

The Suitcase Set

Ted Hall ex-G3ETA



Volume 3

G3SDS



G8SDS

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CHAPTER SEVEN

When I was once again seated in Robins' office, he asked with a smile, 'Did you have a pleasant holiday in Palestine?' I gave him an old-fashioned look and replied, 'The first week had its moments of excitement and I learned a lot during the second week but I need practice with coding and to gain confidence with the transmitter of the wireless.' 'I hope you'll soon have the opportunity to do this, as I've arranged for you to put in some time working in the Wireless Section, where you'll be contacting stations in the field.'

But first I want you to meet the two people who form two thirds of the Victor Mission. They are Major Bolton and Captain Hanbury, they require a wireless operator to complete their team. We hope to get four new Missions into the field during May. Two are already on their way to Derna, our landing ground and base for supplies, which is in Libya, some fifty miles west of Tobruk. Our main problem is that sorties are only made during a period of about ten days in each month, when there is sufficient moonlight to allow topographical navigation, as all the dropping areas are remote. The suitable period this month starts on the 18th.'

He sighed deeply, like a man who bears many burdens. 'During the next three days, I would like you to spend some time with Major Bolton and

Captain Hanbury, so that you can assess whether or not you are happy in their company, and to let them take a look at you, too. Remember, you would be living and working with them day and night for the entire time and we have no way of knowing how long it will be. Three is a difficult number. Do you recall the old adage: Two's company and three's a crowd? Well, it's particularly appropriate in our case. As a matter of fact, we have one Mission which is faced with exactly that problem, and it is the dangerous situation of incompatibility. If you are not completely happy with your intended

companions, I'll make some other arrangements.'

This caused me to think for a short while and then I asked about something that had been niggling away at me ever since I became entangled with MO4. 'I hope you don't mind me mentioning this, but in the RAF there is a preservation of the 'pecking order', even though commissioned and non-commissioned ranks may make up an air-crew. I'm happy with that

arrangement. I know where I am with it. In this organisation there doesn't seem to be any difference between the two, and at times I have something of an inferiority complex.

I'm pleased to try and deal with problems such as this, which our members have,' said Robins. 'You've only been with us a short while and seen us in what might be termed our off-duty-mode. I think you'll find it different when you are in a team of three under a Mission Leader. Then, I would expect you to give the Leader full co-operation. How you address one another is for you to decide at the outset. I think you'll find the problem will disappear.' This made sense, of a sort, and I let it rest there. 'Now,' he

continued, 'I want you to go down to the bar, where members will be gathering for a pre-lunch drink. Major Bolton will be there and expecting you. We can talk later.'

As I entered the bar, a number of heads turned to see who had come in. A man, whom I assumed to be Major Bolton, raised his arm and beckoned me to his table. At the table there were two people; Bolton rose to his feet, shook hands, and introduced himself and then Captain John Hanbury.

I reciprocated. 'What are you drinking?' said Hanbury

'A gin and tonic, please,' I replied. He then went to the bar.

'Sit yourself down, my friend,' Bolton said. 'Robins tells us you've had a good deal of experience as an operator.'

'Well, yes, it's true. I've done a variety of different types of work but this will be something new, using such a low powered transmitter. It's the sort of power used by amateurs.' I replied.

'I hope you don't mind my asking, but how old are you?' Bolton asked, quizzing me with a pair of shrewd eyes

'I've just had my twenty-third

birthday.' 'I must say, you look much younger than that.'

Hanbury then returned with the drinks. As we sat at the small table, I was able to study my drinking companions, and noticed at once, from the colour of their skins, that they had not been in the Middle East very long. Bolton had rather a florid complexion and I guessed that he was in his mid to late thirties. Hanbury was a taller, younger-looking man. 'After lunch, we'll go to a small sitting room, adjacent to John's bedroom, and have a chat, to find out a little about each other,' said Bolton, looking at me in a conspiratorial way, and I nodded.

Hanbury then asked, 'How long have you been out here?'

'I came out from England in November 1940.'

'Were you bored with the journey round the Cape?'

'Fortunately, we didn't have that problem.'

'How did you come out, then?' he persisted.

'I came out with 73 Squadron through the Med.'

'I thought the Mediterranean has been closed to our shipping since the Italians came into the war?' Hanbury sounded dubious.

