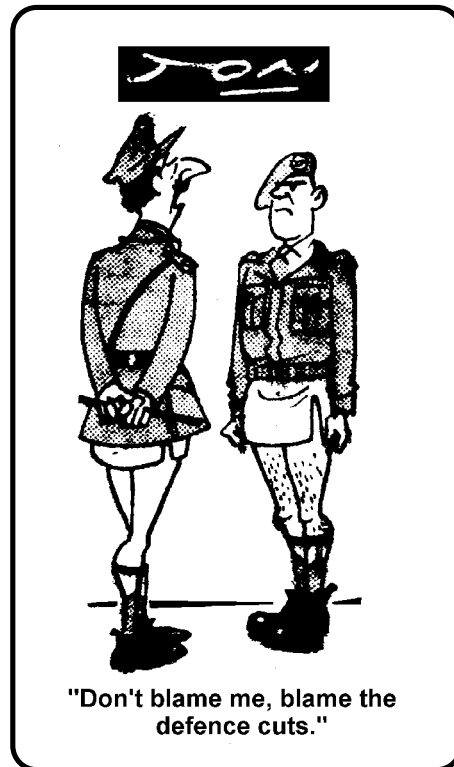


# SERGEANT ENTERPRISE



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## A NOVEL OF POSSIBILITIES BY HENRY T SMITH

J&J  
BOOKS

*By The Same Author*

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

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

*\*\* written with L. Gordon Range*

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*Question:* What is wrong with the peacetime armed services?

*Answer:* They cost a lot of money to run.

Politicians use the armed services as footballs, playing on prejudices to whittle them away to an ineffective and irrelevant minimum. Discontent grows in the services as pay scales and equipment fall short of modern requirements despite frequent protests from those told to do a job with inadequate means.

Yet people are glad enough to see the nation's fighting men around in times of crisis.

Perhaps the ideal solution is to lock them away in a form of suspended animation between emergencies. Or is it?

Suppose control of our armed services were taken out of the changing hands of changeable politicians. Suppose they were allowed to help pay their own way. Suppose enterprising soldiers, sailors and airmen were allowed to use their expertise and their expensive equipment to make a profit for both themselves and the nation.

*Question:* What would happen to any group which tried to put such a revolutionary design into effect?

*Answer:* Those concerned would be locked up as heretics.

But suppose no one beyond a small group within the services knew that it was happening . . . ?

*I am all in favour of private enterprise*  
– as long as a sergeant is in charge

Sergeant George McAndrew.

# 1. BIRTH OF A NOTION

The forecast for that winter Thursday had been rain – as if such a simple word could possibly do justice to the liquid torrent that a south-westerly gale was lashing ashore from the Atlantic. Every foot of the South Coast had spent the first week of a new year beneath grey skies. Overflowing gutters and an insidious, damp chill had soothed away Christmas and New Year euphoria with all the subtlety of a kick below the belt.

Three miles inland from the coastal resort town of Saltby, on the outskirts of the village of East Saltby, rain was bouncing a foot back into the air from the parade ground at the heart of a collection of tatty brick and wooden huts and the concrete tops of storage bunkers.

Only the lights shimmering behind streaked windows and the intermittent dripping security patrols showed that the Ministry of Defence had not abandoned the supply depot to the elements, allowing them to complete the erosion which Hermann Göring's Luftwaffe had failed to conclude during the Second World War.

Not a glimmer of light showed from one of the bunkers, from No. 5 Ammunition Store, but a caller who had keys to penetrate the doubly locked door would have found wet footprints on the dimly lit stone steps that led down to a maze of ancient wooden shelves.

Prints of rubber soles traced a winding path between rows of dark green and dark grey boxes of assorted size. Much more exotic goods than the tools of death and destruction lurked behind most of the white stencilled markings, but the boxes gave no outward indication of their unusual contents.

The shelves occupied about one quarter of the floor space of the 'Office', as its occupants called the bunker. At the exit from the maze, beyond a sliding door in an apparently solid wall, bare stone gave way abruptly to a square yard of doormat, which was inscribed with the legend:

*Should you forget to wipe your feet  
Oh, peasant, we'll be forced to beat  
You up. And so think on, you bug  
Ger. We don't want muck on our rug.*

The rug in question was a tastefully subdued fitted carpet that was ornamented with eye-catching swirls of orange, green and yellow, and gave some life by reflection to plain white walls.

There can be few ammunition stores able to offer a twenty-six inch colour television set, a cocktail cabinet and a full-size snooker table in their south-eastern quadrant, fewer still fitted with the lustrous white enamel, chrome and stainless steel of a fridge/freezer, a sink and an electric cooker in their south-western quadrant. But it was the north-eastern quadrant of the Office which was occupied on the inclement January afternoon in question. Basking in the glow of a three-kilowatt electric fire near the television and music centre, adorning most of the five piece suite, were four figures in uniform.

Sitting in his luxurious, black leather, executive swivelling chair, dry boots resting on the much-scarred, green leather top of his desk, was Sergeant George Robert McAndrew, architect of the Office and leader of *McAndrew Enterprises, Unlimited*. Mac, to use his highly original nickname, was heading for comfortable middle age. Still on the young side of thirty-five, he was of average height and build, and his dark hair was retreating in good order while greying at the temples in what he liked to think was a distinguished fashion.

He was in very good physical condition by civilian standards, but only because he still took an active part in his group's activities. His three colleagues were fond of reminding him that if he ever settled down to a desk job, he would develop a gut like a dustbin – which, if he took after his father, was an accurate forecast of his eventual figure.

McAndrew had grown up in a not very tough district on Scotland's south-east coast and in an unbroken home. But he had 'gone wrong' in his teens. Having escaped arrest and Society's revenge by the skin of his teeth an uncomfortable number of times, he had joined the army to win a bet. He had been fortunate enough to find his feet almost immediately, and he based his claim to the leadership of the group on a record of success in the field that stretched back fourteen years – the field in question being the

disposal of surplus materials through unofficial channels.

McAndrew was one of those fortunate people who can arrive at the ideal (i.e. most profitable) solution to a problem from the flimsiest data. His uncanny combination of instinct and low cunning always left the more conventional, logical thinker standing. He also had the luck of a successful general.

The light spilling from his twin desk lamps, which were adorned with sprigs of holly as a concession to the season, shadowed the lines around McAndrew's dark brows, which were merged in a frown of anger. The storm brewing within him was not a reflection of the weather, nor was it due to indigestion or over-indulgence. His reading material was the source of his displeasure.

On his right, back to the soft drinks machine, lounged Sergeant Arthur Peter Fairclough, whose chair was the opposite of McAndrew's, being upholstered in white leather. Unaware of the gathering outburst, Fairclough was struggling in a leisurely fashion with the crossword in his paper, his face contracted into a ghost of a scowl behind his army-issue, steel-rimmed spectacles, which, together with his short, blond hair, gave him a studious look in an American sort of way.

Fairclough was the educated one of the group. His academic career, minor public school followed by a newly-elevated university, had come to an unfortunate conclusion during his first year. An unauthorised experiment had got out of control. When the smoke had cleared, the university had been obliged to refit one corner of a new and very expensive chemistry laboratory. Fairclough had been awarded the *Order Of The Boot* and he had turned to the army.

Some of the happiest of his twenty-nine years had been spent in Ulster, taking advantage of abundant opportunities to express himself explosively. He was a man who could hate calmly and efficiently, and just as ruthlessly as the faceless terrorists hated the British people and their armed forces. Fairclough and a select band of like-minded spirits believed that causing explosions and killing enemies are jobs for men in uniform, and he had taken great delight in setting traps for usurping civilians and their visiting American financiers.

Life back in England after his third tour in the province had seemed very dull – brightened only by the odd retaliatory foray against old 'friends' who had sneaked across the water with evil intent. He had been resigning

himself to expiring from sheer boredom when he had fallen into the larcenous clutches of George McAndrew. Swept off his feet with promises of fun, excitement and lots of money, Fairclough had jumped at the chance to help McAndrew dispose of the 'surplus' materials that came his way.

"Bleedin' politicians!" Sergeant McAndrew reached the boil and hurled his newspaper away in disgust. The paper moth flapped open in mid-air, stalled and fell on the semi-comatose form of Lance-Corporal Norman William Birky, a diminutive khaki smudge on the bright orange fabric of the settee, which was guaranteed to transform into a double bed at the drop of a knicker. Birky came to life and began hunting for page three of the newspaper.

"What's biting you?" Fairclough invited, on the point of abandoning the unequal struggle with his crossword.

"Try looking at the front page for a change, instead of the bloody cartoons," growled McAndrew.

Paper rustled, then Fairclough read: "DEFENCE AXE TO SWING," in a dramatic tone. Pausing only to adjust his delivery to a less urgent tone for the smaller type, he added, "*Chancellor Expected To Cut Budget In Real Terms*. A non-replacement program will slash the defence budget by a massive 15% in real terms over the next four years. Sources close to the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence are predicting wide-ranging economies in defence spending in the new year. Service chiefs are reported to be up in arms over these new cuts, which follow a matter of months after the Defence Minister's reluctant U-turn on a £500 million development package, which included the *Barron* tank and the navy's new miniature submarine.

"We have reached the stage now,' a senior officer said yesterday, 'when just a comparatively minor cut will do irreparable damage to all three services.' Is that what you mean, Mac?" Fairclough pulled his glasses forward and peered over them, like a solicitor questioning a client.

"What else?" McAndrew returned gloomily.

"Yes, but so what?" asked the remaining member of the quartet, James Simon O'Neil Wellington Spinner, as he poured eight-year-old malt whisky into his glass from an almost empty bottle. Two white stripes adorned the armband between shoulder and elbow patches of his ribbed khaki pullover.

"Is that all you've got to say for yourselves?" demanded McAndrew.

"Bloody hell! I don't know why I bother with you lot sometimes, I really don't."

Fairclough and Spinner exchanged blank looks.

"Can you not see? Are you really that thick?" McAndrew surveyed his cohorts with a look of disgusted pity on his slightly craggy face. He received in return shrugs from Spinner and Fairclough, and a long, heart-felt groan from Birky, who had found page three. "Give us that here." McAndrew took the bottle from Spinner and held it up. "Where did that come from?"

"That bent landlord at the *Three Crowns*?" volunteered Birky.

McAndrew ignored him. "Come on, Art," he said to Fairclough. "Even a university chuck-out should be able to answer a simple question."

"Knocker's right," interrupted Spinner in his Midlands whine. "That Scotch was part of the trade we did for those tyres in . . ., when was it?"

"Early September," agreed Fairclough.

"Aye, laddie, that's right," encouraged McAndrew. "The proceeds from the sale of surplus goods. And what happens if a bunch of bleedin' politicians cut off our money supply? I'll tell you." He counted items off on the stubby fingers of his left hand. "One; there's going to be a lot less gear lying around. Two; nasty, suspicious people are going to keep their eyes on what there is. Three; if anything goes missing, it's going to be spotted sooner and whoever's lost it is going to try bloody hard to get it back if he can't just write out a chitty for a replacement. D'ye get it now?"

"Come on, Mac," said Fairclough. "We're always getting chopped, axed and whatever."

"No." McAndrew shook his head slowly in a definite gesture. "This time it's different. They've been nibbling away at the services for so long, we're pretty near down to the bare bones. If this lot goes through, there'll be no more fat."

"No more Scotch," moaned Spinner, killing the bottle.

Further groans issued from Lance-Corporal Birky.

"There might even be questions about things that have already disappeared," Fairclough realized. "Especially if the CO of a certain tank regiment needs a lot of spares in a hurry. And finds a lot of his have taken a talk out the door and he can't get any replacements because there's a strike at the manufacturers."

"Especially if someone finds out where they've gone," added McAndrew.

"Which might happen if a certain republic in Southern Africa suddenly stops pestering the Government for a delivery date on similar spares."

"But what can we do about it, though?" Corporal Spinner asked of nobody in particular. "Sweet nothing, that's what."

"Put out a contract on the Government," suggested Birky in heavily Americanized Cockney.

"Piss off, Knocker," said McAndrew in an irritated drawl. "This is serious."

Birky shrugged vaguely and returned to his Page Three girl. A contemplative silence descended on the Office as its occupants resumed their former occupations. Corporal Spinner completed the *Times* crossword with a flourish and began a leisurely scan of the news. He was a second generation Briton of West Indian stock, six feet one in his socks, muscled in proportion and a former regimental heavyweight boxing champion.

His career in the ring had been fostered in its early stages by a company commander who faced imminent retirement after a long and undistinguished career. The Major's single burning ambition had been to produce a regimental champion at any weight. The moment he noticed Spinner powering round the assault course, he had recognized someone big enough and tough enough to realize his ultimate ambition – the heavy-weight belt.

Spinner had not objected to the change of direction. He had been growing bored in the clothing store. A special diet and more or less complete freedom between training sessions gave him a taste for the life led by a member of *McAndrew Enterprises*. Two fractured bones in his left hand and the retirement of his company commander had brought his boxing career to an early end. But Spinner retained both the knowledge and the confidence necessary for looking after himself when the going got tough.

On the left of Spinner's brown leather armchair, which made amusing noises when he shifted his position, Lance-Corporal Birky levered his wiry frame into a sitting position and turned to the sports section of the newspaper. He was five feet eight inches tall, an inch shorter than McAndrew, and twenty-four years old, three years younger than Spinner. 'Knocker' Birky was one of those people who manage to look a lot smaller than their true size. His contribution to the team was an almost infallible ability to open locks.

An uncle of his, who had belonged to a rather shady Intelligence group that had remained under military control after World War Two, had begun to develop arthritis in his once nimble fingers. He had persuaded 'Young Norm' to join up as his apprentice, promising him an income far in excess of that generally offered to a private soldier.

'Young Norm' had soon discovered that his CO ran a thriving blackmail business on the side, and that he and his uncle were expected to get the goods on potential victims by examining the contents of safes and similar hiding places. It was during the course of these activities that he acquired his nickname of 'Knocker', which was derived from his usual reaction to a job – 'I'll soon knock this one off, Sir!'

Alas, all good things come to an end. Following the demise of his CO at the hands of a worm that turned, the group had been disbanded. The Major had hidden his files well, however, and they were never found. Thus rumours about his activities could never be substantiated and those in the know had no intention of telling all. Birky's uncle received an honourable discharge and a pension on medical grounds, and bought himself a pub. Private Norman Birky was cast adrift on the seas of fortune.

Out of sheer self-defence, he had made use of his gambling talents to finance a bodyguard to protect himself from the attentions of various Neanderthals who had sought to take advantage of his lack of size. George McAndrew had recruited him on the basis of a few wildly exaggerated stories, which his intuition had told him contained a kernel of truth.

Birky had been on the point of buying himself out of the army at the time and very reluctant to have anything to do with the Scottish Sergeant, who seemed as big a crook as his former CO. But McAndrew had talked him round. The Scot could be very persuasive when he wanted something badly enough.

Just when Birky had picked what would have been a winner at a reasonable price, had the day's racing not been rained off, McAndrew broke out of his reverie and his apparent contemplation of the only unoccupied part of the five-piece suit – a supposedly futuristic, collapsible creation in nylon and tubular steel, which had collapsed for the last time.

"I wonder . . .?" The Scot swung his feet to the floor and rummaged in a drawer of his desk for the box of cigars. Spinner cracked his knuckles reflectively and raised a quizzical eyebrow. This last was lost on McAndrew, who was still rooting in the drawer with his head down. He emerged

triumphant, peeled the cigar and lit it with a gold desk lighter.

"What do you wonder?" prompted Fairclough, polishing his glasses with a corner of a dark blue handkerchief.

"Well, I was just thinking how we go about things here." McAndrew peered at his glass through a minor smoke screen and noticed that it was empty. "Where's the bottle?"

Spinner pointed to the waste basket. "Dead."

"Don't just sit there like a pudd'n, laddie. Get us another one. If you can't drink, you can't think."

Spinner scraped his feet to the floor, adding a new set of black tracks to the desk top. He wandered over to an open ammunition box and drew out a full bottle of malt with the air of a conjurer.

"Sling us a beer while you're there, Spin." Birky folded his newspaper neatly and dropped it on the adjacent coffee table.

"Make that two, will you?" Fairclough added through a yawn. Very little sleep had come his way over the New Year period and he was contemplating getting his head down for a few hours – unless McAndrew had something interesting to say.

"Right, then," McAndrew resumed when everyone was drinking comfortably. "We have the run of this place and we suit ourselves as to what we do, right?" Three thoughtful nods confirmed the truth of the statement. "Okay, how?"

"Easy," called out Birky. "Them you can, you fix. Them you can't, you put the black on them. If you'll pardon the expression." He raised his can in salute to Corporal Spinner.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, honky," groaned Spinner.

"Honk, honk," grinned Birky.

"That's right enough," commented Fairclough. "Apart from the bad jokes. Our special relationship with Captain Kirly makes life a lot easier."

"Right. All we need to do now is think a bit bigger." McAndrew assumed his best *Godfather* expression, which made him look rather like a startled frog. "Put the boot in a little higher up the line."

"What, you mean Major Weaver?" said Birky. "I thought you'd got him straightened too?"

"No." McAndrew sighed. He had forgotten that his intuitive thought processes had put him two or three jumps ahead of the rest of the group. "I mean the people we work for."

A pregnant pause of several seconds was broken by Sergeant Fairclough. "We work for the Government, don't we?"

"Aye, laddie," approved McAndrew.

"Hey, hang about, Mac," protested Birky. "You can't fix the bloody Government."

"We don't need to fix all the Government. In fact," McAndrew paused for a sudden flash of inspiration, "we don't need to fix any of it. All we have to do is get at a few key people where it matters."

"I don't like the sound of this," muttered Birky.

"I do." Spinner flashed an enormous number of gleaming white teeth in a grin. "I like the idea of telling those bastards what to do for a change."

"There's miles too much involved for the four of us to be able to handle it," decided Fairclough, trying to inject a constructive note into McAndrew's flight of fancy. He couldn't quite bring himself to take the idea seriously but he was playing along just to see what developed.

"Right enough," agreed McAndrew. "And we've got the bones of an organization ready and waiting, if only we could put it together. I tell you, if we carry on operating as a bunch of independent units, we've had it, mate. It's all a matter of self-defence."

Fairclough began to catch on. McAndrew's group was by no means unique – but surely, Fairclough asked himself, Mac wasn't thinking of linking up with some of the other private enterprise groups dotted throughout the army? Fairclough voiced his doubts. "But would the other groups play along? I definitely wouldn't trust some of them as far as I could chuck them."

"Look," said McAndrew in a *be reasonable* tone of voice. "We've pulled off five combined operations so far. All of them went okay. Everyone played it straight, right down the line. And that was just for money. What we're faced with now is a direct threat to our whole way of life. If we don't, or mebbe won't, get together now, we've had it. It's that simple. Do or disappear."

"Can I say something?" asked Birky.

McAndrew beamed at him. "Help yourself, laddie."

"I think you're bloody mad."

"Are you wanting out, Knocker?" McAndrew asked in a deceptively casual manner.

"Did I say that?" protested Birky. "I still think you're bloody mad, though."

And so am I," he added with a grin. He had made his protest. If anything went wrong, no one could blame him.

"The problem is going to be finding out exactly whom to fix," remarked Fairclough.

"What about that mate of yours at that swanky country club, Mac?" said Spinner. "What's his name? Mr. Trenton. You get a lot of brass and top Civil Servants going there. I bet he could tell you plenty."

"At bloody last," said McAndrew. "Someone actually using his brains. Good idea, laddie. Okay, I think we'd better do something about getting a meeting organized before you lot drown me in bright ideas. We've got to find out if the other groups will play ball."

"Right," agreed Fairclough. "If we can't get any support for whatever you have in mind, we're wasting our time."

"Time might be something we've got plenty of if this goes wrong," Birky remarked gloomily.

"We'll have to dress it up a bit," McAndrew decided, ignoring Birky's pessimism. "To make sure they come. Suppose we have the meeting at our friend's place in Saltby? This weekend. Nobody will have much on. The only item on the agenda will be what to do about these defence cuts. Okay, let's get phoning."

McAndrew pulled a box file from a drawer of his desk and sorted through a collection of record cards. Corporal Spinner opened another drawer in the left-hand pillar and took out two telephones, one red and one green.

The group had a negative arrangement with *British Telecom*. McAndrew hadn't bothered to mention his telephones and he never received a bill for their use. One of his many disreputable associates had linked them in to the local exchange.

Fingers pressed keys. Impulses sped through miles of copper wire and along glass fibres. Telephones rang and were answered. The group established contact with seventeen parallel bands of buccaneers in army camps all over Great Britain. Birky also slipped in a call to his bookmaker, working on the principle that as long as he was on the phone, he might as well make a few bob for himself. Despite the weather, greyhounds would be running in the Manchester area.

Although Birky won more often than not, the bookie himself took the call, telling his client that it was good to hear from him again. He really meant it – Birky knew for a fact that the bookmaker was not above laying

off his selections with a larger organization to make a few bob for himself.

Peace returned to the Office. McAndrew replaced the telephones in their drawer. Spinner collected a four-pack of chilled cans to provide lubrication for parched throats.

Sergeant McAndrew assumed a receptive air and turned to Sergeant Fairclough, ballpoint pen poised over a notepad. "Right, Art. Are we getting anywhere?"

"Well, they're all interested if you're serious. If not, they'll come anyway for the booze up. They've just about recovered from New Year. Noting McAndrew's scowl, Fairclough hurried on. "Don't blame me. I'm only repeating what my four told me."

"Okay," McAndrew gave him the benefit of the doubt and turned to Spinner.

"All mine are coming." Spinner decided to play safe and not repeat the remarks made by his quartet. "Two of them want to bring their second-in-commands so they can make some personal contacts. That makes six."

"Right. And that have you got for us, Knocker?"

"I think I got all the greedy bastards," said Birky. "Two bodies from each lot."

"Eight more, plus my lot. That's twenty-seven in all."

"How about us, then?" Birky indicated Spinner and himself. "Are us peasants going? Or is it just the nobbs?"

"As hosts, we'll be turning out at full strength," smiled McAndrew. "Don't worry, laddie. We wouldn't want you to miss a booze up. Besides, there'll be one or two wee jobs for you to take care of."

"I thought there'd be a catch," groaned Birky.

"Let's hope our colleagues haven't decided this is just going to be a party at our expense," remarked Fairclough. "We might not be able to afford such extravagances soon. Unless you're going to come up with something clever?"

McAndrew just smiled, quietly confident and refusing to be drawn.

His main fault was a passion for secrecy, which often resulted in his men working in the dark so that he could reveal all at the end of the operation in the manner of a Great Detective. Time had taught the other members of the group that the Master was seldom wrong, and that he rarely talked when pressed. He would present his plans at the conference and not before.

"All right, keep it to yourself," sniffed Birky.

McAndrew's smile broadened. "Let's get cracking, lads. Art, you have a quiet word with Mr. Kirly."

"Special duties over the weekend." nodded Fairclough.

"Take him a bottle of the cooking whisky to keep him happy," added McAndrew. "Spin, Kocker – transport. We'll need to take a few things with us. Tell Staff Sergeant Beswick the usual rates have a built-in inflation factor and he's not getting any more out of us. In the meantime, I'll get on the blower to our wee friend and let him know he can expect us and a few friends for the weekend."

"Break the news gently, won't you, Mac?" laughed Spinner.

"I don't think there's any way to break that sort of news gently," Fairclough decided.

Three men let themselves through the sliding door and negotiated the maze of shelves. As they struggled into waterproof outer garments and nerved themselves to brave the rain, McAndrew lifted the red telephone onto his desk and consulted his file of numbers. Then he began to tap keys, grinning evilly.

## 2. SPREADING THE WORD

George Jackson-Browne, the manager of the Reynolds Hotel, Saltby, replaced his receiver gently and resisted an urge to burst into tears. Not again! If only he had been stronger. If only he had been able to resist the charms of that little French waitress. It was all her fault. He had been in a state of shock at the time. But who would have thought a girl of twenty-three could be interested in a man twice her age?

He should have listened to his wife and never engaged Camille in the first place, even though he had owed Arthur a favour. His brother-in-law had been nothing but trouble. And then that dreadful Smith fellow had appeared on the scene. That evil Scottish vulture, who had smiled so pleasantly and dropped enough hints to prove that he knew everything about his weekend of insanity with Camille, and that Mrs. Jackson-Browne possessed an excitable and jealous temperament.

How could a man live with his guilty secret hanging over his head, ready to destroy him at any moment? George Jackson-Browne was trapped. If the local group-manager ever found out, he would be eased out of his post in double quick time. Leo Trevellyan would not stand for extramarital fun and games with the staff and the risk of scandal. Ethel Jackson-Browne would kill him if she ever found out. Strangely enough, the latter fate seemed preferable.

And now, Jackson-Browne continued his mental chastisement, I have to open up the Conference Area and the top two floors for Smith and his ruffianly friends. What am I going to tell the other guests when they complain about the noise? Cursing all Scotsmen, George Jackson-Browne summoned his minions. He brushed aside their questions and began to set in motion his preparations for clearing the decks for the barbarian horde.

Fortunately, the first weekend of the year was never a time for heavy

bookings – which was why the top two floors had been closed. But business clients were replacing those who had spent the holiday in the hotel and they were regular and valued clients, whose absence would be noted if they took their custom elsewhere.

When he was alone again, Jackson-Browne sank his head into his hands and wondered how he would ever manage to hide the impact of yet another of Smith's conferences. Thirty-one delegates was the largest number yet. The least of his problems was payment. On the contrary, Smith had settled all accounts promptly and in full at the end of the last conference, and the delegates had been exceedingly generous tippers. It was just that they had broken so much and consumed such huge quantities of food and drink that entering all of the gory details in his books would have led to the manager's self-tripped downfall.

Come the annual audit, his own books would have been used to prove that he had allowed the 'wrong sort of person' into a respectable hotel. Higher management, which was very image-conscious, would place no other interpretation on the records of huge income followed by vast expenditure on replacements.

If Smith had not paid in cash and steered him to suppliers who had delivered discreetly and without paperwork, his goose would have been well and truly cooked. That the greater part of the profits from the disaster had found their way into his tax-free pocket, for want of a better home, had proved to be a small consolation, and it had added significantly to his burden of guilt. George Jackson-Browne was not one of the tough, who get going when the going gets tough. He preferred a quiet life.

The weather took a cold turn for the worse in the early hours of Friday morning. A steady stream of guests, an overwhelming majority of them called Smith, descended on the Reynolds Hotel as the afternoon progressed. Soon, the lobby carpet acquired two game trails, formed by melting snow dripped from the guests' coats and shoes. One led from the revolving door to the reception desk and then on to the lifts. The second was a straight line from the front door to the Conference Area and its adjoining bar.

Members of the staff who attempted to satisfy their curiosity ran into a blank wall of non-information. Conferences were never arranged at a day's notice. It was generally agreed that the taciturn delegates were members

of either the police or the Security forces, called together to sort out a serious emergency. The staff kept their ears open, hoping that the emergency was neither too serious nor too near, wondering whether they could slip a bug through the closed doors of the Conference Area.

An army of temporary staff had been drafted to cope with the weekend influx. Several of them made an 'honest mistake' and intruded into the Conference Bar, which was being run by the delegates. When they reported to their colleagues, they were forced to admit that they had witnessed something more like a social booze-up than a crisis conference.

Darkness fell. George Jackson-Browne felt as though it had fallen on him. He had directed the last of the anonymity of Smiths to the Conference Bar. The fuse of the bomb had been lit. He retired to his manager's office, contemplating plugging himself into his desk lamp and wondering whether an electrical suicide could be made to look like an accident.

A discreet tap on the door interrupted his deepest black thoughts. He raised his head wearily and invited the minion to come.

"Excuse me," apologized one of the temps, "but could you come to the kitchen? There's some, er, gentlemen there."

"What gentlemen?" groaned Jackson-Browne.

"A Scottish gentleman called Smith. And two others."

"Very well. I'll be there shortly." The manager dismissed the caller with a nod. He had made it his policy not to take on attractive female staff. She had slipped through the net somehow. Assuming the air of a martyr about to meet a firing squad, or perhaps more excruciating executioners, Jackson-Browne rose to face the new crisis.

"Hello there, laddie," said Smith alias Sergeant McAndrew in a confidential tone when they met amid gleaming stainless steel and copper. "Come along with me." He took Jackson-Browne's arm and led him, unprotesting, into the yard behind the kitchens. "I've brought a few things for the conference."

At his signal, Spinner and Birky opened the back of a dark green lorry to reveal a treasure house of provisions. Cases of food, drink, cigars and cigarettes, many in Christmas wrappings, were stacked in colourful disorder.

"We'd like your lads to unload it a bit sharpish," McAndrew added. "The lorry has to go back for more."

Leaving Lance-Corporal Birky to supervise the unloading, McAndrew and Spinner accompanied the manager back to his office. Jackson-Browne offered them chairs, then slumped behind his desk.

"He doesn't look very happy, does he?" McAndrew remarked.

"He looks bloody fed up, if you ask me," said Spinner.

"Is there something wrong, Mr. Browne? Can we help?" McAndrew invited, oozing co-operation.

Jackson-Browne uttered a strange noise, which could have been interpreted as laughter. "Is there something wrong?" he asks," repeated the manager weakly. "Wrong? Oh, no! You bring thirty people here for the weekend. I have to give them rooms, food, enormous quantities of drink. They annoy my guests, upset my staff, break everything. And I have to cook the books to hide the cost of all the replacements. Make it look as though it never happened. Oh, no! There's nothing wrong. Nothing at all. Everything's fine."

"No, he's definitely not happy," concluded Smith alias Corporal Spinner.

McAndrew weighed the situation rapidly. Jackson-Browne was winding himself into a tight spiral of despair, approaching breaking point. The Scot's radar told him that Jackson-Browne's old fear that McAndrew would compound his assault on the hotel by sneaking away without paying was also close to the surface. He was such a useful person to have under the thumb, and he had such a handy place for weekends and 'conferences', that McAndrew decided to hide the big stick and dangle a few carrots.

"I think Mr. Browne would like some money," he remarked.

Spinner stared at his leader in disbelief. Payment in advance was unheard of. "You serious?" he demanded.

"Aye, laddie. We can trust Mr. Browne," McAndrew added with a smile.

Spinner shrugged. "Okay, how much?" He reached into his inside pockets and began to toss bundles of pound notes onto the manager's desk.

"I think that much will do for starters," McAndrew decided. "Feeling better now, Mr. Browne?"

Jackson-Browne's eyes bulged. All that he could utter was a strangled squawk.

"And if anything does get broken," added McAndrew, suggesting that the hotel contained nothing of any great value, "well, you've got the addresses of our friends in the trade. They deliver at weekends. We'll be

seeing you later, Mr. Browne. Don't forget to lock that lot in your safe. I've noticed one or two rather strange characters lurking about the hotel."

Having shored up the manager satisfactorily, Sergeant McAndrew and Corporal Spinner retired to the Conference Bar. George Jackson-Browne spent the next hour playing with his new-found wealth, like a child with a new toy.

The party ended at four a.m. Nobody complained about the noise for the simple reason that everyone was invited. Most of the other guests were sales representatives, who wouldn't dream of turning down a free party. Three students, who were carrying out research into Saltby's Norman past, and the couple who were beginning the new year with a dirty weekend were similarly uninhibited. Members of the hotel staff found themselves drawn into the celebration and four off-duty members of Saltby's CID managed to gate-crash the event. Even George Jackson-Browne found himself recruited to the celebration.

Within minutes of receiving a reassuring telephone call from his wife to tell him that she was snowed in at her mother's and would not be back until at least Tuesday of the following week, Jackson-Browne was ambushed by a sergeant from East Anglia, who was thinking of going into the hotel business if the army lost its attractions.

Having consumed a quarter of a bottle of brandy with a kindred spirit, the manager had been an easy prey for an ambitious temp looking for a permanent position. As the party raged on across the lobby, Jackson-Browne, exhausted by a romantic interlude behind the locked door of his office, slept the sleep of the just in the arms of a Danish chambermaid called Mavis.

The sun rose, sending questing rays through gaps in white clouds and into the Reynolds Hotel. Most of the sales representatives had gone on their way, wondering about the state of their blood alcohol and feeling remarkably well after a dose of McAndrew's hangover cure. The day staff had restored order to the Conference Area and restocked the bar. An advance guard of Smiths reported to the dining room for breakfast, leaving nocturnal companions to wake up in their own time.

George Jackson-Browne had managed to smuggle Mavis out of his office unobserved – or so he believed. Having slipped away from the party

early, he had had time to sleep off his quarter bottle of brandy. His vaguely cheerful mood received the damp sponge treatment when a tour of his domain reached the dining room. He had been hoping that the army of Smiths would spend the morning in bed, suffering. The sight of an increasing number of them sitting down to a fried breakfast destroyed his remaining faith in natural justice.

The conference began at nine-thirty. Thirty-one Smiths in business suits took their places at the long table. Each delegate had been provided with a ballpoint and a notepad, doodling on, for the use of. Smoking materials and liquid refreshments were ready to hand. Everyone looked alert, suspicious and ready for anything.

"Right, gentlemen," said Sergeant McAndrew, bringing the meeting to a semblance of order. "I take it all of you have read the notes Sergeant Fairclough prepared?"

A chorus of grunts replied and nods rippled round the meeting.

Nobody was admitting anything much.

"For the sake of anyone too embarrassed to admit he can't read," continued McAndrew, "we're here to discuss our response to this latest batch of Defence cuts. Specifically, how we're going to neutralize the Government's attempts to interfere with our allocation. Only attempts to reduce it, of course," he added with a grin. "Hector?"

Through some sparse laughter and a few ironic cheers, McAndrew surrendered the floor to a bulky, red-faced man in a well-used suit of warm, dark tweed. Sergeant Hector Blackshaw was one of his closest friends and he had played a leading role in the tank spares operation.

"I shouldn't think anyone's too surprised to be here today," rumbled Blackshaw, resting his cigar in a convenient ashtray. "There's been a lot of jiggery-pokery with figures for years – more than enough to cloud our true situation. And the Official Secrets Act isn't too bad a gag. But I don't think there's one of us here today who isn't concerned about his livelihood, prospects for the future, opportunities missed and the quality of our rulers – using the term in its loosest possible sense. This may be our last opportunity for effective action."

"Ere, we're not talking about a military coup, are we?" drifted up the table. It was impossible to tell from his tone how serious the questioner was.

"I see no Colonels," remarked Lance-Corporal Birky.

"Nothing so public," smiled Blackshaw. "As I was saying, all recent governments have suffered from deep pockets and short arms where the armed services are concerned. If it's not the effects of a recession, it's a need to keep in with the lunatic fringe of their party."

"The other lot are no better," complained an indignant corporal called Ryan. He radiated that dark malevolence peculiar to a certain type of Welshman.

"I'm not saying they are." Blackshaw frowned the heckler into silence, not sure to which party he was referring. "We all know the main concern of politicians is to stay on the gravy train. They're all students of number onemanship. And I believe that's reason enough to be free of them. The sooner we introduce a bit of continuity and common sense into the running of the army, the better. Speaking for my group, we're in full agreement with the objectives set out in Art Fairclough's notes. And we're prepared to gamble everything to back this operation."

Blackshaw relit his cigar to mutters of agreement, some of them guarded.

"Is there anyone here who doesn't want to get involved?" McAndrew asked. "Because now's the time to get out. As Hector said, we're going to need one hundred per cent commitment from everyone. This is strictly sink or swim."

"We want to hear some more before we make up our minds," said the Welsh Corporal Ryan. "You haven't told us nothing yet."

"The less you know, the less you can blab if you're not in with us," remarked Corporal Spinner.

"In the interests of security," added Sergeant Fairclough, "you're either in from the beginning or not at all."

"You want us to buy a pig in a poke?" protested Ryan.

"We're not selling you anything," McAndrew corrected. "What we're saying is things are bloody tough now, and they'll get even tougher if we don't do something. We're making no promises, but I think we have enough brains and talents gathered around this table to work out a way for us to survive and prosper, no matter what the politicians say. The question is, are you prepared to make the effort? If you don't get in now, you won't be allowed in later."

"Who's going to be in charge of all this?" persisted Ryan. "Your group seem to be doing most of the talking."

"The man in charge will be the one best qualified for the job," said McAndrew.

"Who's that? You?" The accent from the other side of the table was equally hostile but from the North, like Sergeant Fairclough's flat tones.

"No," McAndrew put on a modest smile, "I was thinking of Hector Blackshaw, if he'll do it. He knows everyone. Nobody doubts his honesty in dealings between ourselves. And most important of all, he may have rivals in our ranks but there's no one who has it in for him in a serious way. Which means everyone should be able to co-operate with him without wanting to bugger him about."

"Anyone else want the job?" Blackshaw invited. "We can be boring and democratic and have an election."

"Let's not waste the time," remarked someone, provoking a general murmur of agreement.

"That's settled, then," said McAndrew with an air of satisfaction. "Anyone want to leave before I turn the chair over to Hector?" His dark eyes focussed on Corporal Ryan.

Ryan's eyes darted round the table, meeting a challenge from those who had made a commitment and a request for a lead from waverers. "All right." His inky mop of hair bobbed once. "I suppose we've got everything to gain. We're in."

"Good!" Sergeant Blackshaw heaved his bulk one place to the right, taking over the slightly more ornate armchair that McAndrew had been occupying. "Let's hear some details from Mac," he invited.

McAndrew squared his notes and drained the last of the black coffee in his cup. "What we intend doing is infiltrating the Ministry of Defence. In spite of all the fun and games with reducing the numbers of service personnel, we seem to acquire an increasing number of Civil Servants to administer us. The consequence of that is they keep running out of office space. What I think we could do is set up our own department in some suitable annex and then transfer ourselves to it."

"Does that mean we've got to move to bloody London?" demanded Corporal Ryan.

"Not unless you want to," said McAndrew. "You can remain attached to your present unit. But the arrangement should give you improved mobility. Any time you want to make a business trip, you can do it on orders from our department."

"What about transport?" said Ryan, self-interest brushing aside his hostility.

"Our people will authorize anything you need."

"Let's get this straight," interrupted one of Ryan's neighbours. "We remain attached to our present units, but we take our orders from the mob in London?"

"Only *you* tell them what orders you want to get," McAndrew added. "If you like, you're on permanent stand-by. Only *you* yourself decide when you jump."

