had been good, apart from the pain, he

had been grazed by a bullet, the cut was nasty and deep, but not fatal, or likely to cause lasting damage, and twenty minutes later cleaned and bandaged, he was given a sling, and two very strong pain killers, and a word of advice not to hit the bottle till they got back to Gibraltar.

As the boat began a more sedately crossing of the straights, and silence returned to the cabin, men leaned against each other catknapping. A tall man the commodore suspected was the officer, came over and sat beside him.

“First I want to thank you for saving one of my men sir.” The commodore could only whisper, it was nothing. A silly answer he knew but he suddenly felt exhausted and so tired. He felt something, being put inside the pocket of his reefer jacket, but by then the commodore was dreaming of the young naked slave girl.

## **25.**

Brentwood heard Simpson once again on his megaphone, the voice distorted by the metal deck-head above him. He looked at his watch, and just then like a huge juggernaut the eight Admiralty diesel started up.

Now he could only wait for Simpson reporting to him the Cougar was in all respects ready to proceed.

He lets his mind wander back to early this morning, when the same Humber staff car that had brought him came to a stop by the makeshift barricade. A tall dark skinned man immaculately dressed in a dark tailored suit stepped out and began speaking to Pearce. A moment later reaching into his lapel he flashed what looked like an identity card, and Pearce moved a box for him to walk through. The man moved directly towards him, just as the SBS boat silently glided to the steps leading up and onto the jetty.

Surgeon Lieutenant Sawyer and his sick berth attended Salis, went to the steps and helped by a man dressed all in black entered the boat.

“Captain Brentwood?”

Brentwood turned, the man smiled.

“Sorry about this Captain, it was a little operation of mine that really should not have bothered you. Now if you will excuse me, I need to get on board and find out what is going on?”

Before Brentwood could stop him he was moving down the steps. For moment he stopped and turned.

“Sorry to be so rude Captain, but time and tide. Oh, before I forget, it may not be Christmas, but Santa may have come early this year.

Brentwood looked down at the man, who smiled back up.

“Did you not ask Santa for a pair of heavy calibre machine guns?”

The knock on the door, made him turn in his chair, “come in.”

Lieutenant Commander Simpson stepped inside, his hat under his arm.

## **26.**

Below in the gunners workshop, L.W.E.M Kevin 'Jedi' Knight, looked at the disassembled machine gun laid out on the bench, a pile of rags ready to clean away the grease, and the years in the box. Next to him Petty Officer Gordon turned the dog eared pages of the Second World War American manual. Gordon had fired about everything that was belt, bolt, slide or magazine fed, and even one that had been fired by a rifleman at the Battle of Waterloo. Then there were the pistols, from a pair of French cased duelling pistols by Nicolas Noel Boutet, to a colt peacemaker, and all the way to Heckler & Koch. However it had been over ten years since he fired one of these beasts. He turned the dog eared pages of the American manual, and like all gunnery instructions throughout the world began at the 'order one.'

## **27.**

Simpson looked across at the jetty; the empty crates laying scattered like so many unwrapped presents.

Brentwood walked slowly on to the port wing of the bridge and immediately felt the wet drizzle on his face. Staring down for a few seconds to collect his thoughts, he saw the seaman milling around the forecastle surrounded by a 'snakes wedding' of wires and ropes.

Around him was a nervous expectancy. The alter ego inside the ship was coming alive, tentatively, almost furtively growing again with every mooring wire slackening off and disappearing. This was the final break with the land the widening strip of oily water and for the first time an unknown danger.

From the ships tannoy, came the young voice of the bosun's mate. "Hands out of the rig of the day clear off the upper deck,

close all screen doors and hatches. Special sea duty men close up! Assume NBCD State 3 conditions Yankee."

Brentwood felt strongly stoical. The commands handed down by generations, routines etched in years of Daily Orders and scripts read parrot fashion like the one just now. Was this how the Royal Navy went to war? The script already written only chance being the indefinable thing.

Inside the bridge the deep Yorkshire voice of the coxswain came through the bridge and out across the port wing.

"Bridge wheelhouse coxswain on the wheel, testing communications."

"Coxswain the Captain will be taking Cougar out using the fore-spring to bring out the stern. Then astern to clear the jetty, before turning her towards the straights." Said the Navigator.

"Bridge, ops room, special sea duty men closed up 978 and 293 radars operational."

“Very good, keep a close eye in the straights for merchant traffic, and report any that will come inside two miles,” said Padgett who would be the officer of the watch for the forenoon.

Surprisingly thought Brentwood there had been only one rating who would not be returning to the ship, stoker Michaels who tripped over a hatch combing and was now in Gibraltar hospital with a suspected fractured skull. Brentwood already knew the rumours flying around about the rating. A new wife who was pregnant. Surprisingly no one had made a try for the Spanish coast, so he would be the only absentee for this trip down South.

Brentwood walked out onto the top part, and climbing up a small ladder stood on top of the bridge, looking down at 'A' turret and the forecastle. Waiting for him with a rubber microphone in one hand and a small hand held signal lamp in the other stood leading signalman Billings

Quickly glancing and nodding he took the microphone and with a thank you. Walked across to look down the starboard side. The

gangway gone Cougar was held now against the jetty by just two wires forward and aft.

“Signal the tower Billings, requesting permission to proceed.”

Ignoring the clatter from the hand held signal lamp, he walked down to check and confirm again the ship was singled up. Satisfied he turned to see a tiny diamond-bright light answer immediately, and Billings reported, “Proceed, sir, and good luck.”

