

Preface

The man in the park, London, England / October 2004

Love... is the principal means of escape from the loneliness which afflicts most men and women throughout the greater part of their lives.

– Bertrand Russell

IT WAS SUNDAY MORNING. London was at ease. The park in which he sat was quiet, surprisingly peaceful even, given that it was situated in the midst of one of the world's great cities. The distant noise softly enough for him to enjoy the sound of crisp autumn leaves rustling as they rolled across the white-tipped autumn lawn in the breeze, mustering themselves in piles beneath the earthward branches of the evergreens.

Squirrels made industrious use of the time, empty of hordes of rushing humans and rambunctious dogs, to collect and bury scores of the thousands of acorns littering the ground. An occasional pigeon fluttered noisily from its lofty oak perch, adding to the desiccated mess congregating on the stone steps below. Rain had been a long time coming this year and everything was dusty and brittle. So dusty that flocks of sparrows had wiggled small scrape holes in patches of bare earth, flapping a bath for themselves in the dry dirt.

The morning began frosty and his old naval greatcoat guarded him against the chill wind blowing down the great river. But the early sun, appearing above the meandering river in the distance, was now pleasantly warming and cast a reassuring orange glow on the surroundings. It was a soothing morning and in another time he would have enjoyed the peace and quiet, the solitude. Inhaled the briefness of tranquility before the bustle, and let the troubles of the world float away on the breeze, if only for a few moments. But this was not another time.

Sitting on the green park bench the rather pleasant, though melancholy, looking gentleman didn't yet know how his morning would end, or that he would even see it end. But it was a choice in which he was steadfastly resigned and, once made, a strange uncluttered calmness seemed to engulf him. He thought he could live only if she lived, and was happy for this life to finish if she didn't. At this moment he didn't know one way or the other, every day was a struggle. But he would know shortly. In that he was relieved. It had been a long time, half a lifetime almost. And much of it wasted on secrets that were not secret, truths surpassed by time, and lies, lots of lies; designed by zealots and woven by experts un beholden to national or moral boundaries.

To him now they were all meaningless, insignificant: Insignificant lies. Insignificant truths. Insignificant secrets. That insignificance born from the realization of what really mattered, what was of value and what was not: Living a life with someone, living it alone, or not living it at all. One had not been a choice, the other two were.

How everything became so cloudy, cluttered and confusing he couldn't remember. It had, as I have mentioned, and as he told me later that morning, been half a lifetime. Long enough to

purge the reasons for it all, but enough, also, to recover the purpose. Being engulfed in a longstanding, unflinching, chase for truth had cloaked the original purpose for life, cocooned it, retreated it into the deep recesses of his subconscious. Strange that now it was so clear, so apparent, the mistakes so obvious, the reason so lost. Strange also, that a perceived irretrievable subconscious can suddenly evoke such vibrant perspective and consciousness when snapped back to reality. Almost as if regaining the thoughts of childhood, full of lost innocence and honesty.

People had died for it, for the truth, or what they thought was the truth, for the secret created that was for years protected and that which was abused. Some were remembered too late for their efforts. Others forgotten altogether. On a still autumn morning the wheel had turned full circle, it was clicking into position and maybe it was now his turn. Could he forget? Would others forget? Or would he finish at only half a life?

A life for which he hadn't even been a pawn, just an entity to be kicked around; drawn in first by choice, then by guilt, and finally by design. Events hadn't always included him at all and yet they affected him at every turn. He'd been swept along with it, often ignorant that the game was even being played in distant fields. How is it that some people can float through life with no conscious navigation at all, getting everything they want with little effort? While others, equally talented and ambitious, eager to do what is right, and willing stand up for it, are forestalled at every turn, with no fault? Why is it they who pay the price?

The hue of sunlight slowly brightened from deep orange to yellow and stirred the sleeping city awake. There wasn't long to wait, even if the journey had been long, half a lifetime long, and more for some; spanning two generations, several wars, hot and cold, and a life he allowed to pass him by. And for what?

A train clattered and squealed as it traversed over complex points on the bridge and working tugs on the river below blew their deep bellowing foghorns in unison; the sound of industry, old fashioned industry. Then, between the glint of the sun off the water and the rolling leaves he remembered a long forgotten conversation, and slipped into imagination, watching, in his mind's eye, a hulking great battleship enter a distant port in time of war. A monster creeping silently into berth to be victualled. The ship not yet scarred by war, only by salt water, but prepared to unleash its formidable power to do war's bidding nonetheless.

War. It always starts with war. Wars are the ripples of life: Starting as tiny drops of misery that spread ever outward, growing, multiplying, absorbing everything in their path; the hurdles we must breach to push humanity forward in its endless quest for a better future, a more peaceful existence, a righteous and more truthful world. He was never able to breach that wave, but carried forever along on its tip, involuntarily, from one event to another, unable to break the cycle.

Awake he dozed, his mind carrying him from his troubles as the tidal Thames washed against the stone...

Chapter One

U.S.S. Phoenix, Simon's Town, South Africa / March 1941

Silver and gold are not the only coin; virtue too passes current all over the world.