"That sounds great," approved a sergeant from the North-East. "But how do we go about setting up this department?"

"By using the system," said Blackshaw. "Government departments like the Ministry of Defence have become artificially complicated structures thanks to such diseases as empire building, rivalry between various factions and excessive secrecy. There's too much for anyone to be familiar with the whole set-up in any detail.

"We should be able to take over some suitable office space and so on just by doing it with the necessary confidence. One or two people will have to be straightened, of course. But I don't anticipate any difficulties. The two *Bs*, bribery and blackmail, should take care of that.

"We'll have to slip some back-dated supportive paperwork into various filing systems to make it look like we've been around for a while. And if we create the impression we're hush-hush, no one will admit not knowing about us, but they won't be able to ask any questions about who we are and what we do."

Blackshaw refilled his coffee cup and paused to allow a buzz of conversation to run its course.

McAndrew tapped on the table with his pencil to gain the attention of the meeting. "Okay," he announced, "you've heard the good news. Now the bad news: the operation will be expensive. And we're going to have to shell out the initial costs from our own pockets. It's no use groaning," he added in response to sounds of pain. "The money has to come from somewhere, and if you couldn't afford it, you wouldn't be here. None of us are exactly skint. Yet. The army's been very good to all of us. Here's our chance to do something for it. Investing for the future. Call it your pension fund if you like, if you're Hector's age."

"Bloody cheek!" grumbled Blackshaw.

A voice broke through the jeers and sarcastic remarks. "What you gonna call the operation, Mac?"

"A name?" McAndrew scratched his round chin. "Well, I was thinking of something like *Operation Life-Preserver*. It has a nice double-edged ring to it. Something you'd throw to a drowning man. And also a breed of cosh."

"I think we can use that," Blackshaw said through the laughter. He wrote the title on a green folder that Fairclough had just handed him. "The first phase of the operation will be about gathering information. We'll need to look for suitable offices, and spot the people who'll be useful to us. Then we'll have to sort out how best to get their co-operation. Phase two will cover using the information and our new allies to put ourselves in business."

"How long's all this going to take?" asked a Cockney corporal. "Does it mean signing on for another twelve years?"

"At a guess, several months." Blackshaw ignored the sarcastic tone. "I can't give you an intelligent estimate until we've made a few preliminary inquiries. One of the determining factors will be the time it takes to discover and exploit the disgusting habits and cravings of the people we want to use. Returning to the subject of money, I think we should appoint a treasurer for our, well, society. I propose Corporal Walters. Any objections?"

"Thank you, gentlemen," nodded a thin, accountant-type of about thirty when the meeting had approved the suggestion. "I'm sure you've made my Swiss bank manager very happy."

"Who's going to look after the treasurer's passport?" said Corporal Ryan. But he was smiling.

"Anything more, George?" said Blackshaw.

"Not at the moment," replied McAndrew. "If no one else has anything urgent to say, I propose we adjourn to the bar. I think informal discussion groups will be best to get us thinking about the problems. And we can have another session this afternoon to see what ideas have turned up."

"Sounds reasonable," nodded Blackshaw.

"One final point," McAndrew added. "Security. If you put anything down on paper, make sure you keep it in a safe place. There's a shredder over there in the corner, and another one in the bar. They're there to be used."

"Other business?" said Blackshaw. "Okay, meeting adjourned."

Chairs rubbed across the carpet. The gathering split up into smaller discussion groups – some to consider how best to put *Operation Life-Preserver* into action, others to speculate on the future, anticipating success.

There was another full session around the conference table after lunch to discuss ideas and to sort out finances. By the end of the afternoon, the group had reached more or less unanimous agreement on the amount of an initial payment into the operational fund, which Corporal Walters would administer.

Sergeant Blackshaw declared the business section of the gathering closed on that note of unity. Most of the delegates retired to the bar. Sergeant McAndrew went in search of the hotel's manager.

George Jackson-Browne flinched visibly when the dreaded Smith entered his office. He tried to hide his guilty expression behind a sickly grin. McAndrew thought nothing of the reaction because the manager was always nervous in his presence. Little did he know that a well-fortified Jackson-Browne had crept into the kitchen, after escorting Mavis to her room, to misappropriate quantities of the provisions that Spinner and Birky had delivered.

Jackson-Browne now regretted heartily his rash, buccaneering act. It was so wildly out of character that he could scarcely believe that he had not dreamt the ghastly episode. But try as he might, he was unable to think of a way of returning his plunder. The fear of detection weighed his spirits down. But he drew a certain amount of comfort from the odds against the losses being noticed. The army of Smiths could not possibly be keeping accurate records of the consumption of their supplies.

"We're finished with your conference room, Mr. Browne," said McAndrew pleasantly, dropping into a chair uninvited.

"Oh! Thank you, Mr., er, Smith," mumbled the manager. "I hope you found everything to your satisfaction?"

"First class, Mr. Browne. First class," beamed McAndrew. "One small point, though. Someone seems to have shoved a couple of telephone books through our shredders. He must think we're the CIA, or something. I think one of them was the current *Yellow Pages*."

"I dare say we can get another copy from the company," said Jackson-Browne weakly.

McAndrew inspected the manager gravely through an interlude of

sinister silence. "You're looking worried again, laddie."

Jackson-Browne blanched. "Er, yes." His mind spun in dizzy circles. "It's the . . . accounts, yes, the accounts," he babbled. "It's very difficult to account for the accounts . . ." He ground to a tangled halt.

"Is *that* all?" chuckled McAndrew. "We'll see you right before we go. You won't let me forget, eh, Mr. Browne?"

Jackson-Browne managed a weak smile.

Sergeant McAndrew pushed out of his chair. He paused at the door and turned. "Oh, aye. If there's any of our supplies left over, you hang on to them as a wee bonus, eh?" A wink, a conspiratorial grin and he had gone.

God! He knows! Jackson-Browne was petrified with fear. The walls of his office seemed to be closing in on him, His heart pounded wildly. Making a supreme effort of will, he fumbled an almost empty bottle of brandy from the file drawer of his desk. The cap bounced once, then disappeared. He tilted the bottle and poured the liquid straight into his mouth.

Almost immediately, his throat closed in a spasm of coughing and the remainder of the brandy spilled down the front of his shirt, staining it and making the crisp fabric soggy. The spell broken by an image crisis, a measure of rationality returned.

How could Smith possibly know? The manager dabbed futilely at the spreading stain with his handkerchief, expanding the contaminating smell of strong drink. His body stood down from panic stations. His brain decreed a return to normal service.

George Alexander Jackson-Browne, he realized, had put one over on the shadowy Mr. Smith! Suddenly, the world seemed a slightly better place. He would have to change his shirt. A faint smirk tugged at the corners of his compressed mouth as he hurried through the door at the back of his office and up the service stairs to his apartment.

The Saturday night party exceeded its predecessor. Saltby's CID turned up again, and brought with them a posse of WPCs and female Traffic Wardens. Having spent the day plotting an illegal act that bordered on treason, McAndrew and his colleagues found vastly amusing the company of their fellow public servants. Undeterred by the presence of two dozen coppers on his premises, George Jackson-Browne resumed his predations of the previous night. Then he was ambushed and dragged into bed by Mavis, who felt confident that the Reynolds Hotel would soon be making

her National Insurance contributions.

Sunday was a day of departures. The Scottish contingent left first, red-eyed and unsteady despite a dose of hangover cure, and looking forward to more sleep on the flight home. Jackson-Browne managed to smuggle Mavis to her room unobserved. Then he faced up to the task of hiding his loot. He had collected a further case of assorted bottles while his sense of judgement had been suspended by the effects of champagne brandy. He would not be short of a Churchillian cigar for a long time.

His wife would be pleasantly surprised by the collection of exotic tins in the Thatcher cupboards – all of which could be explained as Christmas remnants. But Jackson-Browne had acquired too many bottles and boxes of cigars to be able to dismiss them as samples or presents from contacts in the trade. A locked cupboard in his office seemed the best cache at short notice. It was a good job that his wife was still securely snowed in at her mother's, a safe two hundred and fifty miles away.

Perhaps finding such delicacies as caviar and pressed tongue in Madeira in her storage cupboard would deflect her attention from Smith's parties, Jackson-Browne told himself. Ethel, his wife, was as conscious of the need to maintain the hotel's image as any member of the chain's board. Perhaps mentioning that a number of senior police officers had been present would convince her that nothing improper had happened. There was no need to mention that he had seen a detective inspector wandering around with a plastic pineapple ice-bucket on his head and minus his trousers.

As he watched a group of delegates begin their journey to the North-East, Jackson-Browne damned every single person called Smith, especially ones from Scotland. In his opinion, the world would be a safer place without them.

The main object of his storm of abuse and his group were presiding over a steadily diminishing gathering in the bar. Lubricated by coffee laced with whisky, the delegates were exchanging and discussing more ideas on the subject of *Operation Life-Preserver*. At intervals, a small group detached itself reluctantly from the main body, and those on the fringes moved closer to the centre of the gathering. The scene resembled the death throes of an average business conference. Such is the deception of appearances.

George Jackson-Browne made it his business to look into the bar from time to time. His spirits rose in inverse proportion to the number of Smiths remaining. Not that they could rise very high while Smith alias McAndrew was still there. But the removal of a few pounds from the ten ton weight on his soul was not unwelcome.

Then it happened. One moment, the manager was standing alone in the lobby, gazing vacantly through a window at the snow in the car park. The next, he was in the presence of the last of the Smith clan: one dark, sinister and Scottish, and looking down at him from a small advantage, the other much darker and towering over him. Sergeant McAndrew extended a hand. Jackson-Browne clasped it limply.

"We'll be on our way now, Mr. Browne," said McAndrew.

Jackson-Browne smiled weakly, not trusting himself to speak in case they changed their minds.

"Here's something for you and the staff," added Corporal Spinner, handing the manager a large plant pot.

Jackson-Browne clutched it reflexively. He recognized it as the former home of an elderly aspidistra which, until a few hours earlier, had bestowed its leafy splendour on the lobby. He could think of nothing to say, apart from an automatic, "Thank you."

"Not at all," beamed McAndrew. "We've had a rare weekend. We'll be sure to come back soon."

*Bastard!* Jackson-Browne tried to prevent his mental scream from showing through to his face. The sound of a horn drifted in from the winter-clad front of the hotel.

"There's our transport. Goodbye, Mr. Browne," McAndrew added.

"See you, man," added Spinner.

"Goodbye, er, Mr. Smith." Jackson-Browne bit back an automatic addition about having a safe journey. A short, sharp skid on black ice was more appropriate wish for anyone called Smith.

"Shall I take that, Mr. Jackson-Browne?" asked a voice at his elbow.

The manager recovered himself with an effort and assumed an expression suitable for dealing with a minion. "Yes . . ." His voice trailed away as he caught sight of the contents of the plant pot. "No, no, I'll take care of it." Jackson-Browne raced for his office, leaving behind a puzzled minion.

Moving with the calm control of a person in shock, he spread a news-

paper on the polished top of his desk and set the plant pot in its centre. When he tipped the earthenware container, a river of coins and notes flooded out. The receptionist tapped on his door, then came in to deliver a belated report that the last of the conference delegates had left. The message became a stare of surprise and interest at the fortune on Jackson-Browne's desk.

"They took a collection for the staff," explained the manager, spilling out the rest of the donations.

"They can come back, for me," beamed the receptionist. "Can I help you count it?"

"If you would," nodded Jackson-Browne, disagreeing with his first sentiment.

Lance-Corporal Birky's Jaguar gobbled up the short distance between the hotel and the camp. The weather had kept casual motorists off the roads and the local council was reserving its supply of salt and grit for the working week to come. A slightly erratic note in his driving was due entirely to high spirits. At McAndrew's insistence, Birky had not touched a drop since the end of the party.

"What did old J-B think of his present?" he asked over his shoulder as he left the thirty miles per hour zone and edged up towards fifty.

"You should have seen the look on his face when I gave him that flower pot," laughed Spinner. "He didn't have a clue what to do with it."

"Think he'll ask us back now?" added Fairclough from the front passenger seat.

"Oh, he's sure to," replied McAndrew confidently. "If we haven't straightened him enough, and he's forgotten Camille, there's always Mavis."

"Who's Mavis?" invited Birky.

"One of the unemployed in search of a job," chuckled his leader. "A very enterprising young lady." McAndrew felt quite smug about his decision to keep an eye on the manager, and having been on the spot to witness Jackson-Browne's predictable surrender to temptation.

"Some of those gatecrashers weren't too happy about making a contribution to the staff benevolent fund," remarked Fairclough.

"Tough," said McAndrew unsympathetically. "If you want an after-hours drink, you don't get it for free. That's the trouble with this country. Too

many greedy bastards wanting something for nothing.”

“Bloody terrible,” agreed the driver, turning onto the road to the camp. “I wouldn’t fancy being on sentry go in this lot.”

Fat, heavy flakes of snow had started to fall again to obliterate black ribbons on the metalled surface. The corporal of the guard insisted on checking the identity documents of the four occupants of the Jaguar, making a nuisance of himself until McAndrew parted with a bottle of vodka to keep the workers warm.

Three of the group returned to their quarters to unpack and catch up on lost sleep. But Sunday was not to be a day of rest for Sergeant McAndrew. Pausing only to change suitcases – he kept several ready packed for emergencies – he left the camp again for the wilds of Sussex.

His parting words to Sergeant Fairclough, who occupied the room next door, were that he had gone to see a man about a club. His enigmatic smile gave no hint as to whether he meant a gathering place or an instrument used for beating enemies over the head. Fairclough suspected that a little of both was involved.

### 3. HELLO, SAILOR!

Above ground, life at East Saltby continued at its usual leisurely winter pace. Below ground, in No. 5 Ammunition Store in the nearby supply depot, the pace tended to be even more leisurely. Sergeant McAndrew held several scrambled telephone conversations with Sergeant Blackshaw and reported to his colleagues that *Operation Life-Preserver* had begun, even though there was very little to show for three weeks' effort and expenditure. Morning coffee time came round on the last Friday in January. Four NCOs reported to the Office to scan the day's newspapers.

*The Times* had published a particularly easy crossword. Sergeant Fairclough based his conclusion on the fact that he had solved four clues – double his average for the last fortnight. He passed the folded paper to Corporal Spinner, along with a ballpoint pen which bore the strange legend: *Buckingham Palace Hotel* on one side, and *Bed & Breakfast £525* on the other. A rough area near the business end showed there the *Made In Taiwan* stamp had been filed off.

Spinner glanced at his watch, contorted his dark features into a fierce scowl and filled in a column of squares. Fairclough glanced at the date on the front page of the *Daily Express*. It was the twenty-seventh. For some reason best known to himself, Spinner always started with the clues down on odd dates. A subdued humming issued from the fridge/freezer, competing with liquid splashing as Lance-Corporal Birky poured the last of the coffee into his cup.

Fairclough glanced at the front page of the *Express* then he looked back at Spinner, who had solved three more clues. Fairclough felt vaguely cheated. He had four A-Levels and he had spent almost two terms at university before being shown the door. Spinner maintained that he had given up school at the ripe old age of fourteen. But he had the advantage of a virtually perfect memory for trivia. Ask him who won the Albanian Cup

Final in 1932, or the name of the third witch in *Macbeth*, and there was an excellent chance that he would know – or he would make it his business to find out just for the sake of adding one more fact to his incredible store.

Strangely enough, Spinner made little use of his talent other than to complete crosswords with irritating speed. He could have earned a comfortable living as a memory man but he didn't fancy working regular hours, especially in the evening. And McAndrew had soon discovered that the corporal's ability had no commercial applications.

Ask Spinner to remember a business appointment or the details of a transaction and he promptly forgot. Tell him the number of bricks in the Great Wall of China and he could repeat the answer ten minutes or ten years later. The quartermaster of Spinner's memory would accept only junk for inclusion in his store.

Sergeant McAndrew lifted his boots onto a coffee table. They had been directly in the blast of an electric fan heater and they had started to become uncomfortably warm. Above his head, the snow had turned to rain but the Office remained dry and comfortable, divorced from the whims of weather. George McAndrew shifted restlessly in his executive swivelling chair. All was not well with him.

"These bloody foreigners have got a cheek!" he announced.

Three pairs of eyes lifted to the source of the outburst.

"Look at this here," continued McAndrew in disgust, holding up his newspaper for all to see. "Illegal Entry Foiled. Police Arrest Nine." His blunt finger stabbed the relevant paragraph. "How's that for cheek?"

"What's cheeky about it?" invited Lance-Corporal Birky.

"Here's a bunch of foreigners smuggling more bloody foreigners into our bloody country!" said McAndrew indignantly. "What's that if it's not bloody cheeky? And what are the British getting out of it either? Sod all, that's what."

"Bleedin' disgrace, innit?" Birky disappeared back behind his paper and seemed to lose all interest in the subject.

"I'll say it is." Spinner added to the general indignation.

"The trouble is," said Sergeant Fairclough, "we've got so many people from the hot bits of the Commonwealth here, once the illegals get any distance from their landing point, they just blend into the background."

"We must stop them on the beaches!" Birky said dramatically to prove that he had been listening with at least half an ear.

"Yes," said Fairclough, expanding on his theme. "Or go round giving everyone with a heavy suntan the telephone test."

"Eh?" McAndrew released a Caledonian grunt of incomprehension.

"Take Spin for example," explained Fairclough. "If you didn't know him and you talked to him on the phone, you'd just hear another bum from Brum. He's obviously British born and bred. A lot of the illegals speak little or no English. But then again, the same applies to a lot of the legals."

"And that's how they get away with it," nodded McAndrew. "Keep your head down and no one gives you a second look. And if they do, go and scream to the race relations industry. Tell them you're being persecuted. Those sods would tie themselves in knots to prove black's lily-white."

"Boot the Wogs out," agreed Spinner. "They give us British a bad name."

"It's all right you being sarcastic," returned McAndrew. "But I think something should be done about it, Common Market or no Common Market."

And there the matter rested – dormant, but, as events were to show, not forgotten.

Four days later, Sergeant Fairclough was sitting at his desk, pecking at a typewriter. It was lunchtime and nobody else was working, which gave Fairclough peace and quiet and an opportunity to fill in some of the forms used to writing off items that had deteriorated beyond use during storage. A telephone bell disturbed his concentration. Sergeant McAndrew was at the other end of the line. He sounded unusually excited.

"Get over to the *Three Crowns* as fast as you can, laddie," ordered the Scot. "I think we have an interesting deal cooking." The telephone clicked, then it began to purr into Fairclough's ear before he could ask for further information.

The drab pub on Saltby's sea-front was almost empty. Two men in battered wellies and thick jerseys were assaulting the lumpy dartboard in the public bar. A couple of the students of the town's history, guests at the Reynolds Hotel, were watching them without enthusiasm. Fairclough bought a pint, then joined the three figures lurking in the darkest corner of the bar, blinking through steamed-up glasses.

"Ah, you're here," said McAndrew. "Meet the navy, laddie."

Fairclough shook hands with the strangers, both of whom were in

uniform and wearing massive naval greatcoats. McAndrew introduced them as Chief Petty Officer Don Smith and Leading Seaman Hank Newton, which was just as well because Fairclough was rather weak on naval badges of rank.

Don Smith was thirtyish, about Fairclough's age. He had deepest black hair and a solid face, which was relieved by a vital sparkle in his dark brown eyes. He spoke with a Devon drawl which hinted at countless generations of sea-faring ancestors. His voice also contained a vague hint of menace, a challenge to others to make fun of his rustic accent.

His companion was about five years younger, also with dark hair but his eyes were blue, and he had a lean, handsome face. Hank Newton looked like a prime candidate for the sailor loved by all the nice girls. He had very little to say for himself, which made guessing his origins a very difficult task. But he had a ready laugh to show that his silence was not due to a lack of interest in the conversation.

"You remember we were talking about illegal immigrants the other day?" began McAndrew.

Fairclough looked up from a mopping job on his steamy glasses and nodded.

"Well, we've just been discussing an interesting venture that should prove very profitable for all concerned. Our friends have their own private Motor Torpedo Boat, you know."

Fairclough gazed at his naval colleagues in respect. "How the hell did you manage that?"

"It was easy, really," said CPO Smith smugly. "A Tory government arranged to sell some surplus MTBs to a certain mountainous South American country that must remain nameless. The one with the longest coastline."

"Chile," remarked Leading Seaman Newton.

"Isn't it?" replied Smith with all the grace of a bad comedian cracking what he knew to be a rotten joke. "Anyway, the Labour lot, rot their socks, got in before the deal went through and cancelled the order without a thought for the valuable foreign exchange they were losing. Payment was to be made in US dollars, you know. Of course, this attitude was totally unacceptable to true patriots like ourselves. So we went looking for alternative customers."

"Very decent of you," remarked Fairclough.

"Yes, wasn't it?" agreed Smith. "So the MTBs were sold to a firm in Florida. For renting out to the big, fat executives you see in photos with about fifty tons of freshly-caught marlin or some other billfish. But the boats were sold again before they got to the States. To a firm in California as pleasure craft. Sort of gas-guzzling cabin cruisers for the rich and impatient." Smith produced a paperback book from a side pocket of his slightly damp greatcoat and turned to a marker. "This has just come out. The ship the MTBs were on gets an honourable mention as yet another vessel that disappeared in the so-called Bermuda Triangle."

"An insurance job?" remarked Fairclough.

"That's right," nodded Smith. "The original crew put out a distress signal in a bit of a storm, then took to the boats before they could give much of a position. A new crew came aboard, changed the superstructure about a bit, slapped on a new name and headed south, round the Cape to the real customers. The first crew were picked up by another ship after about a day afloat. None the worse for their ordeal."

"If somebody creates a myth, you might as well make use of it," remarked McAndrew. "And everyone ended up happy."

"Except the insurance company," added Smith. "And they were a Yank firm, so no one on this side of the Atlantic got burned. Of course, only five boats were delivered, even though the real customers had paid for six. But as it was all under the counter, they seemed happy enough to have got that many. We donated the one left over to a worthy cause."

"So we're going to use it to do some people smuggling?" frowned Fairclough.

"Oh, no! Nothing like that!" McAndrew corrected him virtuously.

Sergeant Fairclough was confused, and said so.

"Well, laddie," smiled McAndrew, "the trade in illegals has dropped off quite a lot over the years. They're no longer swarming up our beaches like we're Normandy on D-Day. But there is still some going on, mainly from Belgium. And we have a line on the people handling the transport."

"The plan is to charge an immigration fee," said Smith. "There's no way to stop them coming into the country but I see no reason why a bunch of foreigners should take all the profits."

Fairclough's eyes hopped from speaker to speaker, like those of a spectator at a tennis match. They stopped on McAndrew. "I thought you were against illegal immigration?" he accused.

McAndrew's dark brown eyes acquired a wide border of white as he pantomimed injured innocence. "Not at all. It's probably illegal to be against it anyway. All I ask is they buy their tickets from me."

"Oh, yes," nodded Fairclough, accepting his leader's double-think. "And what happens if the travel firms don't pay up?"

"Then they're in deep trouble," laughed CPO Smith, mixing boyish charm with the humanity of Jack the Ripper.

"You see, they combine conventional smuggling with the trade in illegals," amplified McAndrew. "You know that European Wine Lake the politicians can't do anything about? These guys have been buying it up, distilling off the alcohol and making it into vodka. And selling it over here on the cheap. Just imagine what a few rounds of tracer would do to a boat packed with drinkable Molotov cocktails. Not to mention all the other odds and sods they can buy cheap across the Channel and flog over here at a good profit but still relatively cheap."

"And we're going to charge them import duty?" said Fairclough. "Enough to make it worth our while collecting, but not enough to reduce their incentive too much?"

"That's about it," nodded Smith.

"So when does all this begin?" invited Fairclough.

"Tonight, laddie," came the reply.

"There's no Moon," added Smith. "It's a perfect night for something dark and devious."

"So where do we fit in?" Fairclough twitched a finger between himself and McAndrew, accepting that the matter had progressed beyond discussion and dissent.

"If all goes well, we're just along for the ride," said McAndrew. "All we're expected to do is keep out of the way and try not to fall overboard. But we may just be called on to do a bit of Euro-smuggler-bashing to make them see sense."

A ship's bell clanged behind the bar. "Ten to two," warned a jocular male voice. "Anyone with a job to go to had better start thinking about drinking up."

McAndrew climbed to his feet, displaying an unusual streak of conscience. "Well, we'd better be getting back to camp. See you later, as arranged, lads."

His naval colleagues contrived to nod agreement and continue drinking

at the same time. *Operation Blackbird* was on.

McAndrew remained non-committal during the three-mile drive back to East Saltby. His connections with the Royal Navy weren't exactly unexpected. The Senior Service could provide a useful, if diminishing, transport service. They were also a source of duty-free spirits and tobacco when army stocks proved insufficient. Fairclough was used to McAndrew's reticence. The leading light in any business always has his secrets. They are the edge that he maintains to stay on top. McAndrew's trouble was that secrecy amounted to a religion in his case.

Spinner and Birky were informed of the nautical adventure as a matter of course. Neither seemed too disappointed when they learned that they had not been invited along on the boat ride. They were strongly in favour of the naval protection racket. But, as Birky put it, only an idiot would volunteer to go cruising on the English Channel at night and in the middle of winter when he could be tucked up in a nice, warm bed at home.

"Anyway," added Spinner, "that film's on the box tonight."

"Oh, yes," said Birky, "the late night rubbish. That one they were calling *Frankendrac* in the paper."

"You what?" said McAndrew, who had seen the wrong TV menu.

"That's right," said Spinner. "This bloke gets smashed up in a car accident and they find his brain's okay but his body's a write-off. So they give him this robot body. He's more a cyborg than a bionic man."

"I remember," interrupted Fairclough. "I was going to watch that. He's got this converter inside him that lets him eat food in a fairly normal way and burn it up to generate electricity for his batteries and motors."

"Yeah," said Birky, "and he gets this strange craving for blood, so he makes these screw-in fangs and goes round biting young birds on the neck."

"How about recording it?" suggested Fairclough.

"Okay," nodded Birky. "I think we're all right for tapes."

"I don't know why you're bothering," said McAndrew. "You all seem to know what's going to happen. Why waste your time watching the film?"

"We've read the book," said Fairclough. "We want to see what the film people have done with it."

"Did you know the book was written by a bloke called Airean Whyte?" Spinner offered an item from his rapacious memory. "Reckon that's his real name?"

“Only as far as the tax people are concerned,” said Fairclough. “Right. I’d better get some of my forms signed so we can write a few things off before our customers start turning up at the gate, asking for us. Then I think we’d better get our heads down, Mac. If we’re going boating.”

The night was cold and damp. A film of moisture collected on every horizontal surface and drips ran down doors and windows. The temperature in Saltby hovered just above freezing. Sergeants McAndrew and Fairclough, dressed in the warmest waterproof clothing available, were lurking in McAndrew’s car, waiting for the navy to show up. McAndrew had parked his vehicle in a convenient patch of shade near the sea wall.

The nearest street lamp had attracted a stone from one of the local vandals in the recent past. It had been standing uselessly dark, casting a shadow instead of helping to banish them, for not quite long enough to stir a public-minded citizen into reporting it to the council’s works department.

The time, by the luminous dial of Fairclough’s chronometer, was 00:05 hours. February was five minutes old. The two sergeants took a swig from their supply of liquid warmth just to keep the cold out. If they had to wait much longer, Fairclough decided, their breath would be warm enough to melt the average iceberg.

He looked out past the droplets and streaks on his side of the wind-screen, then he tapped his companion’s arm and pointed. A bulky figure with a pointed head was approaching from the direction of the landing stage. They slid down in their seats until they were no longer visible to a casual glance. They had practised the manoeuvre once already to evade the attention of the copper who had been stuck with the dockside beat on such a miserable night. Feet plodded past at a regulation two and a half miles per hour. The policeman was deep in dark thoughts about his lot. The song about a policeman’s lot seemed strangely apt on such a night.

A few minutes later, McAndrew touched the driving mirror. Someone else was approaching. The top of his head was rounded, not pointed. He was wearing a dark, knitted cap, a bulky anorak and dark trousers. Hands thrust deep into his pockets, he strolled up to the car. The fleet was in.

“Sorry we’re a bit late,” said Leading Seaman Newton, his breath steaming gently. “We had to keep out of the way of a Coastguard launch. Looks like someone else is up to no good. Not surprising, really. It’s a good night for it.”

The presence of the Coastguard station a mile and a half down the coast was one of the drawbacks of using Saltby as a base for extra-mural naval operations. Fairclough and McAndrew climbed out of the car and stretched cramped limbs. They followed Newton to a flight of damp, worn steps. An inflatable dinghy bobbed up and down with the swell at the foot of the steps. The party scrambled aboard, assisted by another member of CPO Smith's crew, who had stayed behind to guard the boat.

"Off we go then, Tiddler," said Newton.

His colleague untied a line from a rusty iron ring and started the outboard engine. The bottle in Sergeant Fairclough's pocket clunked as he tried to find a comfortable position on the hard plastic seat. Leading Seaman Newton recognized the sound. He raised his eyebrows, altering the pattern of shadows on his face, and coughed questioningly. Fairclough grinned to himself and passed the bottle. Newton took a modest swallow, then let the driver take a turn.

After leaving the calmer waters of the dredged channel, the rubber boat plodded on, heading diagonally across a lazy swell. The sergeants exchanged uneasy glances in the flare of a lighter as they lit cigarettes, taking firmer grips on the ropes that circled the dinghy. Newton and Tiddler seemed completely unconcerned by the erratic pitching of their boat.

Ten minutes out from the shore, Hank Newton touched McAndrew on the shoulder and announced, "We're here."

The buzzing of the outboard motor reduced to a less urgent note. Fairclough scanned his surroundings, but failed to find anything of interest in the universal blackness. He was just about to ask where 'here' was when a black shape loomed out of the sea in front of them. They climbed aboard via a short ladder. Shadowy figures hauled the dinghy out of the water, working by torchlight. The silky purr of the MTB's engines took on a deeper, more purposeful note as the vessel picked up speed.

"Welcome aboard," said CPO Smith, touching a finger to the peak of his yachting cap.

"Glad to be here," grinned McAndrew. "Are we all set?"

"Yes, we've just had word from your people in Belgium. Tonight's definitely the night. Our friends loaded the cargo a few minutes ago. They should be on their way shortly."

"Our people?" frowned Fairclough.

"Part of the Cologne Mob," nodded McAndrew. "They're on leave in Belgium. The army's contribution to *Operation Blackbird* – intelligence work on the opposition."

They gathered in the cubby hole that passed for a wardroom on such a small craft. McAndrew and Fairclough found themselves devoting a good deal of their attention to keeping their horse's necks in their glasses. Brandy and ginger ale had taken over from the traditional pink gin. CPO Smith found secretly amusing their attempts to keep their balance, but politely kept his feelings submerged.

A sailor in scruffy jeans, a reefer jacket and a bright orange peaked cap appeared in the doorway, looking more like a fisherman than a member of Her Majesty's Royal Navy. Smith and Newton were similarly dressed, but they had sharp creases in their 'uniforms' and they managed to look quite smart.

Orange Cap handed a folded sheet of notepaper to Smith and used his lanky body to prop up the door frame. "Message from Black Watch, Skipper," he announced.

"Very well." Smith unfolded the signal. "Our friends sailed at sixteen minutes past midnight. We're in business." He nodded to Orange Cap, who disappeared aft, back to the radio room.

"What happens now?" asked Fairclough.

"Nothing much. Not for an hour or two, anyway." Smith spread a chart on the narrow table. "We're here." He tapped a point off Saltby with the blunt end of a pencil. "Our friends are about here." The pencil tapped again without leaving a mark. "We'll intercept them in about three hours."

"How will you find them?" asked Fairclough. "I mean, how will you be sure you've got the right boat? The Channel's supposed to be the busiest piece of sea in the world."

"Really, Art," said McAndrew, shaking his head in pity. "I'd have thought you at least would be aware of some of the marvels of our technological age."

Fairclough shrugged. "Well, there's radar, of course. But you've still got to get close enough to pick them up. And even then, you can't be sure it's the right boat."

"And this is the bloke who keeps reading spy stories," scoffed McAndrew. "We've got the sods bugged, laddie, thanks to the efforts of

Black Watch. They haven't got a hope in hell of getting by us."

"What makes you think they'll have the money aboard to pay the immigration fees?" Fairclough switched to a new objection.

"Tonight is more of an awful warning of what can happen if we don't get our share," explained Smith. "But we may help ourselves to a bit of smuggle to pay for our trip."

"Surprise, surprise," said Fairclough, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a huge yawn. "You've got everything sorted out."

"Do you want to get your heads down for a while?" asked Smith. "It must be past you old folks' bedtime."

"That's a good idea." Fairclough pretended not to notice the insult from a man of his own age. His afternoon nap had eluded him, thanks to a fit of urgency on the part of one of the group's customers. "It's been a long day. We get up in the morning, you know. From what Mac tells me, the navy stay in bed till the pubs are open."

"Don't drag me into your private war," grinned McAndrew. "Which way, Don?"

CPO Smith escorted them to the crew quarters in the bow. He showed them how to strap themselves into the narrow bunks then left, promising to wake them when he established contact with the bug on their target. The wind had picked up, lifting gushes of spray as the MTB butted its way through a deepening swell. Sleeping was like trying to rest while tied to a trampoline that was being used by a squad of over-enthusiastic gymnasts. Surprisingly, both McAndrew and Fairclough managed to drop off.

"Wakey, wakey, shipmates." A sailor with a wide grin splitting the white disc at the front of his black balaclava roused the sergeants.

McAndrew released himself from his bunk and immediately found himself sprawled across a table on the other side of the gangway. The MTB rolled drunkenly, then settled on a new course. Its engines quietened to a muffled grumble. McAndrew and Fairclough struggled into the wardroom.

"Are we there?" said McAndrew. "It's gone very quiet."

"Not quite," said CPO Smith. "We're less than two miles from our friends, though. The course change just then was to bring us round behind them. We're running in on the auxiliaries, hence the lack of noise."

"The buggers must have done a good job," said Fairclough. "Any of that coffee going?"

"Of course." Smith emitted a piercing thistle.

The sailor in the balaclava appeared, bearing two steaming mugs and a plate of thick corned beef sandwiches.

"It's not very clever to go into action with a full stomach," observed Fairclough, helping himself from the plate. "The medics don't like it if they have to cut your guts open."

"I must remember to ask them not to shoot me in the guts," Smith remarked, visiting the plate.

"What happens when we catch up with the opposition?" Fairclough added.

"We call on them to heave to and pay up, laddie," said McAndrew. "Very politely, of course."

"And what if they don't?"

"We tell them we'll give them a fish up the stern and blow them out of the water," said Smith with an evil chuckle.

"That's the last resort, though," added McAndrew. "We don't want to waste a perfectly good boat if we can help it. The object of the exercise is to make a few bob out of the deal one way or another."

"Here's hoping they're not too brave." Fairclough toasted the success of the mission in naval coffee.

Orange Cap appeared in the wardroom doorway. "Contact now dead ahead at two thousand yards, Skipper," he reported.

"Very well," said Smith in a stiff-upper-lipped drawl copied from great naval films of World War Two. "What's the weather doing topside?"

"Wet and windy," was the reply.

Smith and Newton went through a contortionist act to climb into waterproof coveralls in the confined space. Then Smith picked up his yachting cap and led the way to the bridge. On their left, they passed Orange Cap, who was sitting in front of the green eye of the radar screen, looking like something out of the *Frankendrac* film.

"What about their radar?" remarked Fairclough.

"They won't see us on it," returned Smith. "One of the advantages of being in the navy is you can get hold of little black boxes that give you a cloak of electronic invisibility."

They emerged onto the flying bridge to find themselves in a thin, salty drizzle, which fell in bursts and gusted sideways. The lookout passed Smith a set of image-intensification night glasses and pointed into the dim

starlight. McAndrew and Fairclough could see a lot of sea but nothing more. The wind had blown away most of the clouds to show Orion declining with the other winter constellations.

The intercom clicked, then a voice whispered, "Five hundred yards, Skipper."

"Action stations. Gun crews close up," said Smith as casually as he had asked for more coffee in the wardroom.

The cocking mechanisms of the twin machine guns behind the bridge clattered ominously. There was an auxiliary cannon mounted on the deck, between the anchor locker hatch and a ventilator. Tiddler, who had crewed the rubber dinghy, cranked one of the fat, sausage-like shells into the breech and settled himself comfortably in his harness. Engines roared at the night. The vessel's bow reared into the air, sending Fairclough and McAndrew staggering backwards. A spotlight slashed a solid beam out to harpoon their prey. In moments, the MTB was running parallel to a cabin cruiser. CPO Smith picked up a microphone.

"That ship!" he commanded. "Heave to and stand by to take on boarders. Look alive, there, you lubbers."

"I don't know how he can spout rubbish like that," Fairclough whispered to McAndrew, trying not to laugh.

"Don't be a spoilsport, laddie," chuckled his colleague. "He's enjoying himself. It's not often a CPO gets to play at pirates for real."

The cabin cruiser poked its nose into the air and veered off sharply. Smith's helmsman spun the wheel energetically and raced after it. This time, the passengers had taken a firm grip on the rail and managed to keep their balance, more or less. A man burst out of the wheelhouse of the cabin cruiser. He tried to blast the life out of the spotlight with a shotgun.

"Shucking hell!" A scrambled expletive from Smith and McAndrew blued the air as pellets raced over their heads.

"The brown trousers, please, nurse," murmured Fairclough, wishing that he had brought a steel helmet.

Machine guns stuttered briefly, spitting flames after an arc of tracers. The shot-gunner seemed to fly into the greedy sea, to be left far behind in seconds.

"Good shooting!" called Smith. "Give them another burst over their heads. I hope he hasn't put too many holes in the tub," he added as an afterthought.

Red lights hosed over the fleeing vessel, forming a fiery bridge between the MTB and the sea. A stubby mast snapped off and fell in a tangle of wires across the wheelhouse of the fleeing cabin cruiser. The white foam at its stern slackened. It seemed to race backwards towards the MTB. The helmsman hauled throttle levers back. A shuddering dash became a gentle glide.

"Boarding party, stand by," ordered Smith, resuming his detached, stiff upper lippery as the excitement of the brief chase died away.