'We were part of a special operation; it's quite a story I'll tell you about it when there is more time.' 'I'd like to hear it' he continued.

'Yes, I'm sure it was quite an exciting experience' said Bolton.

Bolton had arranged for coffee to be served in the sitting room and, when we could no longer be overheard, he commenced the conversation. 'First, let me tell you a little about myself. I'm a wartime soldier. I came into the army, with a colleague, to carry out a specific task. What it was doesn't matter, because it was cancelled. We were then recruited into MO4, specifically to go to Yugoslavia because we both speak Russian, a similar language, and we have been having lessons in Serbian which, like Russian, uses the Cyrillic alphabet. My colleague, Major Richmond, was dropped in, during March, to the West Serbian Territory and I will be leading the Mission to East Serbia. I'm thirty-four years of age and, as far as I know, I have no offensive habits.'

There was a pause and I realised he had finished. I thought this was at least to the point. John Hanbury then took

up the autobiographical theme. 'I'm from Auckland, New Zealand. I'm twenty-six years old and was in England seeking a job when war was declared. I joined the British Army and was involved in the early days of the Parachute Regiment, in which I became an Instructor and completed over one hundred jumps. I have also received training in the use of explosives. When the SOE, in England, was formed, I trained some of the French agents and then applied to join SOE myself. I was asked if I would join MO4 instead and agreed to the request.' He sat back and relaxed.

It was my turn to tell them about my background and so, like them I kept it short. 'My name is Ted Hall. I come from Hayes, in Middlesex. As a result of a heavily advertised recruiting campaign by the Government, I joined the RAF in 1937, because I wanted to fly. I was trained as a wireless operator at Cranwell, in Lincolnshire. With the declaration of war, I was sent, as a member of the BEF, to France, to build D/F (Direction Finding) stations for use by the RAF. After the disastrous French campaign, I was evacuated from Brest and joined 73, a Hurricane Squadron. My work was the servicing of aircraft during the Battle of Britain. I've already told you how I came to the Middle East with 73. I served a further year with them, going up the Western Desert with the Wavell offensive against the Italians and then retreating to El Alamein when the Germans, led by Rommel, appeared on the scene. After that I was posted to 272 Squadron. 'Thank you for the details,' said Bolton. 'Tell me now, do you know anything about Yugoslavia?' 'Nothing at all,' I confessed, 'Quite frankly, it wasn't until after my initial chat with Robins, that I looked at a map to find it's position in relation to surrounding countries.' 'So, you don't know anything about the history of the country?' 'No,' I replied. 'Well, in due course, if it's agreed that you'll join us, I'll be pleased to tell you what I know. But remember I've not actually been to the country. Now then, if there's anything further you want to know about us, please don't hesitate to ask. I suggest we adjourn for the present and meet again for a drink before dinner. Is that OK?' 'Yes.' I replied.

When I was resting after a shower, I tried to think of anything that disturbed me about these two new associates. I'm pleased to say, there had been no indications of displeasure on their part. I wondered what Bolton had been doing before he joined the Army. When we were having our pre-dinner drink, I asked him about his previous career. 'I was in the Treasury Department of the Civil Service,' he said. 'Did you find it a boring job?' 'Not at all,' he replied, taciturnly. 'I think he held a senior position, somewhat above the level of a pen-pusher,' said Hanbury, ending what might have become an uncomfortable silence.

I had arranged for Ron Simpson to take me to the Wireless Section in the afternoon. This was located within the Army HQ compound in Cairo. The wireless transmitters were maintained by the Royal Signals Corps and operated by land lines from a separate building, which housed the Receiving and Coding Departments of MO4. Ron introduced me to a number of key people and then asked to be telephoned when I was ready to be escorted back to Rue Eleusis. I saw Len Marshall cheerfully working on a set and he told me he had worried for nothing, as it only took a few shifts for him to get back into the groove.

The first thing I was asked to do was send an article of text on a buzzer unit for a number of operators to listen to. This was done to enable the receiving operator to know who was operating the key the other end. It is the equivalent of recognising a person's voice on the telephone. I was asked to ensure the same procedure was carried out for the next two shifts, as a twenty-four-hour operation was maintained. The reason behind this procedure is to prevent the wireless, if captured, with the coding system, being used by the enemy to communicate with us.