– Euripides

THE GREAT WARSHIP GENTLY SLIPPING alongside the pier caused quite a stir among the small group of onlookers. Not for her size, though she was large for a light cruiser, at 608-feet and 10,000-tons, and not for the unusual designation on her bow. But because of the red, white and blue flag flying proudly from her stern. The stars and stripes waving in the southern breeze were easily identifiable, but since the start of the war had been an infrequent sight in the Cape Town port. The United States Ship *Phoenix* was being tugged into position at the secure berthing area on the edge of the Simon's Town naval base at False Bay. Her crew standing rigidly side-by-side in neat white rows along her decks, watching the intricate procedure of docking the massive rust stained vessel after her transatlantic crossing. She was only two years old and yet her structure already bore the appearance of a much older ship, the natural wear and tear of a long sea voyage, having recently come from the Pacific for a quick modification to her armaments. Along the pier, dock workers, although not attended in such neat lines, also stood rigid and stationary, gazing up in wonder at the formidable black and grey behemoth towering high above them. They were accustomed to seeing large merchant vessels but this was clearly not one of them. The *Phoenix's*¹ array of fifteen six-inch guns protruding from her deck portrayed a magnificent military presence, and the unusual color scheme, made up of abstract drab blocks of color, designed to obscure her shape and size and make it difficult for marauding submarines to gauge her speed and range, just compounded the collective awe. Nevertheless, this *Brooklyn*-class cruiser appeared as a colossus next to the other vessels in port and no curious color scheme could hide the fact.

Few people knew the real purpose of the 'Phoo-bird's' visit and everyone that did were keeping it very quiet, not least the Americans for sending her. If people outside the privileged few had known, things might have been very different for the following five war-torn years, and possibly more.

The *Phoenix's* covert task was to pick up gold bullion as the last 'cash and carry' payment before America would release fifty rusting hulks that were purported to be seaworthy destroyers, which, twenty-five years previous during the First World War, they might have been. Since then,

¹ While *Phoenix* was the name given to me, there is no record of it being in the Atlantic during this time. The ship was most probably the *USS Vincennes*, a *New Orleans*-class Heavy Cruiser. This miscommunication might simply be due to sailors transferring from *Vincennes* after she was sunk in August 1942. However, *Phoenix's* presence at False Bay is not beyond the scope of WWII subterfuge, therefore the name remains because it is integral to the story as described to me.

though, these clunky 314-foot, 1,200-ton, four-stacker, flush-deck rust buckets had been mothballed, their empty shells creaking and groaning the approach of their death knell even while in dock. In reality, they were not far from the knackers yard, thanks to being improperly preserved prior to being deactivated twenty years before. The embattled engineers attempting to maintain the antiquated engines were resorting, ironically, to jerry-built tactics just to make steam. Once running their four funnels often spewed huge clouds of smoke that could be seen along the horizon for miles. Admiral Lord Ramsey called them “the worst destroyers I had ever seen... The price paid for them was scandalous.”

Later, however, after Royal Navy crews had time to become familiar with their many awkward idiosyncrasies, some of them performed with distinction in the convoy role for which they were assigned, with their superior speed enabling them to at least keep up with the slower transports they were tasked with protecting, though due credit should be paid to naval skill rather than steel. Their maneuverability, however, was somewhat questionable; their turning circle so huge that twelve ended up colliding with friendly ships. The sailors also generally hated them; with cramped damp quarters and a rough ride they surely must have thought they had stepped back in time. Not one of them survived beyond 1947, most of those surviving the war being broken up between 1944 and 1945. This desperate deal, which demanded the transfer of bases for American use, was, in the long term, far more advantageous to the Americans, but it was trying times.

This, then, was the purpose behind this recently commissioned warship’s arrival; to protect the last of the British Empire’s gold bullion while on its way to the United States before initiating the transfer of fifty aging destroyers under the Destroyers for Bases Agreement.² Those destroyers so urgently needed, even in their current dilapidated state, to safeguard Britain’s beleaguered lifeline during the Battle of the Atlantic.

Despite the largely one-sided deal, the British Parliament really had no choice in the matter, they were at the end of the rope, as it were, and about to fall into the abyss. Every member of the age-old parliament knew it was the New World gouging the Old in an obvious attempt to end, once and for all, what America saw as an outdated imperialistic empire. Before the Americans got their way, however, there was a diminutive deluded Austrian corporal staking a claim to a new empire, and squeezing the Home of the British Empire so that he could be leader of the next Reich. The New World knew that if they could bleed the Old dry, use its manpower and drain its resources in fighting this Nazi tyrant and his hordes, they could pick up the pieces as the spoils of victory. They, however, like Hitler, didn’t fully appreciate the practiced shrewdness and determination of Britain’s new wartime leader and its new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

Churchill had been long behind the scenes of government and largely forgotten for ten years, from 1929 to 1939, known as his ‘wilderness years.’ This had infused many foreign leaders into the mistaken assumption that if Churchill was of no value to Britain then he was no threat to anyone else. Indeed, even the respected British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), under its

² This agreement was a loose precursor to the Lend-Lease Act which effectively ended American neutrality by providing the Allied nations with war matériel from March 1941 onwards. The Lend-Lease Act being a much more favorable deal, much of it being written off after the war when replaced with the Anglo-American Loan Agreement that Britain finished repaying 60 years later in December 2006.

founder John Reith, who absolutely loathed Churchill,³ went to extraordinary lengths to limit Churchill's exposure to the public by denying him (and also David Lloyd George) access to the radio – such is the political sway that one vindictive man in power can wield. Churchill said that for eleven years “they kept me off the air... prevented me from expressing views that proved to be right.”⁴ But the pugnacious bulldog was born to this role; his Parliamentary speeches were his teeth, and once in his grasp his bite inescapable. He was, then, perhaps Arthur, King of the Britons, as in legend, returned to protect Britain in its moment of greatest despair. It was the role for which he had been born and, moreover, he well knew it and thoroughly relished the thought of it. Fortunately for him, and the country, and despite his initial unpopularity and the BBC's “tyrannical” intransigence, he regained his seat in government at exactly the right moment, immediately shrugging off any soft talk of appeasement in exchange for untold toil and violence.