The two vessels came to relative rest, side by side. Crew members carrying mooring lines leapt across from the MTB at bow and stern. Having secured their lines, they brought Heckler and Koch MP-5 sub-machine guns to the ready position. The weapon favoured by the SAS was also available through SBS channels.

"Everyone on deck, at the double," Smith shouted into his microphone, returning to the role of Captain Kidd.

"Don't tell me, he's going to make them walk the plank," whispered Fairclough.

"He'll make us walk home if he hears you," chuckled McAndrew.

Figures emerged from the cabin of the captured vessel. Under the watchful eyes of Smith's crew, they filed up onto the pitching deck. The three passengers, unsure of their fate, co-operated listlessly. The cabin cruiser's three remaining crew members were more inclined to be bolshy when they realized that they had been stopped by pirates, not British Coastguards. Smith decided to make an example of them.

The Belgian skipper spoke fluent English and he had an excellent command of its swear words. He used most of them on Smith when he was informed that he and his colleagues could make no more of his smuggling runs unless they paid a toll to their near silent partners. But the threat of being dipped into the freezing waters of the Channel put a brake on his tongue.

Hank Newton and an engineer called Nadger searched the cabin cruiser and found another passenger lurking in a cupboard under a bunk. They made him carry one of the two inflatable life rafts that they had found in the adjoining cupboard over to the MTB. The rest of the prisoners followed, one at a time. They were directed to a crash net on the slippery afterdeck, between the empty depth charge racks.

Smith had decided to take them within sight of the French coast, and

then let them row the rest of the way in their own life rafts. As subdued foreigners were coming aboard, the captain of the MTB hooked his elbows over the rail of the flying bridge and directed a smug expression at the two sergeants.

"Not a bad effort, gentlemen?" he suggested.

"Just beautiful, laddie," grinned McAndrew, trying to estimate the value of the captured vessel.

"A perfect example of combined operations," decided Fairclough, polishing spray from his glasses. "They didn't stand a bloody chance."

"Evening, all," remarked Leading Seaman Newton, having sent Nadger below with a carton.

"What was in that?" invited Smith.

"Samples," grinned Newton. "Just a little something off the top for the navy before we share everything out."

"Samples of what?" said McAndrew, giving up the struggle to put a value on a lightly-machine gunned, second-hand cabin cruiser.

"Our friends have been a bit naughtier than we expected." Newton produced a dark green bottle from a pocket of his coverall. "There's a load of Euro-vodka in plastic jerry cans. But there's also some litre bottles of quite decent brandy and assorted liqueurs. Not to mention export ciggies and cigars. Looks like someone's done over a duty-free shop somewhere."

The sounds of a short, sharp scuffle drew their eyes to the afterdeck. One of the prisoners had tried to jump a guard and take his sub-machine gun. Muttering viciously, the Belgian was sprawled on the crash net, clutching a booted shin.

"The natives are restless tonight." Smith moved to the intercom and contacted the radio operator. "Al, make to Black Watch: 'Chips for tea'." This was the code signal for a successful interception. "Prize crew ready, Hank?" he added to Newton.

"As soon as Nadger gets back," nodded his second in command.

"I think that includes us," remarked McAndrew.

Leading Seaman Newton took command of the prize, assisted by 'Nadger' Nadin in case its engines gave any trouble. McAndrew and Fairclough went along to inventory the cargo and to get a ride back to Saltby. Engines revved up from a tick-over. Smith sketched a salute towards the cabin cruiser as the MTB throbbed onto a southerly course. Then its deck lights went out, leaving the night blacker than before. After

discharging its passengers, the MTB would be returning to Portsmouth. Newton set a westerly course. Given a trouble-free run, the launch would be off Saltby an hour and a half before dawn.

Corporal Spinner and Lance-Corporal Birky were not early risers by nature but they were prepared to brave a cold and damp winter morning in a good cause. McAndrew had arranged a rendezvous at a quiet beach a mile up the coast from the town of Saltby. An old wooden jetty still ran out from a boatyard which had failed to survive hard times. Unloading proceeded at a frantic pace. The hi-jackers did not wish to attract the eagle eyes of the Coastguard.

"Did you get that film recorded, Klocker?" Fairclough asked as he heaved a carton of bottles up to a decking of soggy and splintered planks. The tide was an inconvenient yard too low.

"No trouble," confirmed Birky, picking up three boxes of cigarettes. "We even edited the adverts out."

"Yeah, right" added Spinner, winking at Fairclough as McAndrew struggled out of the captured vessel's cabin with more bottles. "It wasn't bad. But they bugged the ending about. What happened was . . ."

"Don't tell us!" complained McAndrew.

"What's that?" another carton, closely followed by Leading Seaman Newton, appeared on deck.

"That film last night. The *Frankendrac* one," said Fairclough. "They recorded it for us."

"Oh, yes, some of our lot were going to record it for us," nodded Newton. "We're all looking forward to it."

"Aye, same here," remarked McAndrew, mopping a mixture of sweat and drizzle from his face.

"I didn't think you was all that interested, Mac," said Spinner, looking surprised. Then he gave Fairclough another large wink, letting McAndrew see it this time. The Scot returned to the cabin for another load, muttering indignantly about cheeky sods, but grinning quietly.

Eventually, the lorry departed for a rendezvous with a customer. It would be back at the supply depot at East Saltby, innocently empty, in time for the crew to enjoy a late breakfast. Newton gave McAndrew and Fairclough a lift down the coast as far as Saltby, where they collected McAndrew's car. Then the cabin cruiser turned into the rising tide, heading back down the

Channel to circle the Isle of Wight to a boatyard on its south coast.

It had been a good night's work, which had cemented relations between the two groups. When the captured vessel and its cargo had been sold, McAndrew would be able to make a sizeable donation to the fighting fund of *Operation Life-Preserver*. *Operation Blackbird* had proved yet again that inter-service rivalry could be set aside at times of peril.

CPO Smith and his MTB put out to sea a dozen times more to brave February's sleet and snow, and then March gales. They enjoyed an overwhelming superiority of firepower, training and speed, which proved to be decisive factors in every interception. The opposition could only fight and run, and neither tactic was effective against a battle-ready naval craft.

Given the choice, Smith and his crew preferred either cowardly or realistic opponents. They were not lacking in courage themselves, but profit dictated their choice. There was less profit in a captured bullet-riddled vessel – and none in one that they were forced to disable to the point of sinking.

The smugglers tried sending out two, and then three or four vessels on the same night, but Black Watch continued to monitor their planning sessions and to bug their boats. Vessels which CPO Smith was unable to intercept at sea ran into McAndrew's colleagues at the shore, where their goods were unloaded before they were sent home with their human cargo.

Most of those who ignored the advice and tried to land illegals immigrants elsewhere received another rude shock. Inevitably, some of the smugglers got through the blockade. But the odd success served only to underline the steady slide into loss.

Several tons of cannabis resin and quite a few pounds of mainly Iranian heroin found their way to the bottom of the Channel for the delight of fish. Smith and McAndrew had decided to take home only goods which could be sold openly in England. Smith had given his gunners strict orders not to damage their targets more than absolutely necessary, but he suspended the rules when they encountered drug smugglers. The gunners could fire at will in that event if the opposition opened up with light or heavy automatic weapons.

Most of the people- and vodka-exporters stuck to pistols, shotguns and the occasional Armalite rifle or US Army-surplus M1 carbine. The drug smugglers preferred sub-machine guns with high rates of fire but generally

low accuracy at any distance. One crew even managed to get hold of a couple of wire-guided anti-tank missiles.

Luckily for CPO Smith and his crew, the aim of the missile crew failed to match their imagination. Nevertheless, Smith and company received the shock of their young lives when the first projectile roared over the MTB and exploded in the water, a quarter of a mile away.

Unluckily for the smugglers, they had been sold defective goods. The second Russian-made missile exploded in its launcher, ripping its users to bloody shreds and tearing the boat in half. Smith's crew pulled two blackened and semi-conscious survivors from the freezing water as it was extinguishing blazing wreckage and swallowing the evidence of the disaster. There were no more missiles after that.

Usually, a show of force – tracers whipping past the wheelhouse – was enough to convince the opposition that surrender was the best course of action. Very rarely did Tiddler Barnes have to direct cannon fire at the waterline of a stubborn fugitive.

CPO Smith reintroduced keel-hauling for skippers of badly damaged vessels or bullet-riddled cargoes. While a quick trip from bow to stern of a launch bore little relation to being hauled the length of the barnacle-encrusted keel of a wooden Man o' War, it had a shattering impact on the victim and exerted a satisfactory psychological pressure on his colleagues ashore.

The crew of the MTB soon got fed up of digging bullets and shotgun pellets out of their vessel's woodwork and replacing shattered wheelhouse windows. Smith ordered some lightweight armour plate and had it fitted at the boatyard on the south coast of the Isle of Wight. He also had the machine guns and the twenty-millimetre cannon enclosed in small turrets.

By the middle of February, the MTB had become a sea-going tank. New, more powerful engines and larger fuel tanks restored its top speed and increased its range. At a riotous launching ceremony, CPO Smith named the vessel *Ned Kelly* in honour of its resemblance to Australia's most famous son.

Winter became spring. The smugglers began to lose heart. Some of the Belgian operators emigrated to join colleagues in France. Black Watch followed them and kept their naval allies informed of the opposition's plans. A pair of captured vessels, armoured and armed, joined Ned Kelly on patrol. Eventually, Smith intercepted a vessel which heaved to without

being challenged and ran up a white flag. The smugglers had decided to negotiate.

A new, improved, undercover cross-Channel ferry service opened for business in the second quarter of April. This time, however, the British were firmly in command of an operation that admitted irregular immigrants and duty-free goods to their country. *Operation Life-Preserver* acquired a steady income. Sergeant McAndrew and CPO Smith realized that they had a lot in common and became close friends, which caused a few problems for their colleagues. The two men were virtually interchangeable in a bad light – both having dark hair and being of average height and stocky build. The only way to tell them apart under such conditions was to remember that Smith had more hair.

Driven by the powerful force of mutual business interests, they came to consider their separate groups to be wings of the same organization. Inevitably, the navy learned of *Operation Life-Preserver*. As they felt that they had been deprived to a greater extent than the other services, Smith and his group expressed an immediate interest in the plot. McAndrew introduced Smith to Sergeant Hector Blackshaw.

After a briefing on the aims and objectives of *Operation Life-Preserver*, Smith made a lighting tour of selected colleagues to find out whether they were interested in dipping into their savings in a good cause. Existing informal contacts between army and navy strengthened as Smith explained that they would no longer be fighting for a share of the same pie. After *Operation Life-Preserver*, everyone would get his own pie.

Sergeant Blackshaw found himself in great demand to give lectures on the aims of the operation and the benefits of its success. When he called a second conference at the end of April to receive progress reports on Phase One, it seemed only natural that representatives of the navy be invited to attend as observers.

## 4. THINKING BIGGER

Most of the intelligence-gathering phase of *Operation Life-Preserver* had been concentrated in and around London, because this was where most of the targets were to be found during the day, and often at night too. But the provincial members of the conspiracy did not feel too left out of things. They knew that their fund-raising activities would determine the success or failure of the grand design. Almost four months had slipped by since the first conference. The time was overripe for another.

Mindful of the success of the first conference, his colleagues volunteered Sergeant McAndrew to host the next one. He didn't mind taking on the job as he would be spared the inconvenience of a long journey. There was only one person who was likely to object to the idea. McAndrew put on his best suit, polished his most persuasive smile and went to see him.

George Jackson-Browne made very little attempt to hide his horror. But whenever the dreaded Smith asked him to do something, all of the mouse in his soul seemed to rise to the surface. He tried to explain that another conference was out of the question – to no avail, McAndrew had taken the trouble to find out that he had plenty of room.

He tried to explain that the group manager had heard rumours of the goings on at the last conference, and he had descended on Jackson-Browne unexpectedly to deliver a long lecture on what is and what is not fitting conduct for the staff and guests at one of the hotels in Arthur Trevelyan's group. McAndrew was unimpressed.

When Jackson-Browne mentioned that his job was hanging by a very slender thread, and the only reason that he still had it was Trevelyan's reluctance to see his cousin Ethel suffer the indignity of having her husband on the dole, the dreaded Smith dismissed his fears as sheer imagination.

When he mentioned that his wife had been giving him hell for two

months, Smith reminded him that he shouldn't have joined if he couldn't take a joke.

In the end, Jackson-Browne heard himself refuse point-blank to allow another conference. Smith just smiled gently and tossed an envelope onto his desk. It contained a thick wad of five pound notes, all used, and six fairly dull photographs of Jackson-Browne and Mavis, the Danish chambermaid, who had been working at the hotel since the second week of February.

Although the pictures were completely unshocking – both parties were fully dressed and sitting on separate chairs in most of them – there was a suggestion that more interesting poses could be produced if the need arose.

"They came out rather well, don't you think?" observed Smith alias Sergeant McAndrew.

Jackson-Browne said nothing. His whole world was collapsing about his ears yet again. Smith, the demolisher of wills, had struck once more. There was nothing to be done about his predicament. The very inevitability of his future seemed to have a numbing effect on him. It was all so terribly clear. There would be another of Smith's famous conferences. George Jackson-Browne would be forced to resign. Ethel would kill him. He had barely survived the last conference. This one would finish him off. He felt a hand on his arm. The dreaded Smith was saying something.

"What?" asked Jackson-Browne vaguely, stilled by a spreading inner calm as he came to accept his fate.

"Where do I find this group manager of yours?" repeated McAndrew. "You know, your boss?"

Jackson-Browne pulled an address book across his desk and opened it at 'T'. "Here." He stabbed an entry with a finger.

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you, laddie," said the dreaded Smith, perching himself on a vacant corner of the desk to add the name and address to a small notebook. "I'll have a word with him. Then I'll get him to come and see you to give you the go ahead for the conference. Is that okay?"

"Perfectly," nodded Jackson-Browne, reduced to one word statements, struggling to adjust to the fact that someone else was about to receive Smith's attentions.

"Fine," smiled McAndrew. "I'll be seeing you in a few days, then. I'll see

myself out," He left the office congratulating himself on having nipped a potential mutiny in the bud.

Jackson-Browne sat staring, in turn, at the photographs, at the money and into space. The impossible was about to happen. The decision was about to pass out of his hands. The dreaded Smith was going to give Trevellyan the shock of his life. He wouldn't have to leave the hotel if his group manager authorized the conference. And if his wife said anything, he would be able to shed responsibility with the classic excuse that he was only following orders. Trying to ignore Smith, he decided, was like trying to ignore a tiger living next door. Smith could sit and smile, and terrify just by being what he was.

For want of something better to do, Jackson-Browne began to stack the five pound notes into heaps of twenty. He ended up with ten and a half units. Idly, he pushed buttons on his desk calculator. 1050 stared back at him greenly. Then he realized the significance of the number. With an unexpected touch of class, the dreaded Smith had left him a deposit of one thousand guineas.

Arthur Trevellyan arrived at the Reynolds Hotel, Saltby, within the hour. His flustered air set the staff speculating when he asked for the manager with an urgency that usually meant trouble. Jackson-Browne received him with reserved cordiality, which began to evaporate when Trevellyan suggested that a glass of sherry might be in order.

Jackson-Browne felt sure that the group manager had been threatened with the exposure of a deep, dark secret. He was not prepared for coy references to HMG, and the MoD and Security – as if Trevellyan had suddenly become a junior spy.

As if on a cue, the telephone rang. It was Smith. Jackson-Browne confirmed that he was making arrangements for the conference while his group manager beamed uninhibited approval. Trevellyan had become part of a conspiracy of silence. Jackson-Browne watched him sip the good sherry and wondered what Trevellyan would do if he ever found out that he was dealing with a cloak and dagger tiger.

Smiths of all shapes and sizes descended on the Reynolds Hotel on the morning of the last Saturday in April. CPO Donald Smith was one of the last to arrive. The addition of his name to a procession of names brought

no perceptible reaction from the receptionist, who had seen more Smiths than the pair of them had had hot dinners.

"Room three oh two, Mr., er, Smith," he said in a faintly bored voice.

The pause before his name offended CPO Smith. He took a perverse delight in making the receptionist examine his driving licence to prove that he was the genuine article, then extracted a humble apology for the imagined insult.

Other eyes and ears saw and heard the incident. A report sped round the staff grapevine, triggering a crisis of belief. Was it possible that all of the Smiths were genuine? There had been *Smith Weekends* at hotels in the United States, and further along the coast in South Devon. From that moment on, the Smith tribe was to find a new note of credibility in the voices of the staff. After all, a customer who feels slighted never tips.

To keep the attendance within manageable proportions, only group leaders had been invited to the second conference. Army and naval Smiths mingled freely, making jokes at the expense of the other service as an automatic reflex. They were all on the same side against their political enemies.

The first session of the conference opened at eleven hundred hours. Twenty-eight pairs of eyes rested on Sergeant McAndrew as he welcomed the delegates. Then he invited CPO Smith to introduce the naval contingent. Sergeant Blackshaw uncovered a large map and a diagram on twin blackboards, then resumed his seat at the centre of the northern side of the table.

"Gentlemen, our headquarters," he announced, tapping a red dot on the map with a long steel rod. "For the benefit of anyone who doesn't know London too well, we're in Westminster. Landmarks." He shifted the pointer. "New Scotland Yard to the north-west and Westminster Abbey to the north-east. The Department of Trade have offices a few streets away, and we're surrounded by assorted spy-types – mostly Security Service, or MI-Five, as they're better known."

"Cops and counter-spies?" observed the Welsh Corporal Ryan. "Sounds a dangerous sort of place to be."

"But the right sort of area if we want to suggest we're an off-shoot of some obscure branch of Military Intelligence," returned Blackshaw. "They don't all hang their bowler hats on and off Whitehall. What we're doing is infiltrating an existing department. After a lot of investigation, we've settled

on the *Combined Services Special Statistical Unit* – which is just as well in view of the interest of the navy. The job of these people is to trot out facts and figures on the services, often to answer parliamentary questions. If some MP wants to know the number of boots in the army, they count the feet and divide by two.”

“They sound a right bunch,” observed a sergeant with a strong, no-nonsense Yorkshire accent.

“Highly expendable,” agreed Blackshaw. “Of course, we’ll have to have a civilian staff. This is the structure.” He tapped the other blackboard, where a succession of boxes grew pyramid-fashion to the top of the heap. Several of them contained photographs. “One or two of the existing staff will be allowed to stay on,” resumed Blackshaw. “The rest will be transferred out and replaced by ‘the right sort of chep’. Villains with dark secrets which we can hang over their heads to keep them in line. Our recruits will do what we tell them or else. The top man, unfortunately, is one of Nature’s untouchables. He’s quite a decent bloke, but he’s led a pretty blameless life and he has scruples. We’ll have to promote him and slide someone corrupt and manageable in sideways.”

“If this place has a civilian staff, how do we fit in?” asked Corporal Ryan, looking for problems.

“We’ll be sort of roving inspectors,” said Blackshaw. “With powers to go anywhere and requisition anything we need to produce useless figures for our political masters.”

“How soon do you expect to have your ‘right cheps’ in place?” asked CPO Smith.

Blackshaw heaved a suitcase onto the long table. It was full of dossiers. “If we spend the rest of the morning as a selection panel and sort out some candidates. We can’t rush the transfers too much, but we should have them completed by the end of the summer.”

“September?” complained Corporal Ryan, directing a hostile glare across the table at a blond and tanned Chief Petty Officer called ‘Buck’ Lindsay. It was clear that he wanted a quick, army-only operation.

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Lindsay remarked. “You can’t shove in too many new faces too soon.”

“Before anyone starts moaning about it,” continued Blackshaw, “including the navy in our scheme complicates things, but it doesn’t affect our timetable. There’s another outfit in the offices adjoining our targets.

They're involved in rather theoretical contingency planning – such as what to do if the Russians drop the Bomb on us or how to keep essential services running if the wreckers manage to organize a general strike. When the navy take them over, they'll give themselves the power to try things out to assess their performance under unusual or emergency circumstances.”

Blackshaw brushed ash from the lapel of a new and expensive suit. “Now, I suggest we have a look at these dossiers and decide who we want to have working for us.”

By lunchtime, the group had added pencilled names to most of the boxes on the CSSSU staff organization and structure chart. Only the posts of director and deputy director remained to be filled. Blackshaw had identified too many candidates. He promised to put them through a further screening process.

After a long lunch, McAndrew and several others gave brief reports on their activities, explaining how they were gathering funds to support *Operation Life-Preserver*, inviting helpful suggestions as to how their operations could be made more efficient and hoping to stimulate their colleagues to greater efforts. Then Corporal Walters took a wad of papers from a space-age briefcase with a security lock and an auto-destruct mechanism. He distributed numbered copies of a balance sheet.

“This is the state of our various bank accounts as of Wednesday of this week. These are for information only, not retention,” he added, projecting brisk efficiency. “I’m going to count them through the shredder afterwards. Some of our colleagues from the navy may not be aware of this, but we turn all our donations over to charity to avoid tax complications and having a lot of hot money on our hands. We’ve had to spread ourselves out a bit, so we now own three registered charities. It all helps to confuse the picture if some nosy person tries to take an interest in us.

“As you can see, most of the expenditure falls into two categories: entrapment and equipment. We’re digging slightly deeper holes under our Civil Servants to improve our control over them, and we’re spending most of your contributions on keeping the Barron tank project ticking over. We’ve commissioned some more design work so that we can buy the parts from a dozen different suppliers. We’re going for the first tank in kit form – which should make it easier to transport and easier to service. Both good selling points. The Barron tank should make us a mint if *Operation Life-*

*Preserver* comes off."

"When it comes off, laddie, not if," insisted Sergeant McAndrew, displaying complete confidence in his brainchild.

"When," conceded Walters. "To save you the trouble of counting them, we have forty-three different accounts in banks all over the country, including Scotland and Wales. We were worth on Wednesday around two hundred thousand pounds, but the cash flows in and out so rapidly that the balance at any one moment tends to be fairly meaningless."

"I wouldn't call what you're getting out of *Operation Tin-Tack* fairly meaningless," observed Corporal Ryan. "Two hundred thousand comes to eleven grand a group," he added with mercenary Welsh calculation.

"If you want to share it out, we know you'll only spend it on riotous living," scoffed Blackshaw. "Okay, Corporal Walters seems to be on top of his job. Any questions?"

"How does he manage to make so much interest?" asked a sergeant with a Geordie accent, sounding very impressed.

"I could spend a couple of hours telling you about over-night and short term loans on the London money market," replied Corporal Walters. "Or I could leave it at: you just need large quantities of surplus cash and the right contacts."

"I'll take your word for it," laughed the Geordie.

"Any other business?" invited Blackshaw, moving on to the final item on the agenda.

"Wot about the Raf?" asked a voice.

"Well, what about them?" said another.

"Order, order," intoned Blackshaw. When the usual chorus of requests for pints of bitter and large Scotches had died away, he added to the first speaker. "What do you mean, son? What about them?"

An up-to-the-minute suit contained with ease the skinny body of Corporal Jack Medder, REME. He hitched his chair closer to the long table and said, in an apologetic tone, "Well, I mean, we know these Raf geezers at Milaston. That's right next door to us. In Somerset," he added in case the audience assumed from his London accent that he had wangled a home posting. "Anyway, we've got this arrangement with them. For passengers and freight. They lay on a training flight. And they know some good hotels. Good terms for the trade." He bestowed a cheeky grin on the meeting.

"What's your point, laddie?" prompted McAndrew.

"Well, I mean, with all these cuts and things. And the price of oil. It cuts down on their training flights. And that's going to happen to our business, eh? It's going to be phuckt up real proper, that's what. So I was thinking, like. If we're getting the navy in on Life-Preserver, why not get the Raf in on it too? They've got all those transport planes. And loads of helicopters."

"It's an interesting possibility," admitted Blackshaw.

A murmur of agreement ran round the table.

"As a matter of fact," Blackshaw continued, "a number of people mentioned involving the other services after the last meeting. But we decided we couldn't go too far too fast. We can't have too many people knowing what we're up to until we've laid some really solid foundations. And we wanted to see how things went with the original plan. I don't think we were expecting the success we've had. And I'm sure we never expected to see anyone from the navy present at the second meeting. Have you said anything to your RAF contacts?"

"Oh, no. Not yet," said Medder quickly.

"It might be worth sounding them out – in a roundabout way," continued Blackshaw. "But it's possible the RAF are already up to something along the lines of Life-Preserver. We've not found out anything concrete. But Mike Walters and I have heard whispers. I don't think they'd appreciate us poking around where we're not welcome."

"You have a word with Hector afterwards," said McAndrew. "See if he knows any of your contacts."

Blackshaw nodded ponderously and made a note on his pad. Corporal Medder grinned and relaxed. His big moment had passed, successfully.

"Anything further?" asked Blackshaw. A restless murmuring answered him.

"In that case, meeting adjourned." Blackshaw pushed the top onto his pen in a gesture of finality. "The bar is open." There was a general exodus to the adjoining room. Sergeant Blackshaw counted the dossiers in his suitcase to make sure that they were all there, then added his map of Westminster and the organization diagram of the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit. A buzzing in the background turned out to be Corporal Walters feeding copies of his balance sheet into the shredder.

By common consent, the business of the formal meeting had been confined to general reports and decisions on broad elements of strategy.

Details were to be discussed in smaller groups in the bar, where information, advice and assistance could be sorted out between the parties concerned.

The organization could not be described as a democracy. Although working towards a common goal, each small group of members was free to go its own way and to use its own methods, regardless of the approval or disapproval of a majority – as long as the viability of *Operation Life-Preserver* was not affected by a reckless or foolish action.

In addition to fund-raising, each band of specialists took on tasks related to the abilities of its members – insinuating forged documents into filing systems for future reference, intelligence work on useful or potentially dangerous people, tempting the morally frail and so on. How they solved the problem remained their business. If they needed help or advice, both were freely available. A new spirit of co-operation flourished in the face of the common peril. Enemies were prepared to bury the hatchet in the ground instead in of each other's backs. The system seemed to work, and to work well.

McAndrew made telephone calls to East Saltby and Portsmouth to let his group and Smith's group know that the meeting was over and they were invited to the social activities. When he returned to the bar, the sight that drew his eye was Corporal Medder and Sergeant Blackshaw, who were propping up the plastic counter, discussing something. They looked an ill-assorted pair; exactly like a figure '10', thought McAndrew.

"It's going to get a bit crowded, isn't it," remarked CPO Smith, handing his friend a large whisky and water and directing him to a table.

"Eh?" grunted McAndrew economically.

"When the Raf sign on, I mean," explained Smith. "If they've got any sense, they'll be in like a shot. We'll have to think about hiring the Albert Hall for conference number three."

"Aye, Hector was saying something about that earlier," grinned McAndrew. "He was thinking we might have to get together by region and numbers and just send regional representatives to the next conference, if there is one."

"If we don't watch out, we'll be electing our own MPs to go to our own private parliament," chuckled Smith.

"Don't joke about it, laddie," warned McAndrew. "It might just happen."

"What might happen?" asked Sergeant Blackshaw, crushing an unwary

armchair under his bulk. CPO Smith brought him up to date. "I can see something like a Joint Services Committee being formed," Blackshaw decided. "Purely for liaison purposes. Between our CSSSU . . ."

"Makes us sound like a bunch of Russians," commented McAndrew.

". . . and the Navy's Special Contingency Planning Department," continued Blackshaw. "Funny how they like to put the word 'Special' into their titles. And whatever the RAF come up with. Everyone will be in touch with his own people at Westminster, by phone or teleprinter. The JSC will be a means of extending the range of contacts if your own service can't help. But I don't think we'd ever see it becoming a ruling body. Nor would we want it to."

"Most things have got some sort of governing body," Smith pointed out.

"Ah, but the essence of our organization is that it's composed of individual groups, each surviving, in the main, by its own efforts. If a ruling body tried to impose too much policy, the whole structure would crumble. The inevitable consequences would be dissent, the formation of cliques, and power struggles." Blackshaw ticked the awful options off on chubby fingers.

"In the end, the organization would tear itself apart from within, leaving us at the mercy of the politicians again. It's a mistake to try to govern a bunch of individuals like ourselves. All you can hope to achieve is what we've already done – lead by example and hope to get everyone moving in roughly the same direction. Then leave them alone to get on with it. If the JSC tries to exert any influence, it'll be more sticking signposts along what they think is the best route rather than trying to drive people along it. They'll offer advice, but whether anyone accepts it will be up to him."

"And you expect to be one of the powers behind the throne at the CSSSU?" remarked Smith.

"I freely admit I'm no longer the age or shape to leap about like you youngsters," smiled Blackshaw, who was in the second half of his forties. "I'm looking forward to taking over a desk and keeping an eye on our tame Civil Servants. And kidding the politicians they're whittling us down to nothing, whether or not it makes sense."

"And putting the black on them to make them cough up more for us?" suggested a hovering eavesdropper.

"The more I think about it, the less I think we'll have to screw cash out of the poor old taxpayer," countered Blackshaw. "Even though he'll remain

a major source of income. It's more likely we'll become very prosperous middle-men, selling an extremely wide range of goods and services. Once we get organized, we'll be able to place quite legitimate orders for all sorts of things. Tobacco and drink are the most obvious."

"Tyres and petrol," contributed McAndrew.

"All sorts," nodded Blackshaw. "If we ignore VAT and other taxes, we'll be able to add on a reasonable profit and still flog them off relatively cheaply. And people will be all the more eager to buy them if we don't deny they fell off the back of a lorry, even if they were unloaded quite legally and openly. And don't forget we have one of the finest armaments industries in the world at our fingertips. Once we get rid of such hindrances as political prejudice, the potential world market is enormous."

"We'd have to watch who we sell to, though," cautioned McAndrew. "In case they use them on us."

"Yes, of course," agreed Blackshaw. "We wouldn't deal with the IRA, for instance. But there's an excellent market for basic killing machines – automatic rifles, ammunition and grenades – a reasonable distance from home. And there's all the other bits and pieces you need to outfit an army. Boots, if the natives wear them, camouflage uniforms, webbing, ammunition pouches. I'm sure we can get the right goods at the right price to people who want them."

"And you think we might get started at the end of the summer?" said McAndrew.

"About then," nodded Blackshaw. "I hear you've bought a club, Mac?"

"Just a quarter share in a place called the Bellside," said McAndrew modestly. "About thirty-five miles from London. A couple of candidates for director of the CSSSU are members, as it happens. They're quite interesting blokes."

"Discreet sort of place?" suggested a hovering sergeant.

"Oh, extremely," grinned McAndrew. "It's got its own golf course, and there's a very intimate dining room with soft lights and waiters with bad memories. There's even overnight accommodation if you don't fancy the drive home right away."

"What's the membership fee?" asked Smith.

"Pretty ruinous," McAndrew admitted. "And I don't think they'd let a CPO past the entrance hall, even if he had an urgent message for one of the admirals."

"I'll have to remember to wear civvies," noted Smith.

"Sounds the right sort of place to take customers when we're working for ourselves," mused Blackshaw.

"Sounds like we'll have to be on our own private civil list before we can afford to find out," observed the hovering sergeant. He came from Kirby but his accent was more south Cheshire than Merseyside, and he preferred a gin and tonic to a pint.

"Good discount for the trade, Bill," grinned McAndrew.

"I suppose you know Hank Newton is golf-mad?" remarked Smith. "He'll want to go and live there."

"You haven't heard any recent dirt on these two candidates, have you?" asked Blackshaw.

"Well, yes," nodded McAndrew. "I have heard one of them's been seen around town with his secretary's brother. I don't know quite what to make of that yet."

"Bound to be some sort of dodgy deal involved," remarked Smith.

The formal session of the conference was over but the business continued.

## 5. EXPORT LICENCE NEEDED

May had begun. It was Tuesday and Sergeant Arthur Fairclough was in Somerset, near the county boundary, around a dozen miles west of Taunton. George McAndrew had returned from the conference chewing at a problem which he refused to discuss. Fairclough had learned only that it concerned the RAF in some way – hence his presence at the REME camp at Buddford, as a guest of Corporal Jack Medder.

“How do you fancy a bit of a holiday?” McAndrew had asked.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Fairclough had replied.

“Great!” McAndrew had beamed. “There’s some people I want you to get to know. I’ve fixed things so you won’t be missed here for a day or two. I’ll tell you where you’re going while you pack.”

Corporal Medder was waiting for his guest when Fairclough reached the rendezvous – a pub called the *Buddford Arms*. Medder reminded Fairclough of a slightly larger version of Knocker Birky. He was about an inch taller, half a stone heavier and he could flash the same kind of irrepressible grin.

Fairclough swapped brief biographies with his host over a pint. As far as he could recall, he had exchanged only hellos and goodbyes at the first conference. Then he told Medder what he knew of his mysterious mission, which wasn’t much.

“There you have it,” Fairclough concluded. “I’ve got to meet you and your group, and as many of the RAF group as possible. As to why, your guess is probably better than mine. Did Mac say anything when he phoned you to arrange all this?”

Medder shook his head. “Not a dicky bird, mate. Still, I s’pose he’ll cough when he’s good and ready.” He reached over to kidnap a menu from an adjoining table. “The grub here’s bloody good if you’re ready for some lunch.”

“Yes, I am feeling a bit hollow,” Fairclough admitted. “And it’s been a long time since breakfast.”

There are three ways into the REME depot at Buddford – excluding a parachute drop or a scramble over the chain-link and barbed wire perimeter fence. The main entrance opens, via a pair of slip roads, directly onto the Buddford bypass. Entrance number two used to be the main gate until the bypass was built. A rather bumpy road connects the camp with what the locals call Old Buddford – roughly that part of the town built before 1935.

The Buddford factory opened in May of 1935. New Buddford was a direct consequence of the prosperity that the factory brought to the area. Then came World War Two, the REME camp and nearby RAF Milaston, to which a contingent from the United States Air Force was attached. Then came a period of decline.

The War ended, the Yanks went home and the factory has been closed for so long that it has become a rotting shell and very few people remember what it produced. Despite the council’s regular attempts to bribe companies to build modern factories in the area to produce devices for the Electronic Era, Buddford remains a garrison town at heart. The council and its traders shiver whenever defence cuts are mentioned and they keep a keen eye on the numbers of soldiers and airmen on their doorstep, who provide them with valued custom.

The third entrance to the REME camp is the most interesting and not subject to the scrutiny of civilians. A ride downwards in the lift located in either number 25 or 27 High Street, Old Buddford, begins the journey. Both buildings, the Buddford Arms and Buddford Autos, Ltd. respectively, are owned by Corporal Medder’s group

Sergeant Fairclough’s eyes almost popped out of his head when he stepped out of the lift under the pub and found himself in an underground railway station. He stood, rooted to the spot, and stared at the electric blue form of the single-car tube train. He was afraid to blink in case the vision disappeared.

“Like it?” beamed Corporal Medder, cutting short the unspoken homage to his magnum opus.

“It’s bloody marvellous!” enthused Fairclough.

Medder touched a button to open the sliding door. The subdued lighting

of the cab came on. "Want to drive?" he asked, offering a key.

"I've always wanted to drive a train," nodded Fairclough.

The journey of a mile and a half to the camp was over much too soon. *Welcome To The Bunker* read a large sign on the wall. Fairclough stopped a comfortable yard from the red light on the buffers and followed Medder onto the platform. They were in a tiled cavern which looked exactly like one of the older London Underground stations – even down to the chocolate machine on the platform and posters featuring near-naked models on the walls. Fairclough pointed to another set of tracks and a black tunnel on the other side of the platform. "Where does that go?" he asked.

"That's the line to Milaston," said Medder.

Fairclough shook his head in admiration. "Wait till Mac gets here. He used to be mad on train spotting when he was a kid. And you still had proper engines to spot."

"I know the type," grinned Medder. "They go bloody mad when they get here and there's the chance to mess about with a real train. They'd wear the bugger out, given half a chance."

"It must have cost you a fortune to get the tunnels dug and all this done. How the hell did you manage to keep it quiet?"

"Easy, mate. It was all here when we found this place. They dug them in the war. All we had to do was lay the tracks and chuck a bit of paint about. The stairs are this way."

They walked along the platform and climbed a short flight of stone steps. A left turn and a length of ringing, cream-tiled corridor brought them to a set of double doors, which were flanked by large carbon dioxide fire extinguishers. The doors opened at the mid-point of one of the long sides into an area about forty feet by thirty.

Two rows of square pillars created a corridor ten feet wide down the long axis of the room. Medder turned hard left, towards a drinking area. While he opened cans, Fairclough dumped his suitcase and took a look at his surroundings.

The large room had been divided into individual areas for particular purposes, each defined by its own colour. Pastel shades on the walls matched bright but not aggressive carpets. But the ceiling twelve feet above his head remained a uniform pale cream. The orange of the bar and its collection of padded chairs and steel and plastic tables became a

canary dining area which had been outfitted with reproduction antique furniture.

Then came what looked like a theatre without a stage, with rows of blue chairs. Fairclough learned later that it was a small cinema. A screen could be lowered from the ceiling when required. Continuing clockwise, he noted a green games area which contained three snooker tables, a pool table and the inevitable dart boards in addition to green baize-topped card tables. Finally, there was an office, looking brown and important, its panelled walls rising above a shoulder-high partition.

Fairclough observed that the furniture of the cinema and the dining area displayed an almost military uniformity. Each piece differed from its neighbours only in the distribution of scars and bruises. Not so the bar. If the Office at East Saltby contained a five-piece suite, then the bar at Buddford boasted a twelve-piece suite. A common but independent spirit of eccentricity had been at work in both places. Sergeant Fairclough shed cap, greatcoat and belt, and collapsed into an inviting orange lounge feeling right at home.

"What was the place like before you had the interior decorators in?" Fairclough wondered.

"This bit was all offices," said Medder. "You can see where we got shot of the partitions to make one big room. There was one of the posts at the corner of each office, and a corridor down the middle. The whole place was an alternative hidey-hole for the Government in the War. In case the Jerries made the Smoke too hot for the bastards. Or the invasion came off. There's miles and miles of tunnels and little offices down here. Gord knows what they kept in them. I suppose we'd be all right if they dropped the Bomb. If it wasn't too close. There's supposed to be room for about six or seven hundred people down here. Most of it's a bit rough now, though. Needs a good clean-up."

Fairclough drank a can of beer and met a couple of Medder's colleagues. Then he left the large room by a door beyond the snooker tables. Medder led him along a length of wartime green and cream corridor to the guest quarters of the Bunker Hotel. Fairclough dumped his suitcase beside the bed and found himself clutching a map in a plastic case.