For the remainder of the afternoon I sat in on various schedules. Some were successful and there were others where the field station was not heard. The procedure, as explained before, was for the Base station to send his call sign for five minutes then listen for the field station for five minutes. If contact was not made, Base would transmit for a further five minutes, followed by another five minute listening period, during which there would be two sets listening. Again, if no contact were established, there would be a five-minute repeat sending and receiving period, during which there would be three receiving sets listening. If contact wasn't made during this period, another attempt would be made at the next scheduled time.

There were field stations that had not been heard from for months, in some cases they had been out of contact since arrival. Despite this, the same procedure as I've described was carried out at each, twice daily, scheduled time. It was reassuring to know that there would be more than one operator listening for you. The base station did not expect to make contact at every schedule, as there were many reasons why the field station might not be on the air. I returned in time for dinner, after which I asked my two associates if they would be happy for me to join them in the Victor Mission. They both seemed keen, but I wasn't quite sure whether this was because they had been waiting six weeks for the Mission to be made up. However, I said I would be happy to join them. This called for a few drinks, after which I retired to think things over in my bath.

I saw Robins on the following morning, and told him I had decided to go with the Victor Mission. He showed his relief. 'I'm pleased about that. I think you three will make a good team.' He then handed me a personal shopping list of things I might consider taking with me. 'Apart from your wireless set, coding book and personal possessions, all other equipment will be obtainable at Derna. You should bear in mind, however, that everything has to be carried and must be capable of being packed quickly. Make sure you have a really good, comfortable pair of boots, if nothing else, because there are no taxis where you are going.' He laughed at his joke. 'I'll fix a time and date for your journey to Derna and then arrange a meeting with all three of you. In the meantime, will you continue working in the Wireless Section.' 'Yes, I've arranged to go there this afternoon.'

I spent two more days in the Wireless Section but, for some undefined reason, I was not allowed access to the Coding Section. When I enquired about this ban, it was explained to me that there might have been confidential messages being decoded, the contents of which they would prefer anybody going into the field not to know. At the conclusion, I worked out with a Controller my schedule for the twice-daily wireless contact times and frequencies. Once again, I received best wishes for a successful mission and was assured that they would be listening for me later in the month.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On May 8th, at 11 a.m., the Victor Mission was assembled in Robins' office. 'You will be leaving tomorrow, by train, for Alexandria,' Robins informed us. 'Then you will travel in a three-ton lorry to Derna. I give you fair warning it is a dusty, bumpy, wearisome journey of about five hundred miles and will take two, perhaps even three, days to complete. You'll know something about these conditions already, Sergeant?' 'Yes, I've been to Derna a number of times, but never after such a long journey,' I admitted. 'That is unfortunately unavoidable. At the present time, the Carbon Mission, to whom you will be dropping, isn't in wireless contact (names of missions were chosen by the Leaders). They haven't been heard for the last three days. The reason for this is not known. They had not reported enemy action in the area. It is more likely an equipment problem. Major Bolton will be talking to you about the principal targets in the territory for which you'll be responsible. The one major advantage Yugoslavia has over other countries is that the Chetnik Brigades are in wireless contact with each other and also with Mihailovich's HQ so, if required, co-ordinated action by the Brigades could be arranged.

'At Derna, you will each be given a money belt containing one hundred sovereigns, fifty half-sovereigns, ten thousand US dollars and a quantity of Romanian or Bulgarian currency. Yugoslavian dinars are not provided. They have roaring inflation and a barrow load of dinars can be had for a sovereign. This money is to pay for your expenses and 'palm-greasing' if appropriate. Unfortunately, you'll have to wear the belts all the time, because a number have been stolen. You'll also be provided with individual first aids kits and, to help relieve the boredom of waiting, we have invited Jasper Maskeleyne of Maskelyne and Devants, the London Illusionists, to give you a lecture, and some hints and tips on methods of escape. He has a variety of escape aids available for you to choose from. Personal weapons will also be available at Derna. There is also a Mission Advisor with whom you should discuss any matters about which you may have a query. Have you finished work in the Wireless Section, Sergeant?' he asked. 'Yes. Although, I still need to purchase the two paperbacks, which I'll do this afternoon, when I go shopping with Ron Simpson,' I said.