Churchill had risen to almost instant national notoriety while a Boer War correspondent for the London *Morning Post*. Becoming somewhat of a hero after being captured for playing too big a role in a skirmish when an armored train he was traveling on was ambushed and derailed, and then later escaping to freedom. War reporting being the only way he could get into the fray in order to make the name for himself for which he was so desperate, in order to follow in his overbearing father's footsteps. “It is astonishing how we have underrated these people,” he wrote prophetically only few days before his capture... “The contribution of mounted infantry and heavy guns is extremely effective.” On his return he was commissioned into the South African Light Horse, acting as courier between General Buller's HQ and the battle at Spion Kop. Where, in another of life's stranger coincidences, he very likely rode right past a little known, and yet already politically active, Indian stretcher bearer who was to become a thorn in his side for much of his political career; Mohandas Gandhi.

Churchill had previously fought in India and North Africa and knew well what was needed to fight. But the feeble bloodstained foothold on Gallipoli during the Great War, the great debacle for which he was solely blamed, being First Lord of the Admiralty, leaving untold French, British, Canadian, Indian and Anzac bodies littering the bloody hills around the Dardanelles, abruptly ended any political aspirations in the immediate future. But the failure of Gallipoli cannot entirely be laid at Churchill's feet. Incompetence among high-ranking aristocratic officers, which was so prevalent as to be almost endemic during the Great War, hadn't provided the required forces to complete the mission, nor had they taken full advantage of favorable events elsewhere, all of which inevitably caused the catastrophe.⁵

Such is the nature of war; bold chances have to be taken to seize initiative, seize the day, and more often than not, even during the seemingly endless gloom and misery of an army shattered

³ Reith hated Churchill so much that he would not even walk past Churchill's commemorative plaque in the floor of Westminster Abbey after Churchill was dead.

⁴ Churchill once explained to a producer that he was constantly being “muzzled” by the BBC, having been on ‘air’ only 10 times in 10 years. But was informed that the BBC was in no way biased. The producer's name, Guy Burgess, of the infamous ‘Cambridge Five.’ The treacherous dealings of which will become apparent later.

⁵ Such was the loss of life among Australian and New Zealand troops during their first major action, horrifying people at home, that April 25th is now annually remembered as Anzac Day, even surpassing Remembrance Day (11hr/11d/11m). Red Poppies, reminding Commonwealth Countries of the battles in Flanders' fields, arriving too late for Remembrance Day in New Zealand in 1921 were, instead, used the following Anzac Day, starting a tradition that remains to this day. “They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.” — Laurence Binyon (p. 279).

on the morbid sands of Dunkirk, his stoicism behind a few stalwart military minds, surprisingly brilliant on occasion, would win the day and steer Britain inexorably towards its 'Finest Hour.'

While 'The Few' gained deserved immortality, many difficult decisions were being made. Not least among them giving up the last of the empire's gold. Churchill was deeply hurt by the request from Roosevelt and said that it "was not fitting that one nation put itself wholly in the hands of another." But that is exactly what the American government was demanding. The American people, and Congress in particular, were unprepared for the looming cataclysm and in no hurry to get embroiled in another European war; even accusing President Roosevelt's circumvention of Congress, in agreeing to the destroyer deal, of being akin to "an act of war."

America knew Britain was on her knees. London was being systematically blown asunder during the blitz and crucial men and cargos being sent to the bottom of the Atlantic in ever increasing numbers by German U-boats. Britain had manpower to fight and, with Churchill's determination, was willing to fight, but it badly needed the matériel with which to fight. That matériel could only come from the great untapped resources and industry of America. Churchill's dilemma, then, was to fight the good fight alone, hoping that the empire would, one day, be able to provide the modern tools with which to fight, or sell the empire's very soul in guarantee to save it, and be beholden to another sovereign nation. For the man who said he did not "become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire," it was a considerable choice.

Two things made the decision especially difficult: Admitting to being wholly indebted to one country, with all that that entails was bad enough; but to know that the gold America had come to collect was no longer available was worse, if not downright embarrassing. Only a handful of people apparently knew of this conundrum and most of them were already dead. Churchill reportedly knew, however, and he was very much alive, and more than willing to keep it a secret for as long as necessary to save his country and precious empire. Churchill was, no doubt, aware because of the time he had spent in South Africa, which provided him a network of friends on both sides, including Jan Smuts, one of the Boers' great guerilla leaders and, later, Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa. Churchill, like others before him, discovered that the gold had been locked up and held as collateral against reconstruction loans needed to repatriate the thousands of Boers who had been interned during the War. Interned in shocking conditions against the wishes of the vast majority of British people. For one reason or another the bullion had then remained on the books, just waiting for someone bold enough to tell parliament and the country of the deal. But so far no one had. Elections, strikes and the Great Depression always managing to get in the way of its disclosure and inevitable outrage.

Initially, by aiding the Boers, someone had attempted to do the honorable thing, but many British pro-colonialists saw it as a guilt payment to placate and keep released internees quiet from future claims against the Government. Despite this, Louis Botha, then Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa,⁶ was clearly happy to accept the loans for which he had fought so hard and share them among Paul Kruger's tough old Boers so that they could rebuild the devastated farmsteads that were necessary to feed the country.