"What's this for?" he frowned.

"We warn everyone never to go anywhere without these," Medder

explained. "If you take a wrong turning, there's a good chance you'll never get out again. The tunnels seem to go on forever, a bit like a Cornish tin mine. The trouble is, there's all sorts of interesting junk in the offices, so you can't stop people exploring." To underline his point, he pulled a battered map in a scarred plastic case from his pocket to show that even he carried one.

"So you reckon they're worth a look?" Fairclough noticed a torch hanging on the wall beside the fire extinguisher.

"Lots think so. If you do get lost, all you have to do is use the numbers painted on the walls at the junctions of the corridors to find where you are on the map. Then it's dead easy. But the numbers aren't in order. Someone thought it would be good for security. So you do need the map."

"I'm almost afraid to set foot outside the door," laughed Fairclough. "See you later."

Medder returned to the bar. Fairclough unpacked, then telephoned his colleagues at East Saltby. Spinner took the call.

"Hello, Brillo-bonce," said Fairclough. "Mac there?"

"Not for ages," said Spinner. "He shot off just after you left. I was just thinking about ringing you up to see if you know where he's gone. But you're as ignorant as the rest of us." Spinner made the lack of knowledge an insult, returning the favour.

"Oh, well, I suppose he'll turn up when he's good and ready," said Fairclough philosophically.

"That's what you're supposed to learn in the army. Patience. How to hang about waiting for someone to give you orders. But I suppose a bloke who's been to university is so bright he gets bored easily."

"No, they taught me to read at school. And I brought a book. This is a fantastic place. They've got a Tube train to take them to the pub."

"Bollocks!" scoffed Spinner.

"All right. Don't believe me." Fairclough sounded hurt. "You wouldn't care to put a large bet on that, would you?"

Knowing that Fairclough gambled only on certainties, Spinner was forced to accept the unlikely story. "Any messages, then?" he invited.

"No, not really. Just tell Mac I'm here, meeting people and itching to find out what's to do. Try and keep Knocker out of trouble. And I'll see you when I see you."

"Okay. Cheers, Art."

“Cheers, Spin.” Fairclough replaced the receiver and set out to find the bar, map in hand.

A tour of the points of interest of the camp took up the rest of the afternoon. Fairclough met the rest of the four sergeants and three corporals who made up Corporal Medder’s private army. Each ruled a strategic part of a depot, which was full of vehicles of every shape and size. Just about everything from motorized trolleys to tanks and tank transporters could be seen.

The main service section of the vehicular hospital also contained a seasoning of civilian cars, which seemed to be sneering from their private wards at the public sector peasantry around them. Their spare tyres rubbed shoulders with those intended for armoured cars and heavy lorries. Medder noticed the visitor’s interest in the interlopers.

“Bleedin’ officers,” he remarked with a perfectly straight face. “Bastards are always on the scrounge.” He assumed a limp stance and an accent to match. “I say, Corp’ral. The awld bas dasn’t seem to be ranning as smoothly as she mate. Think you could get one of your cheps to do samethin?” He did the voice so well that Fairclough concluded that the educated drawl had to be a faithful imitation of the accent of one of the officers at Buddford.

“Watch it!” cautioned one of Medder’s satellites. “Here’s Puffin’ Billy.”

A portly figure huffed and puffed his ray towards them from behind a row of lorries. The group assumed positions of approximate attention.

“Where’s Mr. Lucas?” gasped the corpulent company sergeant major. “I heard him just then.”

“Afraid you’ve just missed him, Sarn’t Major,” said Corporal Medder efficiently.

“Damn!” muttered Puffing Billy. “Well, don’t just stand there, making the place look untidy. Get cracking!”

The mountain of flesh frowned at Fairclough for a moment, then steamed away towards the horizon. Medder joined in the mocking laughter when he was safely out of earshot.

Fairclough decided that he had seen surprisingly few people about for such a large camp. Those who had deigned to put in an appearance seemed to be taking life at a very leisurely pace. In fact, the only people who were exerting themselves in any way were a young craftsman in a new

and ill-fitting uniform, who was polishing the CO's car, and a pair of sergeants who were holding an animated conversation beside a dark green and shiny Challenger tank.

Fairclough arranged a detour which allowed him to pass close by the sergeants, one of whom was lean and tough, and looked like a proper soldier. The other had the body of a Sumo wrestler; minus the bones from the right wrist. Fairclough almost choked trying not to laugh when he learned that the owner of the vehicle was trying to make his mind up about the interior colour scheme of his vehicle.

"Where is everyone?" he asked as Medder was escorting him to the next point of interest.

"Football match," said his host. "It's the semi-final of the Brigadier's Cup. All the skivers have bugged off to watch and left us keen lads behind. Shame, innit? Having to work on a nice day like this?" he added with a grin.

The day was warmish and a little breezy, but quite pleasant in direct sunlight.

"Yes, it's rotten how they take advantage of anyone who's the least bit conscientious," agreed Fairclough.

In the evening, Medder presided over a gathering at the *Buddford Arms* in Sergeant Fairclough's honour. Half a dozen members of the group at RAF Milaston turned out to meet the guest over a drink. Fairclough was surprised to find officers among the ranks of a private enterprise group. When he remarked on his observation, the others laughed like drains. He was even more baffled when he was told that they were not proper officers, just jumped-up sergeants and flight sergeants. One of them took the trouble to explain.

They were all keen fliers of civilian aircraft, but the RAF would entrust military aircraft to mere sergeants only during a world war. And as the RAF declined in the face of successive budget prunings and the number of aircraft in service decreased correspondingly, even the officers were having to queue up to fly. But the group had managed to infiltrate the Transport Command station at Milaston and organize commissions.

The story confirmed something that McAndrew had mentioned after the second *Operation Life-Preserver* conference. Fairclough had a vague memory of McAndrew saying that Hector Blackshaw had suspicions of a

parallel operation. He added six more names and areas of responsibility to his mental who's who in Somerset, and accepted an invitation to visit Milaston, which raised the problem of what to wear.

"Wear your suit, old boy. It doesn't look too bad," suggested Flying Officer Kinney, a thirty-year-old with a ruddy complexion, who seemed to be hiding behind a tawny bush. "We get civvy visitors all the time. Most of them pretty reluctant to chat about what they're up to. And, besides, if you're with an officer, no one's going to think you're a spy,"

"And I can travel by your Tube train, which gets me through the gate," nodded Fairclough, accepting the invitation.

Sergeant Fairclough found a surprise visitor at the Bunker Hotel on Wednesday morning when he wandered into the dining area in search of breakfast. The elusive Sergeant McAndrew was sitting at a table with a canary cloth, deep in conversation with Corporal Medder and Pilot Officer Doran, one of the Milaston group.

"Ah, there you are, laddie," said McAndrew as if Fairclough had just popped out for five minutes. "All ready for a wee job?"

"That depends," Fairclough said suspiciously. "On how 'wee' it is."

"Hardly anything at all," McAndrew assured him. "We've got a wee spot of trouble, laddie."

"That covers everything from a dropped pint to a major disaster," remarked Fairclough, his tone reflecting long acquaintance with his leader's smoke screens. "Go on, tell me the worst."

"It's like this," chuckled McAndrew. "Some of our Asian visitors have been getting a spot of aggro from their brethren. A bunch of them have got their own brand of Mafia organized, and they're charging our former clients hush money. If they don't pay up, the Mafia threaten to turn them over to the police and get them deported."

"Rotten sods," commented Fairclough.

"Of course, they pay. I mean, it's cost them enough to get here in the first place. And if I was in their position, I wouldn't fancy the idea of starting all over again. From what I've been able to find out, the Mafia are regular Sweeney Tods. A finger in every pie," McAndrew added in response to Fairclough's frown of bafflement. "They're behind most of the rackets in their areas. In fact, they're worth quite a few bob."

"This is all very interesting," interrupted Fairclough, "but what's it to us?"

I thought our interest in these Asian characters finished once they'd paid us their fare?"

"It does. Or rather, it did. But suppose one of them finds he can't pay? Suppose he loses his job? He's got nothing to lose, so he might complain about being blackmailed. And he might be persuaded to answer leading questions when the Immigration mob ask him how he got here. We think we're pretty fireproof, but you never know and chucking lighted matches around isn't a clever way of finding out. The Immigration mob have got some bright lads. They might just find out something inconvenient."

"Just goes to show," remarked Corporal Medder. "The ones you have to keep the closest eye on are your own mob."

"And there's an ironic touch," added McAndrew. "The Mafia are all illegals themselves. Not, I hasten to add, brought in with our permission. No, it was the unprincipled bunch of bastards that Smithy's mob saw off that's to blame."

"If they're causing trouble, why not get your naval chum to make them walk the plank, somewhere in mid-Channel?" suggested Pilot Officer Doran.

"Or make some anonymous phone calls to the Immigration bunch and get them booted out, legal like?" contributed Corporal Medder.

"Ah, but it's not that simple," countered McAndrew.

"It never is," sighed Fairclough.

"The thing is," continued McAndrew, giving his colleague an injured look, "this lot are making enough waves as it is. If they're picked up, there's no telling what they'll say to try and make a deal. They'll have nothing to lose either. As I said, I don't think we've got anything to worry about. But there's no point in taking unnecessary risks. These comedians are a loose end, and I don't like loose ends."

"Rather a problem, what?" said PO Doran in his best *Battle of Britain* drawl.

"But Mac has a solution, right?" said Fairclough.

"Dead right!" agreed McAndrew. "If we can get the right help. This lot crept into the country illegally. It's our public duty to give them a hand to creep out again the same way. Now, I've been told the Asian Mafias are having some sort of get-together next week. This means most of them will be concentrated in two places about forty miles apart. About fifty at each do. The theory is we arrange simultaneous raids on each place and grab

the lot of them.”

McAndrew made a sweeping gesture and knocked the tomato ketchup bottle over. “All those taking part in the raids will be issued with fake Immigration Department or Special Branch identity cards. Never mind where we’re getting them from. You can flash them to try and stop trouble before it starts, and it should confuse the issue nicely later on. What I’m here for now is to see if Jack can handle between ninety and a hundred and ten prisoners. For no more than a day or two, I hope. Just one day, if the weather’s okay.”

“Shouldn’t be much of a problem,” said Medder, “We’ve got room for a thousand or two, if we squash them together.”

“What’s our part in all this, old boy?” invited Doran.

“I’m hoping the Raf can provide us with transport to get rid of them,” said McAndrew. “Can you scare up enough choppers to take them all at once?”

“We can get them off the ground,” shrugged Doran, “but it depends where you’re taking them? Mid-Channel? Surely not?”

“Can you manage Brittany?” chuckled McAndrew.

“Oh, yes. No problem. Just a moment.” Doran slipped behind a frown and pulled a diary from a pocket. “Yes, I thought so. There’s one slight difficulty. A full Moon a week on Saturday. We’re going to be rather visible.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” McAndrew confessed. “When I heard the long range forecast for the rest of the month is fairly good, I thought that’d make things okay as far as the flying’s concerned.”

“We’re not just fair weather fliers,” countered Doran. “We can still get off the ground when it’s quite mucky.”

“Good for the rest of the month?” scoffed Medder. “What a load of crap. We’re in for three wet weeks.”

“How do you know that?” said Fairclough. “I saw that long range forecast too. It was saying the middle of the month is a good time to take an early holiday.”

“I get my weather from a bloke down the road, at Hillside Farm,” returned Medder. “And he’s hardly ever wrong. If you’re going to take a holiday, don’t take it in the South-West if you want to sunbathe.”

“It looks like we’ll have to leave a question mark over the weather for the moment,” McAndrew decided. “Still,” he assumed a cheerful expression

and rubbed his hands together in the traditional fashion to express satisfaction, “and apart from that, everything’s coming along very well.” Then he lapsed into mystery, saying that there was much to sort out and he didn’t want to discuss the next part of the operation until the picture became clearer.

The tour of the RAF station at Milaston proceeded as planned. Medder allowed McAndrew to drive the Tube train both ways. Pilot Officer Doran showed the visitors from East Saltby over giant transport aircraft, instrument-packed reconnaissance aircraft and finally, the collection of helicopters. McAndrew and Fairclough climbed in and out of cabins and cockpits, making appreciative noises as Doran trotted out figures on range and payload like a second-hand car salesman.

The visitors realized gradually that an almost unheard of range of different types of aircraft had been gathered at Milaston – further evidence of the private enterprise group’s influence, McAndrew even mentioned to Fairclough that they might end up applying to join an RAF-dominated organization rather than inviting their colleagues to take part in *Operation Life-Preserver*.

The visitors enjoyed their day out, but Fairclough couldn’t help thinking that his colleague had been more impressed by the underground railway than by the millions of pounds worth of new and not so new aircraft. But he was prepared to admit that the point of view contained a certain twisted logic. Every air force has aircraft. But how many have a half share in a secret railway?

It was a difficult day for everyone except Sergeant McAndrew. The others kept asking themselves what on Earth he was up to, and wondering what would happen to the Asian Mafiosi when they reached France. Only McAndrew knew and he wasn’t telling, to the annoyance of all others concerned.

On returning to East Saltby, Sergeant McAndrew disappeared again. Then Lance-Corporal Birky disappeared too. Sergeant Fairclough and Corporal Spinner sat around in the Office until the interesting television programs ended, then they returned to their quarters in disgust. Their speculations had come to nothing, McAndrew was enjoying another of his guessing games.

The absentees returned to the supply depot at dawn and slid off to bed, well content with their night's work. When they deigned to show themselves again at lunchtime, Fairclough and Spinner demanded an explanation and refused to co-operate further until they received one. McAndrew relented, sensing mutiny, and broke his vow of silence.

"We went to get the parachutes," he announced, as if that were a sufficient explanation.

"What bloody parachutes?" demanded Fairclough and Spinner in chorus.

"It's like this," said McAndrew. "We're going to dump our friends across the Channel, as you know."

"By parachute," nodded Fairclough, humouring him.

"Don't be daft, laddie," scoffed McAndrew, pretending to take the remark seriously. "It'd take too long to train them, even if they were willing to learn."

This was too much for Spinner. "I give up!" he complained. "He's going to dump this lot across the Channel . . ."

"From helicopters," added Fairclough helpfully.

"So he won't need parachutes," continued Spinner. "So he's been up all night getting hold of parachutes. That makes sense?" He rested his case.

"If you'll shut up a minute, I'll tell you how it makes sense," offered McAndrew.

Following an unspoken command, Birky went over to the fridge to get some throat lubricant. From the broad grin on his thin face, it was plain that he knew something.

"Right," said McAndrew. "If you're all drinking comfortably, I'll begin. The thing to remember is we want to cause the maximum amount of confusion. The more silly stories we can get into circulation, the less the truth is going to be believed if anyone happens to trip over it. I've called this one *Operation Plank*. Art should remember why. No? Don't you remember one of the Milaston crowd suggesting we hand the Mafia over to Smithy and get him to make them walk the plank?"

"Oh, yes, I remember now," Fairclough recalled.

"Why don't you do that?" suggested Spinner. "I bet it's a lot simpler than what you've got planned."

"Where's your spirit of adventure, laddie?" complained McAndrew. "When we've rounded up our trouble-makers, we give them a wee jag in

the arm to make them go to sleep. Then we haul them off to Buddford. We load them onto the train and take them to the Bunker, and dump them there for the day, under guard.

"If the weather's okay, a bit on the mucky side, we take them somewhere quiet after dark. They'll all be wearing their parachutes at this stage, by the way. Then we shove them aboard the choppers, take them over to France, get shot of them and toddle off back home. And wait for the first news broadcast in the morning. It's all very straightforward."

"I still don't understand what you want the bloody parachutes for," complained Spinner.

"What about the noise from the choppers?" added Fairclough. "They'll wake the whole countryside up. We're going to look pretty bloody stupid when the local cops arrive to find us dumping these unconscious bodies, all nicely gift-wrapped in your parachutes."

"Laddie, have you no faith?" complained McAndrew. "It's all been thought of. The helicopters have mufflers on them so they can make a silent approach. Haven't you ever seen them using them on American cop shows on TV? They cut the speed down, but if you can't see the choppers, they sound as if they're miles away. We won't have to rush ourselves."

"Parachutes!" said Spinner in a determined voice.

"Ah, the parachutes," grinned McAndrew. "That's really the master stroke. I think you'll be able to appreciate it more if I tell you about it afterwards."

"Does *he* know?" demanded Spinner, staring at Birky, who was wearing a mocking grin.

"Why don't you ask him? He's there," suggested McAndrew. "Wait and see, lads. It'll all work out fine in the end. Anyway, I can't hang around here all day, talking to you lot. Some of us have things to do." He winked and clumped off to the sliding door to the maze of shelves, ducking further questions.

Spinner turned to Birky, projecting dark menace. "Come on, me old Knocker," he invited. "Tell your mates that you was up to last night."

Birky assumed a story-telling pose, sprawling himself comfortably on the settee within easy reach of the refreshments. "You know Mac shot off yesterday? Well, he phoned me when it started to get dark, about nine. I had to get hold of some coveralls and a flat cap. Mac said we had to look like we work for a living.

"I met him in the *Swan*, and we hung about there for a couple of pints. Then Mac got a phone call and we piled into his car and shot off up the road away from Saltby. After about ten minutes, he pulled off the road and into this field. There was this chopper waiting for us. So we went charging off into the air and landed in another field. We hung about there for a while, then this furniture van showed up on the road. I got in the back with two other geezers. One was a big bloke – you know, muscles in his spit. The other was a weedy-looking pen-pusher."

"That's great, coming from you," muttered Spinner.

Fairclough gave him a warning look. Birky, who was engaged in draining a can of beer, failed to notice the remark. Spinner grinned briefly, then he assumed an innocent expression.

"Anyway, we went charging off somewhere," resumed the narrator. "I think we ended up near Brum. Spin prob'ly knows the place. Someone told me the name of it but I've forgotten. I won twelve quid at three card brag on the way." Birky paused until he had received the congratulations due.

"When we stopped, Mac stuck his head through a hole at the back of the cab and said okay to the big bloke. He started doing something to the side of the van, then he lifted this panel off. I had a look out, but all I could see was this bit of wall with a window with a grill over it. The big bloke took some bolt cutters to that, the grill. Then Mac told me to check the window for alarms and get it open.

"That was dead easy. The alarm was so old, it looked like it wouldn't work anyway. The window was a pushover with the grill off. No special locks or nothing. When we got inside, it was just like the main stores here. Piles and piles of uniforms, blankets, mess tins, boots, all sorts. Nothing worth nicking, though. All of it looked dead old. And the pen and ink! It was like someone had puked somewhere and they hadn't cleaned it all up.

"Remember that film on the box the day before yesterday? The one where they put in bits from World War One that they'd really shot at the time in Wipers or somewhere? Well, some of the gear looked that old. Mac reckons the army never chucks anything away. If they can't flog it as surplus, they just pile it up in stores like that one till the mice eat it or it drops to bits. Or the rats. We saw a real big bugger." Birky held his hands ten inches apart. "Mac chucked a mug at it and knocked it clean out."

"He was never much good with a rifle," remarked Fairclough. "It would

be interesting if they'd include mugs at Bisley."

Birky started a new can of beer, then resumed his tale. "The big bloke knew where to go, 'cos he'd been there before. He led the way and I opened the doors. We all had torches. Mac said he'd bash anyone who shone his on a window. I don't think the little bloke had ever been out on a job like that before. His hand was shaking like mad. In the end, he had to switch his torch off in case he shone it on a window by accident. When we got to the racks with the parachutes, Mac and the driver started lugging them back to the van. But the big bloke took me and the shrimp to this office, then he pushed off. The little bloke . . ."

Spinner emitted a high-pitched giggle, which he managed to convert into a cough.

". . . he didn't say much," continued Birky, giving his colleague a suspicious glance. "He just got me to open the filing cabinets while he looked for something. The office didn't have any windows, so we could have the lights on. So I didn't have to get old wobbly-mit to try and shine his torch on the locks. I only had to open about half the sodding things before he found what he wanted. Did I tell you the office was big enough for about thirty of them? Filing cabinets? Some round the walls and some more back to back down the middle of the room?"

"So anyway, when we got the right one, all he did was take out two bits of paper and put one back in their place. He said he was putting the records straight. When we got back to the others, we had to help them carting the 'chutes back to the van. Still, they'd shifted most of them while we was bugging around in the office. Which could be why the little bloke kept us there so long."

"You could do with a bit of exercise," Spinner remarked.

"I'm a skilled worker, not a shifter, Brillo-bonce," returned Birky. "So then we'd finished, Mac chucked dust around to make it look like no one's been there for ages. Then he watched me lock up again to make sure I didn't miss anything. We climbed out through the window and into the van and I reset the alarm. The big bloke put the grill back on and sprayed the new fittings with something to make them rust up solid in a couple of days. And that was that."

"We went down the road a bit to a café for a cuppa and a grotburger. Then we went back to the field. Only there was two more choppers there now. Big transport jobs. So I asked Mac, 'What are they for?' And he said,

'I'll tell you then we've got the parachutes loaded.' Bloody Scottish comedian! I was knackered by the time we'd finished that. Then it was about half-two. So Mac give some cash to the driver of the furniture van and we come home. Just in time to beat the rain."

"Hang about," said Spinner. "One of the blokes on guard duty told me you got back here at half-five. And it doesn't take three hours to fly a hundred and twenty miles. What else went on?"

"We didn't come straight home," Birky admitted. "We stopped off for a slow one at our club. The Bellside."

"Nothing to do with *Operation Plank*?" asked Fairclough.

"No. Just ordinary thirst," Birky assured him. "The 'chutes went on to Jack Medder's Bunker."

"And what's he going to use them for?" demanded Spinner, striking to the heart of the matter.

"You don't think he told me that, do you?" grinned Birky.

"Maybe not," admitted Spinner. "Where's he gone now?"

"He said something about going out on the *HMS Ned Kelly* with Smithy." Birky shrugged. "He's going shopping in France. But don't ask me what for."

"We weren't going to bother," Fairclough assured him.

D for Deportation Day approached. At the beginning of the following week, McAndrew and Birky disappeared yet again – this time for a day and a night. They were making a reconnaissance trip in order to be sure of capturing all of their intended victims. The plan would not be compromised seriously if one or two got away, but professional pride demanded a clean sweep and success depended on identifying all of the possible entrances and exits to and from the meeting places – hence the night exercise.

McAndrew devised suitable acronyms for identifying the two groups of Asian Mafiosi. Thus the nearer group, which was based near St. Sepulchre's in Northampton, became the SAMs. Their colleagues in the Ward Gardens district of Birmingham became the WAMs. Sergeant Fairclough pointed out that adding a final 's' to the shortened forms was unnecessary, as they were plurals already. He was told not to be a smart-arse and the original versions stood.

Birky returned to East Saltby alone. McAndrew, it seemed, had other

preparations to make. When the lance-corporal crawled out of bed, around lunchtime on the second Tuesday in May, he delivered another account of nocturnal ramblings.

The WAMs would be meeting in what had been a thriving garage until a motorway extension had seduced away most of its customers and petrol price wars had tipped it over the edge from profit to consistent loss. It was a long, single-storey building, which combined a showroom with an accessory shop. It stood in the centre of a large forecourt and parking area. The building could be approached from all four sides – but equally, an assault force could be observed readily.

McAndrew and Birky had found only two entrances, both at the front of the building. The builders had not bothered to install a back door, perhaps for security purposes. A solid door led to the office and shop area, and then to the main part of the building. The other entrance consisted of a large pair of sliding double doors, which gave direct access to the showroom and could be opened only from the inside. A screen of heavy boards covered the plate glass windows of the showroom completely to keep local thieves and vandals at bay.

Squares of heavy-duty plywood replaced the glass in all but one of the office windows. The door to the office boasted two mortice locks and a large padlock, all of which surrendered to Lance-Corporal Birky's expert manipulations in a few moments.

The reconnaissance party inspected the interior of the building carefully, but they found no evidence of concealed emergency exits. There was no access to the flat roof. Escape through a window would require a battering ram. That part of the round-up would be straight forward enough. The meeting place of the SAMs presented much more of a challenge.

The Asian Mafiosi had commissioned one or two structural alterations to three houses in the middle of a terrace. The work had been carried out quietly and without adding to the burdens of their local council's planning department. The end product was a single unit containing one large room on each of the ground and first floors. They had retained one of the kitchens, two toilet/bathrooms and the staircases at either end of the creation.

A preliminary sweep through the super-house before McAndrew and Birky got down to business revealed the presence of three sleepers on settees on the first floor. A quick squirt of anaesthetic gas from an aerosol

ensured that their sleep remained undisturbed. The detailed examination of the premises commenced on the first floor. All of the windows were barred with thin steel rods. Doubled full-length net curtains formed a pocket around the bars – to stop the neighbours seeing people moving from house to house unhindered by such minor details as walls, and to preserve the inhabitants from a locked-in feeling.

The hatches to the lofts could be reached by building a pyramid of furniture. McAndrew placed a chair on a dining table and handed Birky his torch, telling him that he had been volunteered for mountaineering duty. The investigating torch-beam showed that an aerial mole had bashed fairly neat holes in the brickwork to connect each house with its neighbours.

Square panels closed holes leading to the houses on either side of the restructured threesome. McAndrew concluded that the emergency escape hatches had been textured to blend with the brickwork on the other side. Four quick-release bolts held each panel in place, two each side at top and bottom. When tapped with a screwdriver, the panels gave off a metallic ring, as did the surrounding frame into which the bolts sank. The assault force would not be able to make a sneak attack from above, via the neighbours, without creating one hell of a racket.

The ground floor had three front doors and three back doors, all in working condition. Two doors set into the sides of the staircases led to the cellars, from which there were no other exits. All of the ground floor windows had bars and double net curtains, just like the ones on the upper floor.

The cellars were neatly connected with lockable doors. Three small, pavement-level windows had been bricked up. A pair of steel bars had been welded to the underside of each coal-hole cover, fixing them permanently in place.

A glittering array of electrical goods took up most of the cellar space – televisions, video-recorders, music centres. There was a wide range of expensive but easily portable items on show. There was also a small cold store packed with furs in the middle cellar. Birky's sharp eyes settled on a space-invaders machine in the third cellar. A side panel came away in his hands to reveal a modern safe.

To McAndrew's disappointment, Birky announced that he would require special equipment to crack it. But his colleague took comfort from the knowledge that the treasure trove in the cellars would go a long way

towards paying the costs of *Operation Plank*. The contents of the safe would be a spot of jam for all concerned. McAndrew had been fairly confident of being able to cover expenses, but it was nice to be sure.

Their inspection completed, the intruders slipped away into the false dawn, leaving the three sleeping beauties to slip from drugged to natural rest in their own time.

McAndrew drove Birky as far as the outskirts of Oxford, then he transferred to a helicopter in a field beside the River Cherwell. He was off to Milaston and then Buddford to do some briefing and organizing. Birky was entrusted with the task of bringing his colleague's car the finally seventy miles home to East Saltby, which he did, yawning mightily as the excitement and tensions of the night patrol ebbed.

## 6. UP FOR GRABS

Sergeant McAndrew put Sergeant Fairclough in charge of the snatch squad for the Ward Green Asian Mafiosi. Very little could go wrong with that part of the round-up. Once the doors of the former petrol station were covered, the occupants would have to surrender peacefully or stay inside until they rotted. The choice was no reflection on Fairclough's courage or leadership qualities.

As leader of the group, McAndrew would be in charge of the more difficult operation. The talents of both Spinner and Birky would also be required to help to subdue the St. Sepulchre's Asian Mafiosi and to open their safe afterwards. Fairclough's speciality – blowing things and people up – would not be needed. Thus the selection was automatic.

Knowing that the Mafiosi would make their celebrations last well into the night, McAndrew had decided on zero two hundred hours for the simultaneous raids. Everyone else who had any sense would be either asleep or too stoned to care at that time of night. He wanted as few outside witnesses as possible to the mass kidnap.

His main source of worry remained the escape hatches in the SAMs' lofts. McAndrew was reluctant to post guards in the houses on either side of the gangsters' headquarters. Their story of a raid by the combined forces of Special Branch and the Immigration authorities would be a little more credible if two sets of neighbours could provide supporting testimony. But McAndrew was hoping that the general confusion of a loud party would be sufficient cover for his activities. McAndrew was prepared to make bribing or blackmailing the neighbours into submission a last resort.

After several rehearsals on the stairs of the camp's office block, McAndrew decided that a rapid attack plus the element of surprise would be sufficient to carry his shock troops to the first floor before any would-be

escapers realized their danger and managed to stack enough furniture to gain access to the loft escape-hatches.

*D-Day Minus Four* was Hank Newton's birthday. McAndrew and his group spent the night after the reconnaissance mission in Portsmouth, celebrating with their naval colleagues. After lunch on *D-Day Minus Two*, the East Saltby group set off for the Midlands, having arranged with Captain Kirly to be put on special duties over the weekend to avoid yet again their ration of guard duties.

Sergeant Fairclough led the two vehicle convoy of hired cars. There was no point in taking their own vehicles as alternative transport would be available in great abundance for the second part of the mission. McAndrew was sure that a fair number of the Asian Mafiosi would be taking their vehicles to the Friday night celebration, just to prove to their colleagues that they could afford the fuel.

A two- or three-hour drive lay ahead of each vehicle. They played follow the leader and first away from the lights as far as Oxford, where they saluted each other with flashed lights and horns before going their separate ways. Each party was heading for a rendezvous at a transport café within a couple of miles of their respective targets.

McAndrew and his two companions reached their destination while the roads were still comparatively quiet. Solitary Fairclough, who had about half as far again to go, arrived at the start of the run-up to the rush hours – that time when early birds race for home to avoid the official rush hours and find themselves crawling, wondering where all the traffic has come from. Fortunately, most of the flow was coming from Birmingham and it failed to slow Fairclough too much.

Lance-Corporal Birky spotted his transport café when it was a good quarter of a mile away and cut his speed from a highly illegal eighty to a pedestrian thirty with impossible rapidity. His turn into the car park was smooth, yet so abrupt that the driver behind him, who had looked down for an instant to change stations on his radio, spent the next five miles wondering there he had gone.

The Jaguar snaked through the car park, spraying the ankles of a passing lorry driver with oily chippings, then stopped beside an empty coach. Birky's diminutive figure hopped out. The lorry driver started towards him. Spinner unwound his impressive form from the front passenger

seat. The lorry driver lost interest in revenge and changed course.

The café was an exception. It was called *Stan's*, not *Joe's*. The name peered darkly through a generous layer of grime on the sign above the door. Compared with the size of the brand name of the product that had paid for the sign, Stan looked like an afterthought. But he was clearly a friend of the decorating trade. The building looked as though it had been painted at least once within the last twenty years.

A posse of mean-looking clouds took the sun prisoner as the trio crunched across the gravel to the miserable patch of tarmac in front of the entrance. Battered strips of unpainted aluminium guarded the door at foot and hand height. The atmosphere inside was steam and cigarette smoke in roughly equal proportions, with a small quantity of oxygen thrown in for the benefit of the frailer patrons.

An air of greasy prosperity hung over the place, waiting to be cleaned off the walls, the floor and the furniture after closing time. Interesting smells of frying bacon drifted from the counter, pursued hotly by a foreboding of burnt toast.

McAndrew and company collected half pints of tea from the skinny, miserable-looking fellow behind the counter. Assuming him to be an advertisement for the food, they decided to dine elsewhere, CPO Smith, Leading Seaman Newton and three others from Ned Kelly's crew were waiting for them, looking moderately sinister. Half hidden by a huge, ancient juke box, their naval colleagues were wearing spy-type trench coats with the collars turned up. They had tied their belts, not buckled them, in the regulation fashion. By a mighty effort of will, they had resisted the temptation to wear sunglasses indoors on a dull afternoon.

Smith and his colleagues had woven a spell of dominance over the room. Anyone who approached the jukebox became the target of five intimidating stares. Its list of records had been scanned and found wanting. The navy group preferred the sounds of eating and drinking to the current rubbish and revivals available in the jukebox.

Greetings passed back and forth in confidential mutters. McAndrew and Smith withdrew to another table to discuss the final disposal of the SAMs' cellar nest egg. Hank Newton introduced his companions as Bill, the Ned Kelly's helmsman, Jake, the chief engineer, and Tiddler, the forward gunner. A man at a nearby table finished his cup of light brown liquid, lit another cigarette and moved towards the door, leaving a newspaper on the

table. Birky took it into protective custody. He found the entertainments section on the first of the eight page pull-out-and-throw-away advertising supplement. He plucked a pin from Newton's lapel and waved it over the cinemas in town.

"Anyone fancy moving on from here?" asked Birky.

"We're not bloody stopping here," agreed Bill Rogers, who was a Devonian, like his skipper.

Birky plunged the pin into the paper and provoked a muted chorus of derision. The pin had found the only 'U' certificate program in town.

"I can't help it if Hank's pins don't work." Birky tossed the defective object over his shoulder.

After much discussion, the group worked out an agenda for their evening. First, they would dine at a healthier-looking establishment. A trip to the pictures to view a double feature of spy films would follow to put them in the right frame of mind. Finally, there would be a couple of drinks at a pub in the private room that McAndrew had hired for a final briefing. It would have to be a pleasant, non-rollicking evening. Everyone had to remain fit, alert and sober for the main event.

McAndrew and Smith made sure that their men knew the name and address of the pub, then they departed to meet a buyer of slightly dubious electronic goods. The others left a few minutes later. A newly arrived customer dropped money into the jukebox and selected an old rock 'n' roll hit. He was quite startled when every eye in the place flicked towards him.

Sergeant Fairclough was more fortunate than his colleagues. His rendezvous had reopened under new management at the beginning of March and it remained relatively unscarred after ten weeks. The business was owned by a family which believed in making the customer feel welcome. Fairclough received a broad smile and prompt service.

Father and Number One Son were on duty, with Daughter and Number Two Son warming up in the wings as reinforcements when the rush started. The contrast between the bright, comfortable café and the many tired, salmonella factories which Fairclough had visited on his travels was depressingly vivid.

Having worked his way through an excellent meal, Fairclough ordered a second cup of coffee. He lit a small cigar and leaned back in his chair to survey the rush of vehicles beyond the car park. The sky was full of dark

clouds, and rain had speckled the slightly-steamed glass. The debris before him disappeared, removed promptly but politely by Father, who managed to convey the impression that he was tidying the table to give his customer more room rather than as a hint that it was time to beat it.

Corporal Medder materialized at Fairclough's side, grinning cheekily, as usual. Four beefy gentlemen and three others of more modest stature surrounded them. The latter tended to look like midgets beside their companions until sitting brought them to more even terms. Fairclough could guess the role of the heavyweights in the coming night's adventure. The smaller members of the squad were identified as medical technician, radio operator and driver.

The medical technician was one of two borrowed from a Top Secret chemical counter-warfare establishment in North Yorkshire. It was known as AT-17, and their CO was called Dan. Fairclough had gleaned that much while eavesdropping on one of McAndrew's telephone conversations. Further information had not been forthcoming and McAndrew had discouraged curiosity. Each of the technicians had liberated several air-freshener-size aerosols of a fast-acting but harmless anaesthetic gas. They were responsible for knocking out captured SAMs and WAMs, and keeping them subdued.

The café proprietor's opinion of the customer in the dark blue business suit and the regimental tie took a nose dive when he saw the company that Fairclough kept. His sense of hospitality buckled at the knees as he eyed the gathering apprehensively and muttered a warning to Number Two Son. His cool evaporated even faster when he observed Corporal Medder weighing up Daughter. He started to dart anxious glances at the telephone. Father and Number Two Son seemed to be weighing up the chances of reaching it in one piece when the trouble started.

Number One Son scribbled a slim volume of orders in his notebook. Rather nervously, he began to transport vast quantities of food to the army's tables, ably assisted by Number Two Son. Father grew slightly less tense as the small mountain of English and Oriental provisions disappeared. He seemed to believe that it would slow the potential Vikings down if they decided to sack his establishment and rape everyone in sight.

The family actually remembered how to smile when an off-duty motorway patrol dropped in for refreshments. Police eyes scanned a dozen and a half customers, but failed to find any known and wanted criminals.

Having removed their checker-banded flat caps, the two policemen lit up and ordered bacon sandwiches and tea. The quarter of an hour that they spent over their snack must have been the shortest of Father's life. His eyes followed them longingly when they returned to their pink-striped Range Rover.

Father's unease communicated itself to his other customers, who stayed as far as was physically possible from the army table – not that its occupants notices the nervousness of fellow customers. Sergeant Fairclough had decided to put the time to good advantage and he was running through a penultimate briefing

After what seemed like an eternity, the dangerous characters departed, leaving behind them full ashtrays, empty plates and cups, generous tips and routine lecherous smiles for Daughter. They too were off to the pictures and then the private room of a club. Father breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind the last of the WAM force, unaware that the miserable bloke in charge of Stan's Café was doing exactly the same, forty-five miles away.

Friday became Saturday. By 01.00 hours on *D-Day Minus One*, the two assault forces had gathered at their final assembly points. McAndrew's unit, swelled by the arrival of a contingent from Milaston and his medical technician, numbered twenty. His half-platoon included a heavy squad, several drivers and a radio operator. Fairclough's group still numbered nine.

The graveyard shifts at two all-night cafés were still wondering why the place was so full when their unexpected customers melted away as rapidly as they had appeared. The last of them left at 01:30 hours on a cloudy and drizzly-damp night.

Sergeant Fairclough's unit moved off into the heavier rain. Medder's farmer friend had been right about the weather. Their red and cream coach bore the legend *WAMways Travel* in flowing white script along each side. A tight silence had fallen over the assault force as its members prepared themselves mentally for the job to come. After ten minutes on the road, the driver pulled into a lay-by just up the road from the WAMs' headquarters.

The medical technician, one of the heavy brigade, who was to be his assistant, and the driver remained with the vehicle. Both the technician

and his helper had gas masks slung around their necks, ready to be pulled up over nose and mouth.

Fairclough and the rest of the force drifted off down the road. Dress of the night was trench coat, black leather gloves – the tight-fitting ones worn by gun-slingers in Westerns – dark suit and black shoes. Hats were optional, but everyone had decided to wear one to keep the rain off. They were wearing beards and false moustaches as facial camouflage.