'Are there any questions you would like to ask?' Robins looked round at each of us in turn. 'Yes,' said Bolton. 'Is it possible to get a message to the Carbon Mission via the Mihailovich wireless network?' 'No,' said Robins. 'The Chetniks will not allow us to communicate in this way. As a matter of fact, when you are in your territory, you could see if there is a way of getting round this problem. Their wireless equipment is very poor and unreliable.

If we were able to pass urgent messages via their network, we might be prepared to equip them with suitcase sets.’ There were no other questions.

‘Well,’ Robins concluded, ‘it remains for me to wish you the best of luck and safe arrival in East Serbia. The work you will be doing requires a great deal of patience and a good understanding of the Serb mentality.’

During dinner that evening, Bolton raised the subject of his promised background briefing on the situation in Yugoslavia. ‘I think it will be better to wait until we are at Derna for our chat about the history and present situation in Yugoslavia. We will have quite a bit of time to kill whilst waiting for our turn to depart. So, I’m for an early night tonight. We could be in for a rough time during the next few days.’ I was hardly in a mood conducive to absorbing a history lesson, and was perfectly happy to let Bolton postpone it until I had nothing better to do than pay attention.

CHAPTER NINE

Our journey from Alexandria to Derna took two and a half days and was, as anticipated, a very rough ride. The road, which ran a mile or two from the sea, was now, due to the armies of both sides using tracked vehicles when advancing and retreating, more potholes than macadamised surface, making progress very slow. The particle size of the sand in the Western Desert is so small that any vehicle travelling over it creates a dust cloud, which penetrates everything. Amidst all our trials and tribulations, I was thankful that the one thing we did not have was a dust storm. When this occurs the sun is blotted out, darkness descends and vehicular movement ceases so, it could have been worse.

The Derna I had known was just desert; the low growing shrub had been removed to form a landing strip, and it was strewn with a number of burned out and derelict, Italian fighter planes. Now, it was only recognisable by the still present derelict planes. The place was a hive of activity, with many Army and RAF personnel going about their business. An assortment of prefabricated wooden huts and marquees had appeared, and there were also eight Handley Page Halifaxes and three American Liberator bombers.

This was the desert base of MO4.

We were thankful to climb stiffly out of the lorry, bones aching and all, I’m sure, nursing a few bruises. We were hot, tired, hungry, and dirty. The transit camps at which we had stopped on the way had poor facilities, most of them lacked an adequate supply of fresh water. An RASC (Royal Army Service Corps) Sergeant, whose name we were told was Richards, met us. He was to be our Advisor. We were taken to a hut and allocated beds. I asked Sergeant Richards if it was possible, before doing anything else, to be taken down to the sea for a swim, because I wanted to remove the grime we had accumulated in the past three days. Yes, he said, he would arrange this. He explained that, normally, a vehicle went down in the mornings and afternoons for this purpose. Unfortunately, we had missed the afternoon run by about half an hour.’

The swim in the delightfully warm Mediterranean did a good deal to revive our flagging spirits. We met some of the other Mission people, who said they were bored by the waiting and the monotony of the food. There was, however, the consolation of an adequate bar. In due course, we returned to our hut and had a snooze in a motion-free bed. Dinner was all from tins, for there were no fresh vegetables. We had a meal comprising soup, stew and hard tack biscuits, followed by peaches and Carnation evaporated milk.

After dinner, we all congregated in the bar. One Mission, due to go to Greece the previous month, had made two attempts but the plane failed to make contact with the ground party, so they were still waiting around and hoping for a better result in May. Next day, we went to see Colonel Dent, the Officer Commanding the Base.

‘Welcome, to our home-from-home,’ he said with a wry smile. ‘We are located here as this is the nearest and most convenient place for a base on the North African coast, in relation to the countries we are supporting. This keeps the flying time to the various countries as short as possible. In order to get you to East Serbia, with a worthwhile load of three tons, we have to use the Liberators. Our biggest problem is the state of the weather. What we do, for each month, is to make a provisional schedule; for instance, you’re scheduled for the 19th. On that day the load of weapons, ammunition and clothing for the various flights is assembled.’