⁶ General Botha was also the Afrikaner who captured Churchill during the war, and met Churchill once again in London in 1902 while arranging for his country's reconstruction loans. He became the first Prime Minister of the Union in 1910, the precursor to the present Republic of South Africa.

Now, forty years on, the gold was still on the books, and too late to change the fact for fear of financially devastating an already indebted country. As embarrassing as it was for the gold not to be available, Churchill was glad it had been used as it had, for it went some way to heal the deep rifts between the two nations after the expensive bloody war against the Boers ended. In effect, enabling Britain to later count on South African troops in the Desert War against the Italians in North Africa, to great advantage. However, all the advantages that the bullion initially bought were now being offset by the problem of its absence.

Thus, all those nice neat white rows of sailors and awestruck dock workers appeared to be witnessing a great lie. Was the ship's arrival, then, nothing more than an elaborate ploy, where, "In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies," with Churchill, as usual, the puppet master?

The British War Room, consisting of those people in the loop and privy to sensitive information, decided not to divulge the lack of gold and apparently provided a load of gold plated lead instead, securely contained inside welded steel crates lest inquisitive eyes should notice the discrepancy. The *Phoenix's* formidable clusters of six-inch guns were, therefore; to be transporting both a great weight of lead, valued at virtually nothing; and the great weighty conscience of an entire empire, the value of which was priceless. No one else would know. Certainly not the captain of the vessel who was anxiously overseeing the loading of the worthless cargo for which he had just signed. After all, who would not trust Britain's claim that the heavy steel crates did not, in fact, contain what they should?

Roosevelt had originally requested that the cargo be delivered. But this was impossible due to the workload of both the Merchant Navy and Royal Navy, in convoying matériel from the Americas to sustain Britain and its colonies in the war effort, much of it being transferred immediately to the active campaign in North Africa. London and its docklands had been bombed for weeks, ever since Germany lost its fight for air superiority over the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain in September 1940.⁷ Many other ports around the country had also been severely damaged, straining to breaking point the reserves of the Merchant Navy and general transportation system. Guns and ammunition of all types were needed desperately, as was antiaircraft artillery to avert the air menace and instill the embattled populace with confidence that the government was doing its very best to protect them, even if it couldn't. The British Army in the desert had shown their bayonets and provided some tremendous and sorely needed morale-boosting victories, pushing the Italians back over two hundred miles in five weeks during the first of the great sea-saw battles of North Africa. However, a lack of supplies, and Rommel's arrival in February – to be immortalized as the Desert Fox – slowed the British advance after they had captured 113,000 Italian prisoners. There was only one country in which this replaceable matériel could be produced in large enough quantities and be supplied in a timely manner; the United States. And there was only one navy, apart from valiant Canadian assistance, that was powerful enough, and available, for the protection of that matériel since neither the Royal Navy nor the Merchant Navy had ships or time to transport gold, and Churchill said as much in his frequent correspondence to the United States President, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

⁷ A pivotal point during the Second World War which directly prevented Hitler's Germany from fulfilling his plan, Operation *Sea Lion*, to invade Britain. Equivalent, in many respects perhaps, to Nelson's victory at Trafalgar.

By this time Roosevelt was used to getting such frank letters from the 'Former Naval Person,' as Churchill referred to himself, and accepted them with candid politeness, knowing full well the strains under which the Prime Minister was working. Roosevelt was more aware than most in the United States Government about Britain's situation and he fully understood the New World would eventually be drawn into the conflict sooner or later, by choice or otherwise. Infamy later that year meant that it was to be otherwise. In the meantime, however, an isolationist American Government was happy to see khaki-clad Tommies use American manufactured equipment, especially since it was now understood England would not give up the fight, as had been earlier expected.

With Winston at the helm, Britain was not going to fall prey to the Germans as easy as the French. Or not, at least, until they had given it their all and had nothing more with which to fight but their wits – although the 22 mile stretch of English Channel also helped, much as the mud at Agincourt had hindered French knights five centuries before. Two things changed the minds of the pessimistic American Government and its politically powerful media on that account: The sinking of the French fleet at Oran and Mers-el-Kebir, to prevent the Germans from taking control of the superior French ships; and the Battle of Britain, when American newspaper reporters, such as the evolutionary Edgar R. Murrow, sat above the White Cliffs of Dover watching the daily aerial spectacle between the youthful beleaguered 'Few' of the Royal Air Force, who were becoming fewer by the day, and the overwhelming might of the Luftwaffe. Prior to these two significant events, world opinion had largely predicted that Britain would succumb to the inevitable. But Britain's audacity was now cemented in the eyes of the world, thanks, in no small part, to the likes of Murrow, whose efforts altered the attitudes of world leaders, especially the Americans, causing everything to change quite considerably in Britain's favor.

However, this still didn't prevent the New World from wanting to dissolve the Old, even if Britain and its empire were willing to fight on alone to save the world from domination by Hitler's arrogant Aryan masses and Mussolini's pompous, Romanic delusions. America had successfully stayed out of the war for almost a year and a half, forced to do so mainly by its traditional isolationist policies that Roosevelt was slowly but steadily eroding, to the vocal consternation of many powerful and highly influential senators. A few of whom were still actively doing business with both German and Italian companies and reaping tremendous rewards, albeit indirectly in most cases. Even the more legitimate, and one could attempt to say moral, businesses within the United States were garnering huge profits from the production of war matériel in ever growing proportions, until, that is, the government was forced to cap such exploitive gains once it realized that it also would have to pay the same exorbitant prices.