Most of the assault force had been issued with either a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver or a Thompson sub-machine gun fitted with a gangster-style, fifty-round drum magazine. These weapons had been chosen for their size and menacing appearance. Anyone who had ever watched television would recognize them instantly and know what a mess they can make of the human body.

In fact, the weapons were for intimidation purposes only. McAndrew and Fairclough had given strict orders that they were to be fired only as a very last resort. Any shooting that proved necessary would be done with the .25 automatic pistols that everyone was carrying in a convenient outer pocket. These were weapons which could be aimed easily in a crowd and they were adequately lethal at close quarters. They were also very quiet – ideal weapons for a night operation.

Figures slipped in among the collection of vehicles around the WAMs' converted garage. Tense minutes later, three voices whispered in turn from the earphone of Fairclough's radio-transceiver. Two sentries had been posted to keep an eye on the cars. Both had been neutralized. The third man had nothing to report.

Fairclough tapped the radio operator on the shoulder. He slipped away to cut the telephone wires from the garage. A glow spilling down from a recently constructed section of elevated motorway gave a useful level of illumination on the car park, but only when night vision had been allowed to build up.

Corporal Medder worked on the side door of a Volkswagen van for a few moments, then he slid it open. The radio operator returned to set up his equipment out of the rain. As soon as he had contacted the SAM force, he beckoned urgently to Fairclough.

"The SAM force reports a hold up," he announced. "Just a minute." He listened again, then passed the telephone handset to Fairclough. "Mac wants a word with you."

"Hello, Mac?" said the leader of the WAM force, wondering what had gone wrong.

"Yes, laddie. Listen, we've got a wee spot of bother. Are you all set to go?"

"All set," confirmed Fairclough. "Are you going to abort?"

"Not yet. Listen, if you've already put their phone out of action, you go ahead. There's no need to wait for us."

"Right," said Fairclough. "Best of luck with your end."

"Luck? Who needs it?" scoffed McAndrew, full of confidence. "Just go now. See you later."

Fairclough returned the handset to the radio operator and waved a thumbs up to Corporal Medder. He unlocked two of the cars. A pair from the heavy squad pushed one of them in front of the double doors to the showroom. Fairclough helped Medder to steer the other to the front of the darkened sales office. The other heavyweight took up a position on the right of the door.

Fairclough beat a smart tattoo on the peeling paint. Then he discovered a bell push. The interior door of the office opened, increasing the volume of faint, reedy music and rhythmical tapping. A figure stood in the doorway and waved to Fairclough. He waved back pleasantly, pretending not to realize that he was being dismissed. The figure turned to go. Fairclough pressed the bell again. The man switched the office light on and approached the one remaining window. The inner door swung shut behind him.

Now that he was no longer a silhouette, Fairclough took a good look at an Asian Mafioso, as seen through a screen of close-meshed wire and filthy, streaked glass. The man was a little on the short side, well fed and quite young – late twenties at the most. He was well dressed in Western clothes and he looked fairly harmless – certainly nothing at all like an ageing and bloated Italian gangster.

His command of idiomatic English proved to be as healthy as his appearance. In a slightly Peter Sellers accent, he told Fairclough to go away, clearly and forcefully.

Fairclough weathered the tirade, putting on a half-smile of studied incomprehension as he dripping gently and wondered whether his beard would come unstuck. Then he pointed to the car and made telephoning gestures. The man waved him away emphatically. As he turned back to the

inner room, Fairclough rapped on the door and pointed to the telephone on the desk. Realizing that he had a Grade A nuisance on his hands, the man surrendered. He turned two keys and drew back two bolts.

Sergeant Fairclough thanked him politely, then he grabbed the man by the throat. The Asian was trying to draw breath to shout for help when Corporal Medder squirted an aerosol into his face to put him out of his misery. Fairclough lowered the unconscious prisoner silently to the floor.

Medder stretched an arm out of the office and raised a thumb into the rain, giving the radio operator his cue to order the coach to move up. Fairclough, Medder and one of the heavyweights paused in the office to straighten their trench coats, produce their weapons and check that their damp facial hair was still in position. Then they slipped into the din in the long showroom.

The heavyweight remained to block the doorway, his huge revolver looking a normal size in a massive fist. Medder went directly to the double doors and tapped on one of them with the stock of his Tommy gun to tell the men outside that they had been secured. Fairclough crossed to the record player and switched it off. A compilation of fifties rock 'n' roll tunes nailed to a merciful halt. Silence spread across the showroom like a plague as the WAMs spotted the artillery.

"Immigration Department, gentlemen," said Fairclough in a loud, clear voice, holding up his fake identification card. "You're all under arrest. Please sit where you are for the moment. And let's have a bit of hush."

His announcement did not please the audience. A resentful tide of protests swelled immediately. Fairclough transferred his revolver to his left hand and reached into the right side pocket of his trench coat to release the safety catch on the .25 calibre automatic pistol.

Corporal Medder cleared his throat, loudly and theatrically. The tide ebbed slightly. The metallic scrape as he drew back the actuator and slid a cartridge into the breech of his Tommy Gun brought perfect silence. He had chosen the loudest weapon deliberately for just this purpose. Then he provoked a minute's confusion. With all eyes on him, Medder sneezed violently. His false moustache fluttered to the floor. As his were eyes closed at the time, he failed to notice his own unveiling.

"Your attention, please," said Fairclough, struggling not to laugh at Medder's loss.

Around fifty pairs of eyes turned back to him. He noted that the Asian

Mafioso who had opened the office door was fairly typical of the WAMs. Grey hairs were few and far between in the ranks of solid black. Here were young, tough and ruthless men, who were prepared to step outside the laws of their adopted country and prey on their own kind with merciless ferocity, if the stories could be believed.

Another of the heavy squad entered from the office, Tommy Gun at the ready. Fairclough was glad of the support. He was feeling outnumbered but another sub-machine gun helped to balance the scales. The newcomer coughed and hooked a thumb over his shoulder, telling the unit leader that the coach had arrived.

"Starting from that table, over there," ordered Fairclough, "Move to the door, one at a time." The faster the raiding party reduced the enemy's numbers, he decided, the less risk there would be of the remaining prisoners starting something.

Flashing a killing look, the first man dragged himself to his feet and struggled into his jacket. He moved – unwillingly, but he obeyed the order and disappeared into the office. A sequence of events that was to be repeated forty-nine times swallowed the prisoner up.

The office light had been switched off. As soon as the first WAM entered the office, the gas-masked assistant grabbed his arm and marched him onto the coach. A quick twist of an arm, a simultaneous squirt in the face of the medical technician's aerosol, the prisoner gasped with pain, inhaled the gas, and went to sleep. Then the other member of the heavy brigade saw him to his seat.

Loading took forty minutes. The medical technician and his assistants were feeling as though they had done a hard day's work then they reported to Sergeant Fairclough in the showroom. But a quick snack and a couple of drinks soon revived them.

The WAMs had opted almost exclusively for typical English party fare – sandwiches, pies, sausage rolls, crisps and so on. Apart from a small oven full of vegetable samosas, there was very little to show that the guests had originated in the areas shown on pages fifty-eight and fifty-nine of the 1958 edition of the Oxford Atlas. Leaving the rest of his force exploring the food, Fairclough sent the radio operator to reconnect the telephone and he contacted McAndrew's unit by radio.

"We're still getting them out," responded an unfamiliar voice at the other end of the connection. "We're a bit behind schedule at the moment, but

we're trying to make up as much time as possible. Do you want to talk to your boss?"

"Not if he's busy," said Fairclough. "Just tell him our operation went off without a hitch. We've given them all a shot of gas and they'll be asleep till after breakfast time. We'll be pulling out in a few minutes."

"Understood, WAM force. SAM force, over and out," came the very military reply in a *Battle of Britain* drawl, telling Fairclough that someone from Milaston was manning the radio.

His radio operator reported that the garage's telephone was working again. Corporal Medder made a brief call, then he joined Fairclough in the car park to see the coach off. The rain had just about exhausted its reservoir. With a silky diesel purr, the darkened vehicle turned onto the road and headed for the motorway – to become just one more passenger vehicle taking its sleeping customers to the south at a fraction of the cost of a train journey.

Medder produced a torch and went round the car park, having a quick look at each vehicle. Eventually, he produced a large loop of wire, from which dangled scores of keys. He selected a motor caravan with the current registration letter and drove it over to the office. Moments later, three cars turned off the main road. A small crowd emerged from them.

The leader, a burly man in a sheepskin coat, made a rapid tour of the car park, then he approached Corporal Medder. "Two grand each, whatever the condition," he announced. "And I'm being bloody generous."

Medder laughed scornfully. "They're either this year's or last year's models. There's Rovers, Mercs, Jags, a couple of Range Rovers and three pretty neat motor caravans. I wouldn't give you the air out the tyres for two grand."

"All right, it's the middle of the night, and we want a quick deal," said the hot-car merchant. "Two and a half grand each, and that's very generous."

"The day you're generous, I'll buy myself a flying pig," mocked Medder, leaning back against his motor caravan as if he had all the time in the world. "Go and phone Wheels Williams, Art. I think we've got the third division here."

The man in the sheepskin coat complained about daylight robbery in the middle of the night. Medder refused to budge from his idea of a fair deal. Eventually, the hot-car merchant counted a huge sum in used twenty

and fifty pound notes onto the table in the sales office.

"I hope you guys aren't planning a little ambush on the way out, John," remarked Medder, repacking the loot in a briefcase. "There's one or two who don't believe a deal's a deal in your business. Not till they've got their end of it back in their sky rockets."

*Auto John* smiled nervously at the indirect threat. He flicked a glance at the Tommy Gun which a bodyguard from the heavy squad was cradling in brawny arms. Then his eyes travelled to the heavy bulge in Fairclough's coat pocket.

"A fair deal at a fair price, that's me," he assured Medder. "Right, get them moving," he added to his bodyguard, who carried the briefcase containing *Auto John's* portable bank.

*Auto John's* crowd scattered. As soon as one of them found a car that his bunch of keys would open, he climbed in and drove away. The man himself went home to bed, leaving the task of moving his latest acquisitions in the hands of a trusted lieutenant.

"I hope they find good homes, now their owners have deserted them," said Sergeant Fairclough with false piety, watching the tail lights of a rather nice Rover turn onto the road.

"We'd better get going before they have this one," said Corporal Medder, starting his motor caravan.

The last of the WAM force withdrew. They had one hundred and thirty-five miles of night driving ahead of them, but most of it would be down the M5. Hoping that the SAM force had been equally successful, Medder set off in pursuit of the coach.

Sergeant McAndrew's task force ran into trouble almost immediately. The snag was both time-consuming and annoying, but they did have one small consolation. Although the sky was completely overcast, the rain held off.

The problem concerned the telephone at the SAMs' headquarters. Each line from the fifteen houses in the terrace emerged through the front cellar wall to join a neat conduit, which ran below the pavement with the gas, water and electricity mains. This meant that the only access point was a junction box, through which were routed the SAMs' block, the terrace across the street, two corresponding blocks beyond an intersecting side street and the premises on the side street as far as the next road junctions.

McAndrew and Birky had identified the difficulty during their

reconnaissance of the SAMs' super-house. A pair of Signallers, suitably disguised as British Telecom engineers, had located the correct set of terminals by the usual method. While one of them had made a series of wrong number calls to the SAMs' number from the phone box round the corner, his partner had prodded and plodded round the junction box until he had recognised his colleague's voice. He had marked the appropriate terminals with a couple of stick-on tags.

Unfortunately, due perhaps to the damp weather, the adhesive on the tags had not proved powerful enough and they had dropped off. Instead of a quick twirl with a screwdriver, the SAM force radio operator found himself faced with two dozen possibilities when he took the cover off the junction box – assuming that the tags had dropped straight down. He reported the situation to McAndrew immediately.

The leader of the expedition discussed the matter with CPO Smith and decided not to take the risk of leaving the SAMs' telephones intact. While calling for reinforcements, they could also warn their colleagues in the Birmingham area about unwelcome visitors. Sergeant Fairclough's report that his radio operator had sabotaged the WAMs' telephone relieved the position slightly by ensuring that one half of the operation could go ahead. But the expedition against the SAMs would be in the area for the best part of an hour – long enough for their friends to assemble a considerable rescue force.

The only safe solution seemed to be to isolate every connection on that rack in the junction box and hope that none of the other subscribers tried to use their telephone at two o'clock in the morning. By the time the radio operator had completed his task, the round-up at Northampton was running sixteen minutes behind schedule.

Three pairs of heavyweights slipped into the alley behind the terrace and into the back yards to cover the rear exits. The shock troops moved up. McAndrew, Birky, Spinner and four members of Ned Kelly's crew stopped at the first front door. Four more heavyweights, in pairs, covered the remaining doors.

At a signal from McAndrew, the farthest pair knocked at their door to provide a diversion. Birky slipped the lock on his door. McAndrew severed the chain with a pair of bolt cutters. Spinner and the rest burst in and raced for the stairs, waving their shooting irons. They pounded up to the first floor, dragging surprised faces towards them.

They caught two of the more alert SAMs trying to position a table and chair under one of the loft escape hatches. Another had taken a flying leap from a chair and he was trying to heave himself up into the roof space, but he lacked sufficient power in his arms. The rest of the first floor SAMs were caught totally unawares. Stunned expressions confirmed that they didn't know what the hell was going on.

McAndrew and Birky entered the super-house at a more leisurely pace to find the heavy squad pushing would-be escapers back inside. One hopeful gangster was crouching under the dining table, trying desperately to make the telephone work. McAndrew left him to get on with it. A display of artillery quietened the SAMs long enough for the leader of the assault force to wave his bogus identity card and say his piece about arresting them. Above his head, Corporal Spinner was doing exactly the same thing.

The SAMs proved more argumentative than their cousins the WAMs. A group of them surrounded McAndrew, protesting vigorously and trying to bribe him in a roundabout sort of way. McAndrew ignored them. The offers became more pointed and larger. He felt tempted to hang on to some of the gangsters for a little longer than planned to see what they could come up with, but a clean operation demanded that he follow the original plan as closely as possible.

McAndrew used his radio transceiver to summon their coach, which parked at the end of the back alley, blocking both the pavement and one side of the road. A search of the prisoners began. Those carrying car keys were questioned as to the location of their vehicle. Believing their captors to be Immigration officers backed up by the police, they supplied the information after a token show of reluctance. It made more sense to have their vehicles taken into police custody than to leave them at the mercy of the local vandals and car thieves.

Lance-Corporal Birky and an assistant tied a label bearing the registration number and location of the vehicle to each set of keys. A patrol, led by one of the directors of Buddford Autos, departed with instructions to appraise the value of each vehicle, then report back. The heavy squad loaded the prisoners into the coach, using the system which had proved so effective against the WAMs. Leaving one of the Milaston group to look after communications, the radio operator settled down to the task of restoring the telephone system.

The patrol returned with its valuation report. Their haul included more

of the motor caravans that seemed so strangely popular with Asian Mafiosi. Three of the patrol went out again with radio transceivers and orders to select the best cared for motor caravans and stand by for further orders.

Twenty minutes after Sergeant Fairclough's report of the success of his mission, the SAMs' coach departed, heading for the A43, escorted by the heavy squad in two motor caravans. Corporal Spinner had been placed in command of the coach. A rising wind began to blow the clouds to shreds, revealing an ominous brightening of the eastern sky. McAndrew summoned the hot-car baron of his choice, who was waiting at an all night café, two miles away. Syd Speed was based in Cambridge and had neither business contacts with, nor sympathy for, the deposed Asian Mafiosi.

In the cellar, Lance-Corporal Birky had packed away the ultrasound equipment which had helped him to open the key and combination locks on the SAMs' safe. Assisted by CPO Smith, he loaded bundles of paper currency, pouches of investment diamonds, boxes of Kruger Rands and Maple Leafs, and a set of very interesting account books into naval holdalls. When they had transferred the loot to the naval group's motor caravan, Smith and his crew took their leave.

Syd Speed was a clone of Auto John, as far as appearance was concerned. He arrived promptly, paid McAndrew's price without argument and left equally suddenly, the pockets of his sheepskin coat bulging with labelled keys.

The buyer for the rest of the goods took his time. His furniture van stopped at the mouth of the alley twenty minutes after the departure of the SAMs. He was one of those people who are eternally complaining about how life is all go and worrying about how they will get everything done in time. He looked quite capable of fidgeting himself into a muck sweat on an icefield during an Arctic blizzard.

McAndrew had taken an instant dislike to him when they had met earlier in the evening. The sergeant couldn't get used to the fellow's habit of calling everyone 'luv'. But business was business.

The buyer's crew of shifters eyed Lance-Corporal Birky and Corporal Clark, the Buddford-based radio operator, with thinly disguised contempt. While McAndrew and the buyer concluded their deal in the cellars, the shifters strolled about the ground floor of the super-house, sampling the party food and drink – which was typically English.

Jokes about kicking sand into people's faces alternated with bouts of

muscle-flexing. Diminutive Birky grew tired of being a figure of fun. He stopped the jokes at his expense by the simple expedient of scratching his nose with the distinctive muzzle-brake of his Tommy Gun, which he had left under an armchair, out of sight.

Following this able lead, Corporal Clark, who was no muscle-man, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. As if by accident, a hand grenade crashed to the floor and rolled towards the shifters. They scattered at top speed. The grenade bobbed as far as Birky, who just kicked it back to its owner in a casual fashion. But he knew that it was just a dummy, full of medicinal brandy.

McAndrew reappeared from the cellars with the buyer. They shook hands at the nearest front door. Both were wearing gloves. The winners of the war of nerves gathered up their shooting irons and followed their leader to McAndrew's motor caravan. Dawn lay two hours in the future as they pulled away from the kerb and started for the south-west. Part One of *Operation Plank* had reached a successful conclusion.

## **7. INVASION OF THE BODY-DUMPERS**

The WAM force arrived in Buddford at five-thirty, fifteen minutes after sunrise. Nobody saw the coach, closely followed by a motor caravan, creep off the narrow main street of the old part of the town and disappear behind the showroom of Buddford Autos. Safe from view behind the locked doors of the service and repair shop, the troops devehicled. They indulged in the obligatory session of limb-stretching, yawning and grunting.

Prompted by Sergeant Fairclough, the medical technician examined three of the Asian gangsters at random and confirmed that none of them would begin to wake for four to five hours.

A far-sighted person had equipped the repair shop with an electric kettle and more than enough mugs to provide black coffee for nine. By unanimous decision, the WAM force postponed unloading until after an inspection of the plumbing and a brew up.

Then Corporal Medder commandeered a couple of motorized trolleys to set up a shuttle service. The Asian Mafiosi, laid out on the trolleys like so many sides of beef, descended to the station in the cunningly concealed lift, to be loaded into the tube train for their journey to the Bunker.

Another coachload of sleeping gangsters arrived at ten past six. Their escorts increased the number of motor caravans in the showroom to three, then they set about the task of brewing for seventeen in two shifts. McAndrew arrived ten minutes later, as the last of the WAMs were taking a train ride of a mile and a half to their temporary prison under the REME depot.

Yawning troops completed the unloading operation. Forty-seven Northampton-based SAMs joined fifty-one brothers-in-crime from the Birmingham area – locked in dungeons behind the Bunker Hotel.

McAndrew had decided to keep the gangs separate during the day, and then transport mixed groups of SAMs and WAMs to France in order to

create as much confusion as possible in the minds of the Asians and the unfortunate French officials who would be required to sort out the tangle. Thus the gangsters were dumped on inflated mattresses in two sizeable and separate assembly rooms to sleep off their sedative injections.

Sergeant Fairclough supervised an operation to oil and pack the borrowed weapons for return to their owners. Corporal Medder insisted on retaining a couple of the Model 1921 Tommy Guns for the visual impact of such museum pieces. Everyone was allowed to view two large collections of banknotes before they were locked away in the Bunker Hotel's safe. The RAF group began the two and a half mile journey to Milaston at seven twenty-five, after breakfast. Those of their army colleagues who were not on guard duty retired to their rooms for some well-earned sleep.

Fairclough, Spinner and Birky realized that they had dodged their turn of sentry duty at East Saltby only to be stuck with the same chore at Buddford. Dull routine had a habit of catching up with serving soldiers no matter what.

Eventually, the Asian gangsters began to wake up. They found themselves sprawled on plastic mattresses in an oblong room the size of a small cinema. The walls were dark green to shoulder height, then the cream of the ceiling. Red *Lino-paint* covered the concrete floor. Half a dozen lights fitted with wartime metal shades pushed shadows away.

Reverting to their native tongues, the prisoners began to compare notes in mutters, trying to work out where they were and what their fate would be. Adventurous spirits tested the room's two doors. One of them led to a five-seater washroom. The other was locked.

Armed guards in featureless, dark green uniforms and wearing man-with-no-eyes mirror sunglasses and bushy moustaches brought coffee, tea and sandwiches and left the Mafiosi to organize their own distribution system. The food and drink disappeared slowly. Few of the gangsters had much of an appetite and the rest suspected that their rations had been drugged. But as stomachs began to rumble and the brave ones displayed no ill effects, the waverers decided to keep their strength up.

Around mid-morning, the gangsters were marched down the corridor in groups of five to a large office. Here, they were identified, ticked off the list of undesirables and given a complete new outfit of underwear, blue boiler suit and training shoes. These new clothes were all of Continental origin,

both Belgian and French. McAndrew and Smith had acquired them as part of a business deal. They were one more step in the process of severing the gangsters' connections with their adopted homeland.

Pleas for information, release or mercy bounced back from the mirror sunglasses of the taciturn guards. The Asian Mafiosi were told only that they were to be held over the weekend while their presence in the United Kingdom was investigated. Having been assured by various left-wing and criminal contacts that the country was run by a fascist conspiracy, a majority of the gangsters accepted their fate with surprising stoicism.

Fairclough and McAndrew's forces exchanged notes during the period of activity. Then those who were not on guard duty retired to their beds to sleep until lunchtime. Wide awake WAMs and SAMs brooded on their fate, feeling the crushing weight of boredom, each group imagining that the other was still enjoying freedom on a spring Saturday, unaware that they were separated sometimes by the length of a corridor, sometimes by the thickness of a wall.

The gangsters' next meal was their last under British soil. They were all hungry enough to tuck into the hot food and none of them realized that the tea and coffee also contained a sedative. The guards who removed the dishes warned them that they had fifteen minutes to brush their teeth before Lights Out.

As all wrist watches had been confiscated, the gangsters had to believe that a quarter of an hour had passed when the lights dimmed to a faint glow. Sleep seemed to come naturally amid the squeaking of plastic mattresses.

Milaston's group arrived by Tube train to help reverse the procedure of the morning. They transported sleeping Asian Mafiosi back to Buddford Autos in the town, buckled them into parachutes and loaded them into the coaches. At precisely thirty minutes past midnight on *D for Deportation Day*, a convoy led by Corporal Medder's car moved out of the concealment of the repair shop.

The B-class road became narrower and more bumpy as they left the town behind. A thin, mist-like drizzle reduced visibility satisfactorily and drew closer the night's clinging blackness. McAndrew viewed it with some concern but the RAF group had assured him that they would be able to fly through it without difficulty.

Medder had selected a rendezvous point at least three miles from the nearest human habitation. The coaches turned left and right off the road into slightly boggy fields. Four dark blue helicopters merged with the rainy gloom beyond each line of wire and post fence. Doors trundled open, spilling muted reddish light onto flattened grass. Limp, parachuted bodies were transferred from the coaches to the cargo bays of the helicopters.

CPO Smith and Leading Seaman Newton, carrying a SAM between them, passed Birky and Fairclough going back to the coach for another WAM. Birky's 'Hello, sailors' received a laconic 'Evening, all' from Newton by way of reply. Smith flashed his teeth in one of his blood-chilling grins. Fairclough believed that he spent a lot of time in front of his shaving mirror, perfecting the cold expression of sinister humour.

Ned Kelly's crew had covered just over one hundred miles from Pompey in less than two hours, despite the slippery condition of the roads. None of them had been up in a helicopter before, and they were looking forward to the treat.

Grunts and curses gave way to sighs of relief. A final chink of buckles and a dull thud marked the none too gentle lowering of the last gangster into his appointed place. The pilots ran a final check of their load to make sure that it had been distributed evenly in order not to disturb the helicopter's trim. The RAF was ready to go.

The coaches bumped back onto the road to join Corporal Medder's car, which he had turned over to one of his lieutenants. Red tail lights started back for Buddford as helicopter engines coughed into reluctant life. Rotors began to spin faster and bite the cold, misty air. McAndrew blinked a torch at the flight leader of the group of four helicopters on the other side of the road.

In a blast of cold air and particles of mud, the first pair of helicopters took to the air. Two minutes later, McAndrew's flight followed. Flying near the cloud base, without lights, and on muffled engines, the helicopters set a southerly course, passing to the east of Honiton and crossing the coast between Sidmouth and Seaton.

It was a perfect night for the climax of *Operation Plank*. The full Moon peeped out briefly in mid-Channel, as the helicopters were passing to the west of Guernsey. Then heavy clouds swallowed it again. A tense atmosphere clogged the aircraft. Low-level night flying into a rain-filled head-wind gusting at anywhere between five to twenty knots is never a

relaxing experience.

"Strange, isn't it," mused CPO Smith, watching the running lights of a freighter, which was ploughing through choppy seas along the coast towards Brest. "Here we are, exporting a load of illegal immigrants. And there could be another bunch doing exactly the reverse two or three hundred miles up the coast."

"One of life's little ironies," said his pilot. "The ones coming in had better watch themselves. Or we'll be doing another *Operation Plank*."

"It's well worth all the effort," Smith assured him.

"I heard you waltzed off with the contents of a safe last night," nodded the pilot. "Was it worth the petrol?"

"We haven't arrived at a final figure yet, but we confidently expect it to contain enough zeros for two and a half pairs of specs," grinned Smith. "And there's all sorts of other odds and sods to dispose of. If your racket's big enough, the money just floods in. And these characters believed in hanging on to a lot of it for a comfortable old age."

"Mafia Granny Bonds," laughed the pilot.

At 03:05 hours, the lead flight of helicopters crossed the coast into French rain. A lone car on the N786 drifted across their bows from left to right. The pool of light seemed to be in a great hurry to reach St. Brieuc. On muffled engines, the helicopters continued inland. The ground, started to rise sharply in front of them, a deeper black against the inky sky. Fifteen minutes after crossing the coast, CPO Smith's flight dipped into a valley between two ridges descending from Brittany's backbone.

"We should be close enough now," said Smith's pilot.

Smith nodded and switched on a low-powered radio transceiver, which had a range of about a mile and a half. "Plank One to Black Watch," he drawled. "Come in, Black Watch."

"Black Watch to Plank One," came the immediate reply. "We hear you loud and clear. You are approximately north-west of us. Stand by for our signal."

"Standing by," acknowledged Smith. "Look out for a signal on the port side," he told his pilot. "About one three five degrees relative. They should be sending now."

Eyes strained into the blackness, then they saw it. A powerful torch flashing Morse into the night.

"Dah dit dit dit, dit dah dah," remarked Smith. "BW. That's them."

Four helicopters banked off to the left. CPO Smith's pilot flicked his navigation lights on and off. A square of camping lanterns marked the landing ground. Each pilot set his machine down over one of them. Doors slid open. Figures in dark clothing seized unconscious gangsters and dragged them away from the aircraft.

Three helicopters took off as soon as they had been unloaded and refuelled from a small tanker. The flight commander's machine was unloaded last. He and Smith helped to open and deploy four dozen parachutes while their medical technician raced from gangster to gangster, administering injections which would bring sleeping prisoners to consciousness in ten to fifteen minutes' time. The Black Watch team exchanged hasty farewells with the helicopter crew, then they piled into their vehicles.

As they raced away, taking the country road to Loudeac on their way to a small airfield to the south of Rennes, the headlights of the tankers illuminated briefly the back seat of one of the cars. A masked figure was sprawled across it, speaking into a microphone. Seven miles away, another member of the Black Watch team picked up a telephone and dialled the number of the police station in Mur-de-Bretagne . . .

The last helicopter took off. Hovering five yards above the soggy ground, the pilot tilted his machine slightly, sending a minor gale whipping across the landing field. Forty-eight damp parachutes blossomed sluggishly, dragging their wearers across the slick grass until they collapsed again or became entangled in trees and bushes. Satisfied with his efforts, the pilot gained height and turned his machine to the north.

A quarter of an hour later, two French policemen sprinted for their car and set off on what they both knew had to be a fool's errand. Wipers flicked exploding droplets from their windscreen and the beams of their headlights were full of falling sparkles. The picturesque cobbled slope down to the main road was like a skid pan. Giles Marton released a reflex 'Merde, alors!' when the back end of the car snaked as he tried to turn too fast at the bottom of the hill. It was not the night for a trip to the middle of nowhere.

Some idiot with an almost incomprehensible Breton accent had phoned in an excited and garbled report of an 'invasion' by hundreds of para-

troopers. Suddenly, the three telephones had clamoured for constant attention. Breathless voices gasped out stories of dozens of aircraft overhead and parachutes covering the whole sky.

Unfortunately, the callers had all demanded that the police come at once and rung off before they could be asked why the police hadn't heard any of the aircraft and how the callers had managed to see parachutes on a coal-black night in the middle of a rainstorm. Jouvét and Marton had been sent to investigate.

"I think the Sergeant has got it in for us," moaned Jouvét, peering up at the sky as the car rounded the flank of a hill and started up the valley. "He's sitting with his feet up in front of a nice fire, drinking the coffee I brewed. And we're stuck out here, playing silly buggers, chasing a bunch of imaginary parachutists. It's not on, you know."

His partner grunted ambiguously. He didn't mind, an excursion, as long as he didn't have to leave the car. The wild goose chase had taken him away from the sergeant and his interminable stories of all the crimes that he had solved, apparently single-handed, during his days at St. Nazaire. And if he heard the story of how Sergeant de Roche had met General de Gaulle once more, Marton was certain that he couldn't be held responsible for his actions.

Sergeant McAndrew had dropped his prisoners twenty-five miles to the west, just north of Callac. Another police car was beginning a journey up and over a saddle in the hills when Jouvét and Marton reached the scene of the first alleged mass parachute drop. Incoherent reports of an invasion continued to jam telephone lines all over the district. And when they dried up, the Press took over. Someone had tipped off the news media that something strange and military was happening in the central highlands of Brittany.

Jouvét and Marton spotted wavering lights beyond a hedge and stopped their car. Voices drifted through the rain. Their owners were too far away for the policemen to be able to make out what was being said. Cursing their luck, they zipped up their waterproofs and went to investigate. They climbed over a hedge and swished through soggy grass, shining their torches on the ground immediately in front of them to make sure that they didn't step in something nasty. The French equivalent of, 'Hello, hello, hello! What's all this, then?' died stillborn in their throats.

CPO Smith had provided his Asian Mafiosi with half a dozen torches. The beam of one of them happened to fall on a parachute, which was draped across a low bush. Jouvét and Marton came to a dead stop. Suddenly, they could make out an army of milling figures, many of them trailing parachutes. Most of the exported gangsters were awake, but still groggy. To the French policemen, they were gabbling away in a foreign language. Jouvét and Marton came to a simultaneous conclusion.

There could never be a better time to PANIC!

They broke the world record for the thirty metre dash on wet grass and through a hedge on the way back to their car. The instants spent fumbling with the radio seemed to endure forever. Sergeant de Roche tipped his chair back a fraction too far when he grasped the full significance of the hysterical report and crashed to the floor. He kicked violently, trying to release himself from the loving embrace of the chair's legs so that he could call for reinforcements.

While Jouvét and Marton retreated to a safer distance and a piece of higher ground to keep the invading army under observation, Sergeant de Roche phoned the Chief of Police, then he set about trying to summon aid from local sources. The Minister of the Interior was roused from a sound sleep as requests for units of the CRS poured in.

The Minister of Defence received similar pleas for Brigade Mobile assistance. Every unit of the armed services in Brittany was put on alert. Mediapersons who had been listening in on police frequencies spread the frantic reports of Jouvét and Marton, and their colleagues from Callac. The whole of central Brittany seethed with a mixture of fear, excitement and defiance as Black Watch added their own contribution of alarm and confusion, in accordance with Sergeant McAndrew's orders.

There was some shooting, of course. A decent invasion cannot take place without it. The French forces took most of the casualties – which made a strange sort of sense. They had the greater numbers and all of the guns.

Asian Mafiosi trying to surrender when the first shots were fired were thought to be making mad Kamikaze charges and came under sustained but highly inaccurate fire. Uncertain torch and spotlights against the background glow from nearby towns as they came to anxious life in the middle of the night, coupled with the broken ground, made aiming an uncertain business.

Police and paramilitary security forces loosing off at shadows became hostile forces in the opinions of nervous and trigger-happy colleagues. Thousands of rounds of ammunition left pistols and light automatic weapons. But, by some miracle, nobody was killed. Of the ninety-eight Asian Mafiosi exported to France, three escaped from the battleground and were picked up in St. Brieuc, trying to shoplift some breakfast. Thirty-seven of the others were captured wounded and the rest were unmarked but hysterical.

Details of the casualties on the French side became a state secret. Various estimates ranging from fifty dead and two hundred wounded to three hundred dead and sixteen hundred wounded appeared in the foreign Press, according to their estimates of the trigger-happiness of the French security forces. It was not a night destined to go down in French military history.

Black Watch did their job so well that the authorities kept up the hunt for more invaders until well into the early hours of Wednesday morning. They were still hard at it, and wrestling with a second invasion of newspaper and television reporters, as dawn broke over the English Channel.

Sergeant McAndrew's helicopter crossed the Devon coast at hours on a brightening Sunday morning. A quarter of an hour later, he joined the others at Milaston. Corporal Medder and his guests returned to Buddford by Tube train in triumph. The RAF group raced through the inevitable debriefing session that follows any training flight, bogus or not. They gabbled through a carefully rehearsed account of a routine flight, then they retired for some well-earned sleep.

The Sunday newspapers had gone to press too early to include the *French Sensation*. Radio and television found that they had been left with a clear field for bringing the events from across the Channel to the attention of the delighted British public. The discomfiture of their old enemies was a much-needed tonic for their neighbours, something to take their minds off the recession, the latest example of government bungling and recent trade union bloody-mindedness. It was seen as a divine judgement on the French for flooding Britain with tasteless apples and refusing to buy British lamb, and for milking the British taxpayer to subsidize inefficient French farmers.

Reporters crowded into Brittany, to find intense activity going on behind a wall of police and troops. They were told to go away – quite politely at first, then with increasing abruptness. The inevitable trickle of more enterprising media-persons managed to slip through the cordon as if it were so much fresh air. They emerged with the wildest tales imaginable. Their informants, not a few of whom came from the ranks of Black Watch, were more than willing to pour out the terrible sights and sounds of the night for a consideration. Eager media-persons watched their expense money evaporate in record time.

Two huge armies had battled through the hours of darkness. Some witnesses said that they had heard tanks, others that they had actually seen them, illuminated by the flashes of their guns. There had been air-strikes by fighters and bombers at first light, even naval gunfire from the coast. Farmers swore that they had seen fields littered with the dead and dying of both side. Some of them could dig into a pocket and produce nine millimetre Parabellum cartridge cases by the handful, glittering with fresh scratches and reeking of recently exploded cordite.

As to the truth of the matter, that was anybody's guess. There were no shell holes or bomb craters to be found, which ruled out land-based and naval ordnance and air attacks. Similarly, tank tracks were conspicuously absent. But every patch of soft ground retained impressions made by a multitude of police cars and trucks belonging to the CRS, Brigade Mobile and the French army. Trees, fences, buildings, stone walls – all bore fresh, splintered scars and bullet holes. It was the aftermath of the 1944 Allied invasion all over again.

Several enterprising people had actually managed to get hold of parachutes, snatched from under the noses of the policemen who were supposed to be guarding them. One parachute shown on television was a real collector's item. It was both bloodstained and riddled with bullet holes.

Reporters did their best to sort out what they judged to be truth from obvious fiction. But their sifting process helped only to confuse the issue further. All through D-Day, a homogenous blend of fact and fantasy seeped out from behind the blockade, aided and abetted by Black Watch.

Official French sources remained silent at first, then they began to make half-hearted noises about military manoeuvres, training exercises for the civilian security forces and long-planned counter-terrorism operations. The

interrogation reports on the captured Asian Mafiosi were making very little sense to those charged with sifting the truth out of them.

Corporal Medder's group and their guests from East Saltby, Portsmouth, and AT-17, and later the RAF group from Milaston, enjoyed a lazy day in the Bunker, listening to news reports on the radio and monitoring French television for up-to-the-minute information while marvelling at the number of silly stories in circulation. They used the threat of cutting off his liquor supply as a lever to prise the significance of the parachutes out of Sergeant McAndrew. Glass in hand, McAndrew found himself addressing an audience which had overflowed from the orange bar area and into the yellow dining area.

"Cast your minds back to the early hours of this morning," invited the Scot. "Mafia men who went to sleep in the Bunker Hotel wake up in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, getting rained on and being dragged about by a parachute. The next thing they know, there's French cops shooting at them and rounding them up for bed and breakfast at the local nick. None of which is likely to promote clear thought. Then they try and tell their story – when the Frogs have rounded up some interpreters. Who'll have to have Hindi and Bengali, and God knows what else, as well as English.

"The blokes in charge will get some wild tale about the Mafia men being rounded up by the British Immigration people, drugged and dumped in France. Now if some silly sod in a parachute and with no means of identification told you a load of old rubbish like that, would you believe him?"

"Sure, Mac, I would," grinned Corporal Spinner, ignoring the shaking heads in the audience.

"So they must be up to something," beamed McAndrew. "But what? Figuring that out should keep the Frogs busy. Of course, they'll have to check up, just to be on the safe side. The story might just be true. But what will they find? Our people, when they stop laughing, will give them a big, fat zero. And the parachutes are some wartime ones we found. Obviously army issue, but so old it's equally obvious they were chucked out years ago. Figuring out how they got to France and how the parachutes fit in should give them a few more headaches.

"So there the Mafia men are, stuck in France. Our Government isn't going to let them back because they were never here in the first place,

officially. The only way they can possibly get home is on the ferry service, except that we're not going to let them buy a ticket. They're out on their ears, which serves them right for being awkward sods in the first place."

"You know what, Mac?" decided Spinner, popping open a new can of beer. "You're too bloody devious for your own good."