At 1600 hours a decision is taken based on the latest weather forecast and serviceability of aircraft, then loading carried out. If, between 1600 and takeoff time, an adverse report is received concerning a destination, the load is removed and replaced by that of a reserve flight. We don't like doing this unloading and re-loading, but, if we are to maximise the use of the aircraft over about the ten days of the month in which we can operate, it's essential. The majority of our flights are with equipment only, so we can drop the parachutes with a higher predicted wind speed than when dropping personnel.

After leaving Colonel Dent, we went to the Stores Office and I handed in my wireless set. 'Have you selected and tried out your petrol charger?' I was asked. 'No,' I said, 'where do we go to find this equipment?' 'The best thing to do is to get your Advisor to take you round the various stores. 'You'll be able to see our stores of equipment and follow through the assembling and loading operations. We are dependent on what captured equipment the Army sends plus the efforts of two search parties we have out, scrounging on our behalf. The problem arises because the rifles and machine guns in use by our Forces, apart from the Sten gun, have a different size of ammunition to that used on the continent of Europe. All equipment we send has been tested but we don't have the staff to clean each piece



CHAPTER TEN

Following our afternoon swim, Bolton suggested we settle down somewhere and have the postponed chat about Yugoslavia. We found a vacant table in the bar and, using notes and a sketch map, he began. 'In 1919, following WW1, on the insistence of the British and French, a number of independent states were brought together to form Yugoslavia. These included Bosnia, Croatia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia.

They were then sub-divided into three so-called countries. Croatia and Slovenia were two and the remainder were lumped together with Serbia. The ethnic makeup of this alliance, with the added complication of the prevalent Orthodox, Catholic and Moslem (Islamic) religions, was bound to create problems from the very beginning. On a number of occasions there have been reports of border clashes, with casualties running into hundreds. Apparently, the aggressor in these engagements has been difficult to prove, particularly in the confrontations between the Croats (Catholic) and Serbs (Orthodox). Since we are going to a traditional part of Serbia, having no borders to the other countries who form part of Yugoslavia, we may not have to be concerned about this problem, only time will tell. We need go no further into the historical aspect except to mention that, after Yugoslavia had been conquered by the Germans, in 1941, a number of Croats volunteered to serve with the German army. They were formed into a unit called the *Ustashe*. We may find that they are active in our territory.

'In 1941/42 reports of guerrilla activities in Yugoslavia began to be received by our Government. It was established that a General Mihailovich was their leader and had been placed in that position by the Yugoslavian Government in exile, in Britain. His followers were known as *Chetniks*. Reports on the Russian wireless gave details of another band of guerrillas, the Partisans, led by Marshall Tito, a Croat.

'Early in 1942, a Colonel Hudson was sent, by submarine, to try and establish the true position. He landed on the Adriatic coast and, since it was the area in which Tito was supposed

to be active, Hudson tried to make contact with him, but failed. There was a question mark concerning this Marshal Tito. We know that his real name is Joseph Brodz and he was a political activist with communist tendencies, prior to the war. Colonel

Hudson, after failing to make contact with Tito, went eastwards, found a Chetnik Brigade and, eventually, was taken to Mihailovich. Therefore, when it was decided to provide support to Yugoslavia, the first Mission, under command of a Colonel Bailey, was sent to Mihailovich in mid 1942. Since that time five Missions have been established with the Chetniks, in Central and East Serbia will be the sixth.

In my original discussions with Robins, it was mentioned that, if possible, they would like the Chetniks to be well enough organised so that a major diversionary operation could be carried out just prior to the time when our forces launch a major attack on Southern Europe. The objective would be to draw off some of the enemy forces. If the British Missions thought the Chetniks were good enough to carry out such an operation, it's possible it would be supported by parachute troops.' Bolton asked me, 'Have you any questions?' 'I've understood what you have said, so there are no questions on that, but the problem created by the nationalistic and religious differences is not easy for me to understand; I'm completely ignorant about these matters. How conscious of this situation do we have to be?' 'I think it's something you needn't concern yourself about, particularly as you don't speak Serbian. As I've said, the differences between the various groups may not be evident in our part of the country,' he concluded, leaving me considerably less than convinced that these ethnic and religious differences were really so unimportant.