Meanwhile, as all the political wrangling and soul searching was underway in London and Washington, the South Atlantic was about to be host, once again, to the *Phoenix*. The great ship slid quietly from its moorings in total darkness, ready to negotiate the dangerous U-boat infested waters of the frigid Atlantic Ocean. America was not yet at war and so far no United States Navy vessel had been attacked, although some United States Merchant ships had. But the *Phoenix's* captain didn't want to be the first to chance a U-boat encounter before hostilities had been declared, because the current rules of engagement gave complete advantage to the attacker, which he wasn't allowed to be.

While slipping quietly out into the murky depths they didn't go completely unseen, however. On shore someone was watching the whole affair. Not for the cargo as much as for the vessel itself. The spy's information was transmitted to the Japanese High Command, which immediately sent orders to one of their active submarines rendezvousing with a German counterpart to exchange sensitive coding materials. The German submarine, finished with its Far East exchange, and armed with this new information, was on the surface and speeding toward the expected path of the warship. Although no one aboard the submarine knew what they were going to do if they made contact. All but the most ignorant knew that a shooting war with America was inevitable, but no one knew who would be allowed to fire that first fatal shot.

Unknown to the submarine's captain, the Americans had successfully broken the Japanese naval code in 1939, and long before the information had been decoded on the surfaced Japanese submarine it had already been read in plain text by the Americans. The *Phoenix*, therefore, knew well of the submarine's whereabouts and avoided the area, successfully evading the unwanted rendezvous without the Japanese being any the wiser to their signal being deciphered. Once past danger the *Phoenix* steamed toward the eastern seaboard far faster than any submarine could match. The German U-boat captain, unaware of why he hadn't made contact with the battleship, passed the information to the German Naval High Command who then alerted their patrolling U-boats in mid-Atlantic. It seemed as though all the active U-boats wanted to be first in line to have a potshot at this American vessel and be first to sink her should the situation arise after orders were changed. One or two ambitious captains knew that even without orders they could always later say they had thought she was British, as they had done a few weeks earlier when sinking an American merchant vessel with all hands off the Azores. So the Germans had many practiced veteran U-boat captains either in the vicinity or in the *Phoenix's* expected route just waiting for a glorious opportunity to serve the Fuhrer.

With increasing risk of attack, American Naval Headquarters changed plans for the shipment immediately. This was no time to lose a major warship in a fight in which they were not yet a combatant. The ship would be too valuable later when they most assuredly would be. The cargo was then arranged to be transferred to a small ballast only merchant ship on its way back to the United States, while the *Phoenix* was ordered on to the Pacific to join the Seventh Fleet, much to the pleasure of the crew who were already tired of the Atlantic weather. The British naval officer portraying himself as a spy on Table Mountain above Cape Town had made everyone very happy.

The transfer occurred without a hitch a few hundred miles west of the African coast, well away from the U-boat's prime hunting ground around Sierra Leone. *Phoenix*, happy to be away, steamed for the Scotia Sea and Drake's Passage and later found her place in history in the midst of the Pacific War. She was fondly known as a lucky ship and survived Pearl Harbor and the whole Pacific Naval War. Ironically, she was eventually sunk during another war, by a British nuclear submarine forty years later in the South Atlantic, when she was called the *General Belgrano*. In that, she found herself yet another place in history; being the first ship ever sunk in conflict by a nuclear submarine. The merchant ship, *Albatross*, meanwhile, empty except for ballast and a few extremely heavy crates, steered north by east toward the eastern seaboard for her new destination, Portsmouth, Virginia.

Churchill had apparently already devised a suitable plan in the event that the *Albatross* actually made it to port, which was not thought likely. That plan was reported to have real bullion

coming from Russia shipped onboard the *Duke of York*, currently engaged in escort duties and shipping Italian prisoners of war to captivity in Canada. In the unlikely event the *Albatross* did make landfall, Churchill would indulge Roosevelt into his obscure ‘bodyguard of lies,’ scenario, in which the *Phoenix* had been nothing more than a lavish decoy. It was, after all, the last of the empire’s gold and should be protected as such.

The likelihood of the dilapidated old rust bucket *Albatross* reaching Portsmouth was remote, however. Her reduced crew were Royal Navy volunteers, instrumental to yet another of Churchill’s ploys; an exercise in coastal safety and an attempt to get the United States into the war by having her sunk by a submarine just as she reached the apparent safety of the U.S. coast. A British submarine was already laying in wait for her arrival should the Germans fail. The ship would sink to the deepest depths, with no possibility of salvage. With her would disappear the 40-year secret and the lies which had kept it. Yet with her loss would also come hope in the form of destroyers, and possibly the eventual entry of the United States into World War Two. The latter of which Churchill knew would guarantee victory to the ‘Grand Alliance.’ The Old World and the New locked together in battle against the tyranny of fascism to save the world.

Once within sight of the eastern seaboard the skeleton crew of the *Albatross* disembarked and boarded the surfaced Royal Navy submarine, while commandos placed onboard a few deceased Germans they had picked up from a destroyed U-boat and attached some strategically placed explosives. Transfers completed, the captain of the submarine unleashed four torpedoes from four hundred yards. Three fired straight and true and hit the *Albatross* broadside, obliterating everything in a great fireball that could be seen for miles along the shores of numerous, still well-illuminated, small towns up and down the coast. The next day all the coastal inhabitants knew of the ship that had gone down with all hands. She had probably exploded and disappeared so quickly because her empty tanks hadn’t been vented, a fatal error on behalf of her inexperienced crew. Rather unexpectedly, but to make it even more believable, a U-boat patrolling unusually near the area actually claimed her loss to make up tonnage in order for her captain to receive a much prized *Ritterkreuz*⁸ – for sinking 100,000 tons of allied shipping. The captain had seen the ship blow up, apparently all by herself, and added her to his already numerable sinking tonnage. No one ever thought differently because soon after documenting the claim his U-boat was itself sunk with all hands on its way home a week later, by a patrolling RAF Coastal Command Sunderland flying boat during standard antisubmarine operations off the south coast of England.