"It's all perfectly reasonable and logical to me," protested McAndrew.

"We'd be in dead trouble if it wasn't," observed Lance-Corporal Birky.

McAndrew looked at him suspiciously, unable to decide whether or not he had been offered an expression of support. Then someone asked for quiet and turned up the sound on a television tuned to one of the French channels for another newflash.

The British national newspapers splashed the story on D-Day plus one. So little hard news had accumulated over the weekend that the month could almost have been August, not May. The populars devoted four or five pages to the events in France. Sub-editors racked their brains to produce cliché invasion headlines and variations on the theme: 'FRENCH TROOPS RAP PARACHUTE MEN'. Cartoonists excelled themselves.

Some real information on the invasion force had filtered across the Channel. The prisoners were all of Asian origin. They alleged that they had been arrested at gunpoint by the British Immigration authorities, drugged, imprisoned and then drugged again.

Some of them, WAMs who had witnessed Corporal Medder sneezing and losing his false moustache, said that the arresting officers and their gaolers had been disguised. Others, wishing to preserve their credibility, had kept quiet about the disguises during their preliminary interrogation. They insisted that their colleagues were mistaken during further questioning. But the Asian Mafiosi all agreed on the next part of the tale.

They had been unconscious during their journey to France. They had no recollection of jumping from an aircraft – in fact, none of them had been closer than a television set to a parachute before that fateful Sunday morning. The British Immigration officers had confiscated all of their personal possessions, including identity documents. And they had been forced to change into their current outfits at the detention centre, which explained why they were not wearing clothes of British origin.

Telex requests for information and assistance sped across the Channel to New Scotland Yard. As anticipated by Sergeant McAndrew, the initial

reaction of the British authorities was private amusement behind a public poker face. When the laughter stopped, the police made a few preliminary enquiries, just to be on the safe side.

Officials of the Immigration Department denied any knowledge of a round-up of around one hundred Asians in the Midlands at the weekend. Although named specifically by the gangsters, Special Branch could also prove that its officers were innocent of the mass kidnapping.

None of the people named on the list supplied by the French had been reported as a missing person. But, if the Asians' story of being kidnapped on Friday night was to be believed, they had not been away long enough to be missed. Several café proprietors did recall seeing rather strange groups of men in their establishments on the night of the alleged kidnapping. When they heard that the British authorities had played no part in the affair, they decided that it would be safer to remain silent. The risk of a return visit from the mysterious strangers outweighed the beneficial effects of some free publicity.

The authorities selected ten names at random from the French list and dug deeper. When interrogated, various computers spat out uniformly negative results. None of the Asians had a criminal record, or even an arrest record in the United Kingdom. The licensing centre at Swansea insisted that none had ever held a British driving licence, paid road tax or bought a car in the United Kingdom.

The Departments of Employment, Health and Social Security and Inland Revenue Department had never heard of the Asians. According to the appropriate electoral registers in Northampton and Birmingham, people of the names supplied did not live at the addresses given. As far as local and national government were concerned, the Asians were non-persons. As illegal immigrants, they had opted for a cloak of anonymity, and they had sealed their own fate with their secrecy.

Army records showed that the parachutes worn by the invaders had been stored in a warehouse near Birmingham until their sale as surplus to requirements in 1955. The line of enquiry came to a dead end with a firm which had gone bankrupt in 1957. The Air Ministry and the Civil Aviation Authority were able to confirm that no non-scheduled flights, or a fleet of small aircraft capable of dropping ninety-eight parachutists, had flown from England to Brittany on the night in question – which explained why the aircraft had not been picked up on radar at the airports at either Dinard

or Rennes. The British authorities concluded that the Asian Mafiosi were illegal immigrants who had been double-crossed by their travel agent on the way in.

Trying to play on the sympathies of the soft-hearted British public, the usual pressure groups insisted that the Mafiosi had had such a tough time that they should be allowed to jump the immigration queue. The Government turned a deaf ear to their agitations and declined a French offer to return their alleged citizens.

A suspicion persisted in French Intelligence circles that their old enemies had been the cause of their embarrassment. The more they studied and sifted the interrogation reports from the Asian Mafiosi, discarding the unlikely sections, the clearer it became that the British had managed to rid themselves of a group of illegal undesirables without contributing to the coffers of the legal profession.

Agents of the SDECE travelled to Northampton and Birmingham, picking up Security Service shadows at their points of entry. The Asian communities were unable to help the investigators. Some of those questioned were genuinely ignorant. Others, who had known of the gangsters' rackets, refused to discuss their people's affairs with outsiders on principle. Many more were fearful of being entrapped as accessories. The rest were just grateful that the burden of a gang of criminals had been removed and they had no wish for it to be reimposed.

The story died a natural death in the newspapers for lack of information. Other matters filled the headlines. At the police station in Mur-de-Bretagne, Sergeant de Roche suspended his catalogue of achievements with the St. Nazaire force in favour of compiling a list of people whom he would like to export. His long-suffering subordinate, Giles Martin, knew exactly who would top his list.

Eventually, ninety eight Asian Mafiosi were deported to their countries of origin – India and Pakistan. When the news filtered across the Channel to the Midlands, some of their victims began to wonder whether there might not be a Santa Claus after all. Others, sadly, had already fallen into the power of new oppressors. It is an unfortunate fact of life that criminals, imitating Nature, always rush in to fill a vacuum.

## 8. MILKING TIME

By D-Day plus three, most of the dust kicked up by the great invasion shock horror drama had settled. Sergeant McAndrew and his East Saltby group paid a Wednesday morning visit to CPO Smith's base in a converted warehouse in Portsmouth dockyard. Clean-up squads of fellow members of *Operation Life-Preserver* had visited the homes and retreats of the captured SAMs and WAMs to remove all traces of their sometime presences. The spoils had been enormous. Disposing of the moveable items would take a considerable time.

All of the houses where the Asian Mafiosi had lived were owned by dummy companies with stooges for officers. The system provided the Mafiosi with a series of safe houses and let them combine mobility with anonymity. Corporal Walters, *Operation Life-Preserver's* financial expert, had begun the process of taking over the companies. CPO Smith had taken charge of some less tangible assets.

A translator had looked over the account books found in the SAMs' safe and realized that they contained details of victims of the blackmail racket and their payments. There was information on transactions with bullion dealers and various fences, and also pencilled notes on the contents of a number of safe deposit boxes.

To have dared to keep such detailed records demonstrated the gangsters' supreme confidence in their security and their magnificent contempt for the forces of law and order and their blackmail victims. Smith's translator had been impressed both by the cheek and scale of the extortion operation and the amounts hoarded in the safe deposit boxes.

The Asian Mafiosi had preferred a cash economy. Each of the clean-up squads had found wads of paper money and the homes of the half dozen top men in each gang had yielded a stock of interesting keys. References in captured documents had identified the location of the WAMs' business

office in the heart of Birmingham. McAndrew and Birky had paid it a visit the previous night, which explained their occasional yawns during the reunion with CPO Smith's group. The expedition had turned up a safe with contents similar to those captured from the SAMs.

"It's the safe deposit boxes that have got me stumped," admitted Smith from the depths of his olive and silver armchair. His conference room was the size of the drawing room of a large country house. Pictures of sailing ships in gilt frames decorated the oak-panelled walls, and models of modern warships occupied most horizontal surfaces. "Getting rid of the rest of the stuff is no problem. Anything you can't sell, you just have to leave it unattended long enough and some sod will waltz off with it." He frowned down at the collection of keys on the glass-topped coffee table.

"We could try the direct approach," remarked Hank Newton, making the rounds of the four guests with a fresh pot of coffee. "How many of those are there?"

"Six from Brum and six from the other place." Corporal Spinner provided an item from his dustbin of a memory.

"Okay," continued Newton, "we need six Pakis aged between about thirty and thirty-five, average height and build, and fairly forgettable faces. I can't see anyone at the bank knowing these characters too well – all wogs look alike and they'll have kept their heads down. So we teach our blokes to do the signatures, give them a briefcase and take one of them to Northampton and Birmingham on a busy banking day. Say two a week for the next three weeks."

"All very well as long as no one can spot an imposter," said Smith. "There's just a chance the bank security staff will take an extra special look at someone wanting access to a deposit box. And where are we going to get six completely trustworthy Pakis who look right and can stay cool under stress? It would mean involving outsiders."

"We're thinking about the problem, as a matter of fact," McAndrew said.

"You mean you've got an idea," interpreted Smith. "And George isn't telling? Like bloody usual? Oh, well. The thing I'm worried about is getting the best deal for the diamonds and the gold coins. They're a long way outside our experience and I can't help thinking there's a bloody good chance we'll make a second-best deal because we don't know any better."

"I'm having a word with Corporal Walters about that," said McAndrew, brushing a flake of ash off the arm of his tangerine and bronze visitor's

chair. "I've invited him to the Bellside Club to pick his brains. I'm sure he'll have some good ideas."

"I've not been to your famous club yet," mused Smith.

"Got it's own golf course, hasn't it?" added Newton. "If the Skipper's too shy to ask for an invite, I'm not."

"You got some luminous balls?" grinned Birky. "For playing in the dark?"

"It's all right, Hank," McAndrew laughed in response to Newton's expression of disappointment. "The meeting's on Friday afternoon."

"Let's hope the rain keeps off," said Newton. "Invitation accepted with thanks."

"I wonder if I should go in uniform?" remarked Smith. "The Andrew always goes down big at posh clubs."

McAndrew almost choked on his coffee. "They wouldn't let a Chief Petty Officer in to do the bloody windows!" he spluttered. "Nor a Sergeant, for that matter," he added to take the sting out of what was no more than the simple truth. "You could try a blazer and your yachting cap."

"Yes, I might just do that," decided Smith. He had run into similar prejudice before, but a suitable disguise had always allowed him to sneak through the hallowed portals.

The Bellside Country Club had come to Sergeant McAndrew's attention through the activities of one of his side circle of unusual friends. Mr. Trenton, who used a courtesy title as a first name, was a professional gambler, who sometimes worked at the club as a dealer when times were hard. His services were much in demand for the extra-legal, extra-high-stakes poker games that a select circle of influential people held two or three times a month. As a professional, Mr. Trenton could spot cheating almost before it happened and his integrity was beyond question.

Through Mr. Trenton, McAndrew had learned that membership of the Bellside carried a great deal of weight in certain circles. The club had a long and distinguished roll of members, current and deceased, and an equally impressive waiting list.

At one time, only those who had attended the right school and university were considered for membership. His case could be improved if the candidate held or had held a commission in a branch of the armed services, and he could offer a long and distinguished record. But standards had declined significantly since the Second World War, and the shirts had

become markedly less stuffed.

The membership committee had realized that financial considerations demanded that they admit people with the wrong sort of accent who had made their fortune in not terribly gentlemanly ways. McAndrew had made it his business to gain admittance to the club as a guest of Mr. Trenton, just to find out what went on in a place like that.

Some of the older members had looked him over from a distance and concluded that he was a wide-boy from the back streets of Glasgow – even though McAndrew's accent was distinctly east coast – and that he had made his money doing something unspeakable. Their ignorance of just how unspeakable it was remained a source of constant amusement to the Scot.

He had been introduced to Elias Gorgiou, the owner of the Bellside, during his first visit. Casual comments on the state of the economy had drawn a tale of woe from Gorgiou. He was thinking of retirement. Spiralling costs and increasing bureaucratic interference were turning a previously enjoyable if not slightly glamorous life into a mere existence.

Although he employed a manager called Gordon Bryant, who reminded McAndrew a little of George Jackson-Browne of the Reynolds Hotel, Gorgiou had never learned the secret of delegating responsibility and he kept such a close eye on the business that he was virtually running it. Such close contact with the daily routine kept him aware of each price rise as soon as it affected the club.

McAndrew had smoothed a few of Gorgiou's worry lines by putting him in touch with suppliers who could offer better discounts than those with higher overheads. His offer for twenty-five percent of the club after the first *Operation Life-Preserver* conference had come as a welcome surprise – particularly when McAndrew explained that most of the money could be deposited in an untraceable, tax-free, numbered Swiss account.

With the assistance of Corporal Walters, Gorgiou had transferred the quarter share to McAndrew as settlement of a gambling debt. As a part owner, McAndrew gained a new respect from the senior members. Someone with a large interest in a place like the Bellside had to be a good chap, no matter how unspeakable his background. Indeed, the fact that he had risen above it was further proof that the British system could still bring worthy people to the top.

His new position had allowed McAndrew to research more thoroughly

the backgrounds of selected members. Some of the younger Civil Servants with Ministry of Defence connections were having a bit of a struggle to keep up the extravagance of membership of the Bellside. But they were trapped firmly between the twin forces of ambition and socially conscious wives. They had to remain in the right circles in order to get on. Some of them were ideal targets for a combination of bribery and blackmail.

McAndrew arranged for potentially useful Bellside members to be introduced to Sergeant Blackshaw's London-based group. A loan from a new friend to help cover a gambling debt or a bar account rapidly turned into an obligation. Easing information out of the victims was a fairly painless process on both sides, and the background obtained was of great help in screening the new staff of the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit and establishing it in its new role.

Blackshaw used different tactics against the more senior figures. Having reached a certain stage in their careers, most were able to afford a decent house, a good car and membership of the Bellside. But they had their weaknesses. Some believed that women are drawn irresistibly to men in positions of power. Sergeant Blackshaw fostered their illusions. Some had secret cravings that were just immoral, others cravings that were plain illegal. Sergeant Blackshaw did not presume to judge them, other than to deny them chances to do violence to third parties, cause excessive damage to property and corrupt minors.

Blackshaw merely made investments for the future. Where possible, he created obligations by fulfilling military ambitions. Very few civilians can boast that they have driven a modern tank, shared the cockpit of a jet aircraft that was making a rocket attack on a practice target, or even emptied the magazine of a sub-machine gun at a target that looked vaguely like Russian soldier. In Blackshaw's experience, happy people talked freely. And the things that they told him made Blackshaw happy.

On the Friday after D-Day, Lance-Corporal Birky led a procession of two cars off a feeder for the A264 and sped down a tree-lined drive. A left turn took him down to the sunken car park before the west wing of the club. An unwritten convention directed guests and members with no military connections to the matching car park before the east wing.

When they reached the entrance hall, McAndrew took Leading Seaman Newton and his golf clubs to the left, into the lounge and bar on the

ground floor of the west wing, to find him some partners for a round on a sunny afternoon. Sergeant Fairclough took CPO Smith to the manager's ground floor office, which lay on the right of the main entrance. Spinner and Birky trailed after him, feeling more and more confident that their one sixteenth share in the club had been a good investment. Having included Newton in a foursome, McAndrew stopped at the porter's desk in the entrance hall.

"I'm expecting a Mr. Walters," he announced.

The porter consulted a list. "Ah, yes, sir. You'll find him waiting in the library."

McAndrew followed the corridor to the east wing. He found Corporal Walters lounging in a leather armchair, watching the play on the bowling green and chatting to Mr. Trenton.

"Didn't expect to see you out of bed before dark," McAndrew remarked to the professional gambler as he shook Walters' hand.

"There was a game last night," smiled Mr. Trenton, offering a hand with lone, slim fingers. "And I've only just crawled out of one of the guest rooms on the top floor." He had acquired the accent and manners of a gentleman, even though he continued to live in down-to-earth Shepherd's Bush, not too far from the BBC studios. "I've just been telling your colleague, we had one of your lords and masters here last night. He lost quite a bit."

"Serves him right for gambling," said McAndrew virtuously. "How much did he drop?"

"Couple of grand, give or take a few hundred."

"I always said they overpaid generals," smiled McAndrew.

"Oh, no, he's a Civil Servant," corrected Mr. Trenton. "Something to do with the Ministry of Defence." He knew that McAndrew had military connections, but assumed that he was the equivalent of at least a major or a lieutenant-colonel, not a humble sergeant. "Well, if you'll excuse me. I promised myself a walk round the grounds to settle an enormous lunch."

"He was talking about Biffo," explained Walters as he accompanied McAndrew to the manager's ground floor office, which had been borrowed for the meeting. "Our prime candidate for number two at the CSSSU. His gambling habits are sinking him quite deeply into debt. They might prove embarrassing if he has to be vetted again to find out if he's fit to become the organ grinder's mate."

"He sounds the right sort of bloke for our purposes," grinned McAndrew, opening the office door.

The new arrivals took over chairs and accepted drinks. "Investment diamonds and gold coins," said McAndrew, getting down to business. "How to get the best possible deal for them. We already have some of each, and we expect more when we open a few safe deposit boxes."

Corporal Walters opened a black pouch and tipped half a dozen stones onto the blotter. They sparkled green mixed with red from the velvet wallpaper. Walters picked one up in a pair of tweezers and examined it with a jeweller's glass. "I don't know too much about these, but they've not been a particularly clever investment for some time. Still, we might try selling them to people who want to own a genuine diamond or two, instead of to dealers, who'll want to take all the profit. As for the gold coins, we'll do better disposing of them in the Far East. They're very hot on stuffing them in mattresses out there, instead of putting it in the bank."

"Shove them on a plane for Hong Kong?" asked Birky.

"Suitably disguised in some piece of military hardware," nodded Walters.

"Something else has come up." McAndrew opened a black plastic and aluminium attaché case. "Since I phoned you on Wednesday morning."

"There's always something," remarked Walters.

"We checked out some addresses out Kidderminster way," said CPO Smith. "With quite interesting results. The six top WAMs had more houses out there under another set of false names. And quite healthy accounts at local banks. I can't imagine who they got to give them references."

"Unless it was each other," said Fairclough.

"So that's the other problem," continued McAndrew. "How to drain these bank accounts. It's a shame to leave all that lovely money there, going to waste."

Corporal Walters glanced at a couple of cheque books, then he brushed cheque cards aside to reach a wad of statements. He frowned through them, sipping at a stiff gin and tonic.

"Hmm!" he announced. "Have we got any decent examples of these characters' handwriting? In English?"

"Perhaps for a couple of them," nodded McAndrew. "But most of their stuff is written in their own brand of squiggles. That's why we've had Smithy's translator on overtime."

"One thing we could do is close the account in favour of one of our

charities,” explained Waiters. “Return the cheque card and the unused cheques. And sending a letter, apparently in the client’s own fair fist, would add a very disarming touch of authenticity.”

“How about the others, a typed letter with a good signature?” said McAndrew.

“Just from a quick look at these statements, there doesn’t seem to be a regular pattern of debits and credits,” mused Waiters. “They seem to let the accounts run down to a certain minimum, then top them up. I think we could hit them with a series of direct debits and cheques over a month or two, then just let them go dormant with a tenner in them.”

“Waste ten quid?” protested Corporal Spinner, pretending to be horrified.

“Just the job,” said McAndrew. “We’d better let you have the cheque books and so on. We’ll send any handwritten stuff on to you.”

“You might address it to office 222, CSSSU,” grinned Walters.

“What, you’re actually in there?” marvelled Smith.

“Hector Blackshaw and I have a toehold,” said Walters. “We’re sort of liaison officers and advisors, but no one knows quite what to make of us yet. So when we tell someone to do something for us or get hold of a file, they do it. We’re hoping it will become a habit before long.”

“There you are,” Birky insisted to Spinner, “I told you Life-Preserver isn’t just a load of bullshit.”

“And when was it you told me that?” scoffed Spinner.

“That just leaves the deposit boxes,” hinted Waiters. “Or lucky dips, as they’re known in the bank robbing trade.”

“We thought about sending in blokes to impersonate the Mafia men,” said Smith. “But that idea’s been booted into touch.”

“I reckon we could screw them quite easily,” remarked Birky. “Sneak in, do all six boxes at once, and sneak out again.”

“If you know what you’re doing, that’s probably the best way,” nodded Waiters. “I’d rent a box at each of the banks and take Knocker along to carry something. If he’s just a servant, no one will take much notice of him, and he’ll be able to take a long look at the security precautions.”

“It should work,” agreed Fairclough. “You keep reading about these cases in the papers. Where the first thing they know about the job is a vault door that won’t open.”

“All right,” said McAndrew, “we’ll look into it.”

"In that case, I'd better borrow Keyhole Charlie," said Birky.

"Who's he?" invited CPO Smith.

"Remember that gadget I used on their safe?" said Birky. "With the ultrasonic probe? You shove it in the keyhole to map the inside of the lock and a computer in it feeds the profile to the key-cutting machine."

"You can't go lugging all that lot into a bank," protested Smith. "There's a suitcaseful."

"You can get the power pack and the recorder into a case like that." Birky pointed to the black attaché case on the desk. "If you scan the locks on the front door. You can do the rest on the night."

"Can you handle the alarm systems? And the time lock on the vault?" said Smith. "Or are we going to have to get an expert in?"

"You've got one," said Birky confidently.

"Have you ever done a bank before?" asked Walters.

"Not a bank exactly . . ." Birky smiled and refusing to be drawn further on his murky past with Army Intelligence.

"I suppose we'll find out if he's all talk on Monday," Smith decided. "That's about as much as we can do for today."

CPO Smith opened a deposit account at the bank in Birmingham with a respectable wad of ten pound notes, and then he rented a safe deposit box, mentioning that he wanted somewhere to store his valuables during a trip abroad.

Lance-Corporal Birky, in a dark blue chauffeur's uniform, followed him like a second shadow, carrying his attaché case. While Smith filled in forms and chatted aimlessly about his travels in foreign parts, his chauffeur's eyes were never still. The pair took a trip beyond the security screens and the cashiers' area, down two flights of thickly carpeted stairs, through a collection of bars that looked as though they belonged in an American prison and into the strongroom containing the safe deposit boxes.

They received a demonstration of the workings of the double key system, then Smith and his attendant were shown to a cubicle outside the strongroom. Birky produced several weighted packets from his briefcase to give the deposit box a little substance when the member of the bank's staff carried it back to the strongroom. On the way out, Smith stopped at the front door for a word with McAndrew, then he continued on to his car.

McAndrew bought a £5 bag of ten pence pieces and joined him a few minutes later.

Fairclough performed in Northampton. The same anonymous chauffeur followed him at a respectful distance, added weight to his deposit box and probed mortice locks while McAndrew exchanged a few words with his employer at the bank's front door. McAndrew changed his Birmingham ten pence pieces back into a Northampton five pound note. Then the expedition retired to one of the town's better restaurants for lunch before flying home.

The conspirators visited the banks again on Wednesday of the following week. Smith and Fairclough added more weighted packages to their deposit boxes. Their invisible chauffeur took another look at the security system and remapped the locks on the front door. This time, Hank Newton changed a five pound note into silver and back again.

Birky announced that he was confident of being able to pull off a clean job. As he had assembled all of the necessary equipment by then, McAndrew decided that the operation might as well go ahead on Friday night. June the first was as good a day as any for a bank robbery, which had been known all along as just *the operation*. McAndrew was so confident of success that he had not bothered to give it a special name.

CPO Smith insisted on joining the assault force, explaining that he had never robbed a bank before and he wanted to find out what it felt like. Hank Newton was drafted as another lookout.

More by accident than design, heavy rain was falling in Northampton on the night of the operation. McAndrew was well pleased with the sort of weather that dampens the enthusiasm of police patrols. The public part of the bank was the ground floor of one of those sleek high-rise office buildings, which let the customers know why their charges are so high and why banks lend money at ten per cent more than the rate paid to depositors.

Hank Newton parked his Thames van on the other side of the road and twenty yards from the front of the bank. He gave an all-clear over his radio, then raised the cover over the van's engine. If any nosy coppers asked him what he was up to, he would be able to explain that he was trying to do something about a radiator hose which had come adrift and refused to slide back onto the fitting on the engine.

Four black-clad figures with kitbags sprinted across the road behind the bank to the covered walkway. They paused to wipe their rubber soles to avoid leaving footprints. Then they followed the walkway down the side of the bank through a flagged area with half a dozen long wooden benches for summer lunchtime picnics.

Newton repeated his all clear. Birky and McAndrew turned keys in mortice locks. To their delight, the bank's front door opened. Even though the two examinations of the locks had yielded identical keys, McAndrew had been slightly concerned about falling at the first hurdle. His faith in modern technology was not as strong as Birky's.

Three of the raiders crouched in corners and held their breath while Birky probed the lock on the next door. The time was one-fifteen on a wet night. Some traffic was still moving on the main roads but the bank was situated in an area devoid of pubs and clubs.

The key-maker emitted a faint buzz as it chewed at a blank, guided by the small computer and an ultrasonic map of the lock's tumblers. Metal scraped on metal. Birky let his colleagues into the bank's main lobby. They felt less exposed in the shadows below the long row of windows.

Beyond a second internal door, they passed the door that led to the tills and the cashiers' desks, then the hatch at which renters of deposit boxes signed in. They hurried down the stairs in front of them. The stairs doubled back at the landing. On their right lay the bars.

"I was expecting something much bigger," remarked Spinner, sounding very disappointed. He approached the bars but kept his hands off them. "Even my local branch at East Saltby's got a bigger vault than that."

"That's not the main vault," scoffed Birky. "That's through there." He pointed to the right hand section of wall beyond the floor to ceiling bars. "You get to that through the office behind the counters. That's just the deposit boxes."

"And they're quite enough for us," remarked McAndrew. "How long will it take?"

"If I've got people breathing down me bloody neck, it's going to take twice as long," Birky said firmly.

His colleagues retired to the staircase to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes to calm jangling nerves. There was a warm, enclosed security about the basement of the bank, and an alarming sense of forbidden territory. If Birky made one wrong move, and they didn't get out fast enough, there

would be no more easy life and no more Bellside Country Club for a long time to come.

McAndrew, Smith and Spinner felt totally useless. Their nerves were twisted tighter by the knowledge that they had to sit tight and wait. Half an hour crawled by. Then Birky moved to the combination dials on the gate in the bars.

"If I haven't fixed the alarm right, it's going to get bloody noisy when I mess with these," he announced.

"I don't want to hear things like that." Spinner covered his ears as a precaution.

Birky turned the dials, studying the displays on another of his electronic safe-cracking tools. Suddenly, he was pushing the gate aside and the only sounds were heavy breathing and a faint squeak of its wheels. "Right, that's nearly it," he proclaimed. "I've just got to bugger about with the time lock. And someone can make a key for the door. The blank is the one marked '5'."

"Allow me," said CPO Smith, eager to do something.

"Zero one fifty hours," murmured McAndrew.

"You can't rush this job," Birky told him. "We've got to wind the clock on to later this morning. Good job this place has started opening on Saturdays."

A steel door two feet thick swung ponderously open, revealing a cavern which was lined on three sides with doors, each with two keyholes. Birky hauled the key-maker into the four-foot wide gangway. Three minutes later, the first door opened and McAndrew slid out the tray-like deposit box. He tipped the contents without examination into a kitbag. Then he returned the drawer and made sure that both locks on the door had been turned.

Just after two-thirty, McAndrew loaded half a dozen bundles of blue and brown notes into the deposit box which Sergeant Fairclough had rented, for future reference, and dropped the original contents into one of the kitbags. Birky locked the vault door and reset the time lock. The quartet retraced their steps as far as the first internal door. McAndrew pressed the transmit button on his radio transceiver, which produced clicks in the sets in the two vans.

"Okay here," said Art Fairclough from behind the bank.

"Stay put, fellers," warned Hank Newton from the front.

Footsteps approached the front door. Someone rattled it and a torch beam lanced through plate glass and the reinforced window on the internal door to reveal that the carpet in the lobby was dark blue. Four shadows pressed themselves harder against the wall and thought themselves invisible, hoping that Fairclough would not have to recover the contents of his deposit box to buy them a defence. The torch went out. A car zoomed down the road to the traffic lights. Police boots squelched back into the rain.

"Go now," said Hank Newton.

"Still go for me," added Fairclough.

The visitors let themselves out of the bank and locked up carefully. They were completely out of breath by the time they reached Fairclough's van after covering twenty-five yards, such was the tension and relief of a job successfully concluded. Their driver released the hand-brake and rolled down to the main road. He started the engine there, pretending to have stalled, attempting to create the impression that he had just driven down the side street without stopping.

"Without a doubt, that was the most bloody terrifying thing I have ever done in my life," decided CPO Smith, wetting his parched throat with tepid coffee.

"Enjoy yourself?" chuckled McAndrew.

"We could knock the other one off tonight," Birky suggested. "We could be in Brum in less than an hour. Up the M1 and turn left onto the M6."

"Robbing banks is like a Chinese meal for him," laughed Spinner. "Do one, and an hour later he wants to do another."

"No, time's getting on," McAndrew decided. "We'll do it tonight, as planned."

"We could have stopped a bit longer and done every box in the vault," mused Birky. "All hundred and twenty of them."

"Even if we were all built like Spin, we wouldn't have been able to carry the stuff," McAndrew pointed out. "And we'd have a hundred and thirteen people yelling they've been robbed. There's no sense advertising we can sneak in and out of banks when we're doing another one tonight."

"I can see his point, though," said Smith. "You feel like leaving the *Mark of Zorro* or the ace of spades to let someone know you've been."

"Perhaps it's just as well you're going to be a lookout and Hank's going along tonight," chuckled McAndrew. "Where is Hank, by the way?"

Fairclough checked his driving mirror. "He's right behind us. And there's not a police car in sight."

The next raid, led by Sergeant Fairclough, went off without a hitch. Dawn found the two vans approaching Salisbury, half an hour from home. The adrenaline high of achievement had long since worn off. Only the drivers were awake, and they were yawning. At five-twenty, the vans turned onto the drive of a house on the outskirts of East Saltby. McAndrew had rented it as an out-of-camp business office.

The six raiders slept until well into the morning. Then they examined their loot. Paper money, US dollars as well as pounds sterling and gold coins made up the bulk of it. More investment diamonds emerged from the kitbags, along with plastic wallets containing one, two, or five ounce gold wafers of the sort manufactured by the unofficial mints that flourish in Hong Kong. Several plain wooden boxes proved to contain ominous plastic packages of white powder.

The WAMs had invested in one and a half kilograms of almost pure heroin. This discovery angered McAndrew, and he had sound commercial reasons for his feelings. The best customers for hard drugs – those who need the largest doses – are generally forced to turn to crime to support their habit. And their fumbling, amateur efforts bring them into direct confrontations with Joe Public, who moans about lack of police action, which annoys the under-staffed police force, increases vigilance and increases the risk of accidental detection of those with grander schemes in mind.

McAndrew's colleagues favoured taking the heroin out into the Channel on Ned Kelly and throwing it overboard. They realized that they should have followed Pilot Officer Doran's suggestion and let the WAMs try walking on water instead of transporting them to the doubtful safety of French soil. But McAndrew decided to hang onto it for a while, in case it could be put to good use. Despite the misgivings of his colleagues, and not really sure that he was doing the right thing, Sergeant McAndrew stashed the boxes in a safe place for future reference

## 9. CLOAK & DAGGER DAYS

After splitting the proceeds of the robberies with CPO Smith, and making a generous contribution to the fighting fund of *Operation Life-Preserver*, Sergeant McAndrew faced up to the problem of investing his group's share of the loot. Inspiration struck on the evening of the following Tuesday. He took his eyes from the nearer of the Office's two televisions and surveyed his sprawled colleagues.

"How would you like to be club owners?" he asked.

Gunfire from the television filled the short pause as his colleagues thought it over, and asked themselves if McAndrew was serious.

"Are we talking about *The* club?" said Sergeant Fairclough.

"Very much," said Corporal Spinner.

"Ow much?" added Lance-Corporal Birky.

"Yes, I mean the Bellside. I was thinking of acquiring the other three quarters," McAndrew confirmed, answering all three questions at once. "What d'you reckon?"

The response was immediate and favourable. His colleagues realized that McAndrew had explored the deal already and he had concluded that the investment was sound. And there was a certain magic about being a club owner. They would become the equal of the most exulted member – more equal, because they would have the power to choose who could cross the hallowed threshold.

"Right, then," said McAndrew, scraping his feet to the carpet and adding a new set of black scars to the battered leather desk top. "I'll get changed and take a turn out there."

"You're not going now, are you?" said Fairclough. "It's getting pretty late, you know."

McAndrew shrugged. "Why not? The place should be coming to life about now anyway. It's poker night, so old Gorgiou will be there. And

there's nothing much happening here."

"There's that film you wanted to see on the box," said Spinner.

"Oh, aye." McAndrew paused, trying to make up his mind. "I was wanting to see that. Tell you what, I'll let you record it for me."

"That's damn decent of you, old boy," drawled Fairclough.

"Well, it'll keep you out of mischief," grinned McAndrew.

"I'd better drive to get you there tonight," Birky decided. "You never take the bloody brake off."

"I hope we get there in one piece," McAndrew remarked with a shudder.

"We should be back sometime tomorrow. Are you going to cover for us, Art?"

"Not bloody likely," said Fairclough.

McAndrew and Birky hurried to the sliding door and the exit from their underground ammunition store. Fairclough moved over to the leader's desk and took out the black internal telephone. He tapped out the three digit number of the Officers' Mess and asked for Captain Kirly. His colleagues' unofficial absence required an official, military explanation.

"This is getting to be a bit of a drag," he remarked as he returned the telephone to its drawer.

"What is?" invited Spinner, most of his attention on the television set.

"I'm getting fed up of giving bottles of Scotch to our officers when some or all of us aren't here."

"You know why that is. It's because we're just a bunch of sergeants and corporals. And lance-jacks. We'd be all right if we was bloody generals. No one asks where they're going or where they've been. It's like they was in their own little private army."

"A private army," Fairclough repeated thoughtfully. "Now, there's a thought. No, just a minute." He held up a hand to stop Spinner breaking his train of thought.

To a background of synthetic, studio laughter, Fairclough walked over to the soft drinks machine. He thumped the strategically-painted orange spot to make a chilled bottle slide down into the tray. Forbidden to speak, Spinner snapped his fingers and pointed to himself. Fairclough thumped the machine again. He took the bottles over to the desk and slumped into McAndrew's chair.

"How would you like to be a spy?" he asked in unconscious imitation of his leader.

"Huh?" invited Spinner through a mouthful of orangeade.

"Suppose we get orders to report to a high security establishment for special training? No questions allowed, but vague hints thrown out it might be a spy school, or have SAS connections or something similar."

"I don't get it," Spinner admitted. "How does that help us? We'd just be giving our bottles of Scotch to a different bunch of officers. No, I'm quite happy here, thank you very much. And I don't fancy being a spy, They get shot at and their fingernails pulled out."

"What about James Bond? He never gets hit when people shoot at him. And he's got all his fingernails."

"Do I look like James Bond?" Spinner demanded scornfully.

"I suppose you're a bit taller," Fairclough admitted. "Your hair's the same colour."

"But the rest of me ain't. No thanks, I'll stay here."

"Suppose," insisted Fairclough, "there's some sealed orders in with the basic orders. Telling us to leave East Saltby and stand by for further orders to tell us where to report. Suppose the orders originate from the Ministry of Defence via one of the people controlled by our colleagues in CSSSU?"

"Okay," said Spinner, "you want to chuck us out of this place. So there do we go?"

"Laddie," sighed Fairclough in his best imitation of McAndrew's accent, "do you not see? We'll have complete freedom of action. To go where we want, when we want and no questions asked. And no bottles of Scotch."

"I like it," grinned Spinner. "You sure you're not really Scottish, Art?"

"Well, we've been pushing money into Life-Preserver for five months. I think it's about time the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit did something for us. I think I might just take a quick trip up the M3 for a word with Mike Walters and Hector Blackshaw. Cover for me?" Fairclough dumped the black telephone on Spinner's side of the desk and headed for the door to the maze of shelves.

"By the way," Fairclough's head reappeared as Spinner started to dial. "Don't forget Mac's recording. And not a word to the others, eh? Let's just keep it as a surprise for them." With a wink, the head withdrew.

Elias Gorgiou was pleased to see his junior partners. They could be relied on to bring welcome diversion into his otherwise orderly life and they convince him that the twin forces of chaos and insanity still ruled the

world. His shadow of preoccupation disappeared the moment McAndrew offered to buy him out in two instalments, one of them in the form of another contribution to his tax-free Swiss account.

Pausing only to wring his visitors' hands vigorously, he pounced on his telephone. His solicitor was out, but a handy son was able to supply another number.

The solicitor seemed to need very little convincing to rush over to the club immediately. Gorgiou then made a third call, this time to his wife on the internal telephone, telling her to pack.

Having burned off the surplus energy that the good news had given him, Gorgiou remembered his duties as a host. A magnum of his best champagne arrived in a silver ice-bucket. As Birky remarked to McAndrew in an undertone, he was being very generous with what had become, on the strength of their gentlemen's agreement, their booze.

Gordon Bryant, the manager, was summoned to hear the news and to make small talk with his future bosses. Gorgiou hovered in the background, flashing smiles when someone caught his eye and darting anxious glances at his watch. He seemed to be willing the solicitor to appear before McAndrew could change his mind about the deal.

The solicitor was issued with a glass of champagne on arrival and instructed to draw up an instrument of sale. He was unused to such rapid deals but the transfer of ownership was completed in a manner that was satisfactory to both parties. The exchange of title deeds for payment would take a little time, which McAndrew interpreted as a month or two at the law's usual delaying pace, but Gorgiou seemed happy enough with a sizeable deposit in the form of a cheque drawn on a Ministry of Defence account.

The solicitor nodded to himself, realizing with hindsight that the purchasers looked very much like military men. He shook hands all round, then returned to his car. If he drove slowly, a boring dinner party would be almost over by the time he got back.

"More champagne?" Gorgiou filled glasses. Then he pulled a key ring from his trouser pocket and dropped it on the desk. "Bryant knows all about the keys." He searched the rest of his pockets. "Have you got the safe key?"

"Yes, sir," confirmed the manager. "You gave it to me yesterday afternoon."

"Ah, good. There's one or two personal things in the safe," the former owner explained.

"Allow me, squire," said Birky.

He slid a colourful still life aside to reveal a blank section of wall. Gorgiou started at him in horrified silence as Birky touched a concealed button and pushed a panel in and to the left, revealing a dull grey safe door.

"How on Earth did you know about that?" Gorgiou gasped. "There's only supposed to be a handful like it in the country."

"I know the bloke that designed it," said Birky casually, testing the handle on the safe door. A delighted grin spread across his thin face.