He placed the sketch map on the table and smoothed it with his hand. I again felt curious about his past career, since he seemed to be so remarkably well informed about matters which, surely would have been secret. I knew by now, though, that I should probably have to remain in ignorance. This suited me well enough. 'The part of the country in which we will be operating is bounded on the East side by the River Danube, and in the North extends to about fifty miles south of Belgrade. In the South it goes to the junction of Serbia with Rumania and Bulgaria. In the west, it comes up to the Carbon Mission territory. It's a mountainous territory, with only a few macadamised roads connecting the larger towns. Other places are linked with dirt roads or tracks.' He traced the borders with a finger while he explained the sketch map to us.

'Our brief is to collect intelligence about Axis military dispositions and to encourage and promote resistance by the guerrillas, particularly by sabotaging lines of communication and facilities of value to the Germans. Supplies of weapons, ammunition and clothing to re-arm and re-equip the Chetniks will be dropped by parachute.

'There are three strategically important targets in our area. First, the River Danube, which carries barge traffic bringing supplies for the South Russian front. Secondly, there is a railway which is doing the same thing and, in addition, carries personnel. Thirdly, there is a copper mine at Bor, which we understand is providing about a third of the German requirements for that metal.

'I had hoped to have more information from Major Richmond, who is with the Carbon Mission, but contact with them has been intermittent and, as we have heard, there has been no contact at all for the last three days. We will be unable to leave until communication with them has been re-established. Have you any questions?' 'Yes,' said Hanbury, 'do we have any idea of the strength of the Chetniks in our territory.?' 'No, I'm afraid we have no idea.' replied Roger. 'To attack the important targets you have mentioned,' said Hanbury, 'will require a good deal of planning and a considerable number of troops to carry out the plan.' 'Yes, of course,' said Bolton. 'Naturally, it's not

anticipated that we will be in a position, for at least six months, to mount operations of this complexity. Our first task will be to carry out a reconnaissance of the territory, to establish the disposition of the forces available to us and those against us, as well as consider the difficulties in travelling from place to place. I don't think we can do much planning until we have established those three points.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After dinner that evening we were assembled in the bar and a presentation was made by Jasper Maskelyne. He began by explaining that he was Jasper Maskelyne of Maskelyne and Devant. They were illusionists and, in peace time, performed in London's theatre-land. He had volunteered for service and would normally have been rejected, due to his age, but his specialised ability had been thought an asset.

We were shown a variety of escape aids: maps printed on silk, which could be stitched into the lining of clothing; mini compasses inserted into smoking pipes; and brass military buttons which concealed a compass. There were small saws moulded into a flexible rubber covering for concealment about ones anatomy. This last item, not unnaturally, drew a good deal of hilarious comment. He gave a demonstration of how to pick various types of lock, and showed us how to change our appearance. The talk, apart from being informative, was also entertaining, and after the fashion of a good, pre-war children's party, he invited us to help ourselves to any of the escape aids that appealed to us. When I had a moment in which to ponder the direction my life was taking, I was almost glad that the transfer to Rhodesia had been postponed. My days were interesting, busy and rewarding, and the future would be stimulating; of that I was certain.

The next day, Sgt. Richards gave us a tour of the various huts and marquees where the weapons and ammunition were stored; some Italian and some German in origin. There was also a large quantity of British Sten guns, which had been developed specially to use 9mm ammunition available in Continental Europe. There were mortars of different types; 20 mm cannons; heavy and light machine guns; in fact, every type of weapon that would be of use to guerrilla forces.

We were then taken to the place where the battery charging equipment was stored. Most of the charging motors were of American manufacture. I chose one, tried it out and was satisfied with its performance. In the same place, I also saw a number of pedal chargers. These were of German manufacture and resembled bicycles without wheels; with a generator mounted where the back wheel would have been. I asked for one to be included with our shipment. My two companions thought I was taking something which we would never use, but I knew what cantankerous things petrol charging motors could be, not forgetting the fact that one needs petrol to make them work.

On a number of occasions, we had heard small arms being fired. Bolton asked if we could try out the German Schmeisser machine pistol as a possible personal weapon. This was agreed so, on May 17th, we spent a good deal of time at their range, trying out a number of weapons. In the end we all settled for a Smith and Wesson .38 calibre pistol. There was good news, too. Communication with the Carbon Mission had been re-established. The problem had been flat batteries, as they had run out of petrol for the charger. Major Richmond asked Bolton to make sure he brought some Scotch as part of the cargo, because he could not take the local firewater. The news gave us a lift and a check revealed that we were still scheduled for the 19th. The arms and clothing in our plane was intended for the Carbon Mission, as we would be dropping in their territory.