The Royal Navy’s submarine crew would never say a word, even if they were fortunate enough to survive the war. The British Government’s wartime secrets made available thirty years hence never mentioned any part of Operation *Burden*, and no one at the time was overly worried about the lost bullion; such cargos were being sunk with alarming regularity in the north Atlantic.

It was total war. People were dying of starvation and being murdered by the millions. No one was going to worry about a few bits of gold. Moreover, the British would finally be released from years of subterfuge. For another 40 years anyway, by which time everyone directly associated with it was dead and buried.

⁸ The Knights Cross of the Iron Cross — introduced in 1939 as an addition to the Iron Cross family. A highly respected decoration awarded for bravery on the battlefield. A total of 144 were awarded to U-boat men.

Chapter Two

Sean O'Connor, Eastern Seaboard, United States / May 1982

Ocean: A body of water occupying about two-thirds of a world made for man - who has no gills.

– Ambrose Bierce

THE LARGEST NAVAL CONVOY SINCE World War Two had been scraped together and was underway, and heading in all haste to the South Atlantic in response to Argentina's aggression in invading the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982. The task force had been organized remarkably quickly – sailing on April 5 and 6 – surprising many and shocking skeptics who thought the Royal Navy incapable of such a daunting task in the aftermath of major defense cuts. Yet they had, and a few weeks later a convoy of commandeered troopships would catch up and rendezvous with the fleet at Ascension. There, men would train, ships would be revictualled, aircraft would ferry more men and matériel, and the country would see if the Argentines would either rethink their position or believe that Britain's first woman Prime Minister, Maggie Thatcher, was bluffing, and would wobble. They should have known that she wouldn't. She had already shown her mettle against the Soviets and the European Union, earning her the nickname 'Iron Lady.' To the majority of the British public and government there was no doubt whatsoever what would happen if the Argentines⁹ were still on the islands when the green of the Royal Marines and the maroon of the Parachute Regiment arrived; they would kick them off the island in the manner to which they deserved. Although few were fully prepared for, or could properly comprehend, the true nature and ferocity of the bloody conflict that was about to erupt on these sparsely populated, barren islands deep in the South Atlantic Ocean. People and politicians languishing in luxurious ignorance in a time of lasting peace had all but forgotten the brutality of war. It was to hit them like a brick, brought on a wing by a French jet carrying new technology. Again, Britain was unprepared for war and again troopers would have to win the day, slog by long bloody slog, and divested of the technology that was supposed to save them.

The world had seen newsreel footage of jubilant Argentinean youth going ashore on their self-proclaimed Malvinas, after having first sent a covert salvage team to South Georgia to raise their flag. The only news coming out of the islands was Argentinean, and it would soon tell the world how the Argentines had sunk the Royal Navy's prize aircraft carrier, *Invincible*, not once, but twice. Before that, however, they had been held offshore by a small detachment of Royal Marines from Naval Party 8901, fortunately in double strength (67 marines) but still completely outgunned. While fully prepared to continue the fight, their defense would have meant needless civilian casualties around the town of Stanley and Rex Hunt, Governor of the islands, ordered the

⁹ Throughout I use both 'Argentinean' and 'Argentine', for no other reason than I grew up with both and interchange them freely as I see fit.

marines to surrender. The marines were then transported by C-130 to Montevideo, Uruguay, and released, whence they returned home to board one of the first troopships to head south. On leaving the islands one of the Royal Marines was heard to say: “Don't make yourself too comfy mate, we'll be back.” They were, 76 days later, this time on the winning side, still outgunned, outnumbered, but not out-manned.

Rumors circulated about which side the great superpowers were on. It was assumed the United States would be on Britain's side and that the Soviets would aid the Argentines. Although it took persuasion by Prime Minister Thatcher before the American Government would allow the Royal Air Force to use the U.S. airfield on Ascension Island, even though the island is, itself, British overseas territory! There was also speculation about the Soviets providing the Argentines satellite data on the whereabouts of the British task force. If so, this could prove devastating, and two nuclear powered submarines were patrolling the total exclusion zone looking for the existence of the Argentine fleet, which, until it was later kept in port for its own safety, was a major threat to the under-protected task force, especially the all-important troopships. The French President, François Mitterrand, meanwhile, ordered an immediate arms embargo, forbidding anyone in France to give assistance to the Argentines. French intelligence also tipped off MI6 who were then able to carry out covert sting operations, on French soil, that prevented Argentinean agents from buying further Exocet missiles on the black market. This was all well and good, except for a small group of French technicians already in South America helping to repair and fine-tune missiles the Argentines had already purchased.¹⁰ Israel, on the other hand, with Menachem Begin as leader, who vehemently hated the British with a passion, actively transported all the arms and equipment to Argentina they could muster. While Britain's old, twice wartime, European ally, Belgium, steadfastly refused to supply Britain with any artillery or small arms ammunition.

With friends like these who needs enemies, one may ask.