Brentwood looked at the well-wishers on the jetty, and breathed out slowly. This wasn't the task force leaving Portsmouth; to the record of Rod Stewart's 'Sailing' being played from ashore with washing line lengths filled of frantically waving Union Jacks, and handkerchiefs.

Still on the jetty the small entourage, was all that was left of the once proud dockyard the gateway to the Mediterranean.

“Well let's do this in style old girl, we don't want tugs for you” he whispered to himself.

It had been five years since he took a ship to sea. Hell it was like riding a bicycle, once learned never forgotten, so everybody told him. Until that is you smashed into the jetty or ran aground. Then it was the famous panel of your peers, and your career in the dustbin. Well wasn't his already there? Or so he thought till he got the Cougar out of the blue.

Still she maybe rusty, and temperamental. Certainly all the 'gun' diesels were, and out of date definitely. But she was his till the Admiralty took it away from him, his to command and to fight, and whatever task she was given she was going to do it well. The adrenaline kicked in and for a moment he was shocked to feel an almost schoolboys excitement he had not felt in years.

Lifting the mic he pressed the button and spoke, "ring down, and stand by," beneath his feet the deck began to vibrate with renewed insistence.

"Let go aft!" he turned to look astern.

The order was repeated, and from the quarterdeck came the sudden flurry of activity as the wire was slacked off, while on the jetty two bored dockyard workers released the great spliced eye from the huge worn bollard, and dropped them with an indifferent shrug into the water.

Sub-Lieutenant Pearce, flushed and obviously over-anxious; cupped his hands and yelled, "All clear aft sir,"

Lieutenant Commander Simpson with the voice of a sergeant major boomed out from the megaphone in waves crashing and echoing against the superstructure.

"No you are not! Wait until you've got the spring inboard, before you say all clear. If we wrap this around the screws, you'll be pushing this bloody ship all the way to Port Stanley."

From slow ahead together. Cougar was held by one single wire from the forecastle to a bollard on the jetty.

Brentwood turned from looking aft to gaze down at her bow and the young seaman being helped by Towers to hold the fender

against the bow, as it splintered between steel and concreted. Slowly the lever principle began to work as Cougar's bow pivoted swinging the stern away from the bleached stone jetty

"Let go spring,"

Now clear with her last landlines gone.

"Half Astern both engines" Brentwood spoke calmly into the microphone.

He waited watching the jetty slip by the small crowds some waving others saluting and a few just silent.

Satisfied he had the sea room.

"Stop both engines"

A moment later, "starboard thirty, and slow ahead both engines."

The coxswain's voice boomed out through the bridge tannoy, repeating the order. Brentwood watched the bow come slowly

around until it was lined up with in the middle of the open channel.

“Steady,” said Brentwood into the microphone.

“Course 145 degrees sir,” replied the Coxswain.

“Steer 142, we are just lining up with the breakwater coxswain

He smiled to himself he had not lost the old touch, Brentwood thought. The minimum of wheel and engines order and he had lined up the old Cougar perfectly for her departure.

With her ensign blowing out stiffly in the breeze and making a small patch of colour against the dulled grey paint Cougar shuddered towards the entrance. On her forecastle and quarterdeck the hands were fallen in, their bodies swaying in unison with the moving ship.

Brentwood gave the order for the navigator to take the con and at the same time dismissed Billings. Alone for a few moments he bent to pat the ships crest on top of the bridge and chuckled to

himself. No girl he thought you are not a donkey like everybody tells me, you're a bad old cat and still dangerous.

## **28.**

The commodore winced as he moved his arm in the sling. The coffee was cold, but it was no good asking Patterson for a refill, she was out on the jetty waving with the others.

She had been shocked when she saw him in the office chair. Looking pale and drawn, the bags under his eyes more pronounced. The white sling supporting his arm, and the torn blooded jumper.

He had told her to ask no questions, and he would tell no lies.

However, Patterson went into nursing mode,

"We must get you back to the hotel for a bath and some sleep sir." He smiled, and for the first time said, "don't fuss girl."

Patterson had stopped for a moment.

"Sorry Helen." The Commodore had apologised.

"But a cup of your excellent coffee will be a true life saver."

The Doctor had come aboard the boat along with the man who had probably organised all this, Alexis, or his organisation which was not Universal Exports but simply went by the three letters SIS, Secret Intelligence Service. It was not his world. He looked at Alexis, as he talked in whispers to the Officer. He had been introduced into something where fabulous riches, beauty and death formed the universal triangle. Alexis and men like him moved in. The beautiful slave girl for instance, whose age and innocence beguiled her sexuality. This was a world where life would be the cheapest commodity of all. He shivered, and suddenly he wanted to get out of this dam boat and breathe in some fresh air. Ignoring the look from Alexis and the officer, he followed the last of the boxes onto the jetty.

He looked at the shocked face of Brentwood and laughed.

"You should have seen the other guy."

Now from his office window an hour ago he had seen the sleek black Lear Jet, take off from the airport, on board the two injured SBS men. The boat having left earlier heading for the straights.

Now he watched the stern of the ship, moving past the breakwater, and gave up a silent prayer for any god to look after her.

For a moment he suddenly remember his zippo lighter, and reaching into the side pocket of his reefer jacket, he found something small instead. Taking it out, he looked down at the bronze metal tie pin, with its vertical dagger and the words either side of the hilt, by strength, and guile.

He laughed it had been nothing like that for him. More like blind bloody ignorance would be more like it.

*To be continued.*

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