That night, with many things on my mind, I found it difficult to get to sleep; I went for a walk outside the hut, to get a bit of air, and almost walked into Jasper Maskelyne, who was having a quiet smoke. He said he was a poor sleeper and was kept awake by one of the other occupants of his hut, who snored loudly.

He said he would like to ask me a personal question.

'Fire away,' I said, 'I'll answer if I can.'

'What makes you volunteer for this hazardous activity?'

'I've already been asked that question a number of times since I agreed to become part of a Mission. I think most of those who volunteer would find it difficult to give a positive answer. I haven't met anybody yet whom I thought was doing it out of bravado, or who thought they had something to gain by volunteering. It could be curiosity or boredom. I just cannot answer the question.'

'Thank you,' he said. 'I would have been surprised to receive a straight answer. I wouldn't have volunteered, if I'd known what a lousy place this desert is. There's some compensation in meeting brave people like you.'

I felt embarrassed at his remark. He wished me good luck and disappeared into his hut.

During the morning of the 19th we went for a final briefing with Colonel Dent, who informed us that the weather forecast for Eastern Serbia promised broken cloud and a wind-speed of 5/10 mph. The plane would be loaded at 1600 and we should be present when this was being carried out. Take-off time was 1900 and we were asked to contact the pilot about half an hour before this and he would give us details of the flight plan. We were then handed our money belts I was surprised how heavy and cumbersome mine was. I had not given this any thought until now, but the prospect of wearing it all the time was something about which I was not happy. Following a swim in the afternoon, we went to see the equipment being loaded into the plane. The bulk of it

seemed to have been packed into six, 10-foot-long, cylindrical, light metal, canisters with parachutes attached, which were loaded into the bomb bays, and a variety of smaller packages, again with parachutes attached, which were loaded into the fuselage. After an early dinner, it was time to don our heavy flying/jump suits. These were necessary as it would be extremely cold in the plane. We were to be provided with sleeping bags. Somehow, sleep seemed to be elusive these days.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At 1830 we met our pilot and navigator and were surprised to discover that they were Americans. Apparently, they had delivered the plane, which had only been loaned, and had been asked to stay on and fly the MO4 sorties. The flight plan was to set a course to take us over the Mediterranean, into the Adriatic and over Albania. The course would then be north-east across Yugoslavia, to pick up the Danube at Turnu Severin, where there was a distinctive loop in the river. Then we would fly west for about fifteen minutes, to reach the dropping zone. The plane would circle the dropping zone and look for a recognition signal from the ground. In our case, it was the morse letter 'X', sent on an Aldis lamp or torch, and we would reply with 'Y', and then fires on the ground, in the shape of a 'V', would be lit. The recognition signals had become necessary as the enemy, on previous occasions had attempted to obtain the cargo, by lighting fires of their own when they heard aircraft engines at night.

Our crew had already taken cargo to the Carbon Mission, so they had some idea of the district. The navigator said that, when they crossed the Albanian coast, the height would be increased to twelve thousand feet, due to the mountainous territory, and he would fly higher still if there was any anti-aircraft fire. The flying time would be approximately five hours and forty minutes. We were asked to go forward into the cockpit for take-off, as we would be carrying a full load of fuel and it would help with weight distribution. And, so we began our flight into the unknown.

At take-off, the pilot opened the throttles, there was a roar from the four engines and the plane gathered speed down the sandy runway. There came the time when I thought the pilot would ease the stick back and we would become airborne, but no, we continued in touch with the ground. I could see the end of the runway rushing towards us. At the last minute, just in time, the wheels left the runway. I exhaled slowly and my fingers unclenched. I had been certain that we were going to be in trouble before we had started. The pilot said the load was really beyond the recommended maximum, which meant he needed the full length of the runway.

The fuselage of our Liberator had been specially modified to provide a hole in the bottom through which parachutists and packages could exit. During the flight there was a cap over the opening. The rear gunner was to act as dispatcher. He told us that, on the first run over the target, two of the smaller packages would be dropped, to see how they drifted in relation to the fires. If necessary, the Navigator who operated the ready and go lights would take the drift into account. The Dispatcher also showed us an oxygen mask on the end of a length of rubber hose. 'If you find oxygen necessary, you'll have to share the mask.'