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WATCHING THESE EVENTS UNFOLD in the safety of the western North Atlantic were a group of marine experts onboard the salvage ship *Ulysses*, comprising three Britons and five Americans. The Brits were paying special attention to the goings on in the South Atlantic because had they not just recently finished their active service in the Royal Marines, they would be in the South and not the North Atlantic, where they were now using the skills gained in the marines for their current role as advisors to the team's deep-sea divers. The Americans were providing technical expertise and camera work while looking for a particular World War Two U-boat that was thought to have sunk along the eastern seaboard in 1941. Someone had discovered an engraved German naval knife on a diving expedition around the area, sparking an interest because it had belonged to a captain of a U-boat that was reported to have been in the Bay of Biscay, and was thought to have perished there. Now, however, with this

¹⁰ These were technicians provided by the manufacturer, a company 51% owned by the French Government. There is also evidence suggesting that at least one of the group was a member of France's Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE), or France's version of MI6. The same evidence also states that had the technicians not repaired the missiles they would have likely been duds — from a BBC Radio 4 documentary broadcast on March 5th, 2012.

new find, U-boat records were being checked against Allied naval logs because there were some discrepancies. If they could find the remains of the U-boat in these waters then there was a story in it, and the cameras were here to record it for National Geographic on Assignment.

Ulysses had been here for two months and no one had seen anything except for a few rusting hulks of old coastal tankers that had been torpedoed by lone German submarines and wolf packs between 1942 and 1945. Interesting as they were for history's sake, they were of no use to them in their present task, because they couldn't sell advertising on a program based on a few sunken coastal tankers, of which there were so many. At the time they didn't realize how wrong they were. The convoluted string of events that had brought them here might later alter history, so long as they realized what they were looking at one and a half miles below them in the great abyss off the eastern seaboard.

It was Sean's turn to watch the monitor of the deep sea rover. He was drinking cup after cup of coffee to keep himself awake in the gently rolling cabin. High above where the rover crept slowly along the ocean floor, its incredibly bright lights only managing to penetrate a few feet in front of its path in the gloomy, greatly pressured, depths below. When he needed to go to the bathroom to relieve himself he taped the rover's progress and rewound it on his return. It was his responsibility to see something, since no one else would likely bother watching the tape later if nothing happened. Returning to his post after his second bathroom visit he watched both the taped portion and the live version. If he had looked at the monitor as he walked through the small cabin door he would have just seen a strange rusty steel box sliding out of view beneath the rover. He didn't, however, he was too tired after three hours on shift and it was four o'clock in the morning. Neither did he bother to rewind the tape because there was nothing down there but endless stretches of boring sand. Besides, today was May 2. It was his birthday.

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THAT SAME DAY IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC the old 'Phoo-bird,' now the *General Belgrano*, was taking up patrolling duties with two destroyer escorts just outside of the British assigned total exclusion zone, inside which anything hostile could be attacked under the rules of engagement specified by the British Government. One of the Royal Navy's nuclear submarines in the waters around the islands, *HMS Conqueror*,¹¹ had made contact with this force earlier, while searching for the Argentinean carrier *Veinticino de Mayo*, and was now trailing it. The Argentine ships were a distinct threat to the task force because the Royal Navy couldn't afford to lose either of its two carriers, which together provided the fleet's only air support and which were also needed for air cover during the land operations. So after discussion with the Cabinet the Prime Minister gave orders for *Conqueror* to engage. She fired two Mark VIII torpedoes that sank the *General Belgrano* in forty minutes. Her escorts then either fled or left the area unaware of her sinking, leaving 368 of her crew to perish in the sea. With the *Belgrano* sinking, the 'Phoo-bird's' luck finally ran out and, contrary to her name, would never rise again. The sinking gave credence to the submariner ethos: there are only two types of naval

¹¹ Commissioned in 1971, the *Conqueror* ('Conks') was a *Churchill*-class submarine specifically designed to attack and spy on nuclear-armed Soviet submarines.

vessels; submarines and targets. Following the controversial sinking the Argentinean Navy never ventured from port again, resulting in their air force having to fly 425 miles to attack the myriad of targets in the task force now awaiting them. Had the Argentine Navy stayed at sea the outcome might well have been different. So in retrospect, to the British at least, the ‘Phoo-bird’s’ eventual demise was fortunate.¹²

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BACK ONBOARD *ULYSSES* THEY had just heard news of the sinking of the *Belgrano*. Sean let out a cheer.

“Sinking a ship is nothing to cheer about. I don’t care what side you’re on,” said Peter, the American technical wizard.

“Wasn’t cheering at that,” Sean said, pointing to the monitor. “Look there mate. What do you think those are?”

“Rewind that,” Peter said excitedly.

They had been examining tape from the previous days, fast-forwarding through the boring parts but studying anything looking remotely interesting. It was tedious work but they badly needed to find something in order to justify their role and the camera crew’s existence before they were all pulled from the operation.

“Steel boxes of some kind laying in a debris field. What ship went down here? Can you look in the records Sean?” Peter asked.

“There were several. That’s why there’s such a massive debris field. All of them tankers or merchant ships working the eastern seaboard,” Sean replied.

“Yeah, I get that, but this one was obliterated. There has to be some record.”

With that conversation under way the ship’s skipper entered the cabin with the unexpected news that they needed to head back to port because the National Geographic crew were being pulled off the project. Money was tight and there were plenty of other more enlightening projects with which to be associated.

The crew showed their annoyance but they’d been expecting it. They marked the location of the boxes for future reference just in case they found additional investment, which wasn’t considered likely, and glumly headed back to port.