He waved the key away theatrically and assumed an expression of concentration. He tapped the area around the lock delicately with a finger nail, listening carefully, then he dealt a precise spot a resounding thump and turned the handle. "No trouble," he said to his astonished audience as the door swung open. He stepped aside to allow the former owner to remove a bundle of papers and a cash box.

"This seems a waste of time," the manager remarked, glancing at Birky. He relocked the safe and handed the key to McAndrew.

While the former owner issued last minute orders, McAndrew drew Birky to one side. "All right," he said, "I know you can't open a safe like that. What did you do?"

"They forgot to lock it last time they had it open," Birky admitted, reluctant to part with his secret.

McAndrew heaved with suppressed laughter. Then Gorgiou's indecent haste to sell up and be gone finally registered on his radar. When he mentioned it, the former owner assumed a guilty expression and admitted that another party had expressed an interest in the club. Then his conscience, or perhaps his sense of self-preservation, persuaded him to part with the whole truth.

The other party wanted the Bellside at a knock-down price that amounted to a gift. In return, Gorgiou and his wife would be allowed to move out with unbroken legs. His relief was almost pathetic when McAndrew showed no signs of being impressed by the threat or of resenting his reticence.

The following morning, Elias Gorgiou and his wife said a final goodbye to the Bellside Country Club and left in a taxi, en route to retirement in

Switzerland. McAndrew and Birky, who had spent the night in one of the guest rooms on the top floor, took a turn round the owner's flat, which took up the whole of the west wing on the first floor. Then they left the club in the safe hands of Gordon Bryant. Gorgiou had described him as capable and honest on many occasions. His continuing honesty was assured by the predatory smile that he received from the chairman of the new board of directors.

"You've got my phone number," beamed McAndrew as he offered a parting handshake in front of the club in the warm sunshine of the first Wednesday in June. "If these characters show themselves again, do whatever they tell you to then ring me. They probably won't bother now, though, Not now Mr. Gorgiou's gone."

"Yes, sir, you can rely on me." The manager smiled and tried to return a firm handshake.

Birky's Jaguar chewed at the gravel of the drive and surged along the avenue of tall trees to the main gate. Bryant headed indoors to his first floor office, feeling very shaky, McAndrew's mere presence has an unsettling effect on a certain type of metabolism. At close quarters, it can be devastating. Misinterpreting the cause of his unease, Bryant decided to take on two more gardeners for the summer; the biggest and toughest that the agency could offer.

Fairclough and Spinner were well pleased with the news that they had been promoted from one-sixteenth to one-quarter owners of the Bellside. The club offered a very impressive alternative to McAndrew's rented house in East Saltby for conferences with business associates, especially when McAndrew wanted to conceal the fact that he was a mere sergeant from the supply depot on the other side of the small town.

Lance-Corporal Birky spent the rest of the day in gloomy silence, comparing the Office and the supply depot unfavourably with the Bellside. McAndrew had very little to say for himself too. He kept wondering whether to resign his non-commission by buying himself out of the army, and who to invited to join the group to keep it up to its traditional strength. Fairclough and Spinner played along, making suggestions and keeping quiet about Fairclough's visit to London the previous night.

By coffee time the following morning, McAndrew and Birky had become reconciled again to their lot. The four club owners had gathered in Sergeant Fairclough's office in B Block for a look at the morning papers.

Spinner was adding the finishing touches to *The Times* crossword when the telephone rang.

"Sergeant McAndrew?" said a cultivated voice as the man in question brought the receiver to his ear.

"Who wants him?" asked McAndrew suspiciously, trying to put on an English accent.

"Lieutenant Haynes here, Mac," drawled the splendid accent. "Just a warning. The CO will be sending out a task force to hunt you and your merry men down in a few minutes. He wants to see you rather urgently. Not been up to anything we shouldn't, have we?"

"What, me, sir?" said McAndrew virtuously. "Any idea what it's all about?"

"Difficult to tell," drawled Haynes. "The Old Man was looking a little stuffed. I think it's either the VC or the Tower of London for you, Probably the latter."

"Well, thank you anyway, sir." McAndrew replaced the receiver, then he added a loud, "Pillock!"

Three pairs of enquiring eyes focussed on him.

"That was our good friend Godfrey Haynes warning me the CO is about to set his dogs on us," explained McAndrew. "He wants to see us urgently."

"What about?" demanded Birky.

"He didn't say. Which is why God is only going to get a half bottle," replied McAndrew. "Don't worry, lads. They've got nothing on us."

"Can I have that in writing?" said Fairclough, suppressing a grin.

Corporal Baskerville, the CO's doggie to everyone at East Saltby, seemed rather surprised to find the quartet at the windows of Fairclough's office, watching CSM Raven drilling two squads of reluctant store clerks to remind them that they were soldiers too.

"I thought you lot would have left the country," Baskerville remarked after delivering his summons.

"Woof, woof," said Spinner.

"And you, Brillo-bonce," said Baskerville. "Any coffee going, Art?"

"I thought the CO wanted to see us?" frowned Fairclough.

"Yeah, but he's allowing me half an hour to find you," Baskerville explained.

"They're a bunch of skiving sods in the Company Office," complained

McAndrew. "What does we want to see us about?"

"My throat's a bit dry," croaked Corporal Baskerville. "Postings," he added after a mouthful of coffee. "And that's all I know. You're going on some sort of course."

Four soldiers lined up in front of their commanding officer's desk ten minutes before he was expecting them, which counted in Corporal Baskerville's favour, Major Weaver handed McAndrew a sealed envelope and launched into a short speech of farewell, which he had been polishing for three years. He told the group that they were good soldiers and he was sorry to lose them. But someone else's need was greater than his. The fact that he kept breaking off to disguise an irrepressible grin as a cough destroyed his façade of sincerity.

It was one of the few times in almost three and a half decades that McAndrew had found himself speechless. Taking advantage of his state of shock, Major Weaver added hasty and obviously insincere wishes of good luck for their new posting. Fairclough and Spinner practically dragged McAndrew from the office. Birky moved under his own steam, but he seemed to be in a daze.

In their ammunition store retreat, Spinner poured four glasses of malt whisky and distributed them, Fairclough took the orders from McAndrew's unresisting grasp and ripped the grey envelope open.

"Weaver's done one on us," murmured McAndrew. "But how the hell did he work it?"

"Read that," Fairclough ordered, thrusting a sheet of paper under his friend's nose. "Look where the orders came from."

McAndrew read. A few key phrases registered on his shocked brain – in particular, the department of origin, the wording and the signature at the end of the document. He read again, noting Fairclough's unconcern and Spinner's broad grin. Everything began to make a curious sort of sense.

"You did this, didn't you?" he hissed.

"With a little help from our friends in CSSSU," Fairclough confirmed.

McAndrew's good humour returned miraculously.

A puzzled Lance-Corporal Birky plucked the sheet of paper from his leader's hand and read through the orders. "What's all this mean?" he demanded, "And why are you so chuffed 'coz we're getting booted out of here?"

"Well, laddie, it's like this," said McAndrew expansively. "Thanks to Art and Spin, we've been posted to somewhere undefined to take a training course. We're going to be told where later. And no one's going to ask any questions if we decide to wait at the Bellside for the next set of orders."

"Straight up?" demanded Birky.

"This top secret rubbish is great when you've got it working for you," laughed McAndrew.

Birky began to laugh, a little hysterically at first. The infection spread to the others. In the office building beside the parade ground, Major Weaver turned to the heap of paperwork in his in tray and beamed at it. Someone else was about to find himself stuck with McAndrew and Company, who knew too much and dared more. Someone at the Ministry of Defence, by some miracle, had managed to do something right for once. It was a day for celebration, which seemed to race by for McAndrew and his group.

They had so many things to organize. Essential supplies had to be transferred from No. 5 Ammunition Store to their new command post. They had to inform colleagues of their change of address. They had to sign a mountain of forms for addition to already overflowing files. The list seemed endless. But the final task required very little thought or effort. McAndrew's musings on the subject of replacements had not been wasted. Four kindred spirits, who had served them well in the past, learned that their apprenticeship was over. It was time for them to move up to the first team.

The reserves, who had been expecting an opportunity to make a few bob when they reported to the Office, nearly dropped dead from shock when McAndrew handed over the keys of his kingdom along with copies of selected personnel dossiers, and added his best wishes for the future. After shaking hands all round and promising to advise the new East Saltby group if they ran into difficulties, McAndrew and his colleagues left the supply depot at one minute past midnight. A seventy mile drive under the June stars lay between them and their new home in northern Sussex.

McAndrew and his group took over guest rooms on the top floor of the east wing of the club. In the morning, they set out on a voyage of exploration. Also on the top floor were the manager's flat, store rooms and a private room which was used for such functions as the exclusive poker parties. Below them were the billiards room and the official gaming room.

Elias Gorgiou and his wife had annexed the whole of the west wing at first-floor level as their quarters when they were in residence. Both owner and manager had two offices – a business office on the first floor connected by a small lift with a ground floor office directly below, which was used mainly for entertaining.

The kitchens and store rooms lay below three self-contained, first floor flats, which were occupied by privileged members of staff. The new owners had discovered earlier that the ground floor of the west wing contained a lounge and bar, and that the east wing offered the library and reading room, and the dining room.

After a week of extensive alterations, McAndrew paid off the last of the decorators and the group moved their personal treasures down to their new quarters in the residential suite. A touch-plate, similar to the ones used to operate the lifts, had been incorporated into the panelling on a blank stretch of wall just beyond the head of the left hand sweep of stairs. A section of wall slid aside in response to Spinner's probing thumb.

Another touch-plate on the right-hand wall opened the inner door of the small anteroom and allowed the new occupants to manoeuvre another instalment of luggage into the communal lounge. A combined book and magazine rack blocked their path, but the group made two left turns into the corridor that separated two pairs of suites.

McAndrew had chosen the first bedroom, sitting room and bathroom suite on the left because it contained a secret panel which opened into the owner's upper office. His colleagues were too amazed to laugh when they found a magnificent four poster, curtained in McAndrew tartan, in his bedroom.

Books and records dominated Fairclough's quarters. On the other side of the corridor, Birky's floor space was littered with his collection of old football programs, racing form books, and the computer equipment into which he hoped to feed the information for easier access. Spinner had camped opposite McAndrew. Fairclough solemnly donned a pair of sunglasses in silent protest against the dazzling stripes on the left hand wall and the swirling colours of the carpet.

"You think it's bad now, but I bet this room really moves when you get stoned." Spinner rolled his eyes expressively, a trick learned from studying his videotaped collection of silent and early films.

"Thought you'd never ask," said Birky, staring pointedly at Spinner's

hobby – a do-it-yourself whisky blending kit of two hundred samples of malt in a long display cabinet.

“Bugger off,” warned Spinner. “That’s all good stuff. It’d be wasted on you.” Which was perfectly true.

“No punch-ups before lunch,” ordered McAndrew. “Come on, let’s have a look at the rest.”

Spinner’s quarters shared a wall with a store room. Beyond that was a compact kitchen. The dining area, in front of a picture window, was separated from the snooker table by an ornamental red rope slung from gilt posts. A well-stocked bar filled the opposite corner. Two twenty-six inch televisions, a ten-piece suite of modernish furniture and a scattering of coffee tables occupied the rest of the L-shaped lounge.

Well satisfied with their new quarters, the group changed into club owner’s casual gear and strolled down to the dining room terrace for lunch. It was a warm, sunny day, The weather persons had said June would be a scorcher, but they had been wrong about May too. The four pairs on the bowling green seemed quite happy that the weather had turned out to be merely comfortable. If the rain stayed away, it was an ideal time for a holiday.

For three weeks, the group played the role of wealthy club owner, enjoying their inactivity without guilt, knowing that boredom would drive them back into action sooner or later. McAndrew and Fairclough spent a lot of time talking to potentially useful members and guests, picking their brains casually and storing away information for future reference. That currency of business – information – surrounded them on all sides. CPO Smith joined them several evenings a week. The journey to the Bellside was just seven miles further than the distance between Portsmouth and East Saltby.

Spinner and Birky hob-nobbed with the sporting fraternity. The former was an expert on boxers and boxing through the ages, and members made a point of speaking to him to prove that they had nothing against *y’ coloureds*. Birky became a regular member of the poker circle. He usually won but his victims received the benefit of his racing tips – which won as often as he did.

On one of his occasional trips to London, McAndrew got to know another club owner, a fellow Scot with the not very Scottish name of

Dominic. His new friend had inherited the business from his brother, an expert safe-cracker, who had disappeared in extremely mysterious circumstances after a very big job. Most of the rumours mentioned South America. Jimmy Dominic was an ex-soldier. He had reached the dizzy heights of company sergeant major shortly before his retirement to clubland, but McAndrew refused to hold that against him.

Jimmy Dominic owned the Museum Club on Bromley Way, just off Shaftesbury Avenue. The building was said to have housed a small private museum once – which had closed when the owner became involved in a series of rather messy murders. It had a reputation as a hangout for tough but fair characters. No one ever got into trouble unless he asked for it. Whether he knew that he was asking for it was another matter, however.

Dominic invited the Bellsiders to the Museum Club to take part in an Independence Day celebration organized for some members of the USAF liaison group at High Wycombe. They returned home in the early afternoon of the fifth of July to bad news. The porter told them that the manager wished to speak to them as soon as possible. Bryant was sitting in his first floor working office, nursing a fat lip and a matching nose. A sorry tale emerged with some prompting from McAndrew.

## 10. HORSE FOR A HIGHWAYMAN

Gordon Bryant had been visited by two large gentlemen the previous evening. One had inflicted his injuries in lieu of a calling card – partly to prove that they meant business and partly to express their disapproval of Elias Gorgiou's abrupt defection to Switzerland.

"It was the two who were here a month ago," explained the manager. "I believe Mr. Gorgiou mentioned them to you."

"So he did," nodded McAndrew. "What did they look like?"

"Both six feet tall and heavily built. The spokesman had a faint scar on his face, here." Bryant drew a line with a finger from the left side of his mouth to his jawbone. "I could only see it when the light caught his face at a certain angle. The other one – well, battered is the best way of describing his face. He seemed to be on the point of bursting out of his rather ill-made suit. And he had tattoos on the backs of his hands. But I couldn't make out the designs."

"Any names?" said McAndrew, taking notes.

"They didn't give me any. But I think the one with the scar is called Tony. And he called the other one Bertie or Benny. They said they still wanted to buy the club, at the same terms as before, and you have a couple of days to think things over. Then the trouble will start."

"Hmm," said McAndrew. "Okay, leave it with us."

The group moved across to the owner's working office, leaving Gordon Bryant with his morale dragging on the floor, imagining headlines like: 'CLUB MANAGER BEATEN TO DEATH' followed with a story beginning: 'Gordon Bryant (42), manager of the *Bellside*, became the latest victim of club violence last night . . .'

McAndrew dropped into a chair and placed his elbows on the desk instead of his feet. "First of all," he decided, "we need to organize some reinforcements to help guard this place. There's no guarantee our friends

won't call again tomorrow, just to stir the pot. The sound like people who don't give up easily."

"A real pair-a hoodlums," Birky drawled in an American accent.

"Spin, you get on the blower to the Office," McAndrew added. "It's time the new tenants did something for us. Knocker, call Don Smith and see if the navy can lend us a few bodies. Art, you're in charge of the defences for the moment. Sort out a guard roster and button down any weak spots. Spin, get your lot to bring us some walkie-talkies."

"Weapons," said Fairclough. "I think we need a bit more than my Browning. If only to flash around in an emergency. I'd get a few more pistols, three or four M-10s with sound suppressors and an HK-33 rifle with a telescope and a passive night sight."

"We don't want to turn this place into a bloody shooting gallery, laddie," said McAndrew.

"Nah, we'll just tell the blokes with sawn-off shotguns to go away, nice and polite," said Birky. "And hope they go."

"All right, but for crise sakes, keep the sub-machine guns and that rifle well out of sight of the members," surrendered McAndrew. "I'm off to see if Jimmy Dominic knows who these guys are. When we know something about them, we'll be better placed to get them off our backs."

"And knock them flat on theirs?" said Spinner, dragging a telephone across the desk. "Is that it, then?"

"Let's get to it," nodded McAndrew.

When McAndrew had finished his tale, Jimmy Dominic drew his pale features into a scowl and offered him another belt of the mysterious brew that he kept in an old gin bottle in the file drawer of his desk. "I know who you mean," he growled. "I've had trouble from them myself. Tony Hobson and Bertie the Gorilla, They work for Eddie Armitage. He's a real nasty piece of work, I'd really like an invite to *his* funeral."

They were sitting in the disaster area that Dominic called an office. It lay on the upper floor of the Museum Club. The desk and three chairs squatted in a clear space in a wasteland of full and empty cardboard boxes and broken furniture. A black and white cat was watching them from the depths of a whisky carton, holding a much-chewed rubber mouse between his front paws.

"What's this Eddie's racket, then?" said McAndrew.

"Bit of this, bit of that. And a lot of the other in his 'Houses of Horizontal Recreation' as he likes to put it."

"Fancies himself as a bit of a comedian?"

"He's never made me laugh. He's mainly into drugs. The hard stuff. Shit!" Dominic had contrived to brush his cigarette against his sleeve, scorching yet another hole in his singed suit. He stubbed out the ruined dimp and began to search through the junk on his desk top in search of patching materials.

"A few more of those sticky tape patches and you'll be a fire hazard, like your office," warned McAndrew.

"They keep draughts out," Dominic told him defensively.

"Anyway, why does he want the Bellside, this Eddie?"

"I think he's trying to build up a respectable front with his drug profits. Make a few influential friends. The law's been sniffing a bit close to him lately."

"Aye, well, he's got the wrong boy this time."

McAndrew poured himself another *Atom Bomb*, as Dominic called the concoction in his gin bottle. "Can you put the word round that it might be better if he forgets us? We'll give him a chance to lay off. But if he doesn't take the hint, we'll bloody jump on him, no messin'."

"Okay, I'll spread the word. Fag?" Dominic offered a battered packet of Woodbines. "It's not his idea, you know."

"Bend them yourself?" McAndrew asked drily. He offered his cigar case. "Here, have a decent smoke. Not his idea?"

"No, he got it from George the Nose." Dominic breathed out fragrant and expensive smoke. "George is going into the club business to get his pushers among people with a bit of money. He's nearly as big as Eddie, but not as smart. He uses the stuff himself. Cocaine – that's why they call him 'the Nose'. He's moved in on five clubs this year. And I think I'm near the top of the list for his next recruiting drive."

"What about standing up to him?"

"His goons have put three people in hospital – and they were ones who gave in without a fight. And there's another bloke gone missing. He's supposed to be holding up a motorway bridge now. They're a bunch of head cases. And with a wife and two kids, they know I can't take any chances."

"Right," nodded McAndrew. He switched to a new tack. "What's the

supply situation like for heroin at the moment?"

"You're not thinking of going in for that racket?"

"Yes and no." McAndrew offered an inscrutable smile.

"Funny you should ask. It's a bit tight at the moment." Dominic decided that he would get nothing further out of his guest. He had been warned about McAndrew's passion for secrecy. "The Customs mob stopped a big shipment last month."

"So if I dangled about three pounds of it in front of their faces, it would be the right bait to trap a pair of rats called Eddie and George?"

Dominic's eyes widened with interest. The cigar caught his other sleeve, showering sparks. He slapped at them automatically. Fire fighting was such a routine activity that he could do it without thinking. "Where did you get three pounds of horse?" he marvelled.

"Doing a bit of cleaning up," McAndrew remained evasive, not wishing to admit robbing the WAMs' safe deposit boxes to someone from the no-man's-land between NCOs and officers. "What will it do to their gangs if we send the bosses away for a long stretch for possessing dangerous drugs?"

"They'll start scrapping among themselves. And end up dropping to bits," Dominic sounded quite confident about his assessment.

"Good!" McAndrew took a swallow of the smooth, insidious Atom Bomb brew and began to outline a dark and devious scheme.

At about the time Sergeant McAndrew was looking for somewhere to park near the Museum Club, Leading Seaman Newton, his golf clubs and two colleagues reached the Bellside. The reception committee recognized Kurt Bronski, the radio operator, who wore a distinctive orange cap aboard Ned Kelly, and also cook and machine gunner Alan Logan, who wore a balaclava over his bright red hair. Reinforcements from East Saltby arrived half an hour later. Hank Newton was already guarding the golf course.

Kit bags containing radio transceivers, weapons and ammunition disappeared into the guard room – formerly the manager's lower office. The new arrivals received the grand tour. Then they were allowed to retire to the dining room terrace for coffee. Sergeant Freddie Dancer and Corporals Tom Brooks and 'Chalkie' Miller, who had a dandruff problem, were very impressed by their surroundings.

When McAndrew and CPO Smith put in an appearance, Fairclough

recalled Hank Newton from the golf course and called a meeting in the lounge of the residential suite, where he produced his guard roster.

"The drill is to blend into the background and keep your eyes peeled," he explained. "If you see any suspicious characters, check with the home team before you do anything. He might just be a member. If you see any sabotage in progress, no heroics. Get help before you move in. We don't want to lay on any punch-ups in front of the members. This is supposed to be a very respectable place. That goes double if they're armed. If we get them outnumbered and outgunned, they won't dare try anything. Mind you, I'm not promising any action. But it's best to be on the safe side."

"What about nights?" asked Hank Newton. "There's no one down for them on the roster."

"We have the brilliant mind of Mr. Birky to thank for that," said Fairclough. "He suggested we call in a guard-dog firm. Starting tonight, six man-eating dogs and their handlers will be patrolling the grounds and the vicinity of the club between about midnight and six in the morning, when we take over."

The traditional groans greeted the news that some of the party would have to get up early.

Having secured the club, McAndrew put his relief plan into effect. Everyone agreed that Arthur Fairclough looked the most gullible of the Bellsiders, which was why he was selected at once as their agent provocateur. It was a dubious honour in view of the known ferocity of the opposition, but Fairclough was an expert in unarmed combat – as Miss Clyde, the manager's blonde secretary, could testify. His glasses helped to give him a relatively harmless image, but his mild case of myopia would not inconvenience him in a fight.

After an uneventful Thursday night, Fairclough drove into London with instructions to hang around a café called *Dirty Mick's* until contacted by the opposition. The right ears would hear that he had just returned from the Far East, bringing a parcel for a friend – who was currently inconveniently in police custody on drug charges.

Jimmy Dominic of the Museum Club had come up with the name of a middle man who had been scooped up at the beginning of June in a Customs operation. He would deny knowing Fairclough but his past history would speak volumes, all misleading in the right direction. The

story was that Fairclough had examined the contents of the parcel and, as he was unwilling to hang onto it for ten years, less time off for good behaviour, he wanted to put the one and a half kilos of heroin on the market.

An hour or so after Fairclough's departure, Tony and Bertie toughed their way into the manager's lower office at the Bellside. McAndrew had been warned of their arrival and he was sitting behind the desk, trying to keep amusement off his face. Tony poured himself a drink from the selection on a bookcase. Bertie just stood in the middle of the carpet, cracking his knuckles reflectively and looking big and dangerous.

"I think the gentleman's ready to sell to us," remarked Tony. "Good drop of Scotch, this."

"I've only just bought the place," returned McAndrew.

"Oh, what a shame!" sighed Tony, brushing at the lapel of an elegant slate mohair suit. "He's going to be difficult. Talk to him, Bertie."

Bertie the Gorilla advanced and leaned on the desk menacingly. McAndrew brought his right hand into view. He was holding an army-issue Smith and Wesson .38 revolver of World War Two vintage.

Bertie howled in agony as six pounds of metal crashed onto the fingers of his right hand. The colour drained from the messengers' faces. Their eyes clung to the weapon, bulging in disbelief. Tears of pain trickled down Bertie's stubbled cheeks. They had been told to expect a soft target.

"I think you'd better leave," said McAndrew with the wild grin of a Glasgow hard-man and head-case. "Before someone gets hurt."

Tony Hobson and his satellite fled for their car and flew towards the London road, wondering how they could explain their failure to Mr. Armitage.

"That went quite well," McAndrew remarked to a wall-mounted mirror, congratulated himself. Then he stored the revolver in his briefcase and retired to the guardroom to get on with the serious business of reading the morning newspaper.

The night-shift guards dragged McAndrew out of bed twice with reports of intruders. They failed to take any prisoners, but one dog did manage to capture part of the leg of someone's trousers. Another found several petrol bombs, which the second wave of visitors had dropped. The hired hands had done their jobs well. None of the intruders had penetrated the outer

perimeter. Each of the dog handlers left with a generous tax-free bonus in his hip pocket at the end of their shift.

At breakfast, McAndrew warned his troops to prepare for trouble. The bad guys had started to throw stones at the walls of the castle.

The next assault came after lunch. Corporal Spinner was on duty in the guardroom, reading a science fiction novel captured from Sergeant Fairclough's library. A beep issued from the radio transceiver on his desk.

"Guardroom," replied Spinner.

"Post Two," said the sentry in the east-wing car park. "That bloke coming down the drive doesn't look like he belongs."

Spinner crossed to the window and peered at the well-dressed man through binoculars. "Right, he's not one of ours."

"It's the yellow socks that give him away."

Spinner shifted his gaze downwards. "They're a bit bright, yes."

The man turned to the left, heading towards the west-wing car park. He looked perfectly at ease.

"Guardroom for Rover Three," said Spinner.

"What's up?" Hank Newton was getting in some putting practice on the lawn beside the lounge, harassed by Armstrong and Collins, two of the Bellside cats.

"Take a look at the car park," replied Spinner. "Bloke in a dark grey suit and yellow socks."

"Looks like he's trying a few door handles," reported Newton half a minute later. "He's either after a car or what's in them."

"Grab squad, west car park," ordered Spinner, already on his way.

The new East Saltby group slipped out of the lounge by the french windows and sneaked in among the parked cars. A thin screeching noise set everyone's teeth on edge. Spinner lunged forward with an inarticulate cry. The man turned.

"You bastard!" yelled Spinner.

The next moment the man with yellow socks was flat on his back, blood pouring from his face, cradling the ruins of his nose.

"You really sorted him out," observed Sergeant Dancer.

"Look what he did to my phuck'n car!" complained Spinner, trembling violently with rage. His hand traced a bright, yard-long scratch in the blue paint of a brand new Rover.

Sergeant McAndrew appeared on the scene and took charge. With a few well-chosen words of sympathy, he succeeded in calming Spinner down. "He's probably got someone with him," he added, inspecting the groaning prisoner. "A couple of you take a look along the road for a parked car."

Corporals Brooks and Miller set off down the drive in an electric golf cart, which had been requisitioned as a scout car. McAndrew borrowed Spinner's transceiver.

"All units," he said, "one intruder neutralized. There may be more around. Keep your eyes open, lads."

The scouts reported back a few minutes later. Brooks and Miller had spotted two parked cars. One had three bodies gathered around an open bonnet, one working on the engine and the others giving helpful advice. The other car had a single occupant, who kept glancing at his watch and looking back at the gate.

McAndrew and Dancer loaded the prisoner, his head wrapped in his jacket to keep blood off the seats, into the back of Spinner's car. Spinner drove them to a point just short of the main gate. Then he and McAndrew followed Corporal Miller along the club's newly pointed, seven-foot boundary wall to a fresh scratch mark on one of the stone blocks.

McAndrew found a foothold and peeped over the wall – as an engine started. The mechanic and his two helpers had solved their problem. Looking fifteen yards down the road in the direction of the club's main entrance, McAndrew recognized his old friend Tony Hobson, struggling with the outer wrapping of a packet of cigarettes.

"Tell Freddie to drive Spin's car up behind this one," he whispered. "Come on, laddie, Over the top."

Corporal Miller swished away through the long grass. McAndrew and Spinner scrambled onto the wall, giving thanks that there was no broken glass on it. Tony Hobson nipped a filter between finger and thumbnail and managed to draw a cigarette out of the packet. He pushed the cigar lighter in. Suddenly, a dark brown hand closed around his tie and dragged him half out of his window, banging his head on the top of the door in the process.

The twin of the dark brown hand landed on his nose, sending rivers of tears flooding from his eyes to blind him. When he recovered from the dastardly attack, his assailants had gone – leaving Smart Jack slumped on the back seat of the car. Jack looked as though someone had poured a

full bottle of tomato ketchup all over his face.

Sergeant Fairclough returned in time for dinner, clutching a briefcase wrapped in a polythene bag. He listened to the adventures of the day, then he unfolded his own story during the meal. He looked startlingly different with his hair dyed black and his skin bronzed with a suntan out of a tube. The Bellsiders, CPO Smith, and Corporals Brooks and Miller were dining in the residential suite. Chance had placed the others on guard duty.

"They don't call it Dirty Mick's for nothing," shuddered Fairclough. "I might have to burn the clothes I was wearing. I was there for about an hour before some character started making noises about Eastern Promise. So I let him know I had plenty of it but I was only going to deal with the head honcho. We ended up meeting George the Nose at one of his clubs. I know night clubs aren't at their best at lunchtime, but this place looked a right dive. His real name's George Monk, if anyone's interested."

Nobody was. Fairclough took a break to catch up on the food and accepted a refill of wine.

"I had a bag of sugar in the briefcase to give it an interesting bulge," he resumed. "Nosey George couldn't keep his eyes off it, I could almost hear him wondering if I'd been mug enough to bring the stuff with me. We fixed up a deal – not much of one to prove I didn't know what the stuff's worth. Then I asked George if I could use his phone. He wasn't too keen, but I told him there was a map in the briefcase showing the rendezvous for the payoff. So while he was looking at the map and having a crafty taste of the sugar, I pretended to make a call to my girlfriend while I planted the bug under his desk."

"Which is working fine," remarked McAndrew.

"Then I gave him the aspirin bottle we filled as a sample. He had a little chemistry set and a gadget for finding its melting point, George seemed very happy with the sample. So we shook hands and I took the briefcase round to Corporal Walters. He reckons he's finished with it, but he wants us to keep it wrapped up just in case."

"You've done a fine job, laddie," said McAndrew through a rumble of agreement. "And there's been a development already. I've had a phone call from Walters' people. The ones monitoring the bug. George the Nose is planning to take a couple of boys with him to the meeting place, hit Art over the head and just walk off with the goods. So we're on Plan B now."

"Never trust a bloody Cockney," remarked Spinner, grinning at Birky.

"Jimmy Dominic is going to get the news to one of Eddie Armitage's bunch," McAndrew added. "As soon as Mike Walters has bugged Eddie Armitage. We should be hearing all about his hijack plans shortly."

"When's the big day?" asked Chalkie Miller.

"Tuesday night, provisionally," replied McAndrew. "Are you all right for staying on?"

"Oh, yes," smiled Miller. "Captain Kirly was quite surprised to find the old arrangement carrying on with new personnel."

"You'll have a job getting rid of Hank when this job's over, Mac," remarked CPO Smith. "He really likes it here."

Warm weather overflowed from the weekend into the second week of July. There were no more attacks on the Bellside. Eddie Armitage had called a truce to concentrate on his hijacking. Sergeant Fairclough had arranged to complete the deal at around 23:00 hours in a disused warehouse on the fringe of London's dockland. A briefcase containing the WAMs' heroin had been planted during the afternoon of *Deal Day* in a way that made it look as if it had been concealed in great haste.

As evening darkened into night, McAndrew and colleagues watched from a suitable vantage point as a police surveillance team went through a shift change. The police had been tipped off that something interesting would happen at the warehouse that night.

Eddie Armitage and four men sneaked into the meeting place at ten-thirty and took up lurking position, waiting to pounce on George the Nose when the heroin arrived. George and two beefy assistants arrived two minutes early, feeling very confident. Even if the meeting turned out to be a set-up, no jury would convict them of attempting to buy narcotics. They had no money with them.

At precisely 23:00 hours, a dark blue or maybe dark green car with mud-covered number plates stopped just outside the police cordon. Sergeant Fairclough climbed out, wearing a trench coat and his disguise, and carrying a briefcase. He began to walk towards the warehouse. Then he slowed, seeming to sense danger. Suddenly, he turned and raced back to the car, which roared away in a cloud of dust and exhaust smoke. Even if the police reacted quickly enough, no one was going to get close to the fugitives with Birky at the wheel.

Police officers burst from vans and parked cars and flooded into the warehouse before the noise of the fleeing car could warn the remaining bad guys. A shocked George the Nose was arrested, protesting his innocence. He was even more shocked by the time the police had hauled Eddie and his cohorts out of their hiding places.

Both gangs of hijackers soon recovered their cool. At worst, they were trespassing – an offence not worth pursuing. Grinning, they watched the police officers poking about in the warehouse. Then the police found the briefcase and examined its contents.

As the coppers became ominously cheerful, the smiles on the faces of the hijackers started to waver. The evidence disappeared into a large plastic bag. Kicking and screaming about a fit-up, Eddie and George were dragged away for a night in the cells.

McAndrew and his colleagues drove just over three miles, through Whitechapel, the City, past the Royal Courts of Justice and into Soho for a celebration. Everything was on the house – Jimmy Dominic was celebrating too. The team which had preserved his livelihood and perhaps saved him from a spell in hospital deserved the best that the Museum Club could offer.

Several months later, Eddie Armitage and George the Nose told their jury that they had gone to the warehouse to look it over as a possible site for a small business. It had been a spur of the moment decision, which was why they had been found there at night and without the permission of the owner. They knew nothing about the heroin. Strangely enough, the jury refused to believe that the police had tricked them into handling the briefcase and the bags of heroin.

It never occurred to the seven men and five women that the fingerprints of the accused might have been transferred to the bag by Corporal Walters' technicians. To the jury, it was quite clear that the accused were as guilty as hell, even though Eddie Armitage insisted that although the briefcase was his, it had been stolen from him during the weekend before his arrest. As Jimmy Dominic had predicted, their empires crumbled when Eddie and George went away. But others began – with patience, persuasion and intimidation – to build a new but similar dominion from the rubble.

## 11. THE RED PERIL

Nobody had thought to mention the counter-attack to Gordon Bryant, or to telephone him after its successful conclusion. Nobody contacted the security firm to cancel the dog patrol. The Bellsiders had other things on their minds.

At a quarter to midnight on that Tuesday night, six vans descended on the east-wing car park and disgorged the usual complement of men and dogs. Five pairs set off on their beats. Their leader reported to the manager. Gordon Bryant told him that the Scottish gentleman was out for the night and that he was to be informed if any problems arose.

Having repeated these instructions to the night porter, Bryant retired to his rooms on the top floor, feeling pleasantly secure. The persistent ringing of the house telephone dragged him from a sound sleep. Bryant fumbled the receiver to his ear and mumbled his name. His alarm clock was showing two thirty-five.

"Night porter, sir. Can you come down?" said an alert voice. "The guards have caught a burglar."

Bryant woke up with a rush. "Call the police," he ordered. "I'll be right down."

Bryant grappled with his lightweight summer quilt and then his clothes. Both seemed inclined to be playful when speed was of the essence. The lift seemed to crawl down to the entrance hall.

The burglar was a short man, scarcely more than five feet seven. He was wearing black from head to toe. Black camouflage cream striped his face and he was glowering out from beneath bushy black eyebrows. Bryant estimated his age at around forty, plus or minus fifteen years. Blood dripped from his right hand, forming a thickening puddle on the tiled floor of the lobby. An arm shone whitely through the tattered fabric of his right sleeve.

"We caught him trying to break into the library," explained the leader of the dog patrol. He hefted a dark blue canvas bag. "Quite a collection of bits and pieces in here. I reckon you could just about break into Fort Knox with this lot."

Bryant smiled dutifully. The prisoner maintained his unsettling glower, under the watchful eyes of the patrol leader's Alsatian, until the police arrived – mercifully, without sirens. A heavy-set uniformed sergeant listened to the story while a young constable took copious notes. Then they took the prisoner away. Bryant was glad to see the back of him. He had found his hostile silence and his indifference to the blood dripping from his arm quite unnerving.

The sergeant had promised to contact Bryant in the morning about taking formal statements. The fact that he heard nothing more in no way disturbed Bryant. He didn't relish the idea of hordes of policemen marching about the Bellside, disturbing the members. An early edition of the local evening paper revealed the reason for the broken promise.

The owners of the Bellside and their guests returned from London in time for a late lunch. Gordon Bryant had slipped out for a spot of putting practice. He was on his way back to his office when he spotted McAndrew and company enjoying a drink on the lounge terrace. He rushed over to give an account of the events of the previous night.

"Well! What the hell do we make of that?" said McAndrew as Bryant, his duty done, marched back to his office.

"Is it a one-off tea leaf, or someone else having a go at us?" said Birky, trying to prevent Armstrong from shoving his ginger nose into his glass. The Bellside cats were extremely inquisitive if given the slightest encouragement.

"We'd better keep the dog patrols going, just in case," decided Fairclough. "Looks like you just can't win."

"What about the daytime people-patrols?" said Freddie Dancer as the new East Saltby group exchanged uneasy glances.

"It's all right, laddie," said McAndrew. "We know you can't push your luck just yet. And the rest of us have got better things to do than standing guard duty. It's like being in the bloody army." His remark provoked mocking laughter. "I suppose the navy are in the same boat?" he added, turning the laughter to groans.

"I'm in no rush to get back." Leading Seaman Newton splintered the unity of CPO Smith's nod. "And I'm due some leave anyway."

"Some of the members have been trying to talk him into becoming your golf professional," explained Kurt Bronski.

"Well, I suppose he is getting on a bit," Smith admitted. "How many candles were on his cake last May? Was it twenty five? It's about time he was thinking of settling down."

"If he's past it, what does that make us?" wondered McAndrew.

"Good advice is always for others," Smith assured him.

Gordon Bryant rushed back onto the terrace and thrust a copy of the early edition of the local paper under McAndrew's nose. The banner headline read: 'BELLSHAM GAOL BREAK' above 'Police Officers Found Unconscious'.

The accompanying story was sandwiched between a photograph of the police station and a sketch of the escaped prisoner. It had been written in a breathless, shock-horror-drama style. A sprinkling of facts fluttered in a web of speculation. A prisoner had been charged with attempted burglary and locked in the cells. The next morning, the milkman had found everyone in the police station unconscious. Soon after help arrived, the victims had woken up of their own accord, none the worse for their experience but with no memory of being drugged. A young constable with artistic leanings had sketched the rescued prisoner. The Bellside's manager confirmed that it was a good likeness.

Assuming that the club had been visited by a burglar with caring friends, who would not strike in the same place again, most of the auxiliary sentries returned home. Hank Newton and his golf clubs decided to stay on until the following week. The mild flurry of interest in the mysterious burglar began to die away – until a telephone call revived it.