With nothing else to do but wait, we climbed into the protective warmth of our sleeping bags. Some two hours later, the dispatcher informed us that we would shortly be ascending from 6 to 12 thousand feet. It became increasingly colder and we experienced difficulty in breathing and making body movements, so we began to share the single oxygen mask, which brought small relief.

Fortunately, the sensation brought about by anoxia was soon ended when the height was reduced. The dispatcher informed us that the Liberator had actually been flying at 15,000 feet, in order to avoid the anti-aircraft fire as we crossed the coast.

After we had been flying for about four hours, we were told there was now complete cloud cover and, since it was impossible to go lower, due to the mountainous territory, we were flying on a plotted course. Unfortunately, this cloud cover continued, so the pilot turned at the calculated time and started to circle, in the hope of finding a sufficient break in the cloud for the ground signal to be seen. The circling continued for about half an hour, before the pilot said that it was regrettable but the mission would have to be abandoned, as he could not afford to expend more fuel and it was necessary to have left the enemy coast behind before daybreak. Our return flight would take less time as we would be flying over Greece. I climbed back into my sleeping bag and vainly tried to sleep while we made our way back.

The long haul back to Derna was completed without incident, but we felt decidedly groggy after twelve hours in a non-heated, non-pressurised, plane, particularly when there was the added frustration of not having had a successful flight. We were re-scheduled for another trip two days later. Unfortunately, it achieved the same result.

There was time for just one more effort that month. If this was not successful it would mean that we had to spend another month at Derna, which we found a most distressing prospect. The third attempt went well and we arrived over the dropping zone with a clear sky. Signals were exchanged with the ground and fires in the form of a 'V' were lit. The covering over the hole in the floor was removed by the dispatcher, and when the red warning light turned to green, the first two packages were dropped. On the next run, Bolton was first to slide down the platform above the opening to the hole, followed by me, with Hanbury last. What a fantastic change there was. One second the air was filled by the drone of the aircraft engines, the next all was quiet.

I saw the fires out to my right, but before I could take in anything else or practice my Serbian words *Preatel Eng-lais*, Friend Englishman, I had landed. Based on the previous jumps I had made, I'm sure we had jumped from less than 600 feet. I landed, completely in the clear, about 50 yards from the fires. I was immediately surrounded by a motley bunch of men, then seized by a large bearded gent and smothered with kisses. His alcohol-laden breath was a bit much to take on an empty stomach, but his intentions were friendly.

After releasing my parachute, I was led away to meet Major Richmond, the leader of Carbon Mission. He greeted me with a pleasant smile. 'You took long enough to get here' he said, jokingly. Did the others jump at the same time as you?' he asked. Before I had time to reply, Bolton joined us and, a couple of minutes later, Hanbury arrived. There was a good deal of thankful handshaking. All three of us were in one piece, despite the fact that Bolton and Hanbury had become tangled up in the trees. The local Chetnik Commander, Colonel Papich, was then introduced and also Richmond's explosives man, Lieutenant Arlo, who, I was surprised to learn, was a Serb.

The troops were conducting a search for all the precious packages that had been dropped. Richmond said that his policy was to collect all the packages, load them on to ox-carts and pack-horses and send them away, to be hidden until it was convenient for unloading and distribution. When the search was completed, we would go off to the place he had made his HQ, which was, he explained, about two hours walk.

In spite of the clear sky and moonlight, the trees cast a deep shadow over the ground and, away from the fires, it was almost pitch black. The air was cold, with the night smells of damp earth and resin that are part of every forest. Once our ears became attuned to the silence, we became aware of the sounds of feet moving softly, the sudden sharp snap of a twig, distant screams of owls and nocturnal animals, the gentle sigh of the breeze amongst the pine needles. I drew in deep gulps of the clean, sweet air and shivered

During the walk, in the dark, where each step was either up or downhill, in this unfamiliar, forested country, we new arrivals, carrying heavy packs, soon discovered how unfit we were, as we stumbled rather than walked along. This called for a number of rests. Eventually, we arrived at Richmond's camp and were shown a place to sleep. I can assure you that I needed no rocking on that occasion.



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