Pulling into the small harbor the old dockhand glibly pointed out that they obviously hadn’t found what they were looking for. Their long faces told the story.

“Just what we need,” Peter said, “an old smart bastard.”

“Well, I know what I need to forget this crap; a decent beer. *Albatross* then?” Sean said.

“We’ll be up for that,” Peter said, speaking for the remainder of the crew as well.

“Let’s get cleaned up and meet at the bar,” Sean suggested.

After checking into the hotel they made their way in ones and twos to the small bar which the older locals frequented and had kept going since the forties, when it had been started by a D-

¹² Two months after the Falklands the *Conqueror* was again in action. This time in Soviet waters of the Barents Sea, at the request of the U.S. Navy, for a high risk, very secretive operation to steal a brand new towed-array sonar from, literally, right under the bow of a Soviet spy ship sailing amongst the Soviet Fleet. Operation *Barmaid* is now considered to be the reason why *Conqueror*’s logs were shredded, inevitably further adding to the controversy over the sinking of the *Belgrano*.

day veteran after his return home. The food was traditional seaside fare: Boiled fish, fried fish, baked fish, fish as cakes, and fish battered, all served up with a variety of potatoes, or grits if preferred. The beer wasn't too special for Sean's crowd, who were more used to the upcoming micro-brews on the west coast. Here the choice was Budweiser. But after days onboard a dry vessel anything was welcome and they soon relaxed in the comfortable environment, quickly becoming the topic of conversation among the regulars and answering numerous questions as to what they were looking for, where and why. They were also provided plenty of advice as to where they should have been looking instead, from hearing stories the local fishermen had told after dredging up an assortment of wartime relics over the previous forty years.

The old dockhand entered later and Sean had to move from his stool after the barman explained that it was his seat, literally. He had bought it years ago because it formed to his rather large posterior and its higher position gave him a commanding look over the whole bar, which in normal life he wasn't used to, being little over five feet tall.

After Sean had politely moved the man said: "Yer must have run into a debris field out where you were?"

"Well, we did find something, but not what we were looking for," Sean replied.

"Aye. I'll suppose you're after that German submarine folks have been talking about. Let me introduce m'self to you lad, Larry. 'Short' Larry they call me."

"Nice to meet you Larry. Sean. Sean O'Connor. And that's Pete. The other limey over there is Dave," Sean said, shaking the man's rough old hand vigorously.

"Cheers lads. But yer knows there's no submarine out there. Never was," Larry said, raising a glass of dark rum to his lips.

"Oh come on now Larry, give them a break, we've heard your long winded stories before," the landlord cut in. "Let them alone."

"Aye, but these lads haven't," Larry said, smiling at the opportunity to go over his tale again to a new captive audience.

"What's this Larry? You've got a theory about this U-boat?"

"No theory lad. Gospel truth. I've lived my whole life on this patch of ocean and I guess I know as much, if not more, than the next man about what it contains, and what it doesn't."

"So what doesn't it contain?" Sean asked, with everyone else leaning in to hear.

"There's no German submarine out there. I know that much. The only thing everyone has been going on is a blade, supposedly belonging to a U-boat captain and found in these waters by a hobby diver a while back. There were some sunk further up the coast much later in the war, but you won't find one here, and not this close to the coastline, the waters are too shallow."

"Yes, and the fact that they can't find the wreckage of the U-boat where it was supposed to have been sunk, in the Bay of Biscay," Sean explained. "That pretty much started the rumors."

"What about the ship that was attacked and blown up by the supposed U-boat back in '41?" Larry said. "There were no U-boats working the coast then. America wasn't at war and most of the subs were in the Arctic. They didn't get here 'til later."

"So what sank the ship you're talking about? I heard it was quite the explosion, it was seen for miles," Sean said.

“Aye. It was. I remember it though it were yesterday. My old man was on a coast guard cutter at the time and he was called out to pick up survivors. They found nothing but a patch of oil. Blown to smithereens it was.”

“For a tanker that generally means a submarine, right?”

“Yes, it does. But why does it have to have been a U-boat?”

“Okay, Larry, that’s enough. You lads want to order food before the tales get any taller?” The landlord asked.

Sean looked hard at Larry. There was something in Larry’s eyes and his manner that interested him. He’d seen the look before, in someone trying desperately to get the truth out but without having anyone believing. Consequently falling inward, resolved to despair, cynicism and booze. Larry knew something. Sean would eat and finish the conversation later, when the others had gone to bed. He would give Larry his undivided attention. Besides, he liked the old guy. Larry was quite the character, born from years of hard graft and more than a little of life’s hardship.

The landlord brought out a selection of plates and plopped them on the table for the men to help themselves. “Here you go. This’ll take your mind off water for a while. You do know, of course, that this bar is named after the ship you’re talking about?”

“Really. Why is that?” Sean asked.

“The *Albatross*. My father named it. He came back wounded from Normandy in ’44 and his father kept telling him of the ship that had blown up with all hands, so in sort of respect he named his bar after it. No other reason really,” said the landlord.

“Seems like there’s an interesting history around these parts, and with the people still here to tell about it,” Sean said.

“Suppose you’re right. Being here all the time we don’t think much about it. We just get on with our lives, each day as it comes, you know,” the landlord said, returning to the kitchen.

“You’re mining for something Sean,” Peter said.

“Yeah. There’s something out there, I know it. I just don’t know what it is. I’ll bet Larry has an idea though,” Sean replied, digging into his freshly caught cod and chips, the best on the coast.