McAndrew and his group were in the owner's business office, discussing security, when the call came through. A cultured drawl asked for Mac. Fairclough passed the receiver to McAndrew, who switched the telephone to the conference mode.

"Hello, George, old boy," enthused the voice. "What on Earth have you been up to?"

"Nothing anyone can pin on me, Algy," McAndrew returned confidently. "What's to do?"

"Chums from *Redland* sniffing about on your doorstep, that's what. The

chappie in your local rag is one Leon Artez. Nationality unknown, age unknown to within five years, occupation: agent. Currently employed by the Sovyetskis, but works for anyone who can afford him."

"A bloody spy? What the hell does he want here?"

"A special posting for special training?" mocked Algy. "No wonder the Reds are interested. I was quite interested myself when I found out the Ministry of Defence had acquired an interest in the Bellside."

"Oh, bugger!" murmured McAndrew. "We didn't think we'd have the bloody Russians sniffing about. Should you be telling me that over an open line, by the way? They might be listening."

"They're not that interested yet," Algy assured him. "I say, George, old boy. You wouldn't be slightly short of members, would you? Chaps with an ear close to the ground?"

"Who do other chaps favours?" chuckled McAndrew. "Why not drop round tomorrow morning? You can fill in the membership form while we talk."

"Jolly good! Lunch on you, eh? Cheerio, George."

"Who the hell was that?" said Fairclough, speaking for the group as McAndrew broke the connection.

"Algy Winsloe," grinned the Scot. "He's so well connected, they had to put him in Intelligence."

"What's all this jazz about the Russians? I don't like the sound of that." Birky was doing his best to take the warning seriously, despite the comic impression made by Algy and his casual manner.

"We're supposed to waiting here for our posting to come through," complained Fairclough. "The Bellside isn't supposed to be the training establishment."

"That's Intelligence work, I suppose," shrugged McAndrew. "They draw their conclusions from bits, not the whole story, Which means they'll be back. Probably not the Russkies in person, but a traitor doing it for love or money, or someone like this Artez character."

"This is going to put us in an impossible position," decided Fairclough. "If they start bugging us and tapping the phones, we won't be able to use this place for business."

"I think we'd better hide away anything not connected with the normal running of the club," added McAndrew. "In case they send someone a bit brighter than Leon Artez before we can beef up our security."

"The more security, the more you've got to hide," observed Spinner. "They might do what they did at the cop shop and knock us all out so they can have a good look round the place."

"Perhaps we can allow a controlled penetration of our defences?" Fairclough suggested. "Accept the inevitable, but on our terms. Prove there's nothing here of any interest to spy types."

"If they find nothing," countered McAndrew, "that just means they haven't looked in the right places."

"Fake something up for them to find, then" Birky suggested.

"Exactly," nodded McAndrew. "And we'll have to do something about that . . ." He nodded to a filing cabinet, one of a pair which stood at the back of the owner's business office, the home of the group's confidential papers. The right-hand filing cabinet was a safe in disguise and wired to an elaborate alarm system. It was full of incriminating documents and photographs, which McAndrew used to persuade useful people to be reasonable.

"I seem to remember old Gorgiou saying something," McAndrew added, half to himself. "But I'll have to wade through that mass of paper he left to jog my memory. In the meantime, someone will have to stay in here with the files until . . ." McAndrew let the sentence peter out, hanging onto another secret.

The Bellside Group, plus Hank Newton, reassembled in the office at two-thirty in the morning. Lights still burned in the corridors on the top floor and in the entrance hall. The rest of the club was in darkness, apart from the night porter's domain, settling with faint creaks into a warm summer night. McAndrew and company were making do with the light of a Moon two days past full.

They manoeuvred the filing cabinet/safe into the lift and sent it down to the ground floor. Spinner and Birky fetched a small trolley from the kitchen while McAndrew looked in for a word with the night porter, who was watching a film on his video-system. Their conversation and the television helped to drown any sounds from the lobby.

The filing cabinet travelled down to the basement in the service lift. While the others gaped at the racks of bottles in the wine cellar, McAndrew consulted a sketched map, then pointed to a section of stone wall. "Georgie had a secret compartment built there. To store special stock. See if you can find the door."

His four companions tapped and probed the wall, listening for hollow parts and looking for hidden switches and gaps between the stones. After a thorough search, they admitted defeat. McAndrew took what looked like a television controller from a pocket and touched a silver panel on its otherwise featureless surface. An irregular section of the wall retracted, revealing dark cavities to left and right.

"A magnetic transmitter," McAndrew explained. "It works on the principle of the radios they use during cave rescues. No bloody Russian's going to find anything down here."

Spinner and Fairclough heaved the precious blackmail files into the left-hand chamber, which looked as if it had been specially made for something of filing cabinet-size. They found four bottles of vintage champagne on one of the shelves of the right-hand section, and a note from Elias Gorgiou inviting them to drink his health on a special occasion.

"That was nice of him," said McAndrew as he made the section of stone wall advanced smoothly and silently with another signal from the controller. "All we need now is a special occasion."

Leading Seaman Newton covered his mouth to hide a huge yawn. "Me for bed," he announced.

It seemed a sensible idea.

Algy Winsloe's telephone voice gave an accurate impression of him. He was around thirty, tall and slender, wearing an expensive suit, pale blue shirt and regimental tie and shoes with a mirror gloss when he arrived at the Bellside Club. The eye looked for and found his black bowler hat, and he carried a tightly rolled umbrella like a sword stick.

Collapsed elegantly in an armchair in the upper office, Algy strained dry sherry through a wispy moustache. He set the glass down, dabbed at his lips with a spotless white handkerchief and resumed his normal vacant smile.

"Jolly good drop of fino, what?" he remarked with a significant glance at the bottle.

Fairclough refilled his glass to the golden plimsoll line, trying not to let amusement creep into a hospitable smile.

"What d'you know, Algy?" McAndrew invited.

"I'm not sure where to begin, old horse," Algy replied. "Didn't you mention a spot of boring old paperwork?"

McAndrew sighed and pulled a membership application form, already approved, from under the blotter. Algy punctuated his narrative with by frequent pauses as he wrestled with the intricacies of spelling his name, address and other vital details.

"It seems the Sovyetskis have got wind of your posting. And you've managed to irritate them because they can't work out where you're going. And as you've been spending so much time here, they think the club is the top secret training establishment, *It is* here, isn't it?"

McAndrew forced a laugh. "How did you get in here, Algy?"

"Me?" asked the visitor in surprise. "Well, I followed the road till I saw the sign at the entrance, I suppose. Then I asked the porter chappie and he phoned you."

"So who checked your identity and your pass?" McAndrew persisted. "How many Top-Secret places have you strolled into without a pass or doing an identity check?"

Algy's brain raced in neutral. "I see what you mean," he realized. "The jolly old MoD wouldn't tolerate such slackness. There can't be anything startling here."

"We're still waiting for our course," smiled McAndrew. "All we've got here is a whole load of background material we have to absorb and the pre-course preparation material." McAndrew glanced at the remaining filing cabinet, which had been moved to a readily visible point.

Algy's keen brain seized on an unconscious slip and drew the obvious conclusion – that there was something very interesting in the dark green drawers. McAndrew struggled to control a smile as his visitor displayed his thoughts on his long face.

"Well, now, Algy!" McAndrew skimmed through the membership application. "This seems to be all in order. Shall we have a spot of lunch now?"

Sergeant Fairclough shook his head in wonder as he watched Algy Winsloe's sports car disappear along the tree-lined drive. "You can't half dig 'em up, Mac! What a bloody idiot!"

"An idiot he may be, laddie," smiled McAndrew, "but he has his uses. By the end of the afternoon, he'll have told all sorts of friends he's a member of the Bellside. And some of them will tell their Russian controllers it's not our secret training establishment, but we do have a filing cabinet stuffed with interesting material. And in view of our lack of security, they'll send

some dogsbody in to have a look at it. Shall we have a little look at the besieging forces now?"

McAndrew and Fairclough used a golf cart to cruise to the boundary wall. They stopped just beyond the belt of screening trees, about twenty yards from the main gate. McAndrew produced a collection of tubes from the golf cart's locker and assembled them rapidly.

"It's a combination of a telescope and a periscope," he explained, advancing to the stone wall. "There they are, in among those bushes."

Fairclough peered into the eyepiece and made a minute adjustment to the focus. He could just make out the shape of a green car in the leafy tangle. "Logging car numbers in and out," he remarked.

"Looking for Top-Secret people and not finding any," nodded McAndrew. "We'll give them another half an hour, Then we'll get the police to take an interest in them. No sense in making life too easy for them. Come on, let's go and see how our electronic replacement for the dog patrols is coming along."

As they approached the club building again, Fairclough noticed two strangers wandering about on the vast expanse of lawn. As he watched, one of them drove what looked like a tent peg completely into the ground. The other man was studying a device the size of a transistor radio, apparently looking for a likely spot to plant his next peg.

In the communal lounge of the residential suite, a man who looked like a round, jolly corporal of the Catering Corps withdrew from a television set long enough to wave a greeting to McAndrew. Spinner and Birky were watching him from a discreet distance and trying to make sense of the displays on a huge control unit.

"How's it goin', Archie?" called McAndrew.

"Coming along, George, coming along nicely," replied Major Archie McFee of the Ministry of Defence Security & Surveillance Research & Development Establishment, which was based at Coprill Hall, near Chelmsford. "And I'm looking forward to giving this equipment some practical field testing. I was getting bloody fed up of hearing there was nothing more in the budget for testing."

"That's bloody politicians for you," observed McAndrew. "They tell you to make something one minute, then they turn round and tell you we can't afford to try it out."

"But I hear you've got influence these days, George. You know people

who know people.”

“I’m taking a leaf out of the politicians’ book,” smiled McAndrew. “By looking after number one. Where’s Hank?”

“Up on the roof with two more of them, fixing up the aerals,” Birky volunteered.

“There!” said McFee in satisfaction. He screwed a machine screw down onto a wire, completing the final connection to a strip of chocolate block. The interior of the television set sported several new circuit boards and an anonymous grey box. McFee replaced the slotted back and switched the set on. A BBC 2 testcard appeared. The audience was not impressed.

“It could get that before,” muttered Birky.

“Patience, laddie,” said McAndrew, giving Birky a warning look that told him to behave himself.

Major McFee announced that there would be a short pause until his men had completed deploying the aerals. Birky switched to ITV for the mid-week racing, and armed himself with the morning paper for the runners and a telephone for placing bets. Twenty minutes later, the house phone rang. McAndrew told the waiter that the men who had been planting things in the lawns were indeed his guests, and that anything they ordered was to be conveyed without delay to the lounge terrace. “Your lads have finished now, Archie,” McAndrew relayed.

McFee raised a hand in acknowledgement, most of his attention on the horse that Birky had selected as a sound investment. It won comfortably at eight to one. Birky wrote out a cash voucher, which the manager would redeem, and pocketed the Major’s stake. McFee produced a remote controller from his toolkit and touched one of the buttons. An outline of the club, surrounded in green fog, appeared on the screen.

“This is a test setting,” he explained. “Here you can see the security field all round the building. It’s a succession of big, flat, mushroom shapes. If one of the Trantors isn’t working, you’ll see a dark patch on the screen, okay?”

“What about that bit there?” asked Fairclough. He pointed to a section of screen that was noticeably dimmer than its surroundings.

“That’s the centre of the bowling green. The overlap’s a bit weak there but the bowlers wouldn’t let us put a Trantor in there.” McFee touched another button. The club became a solid, blue shape on a black background. “The yellow dots you see are people in the security field. This lot,

for instance, are the bowlers and the spectators. I suppose these four are heading for the golf course.”

Spinner strolled past the snooker table to one of the windows. “He’s right, you know,” he announced.

“That’s just great, Archie,” enthused McAndrew.

The others made noises of agreement, unable to tear their eyes away from the new toy, McFee accepted a refreshing glass of beer and began to convert another television set as a spare. The house phone gave its distinctive ring. McAndrew answered it, he then disappeared off somewhere.

The rest of the group continued to study the activity at the rear of the building while trying to work out what was happening. Eventually, Birky looked out of a window and reported that a delivery van had arrived. An engine started. Yellow dots moved back into the building in a formation suitable for carrying something.

“No signal from the van till it started to move?” observed Fairclough.

“It’s the way the system’s set up,” explained McFee. “It’s ignoring everything that’s not in motion or bigger or smaller than certain sizes. That way, bushes, statues and garden gnomes don’t clutter the screen up. The van was parked and stationary when we switched on. That’s why you didn’t see anything on the screen until it started moving.”

“Can you see something as small as a garden gnome?” asked Birky.

McFee referred him to the control unit. “See this slider marked from one to ten? It’s set on six at the moment. That’s for man-sized and above. But on two . . .” More yellow dots winked into life on the screen. “This group looks like birds picking up crumbs behind the kitchen, and this single trace must be a cat creeping up on them.”

Birky returned to the rear window. “You’re right. It’s Aldrin. Bet you a fiver he doesn’t catch anything.”

He had no takers. The group watched the cat slide closer. Suddenly, the birds sensed danger and took to the air, Aldrin settled down to wash his tabby flanks, waiting for more birds to arrive and another game with them to begin. Soon, McAndrew bounced into the lounge, looking very pleased with himself.

“I’ve got a wee job for Mr. Birky,” he announced, “This way, laddie.”

He led the way past the book and magazine rack, through the anteroom, and into the adjoining office. “Let’s see you open that.” He

pointed to a brand new filing cabinet, which was standing just inside the door.

Birky tested the drawers, then he took a miniature toolkit from a pocket and attacked the lock. After less than thirty seconds' fruitless struggling, he turned his attention elsewhere. He inspected the top, then the sides and he even leaned the filing cabinet against the wall to look at the underside.

Within two minutes of starting work, he put his toolkit away and turned to McAndrew. "Very funny," he said confidently. "It's a dummy. It won't open at the front. You have to unscrew the bottom panel."

"Quite right, laddie," beamed McAndrew. He took a paper-knife shaped like a small bayonet from his desk and chipped a long and distinctive scar in the dark green paint on one of the flanks of the alleged filing cabinet.

"Bloody vandal!" remarked Spinner.

"All part of the master plan," replied McAndrew. "I suspect the man they send to look us over won't be as expert as Mr. Birky. We'll let him mess about with the filing cabinet for a while."

"Then we grab him," interrupted Birky.

"No, laddie," smiled McAndrew. "We're going to let him get away by the skin of his teeth. Maybe with the odd bullet hole in him for good luck."

"If you fill one of their lot full of lead, how's that going to get them off our backs?" demanded Spinner.

"Simple," said McAndrew. "He'll find the window dressing in the desk and he'll report we've got a special filing cabinet. Then we put Phase Two into operation. Well, I can't hang around here chatting all day. I've got a phone call to make."

The others took the hint and returned to the residential suite with Major McFee.

"What's Phase Two?" wondered Archie McFee.

"One of Mac's bloody secrets," groaned Spinner.

McAndrew reappeared. "Couldn't get through. Where's Hank?"

"That's him." Spinner pointed to a yellow dot. "Out putting with a couple of Major McFee's blokes."

"I suppose it was a daft question," McAndrew admitted. "Asking what a golf-mad sod like Hank's doing. I suppose you realize there's going to be more guard duty tonight?"

The others groaned.

"And every night until we get burgled again." McAndrew added, pro-

voking more groans. "So we'd better be bloody sure we know how to work all this lot."

"The important thing is to keep the recorder running and change the tapes every eight hours," remarked McFee. "So our computer has plenty of data to chew at. The rest looks after itself, more or less."

McAndrew and Fairclough followed Major McFee's departing pair of cars along the drive almost to the main gate, then they turned off along the wall to take another look at the lurkers. The car had gone but two Rockers in chain-bedecked leather jackets had propped their bikes behind another clump of bushes with an equally good view of the gate.

McAndrew glanced at his watch. "Their bosses should have heard from Algy's friends by now. I wonder what they'll make of not being able to get any information from the registration numbers of Archie's cars? They're just MoD general issue."

"It might hurry them up a bit," returned Fairclough. "The suspense is killing the rest of us."

They drove back to the club. The manager ambushed them half-way up the stairs to the first floor, waving a letter.

"What's special about this rates demand?" said McAndrew, glancing through the threatening letter. "It looks a bit steep, but I'm sure you're used to writing out cheques that size."

"It's just that Mr. Gorgiou was on rates strike, sir," Bryant explained. "Until the council fill the potholes on the back road. The one our delivery-men use. They say they haven't got the manpower."

"But you know different, right?" frowned McAndrew.

"It's a question of honorary membership for certain officials," said Bryant delicately.

"Perks for the boys or no co-operation?" McAndrew thought for a few moments. "Tell you what, get a private contractor to do the job and pay him out of the rates money. Then send them what's left and copies of the bill and the receipt. Then you can get on the phone and tell certain officials we'll shop them to the local rag for attempted extortion if we hear any more about it. There's probably not enough to get them prosecuted but we can spread a lot of dirt about them, which they won't be able to do anything about because it's all true."

"Yes, sir." Bryant retrieved the letter and hurried away to his business

office and a telephone.

"It takes a big crook to sort out little ones," Fairclough observed.  
Sergeant McAndrew just grinned.

The first night was an anticlimax. Pairs of sentries kept half an eye on a modified television from midnight through to seven o'clock. The Bellside cats, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins, ganged up to chase away a feline intruder at first light, but no human trespassers entered the invisible mushroom rooms of the security field.

On Friday night, which was heavily overcast, yellow dots crept cautiously across the television screen, moving closer between long pauses. McAndrew had let it be known that the dog patrols had been temporary cover arranged during an overhaul of the club's burglar alarm system.

The targets had a tendency to fade out if they remained motionless for more than one minute, but Major McFee's system successfully tracked the two scouts to the front of the building. There, they parted company and circled the building cautiously. They joined forces again at the kitchen door and moved away rapidly down the back road.

The Moon, five days past full, rose at eleven-thirty p.m. on Saturday and shone brightly through wispy clouds all night. Nobody called on the Bellside Country Club during the quiet hours.

Sunday's sky began to fill up with huge masses of slow-moving cloud after a clear and sunny day. Arthur Fairclough spotted the yellow dot as the audible alarm uttered a muffled buzz. Following a spot of torchlight through the darkened lounge, Hank Newton hurried to rouse the others.

Fairclough watched the dot pause in green fuzz, which represented the bushes at the edge of the golf course. Major McFee had returned to make adjustments to the monitoring system and collect the tapes. Cover on the approaches to the club was sketched in green, and man-size contacts no longer faded if they remained motionless for long periods.

"This is it?" murmured McAndrew.

"From the way he's using cover, this bloke knows what he's at," returned Fairclough. "And he's patient. He never moves till the Moon's right behind a cloud. And he moves fast."

The intruder paused in the shelter of the west wing car park. Fairclough retired to his bedroom. A SWAT version of the Heckler and Koch HK-33 assault rifle, fitted with a sound suppressor and a night vision sight, was

lying on the bed. A small gap in his curtains gave him an excellent view of the top of the visitor's head. Fairclough slipped a compact radio transceiver into the pouch on the back of his belt and slipped the headset into place.

"Here he comes," he murmured into the stalk microphone.

The group in the lounge watched the yellow dot move up to the blue fog of the club building.

"Drainpipe job," said Birky, who was watching from the billiards room in the east wing.

A second television in the lounge showed the view from a concealed 'low light' camera in the owner's business office. The microphone picked up a scraping sound, then hoarse, rapid breathing as the intruder slid over the window sill.

"He doesn't sound very fit," Spinner remarked scornfully.

The shadowy figure lowered a back-pack to the carpet, then he ploughed through the drawers of the desk. He found a collection of empty folders which bore a Ministry of Defence emblem and re-order number, notepaper with the *Combined Services Special Statistical Unit's* Westminster address and a box which contained ink pads and a collection of stamps including 'TOP SECRET', 'CONFIDENTIAL' and 'BY HAND'.

The intruder turned his attention to the filing cabinet behind the desk. He took three and a half minutes to overcome the lock.

"Bleedin' amateur," remarked Birky, announcing his return to the lounge.

The man flicked through three drawers containing just membership application forms, club stationery and fairly unexciting administrative paperwork. The top drawer contained a collection of ashtrays and glasses and five thousand pounds in five pound notes. A gloved hand picked up one bundle of one hundred new notes. Crisp edges flicked free of a thumb. With a sigh, the intruder replaced the bundle of notes.

"You poor sod!" laughed McAndrew. "His employers have told him no one's to know he's been here."

A tiny spot of light searched the gloom of the office, looking like a searchlight on the television screen. The intruder had been told to inspect a filing cabinet of interesting papers. He found the other one against the wall, on the left of the door. Moonlight flooded suddenly into the office to give him a better view of the *McAndrew Special*. The intruder set to work

on the lock. Ten minutes later, he was muttering some very rude words.

"Does his mother know he uses language like that?" wondered McAndrew.

"It's not bad English swearing for a Russkie," commented Birky.

"He's no Russkie," scoffed McAndrew. "There's plenty of unpatriotic crooks about to do their dirty work for them."

"Couldn't we give him a bit of a bashing, for being a bloody traitor, and then let him go?" suggested Spinner.

"I think the party's just about over," McAndrew decided, ignoring the suggestion. "Stand by, Art."

"Roger!" Fairclough murmured to his microphone.

The star of the slightly blurry, black and white television program scratched his head. Someone didn't want him looking inside the filing cabinet. He pulled it away from the wall to look at the back, and examined the scratch closely to see if it could offer a clue. Then the telephone emitted a loud click and a light on the extension panel began to flash.

The intruder started to rock the filing cabinet back to its original position against the wall. Light poured under the door. He zipped up his backpack and wriggled into the straps. A key rattled in the lock. Spinner opened the office door and switched on the light as the intruder was sliding down a cast-iron drainpipe. He rushed over to the window as a breeze billowed the curtains inwards.

"On the ground and running like hell," Birky announced from his position in the billiards room.

"That man!" shouted Spinner in his best parade ground voice.

The Moon slipped behind a cloud, allowing the fleeing intruder to merge with the night. Fairclough squeezed off a shot that whacked into the grass at his feet and made the intruder change course abruptly. Fairclough fired twice more. His first shot put a neat hole in the man's trousers at ankle level. The next caught him in the upper left arm and spun him into an involuntary forward roll. Then the intruder reached the shelter of the trees along the drive.

"Well, that was fun," McAndrew remarked to the Bellsiders. "And it should give them one or two things to think about."

In the morning, Sergeant Fairclough put on a pair of mirror sunglasses, which his optician had made to his prescription, and went for a stroll. The

closer he got to the main gate, the stronger became a feeling that he was being watched. His instinct had served him well in Ulster, where ignoring it could have had fatal results.

In the grounds of the Bellside Country Club on a bright Monday morning, he felt no sense of danger but he remained alert just the same. He exchanged a few words with the man who was pointing the stone gatehouse, then he returned to the club along the drive. He found McAndrew in the business office, scanning for bugging devices.

"You reckon he planted something last night?" asked Fairclough. "I thought you were watching him?"

"Can't be too careful," smiled McAndrew.

"They're still watching us. At the front."

"Did your jungle instinct tell you there's two more at the back?" grinned McAndrew. "Shall we take a look at them?"

McAndrew had invested in a young astronomical telescope and a powerful directional microphone. The whole lot had been wheeled into a guest room with a southern exposure on the top floor of the east wing.

"Borrow that off Galileo?" suggested Fairclough.

"What's wrong with it?" demanded McAndrew.

"I suppose that microphone's an Archie Special but couldn't you have got him to lend you a TV camera with a long zoom lens? So we can all look at once?"

"I happen to like telescopes," said McAndrew defensively. "And anyway, I got it cheap."

Concealed by the net curtains on the window, they examined the other side's surveillance team. One of them had climbed a tree to get a view of the club itself, McAndrew switched on the microphone just in time to hear the watcher ask him partner if there was any more coffee going. The watcher must have received an affirmative answer, for he started down the tree.

McAndrew turned a wheel slowly to depress the telescope and keep him in view. The sound of leaves rustling and heavy breathing issued from the small speaker. Then the climber disappeared behind the summer foliage of one of the trees inside the boundary wall. Fortunately, the trees were fairly young and well-spaced. The front of a dark blue car could be seen through a convenient gap. Another man was leaning against a wing, pouring from a vacuum flask.

McAndrew glanced at his watch. "Keep an eye on them, laddie. The Yanks should be here in a few minutes. Got your radio?"

Fairclough took the transceiver from the pouch on the back of his belt. He knew better than to ask 'What Yanks?'

Five minutes later, a plain brown van with large side windows sped down the drive and stopped in front of the club. Two men wearing denims, white tee shirts, mirror sunglasses and dark brown Ranger boots emerged. The smaller said something to his driver, who started to salute, then stopped and assumed a sheepish expression. McAndrew appeared to escort them into the club.

The watcher had climbed back into his tree. Fairclough reported this fact to his leader. A pair of binoculars tracked the scratched filing cabinet out of the first floor office on a two-wheeled trolley, and picked it up again when it emerged through the front door of the club. After helping to load it into the back of the brown van, McAndrew shook hands with Lieutenant Benowski of the United States Air Force.

"That's some very fine malt whisky you've got there, Benny. I hope your general appreciates it," McAndrew said with a smile.

"You can count on that, Mac," Benowski assured him. "And he's going to appreciate the container, too. A great place for stashing his best booze, a filing cabinet with a security lock."

"Hey, start the car. They're moving it," issued from the speaker beside the telescope.

Sergeant Fairclough tracked the watcher down his tree. An engine started at the front of the club. The van moved away up the drive, Sounds of a starter whirring issued from Fairclough's speaker as the watchers prepared to move off.

"Van on the road," reported Hank Newton, who was trimming the road-side grass verge near the main gate. "There's a dark blue car after it," he added a few moments later.

"Our lot are on the move," reported Birky from his post at the rear of the club.

"Mac to all stations," said their leader. "There goes our secret material. We can all relax now."

The Bellsiders continued to take extra security precautions for a further two days, but the siege of the country club had been lifted. On Wednesday

morning, the headlines of the newspapers delivered to the club were screaming variations on the theme 'AIR BASE GUN BATTLE DRAMA'.

Three men had broken into an office at the USAF maintenance depot at Crane Hill, Sussex, during the night. All of the intruders had been killed in a shoot-out with a security patrol. McAndrew put through a call to Lieutenant Benowski. He had to convince the operator at the air base that he was not a member of the Press before he was connected.

"I hear you had a wee bit of excitement last night, Benny," he began, struggling to keep his tone serious.

"The crazy sons of bitches," agreed Benowski. "They picked the office where the General keeps his Scotch. I guess that's why they got wasted. The General was mad enough to rip them to pieces."

"Any casualties on your side?"

"A couple of minor bullet wounds. A guy broke his collar bone diving for cover. And two bottles of Scotch!"

"Well, your general knows where to come for some more," chuckled McAndrew.

## 12. PIPS FOR STRIPES

The weather improved steadily as July became August and the Forestry Commission issued its usual fire hazard warnings. At long last, the Bellside Country Club became the undisputed property of the new owners, who had become five. Leading Seaman Hank Newton was awaiting a posting for special training;. He had acquired a twenty per cent interest in the club, and he was living the unexciting and totally respectable life of a golf professional while he was waiting for his movement orders to arrive.

"Jimmy Dominic is having his place done up," remarked Sergeant McAndrew, revealing some of the contents of a letter which had just been delivered.

"Not before time," Sergeant Fairclough remarked to his newspaper.

"He says," McAndrew continued, "the guys who got their clubs back after we fixed George the Nose had an attack of the gratefuls. They're paying for a complete redecorating job. New fittings, the lot. So he's having a grand reopening."

McAndrew turned to the next page and read on. "At the beginning of next week. We're all invited to a pre-opening party on Saturday, as his guests of honour, We can bring a few friends, too. Anyone fancy going?"

"You bet!" nodded Corporal Spinner.

The house telephone chose that moment to ring. Lance-Corporal Birky extended an arm, then he covered the microphone. "It's the porter. There's a gentleman here to see Mac. From the Ministry of Defence."

"Wheel him into the office downstairs," said McAndrew.

He drained his coffee cup and took the lift to the ground floor. A familiar shape met his eyes.

"Hello, George," said the large figure in the visitor's chair.

"Hector Blackshaw, you old sod! How the hell are you?"

"Stand to attention in the presence of a senior officer, McAndrew,"

Blackshaw told him with a smile.

"Bloody hell! Don't say they've gone and made you a Sergeant-Major at last?" marvelled McAndrew.

"Colonel, actually, old boy." Blackshaw's voice assumed a upper-class drawl that sounded like a Chinese copy of Algy Winsloe's accent.

"Oh, aye?" scoffed McAndrew. "Whatever you've been drinking, I'll have a large one."

Blackshaw produced an identity card and displayed it.

"Well, I'll be buggered!" McAndrew sank into his chair. "It looks almost real."

"That, Major McAndrew, is because it is real."

"What's the game, Hector?" scoffed McAndrew. "Me a Major! Or have we got an operation going?"

"Quite the reverse. One has just finished. And we're starting to reap the benefits of Life-Preserver. Your lads are now Captain Fairclough and Lieutenants Spinner and Birky. All attached to the Combined Services Special Statistical Unit as liaison officers and investigators."

McAndrew stared blankly at a collection of identity cards in plastic wallets which Blackshaw had transferred from his briefcase to the desk.

"This is a bit much to swallow in one go, Hector. We've been a bit out of touch recently. One or two rather pressing problems. I'd better get the others."

"I gathered that from Lieutenant-Commander Smith when I phoned him at Portsmouth," nodded Blackshaw.

The rest of the group had to be convinced that their new status was neither a joke nor temporary advancement as part of an operation. Hank Newton had become a Lieutenant, RN, and a CSSSU advisor on naval matters attached to Major McAndrew's command. McAndrew sent Birky down to the secret vault in the cellar to fetch two of the bottles of vintage champagne to add a note of proper celebration to the mid-morning coffee break. After drinking the health of *Operation Life-Preserver*, the group settled down to hear the rest of Blackshaw's news.

"We achieved our objective approximately two weeks ago," he announced. "As from the twenty-third of last month, we took control of our destinies out of the hands of the politicians. We can't put such a precise date on the end of the second phase, of course. But there has to be an official birthday, if only for the parties next year."

"In effect, we've stripped the CSSSU to the bare bones and rebuilt it to our own specifications. And the navy have done the same with our neighbours, the Combined Services Special Contingency Planning Department, which is even more of a mouthful than ours.

"It all amounts to business as usual, more or less. There will be no more nicking stuff and flogging it down back alleys. But goods will be available at worthwhile discounts. And services not normally available to the general public will become available to those prepared to pay an economic price for them. And both the CSSSU and the CSSCPD will be there to offer information, advice and assistance. And liaison with the RAF when required."

"The future looks almost rosy," beamed McAndrew. "Compared to the black hole we were looking down in January."

"If it all hangs together," commented Birky.

"And we don't hang separately?" chuckled Blackshaw. "I suppose everything is a little new and fragile at the moment. But time's a great creator of natural camouflage. Once we've been doing things our way for a while, our methods will become part of the natural order of things and pass beyond question. Especially if we can give them a flavour of secrecy. Nobody likes to be left out of a conspiracy. And those not in the know will pretend that they are and co-operate with us just to maintain face."

"So you've got yourself a desk in London and you're happy, Hector?" remarked McAndrew.

"And there's one waiting for you when you get too old for leaping about," nodded Blackshaw. "Because we're a growing organization. We've got the new lads at East Saltby coming up to take your place when you join the planners at HQ. As part of a self-sustaining cycle."

"What a terrible prospect," grinned McAndrew. "Cooped up all day with a bunch of old war horses, boasting about the brilliant scores they made in their prime."

"We'll be too busy for that for a long time," Blackshaw assured him. "There's a hell of a lot of work to be done bringing records up to date so that we can ignore items that only exist on paper. We've helped our fair share of stuff to disappear, but a hell of a lot vanished before we ever came on the scene."

"You mean doing the work of the CSSSU for real?" said McAndrew. "For our benefit, of course, not the Government's?"

"Exactly," nodded Blackshaw. "I don't know how many years ago it was, but a couple of mates and I took over the running of an ammunition store. It was reckoned to be a very cushy number. In fact, we had to cough up a couple of hundred cigarettes apiece to get the job. Then we shifted the boxes around occasionally, issued a few rounds when parties went out to the range, and swept the floor every so often, just to make it look like we were busy. The rest of the time we played cards, or read, or just did nothing.

"Anyhow, one day, one of the lads said why not have a look at all this ammo we'd signed for. He told us later some of the boxes he'd shifted had seemed a bit light. And that's when we found them – three half empty and another eleven completely empty. And we'd signed for full boxes! I can tell you, we were in a real panic for about a week. Scared to death of being caught short, as it were. Then we told ourselves nothing happened to the last lot. Why should it happen to us?"

"Sod's Law," remarked Birky.

"Exactly," nodded Blackshaw. "It took us two months to get another posting. But we managed to get another lot of idiots to sign for the ammo without checking it. Fortunately, they were just as eager as we'd been to organize a cushy number, And we got three hundred cigarettes apiece out of them. Which proves inflation is nothing new, I suppose."

"So there's going to be a purge of empty boxes?" said Fairclough. "You'll need a general amnesty if you don't want to trigger a wave of heart attacks."

"But on a confidential basis so that we don't trigger a mad scramble before the inspectors get there," smiled Blackshaw. "And when the inventory is complete, we're going to modernize ruthlessly and completely. Anything sub-standard, or just plain ancient, will be flogged off to anyone who can afford it."

"I bet the politicians claim the credit for boosting the manufacturing industries involved," remarked Lieutenant Newton, studying the photograph in his new identity card as if examining a stranger.

"I don't doubt it," nodded Blackshaw. "Let's hope it keeps their minds off the strange elasticity of the defence budget. In addition, we'll have teams studying various research projects, looking for military potential and spin-offs for civilian markets. Mostly export – it makes more sense to bring new money from wealthy foreigners into the country than scratch for a

bigger share of the British pie.

"But first, we're going to build a nice, soggy buffer between ourselves and the political establishment. They'll be fed whatever information they need to keep them happy, and we'll go our own sweet way. They'll blunder about, as usual, and we'll make some real money."

"You'll be able to afford some gold plated golf clubs, Hank," Birky told Newton.

"I really need something to stop your bloody cats messing about with my balls on the putting green," returned Newton.

Blackshaw glanced at his watch. "I must be getting on. I'm due in Portsmouth shortly. There's a lot of dashing about to be done over the next couple of days."

"Doing anything on Saturday night?" asked McAndrew.

"Resting, probably," smiled Blackshaw.

"Fancy a party? A bloke I know is having a party to celebrate reopening his club after a face lift. Smithy and his lot should be going. And you can bring your wife."

"Funny about that," mused Blackshaw. "Cathy was just saying it's been a while since we went to a good rampage. Yes, you can count us in."

When Blackshaw had gone, McAndrew and his colleagues rang round their recent business partners. Lieutenant-Commander Don Smith reported that Kurt Bronski and Alan Logan had become Lieutenants, and the rest of Ned Kelly's crew were Sub-Lieutenants. Captain Jack Medder now led the group at Buddford and Pilot Officer Tommy Doran, leader of the Milaston group, had become a Squadron Leader overnight.

While the others were wondering whether they could get new uniforms made in two days for the Saturday night party, McAndrew produced a jug of faintly cloudy liquid and five glasses. The liquid cleared magically when he stirred it.

"Something for another toast," he explained. "There'll be plenty of it around on Saturday, so you might as well try it to see if you like it."

His colleagues sipped the colourless liquid cautiously, then poured it down recklessly.

"Hey, that isn't bad!" enthused Birky. "What is it?"

"Cointreau," said Spinner, bringing his expert knowledge and palate to bear. "Gordon's gin? And dry Martini?"

"It's Jimmy Dominic's favourite tippie," nodded McAndrew. "He picked

up the recipe in a pub in Preston, but it's supposed to have been created somewhere near Manchester."

"And what's it called?" Spinner invited.

"An Atom Bomb," grinned McAndrew.

"I'll risk getting blown up." Birky offered his glass for a refill. "This stuff goes down so nice and smooth, it must be like a bomb going off when it catches up with you."

"Well. . .," McAndrew began, assuming a toasting position. Then he noticed that the others had forgotten the reason why he had produced the cocktail. "Ach, tae hell," he muttered. And the father of *Operation Life-Preserver* drank a silent, solo toast to the future.

## **END OF VOLUME ONE**

HENRY T. SMITH

*Author's notes:*

I wrote the first draft of this novel using a fountain pen [a 21st birthday present] and an old exercise book left over from my days as a university student. I bashed out the words for the next and subsequent drafts on my portable typewriter. Eventually, I spent ages typing and correcting a double-spaced manuscript and a synopsis, which was rejected by umpteen publishers before I gave up trying to shift this particular book.

Twenty-odd years later, I put the typescript through a scanner linked to a PC running Windows 95 and an optical character recognition program. Then I scanned a newspaper cutting from my archive of notes to create a picture for the front cover.

After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing in WordPerfect 6.2 for DOS, I completed my page layout and printed what was to be the twenty-fourth volume in the Romiley Literary Circle publishing programme. Which only goes to show that the determined author, who really wants to see his work on a book-shelf in a proper printed form, can't be beaten if he won't give up.

19th February, 1998.

The motivation for this PDF edition came from a *Daily Mail* article on 2005/09/16, which announced that the Ministry of Defence planned to hire out 'troops, military equipment and buildings' to film production companies as a means of raising cash. Given New Labour's tendency to pinch ideas and claim them as their own, I thought I'd better make this series of books available right away on the world-wide web to re-stake my claim!

It's quite surprising to find the books so relevant after a gap of 30 years – a Labour government in office, cutting the armed services to the bone while expanding the civil service with reckless abandon, people-smuggling still big business through even more porous national borders, and now hiring out the military to film companies, as in Volume 2 of the trilogy.

Maybe I should set myself up in business as a fortune-teller.

13th November, 2005.

Further copies of the PDF editions of this trilogy may be obtained from the *Downloads* page of the **Romiley Literary Circle** website, which is hosted by the **Farrago & Farrago** website:

[www.farrago2.co.uk](http://www.farrago2.co.uk)