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Deadly Encounter

It's August 30, 1942. An American freighter plows through the swelling western Atlantic Ocean 250 miles off the South American coast. It is the 4,600-ton *West Lashaway*, a ship of the Barber Line bound for Fall River, Massachusetts, with a port of call at Trinidad.

The *West Lashaway* is on its regular route between West Africa and the United States. Its crew of 47, including nine Navy men under Captain Benjamin Bogden, has been at sea since mid-June, making intermittent stops all along the coast of colonial West Africa.

Fifteen days ago this vessel left Takoradi, Gold Coast (now Ghana), laden with tin, copper, palm oil, liquid rubber (latex), cocoa beans and an assortment of exotic birds and animals crew members hope to sell to American zoos. In addition to this routine cargo, the ship also carries a secret cache of gold known only to the captain and a few select officers.

Now everyone eagerly awaits the first landfall at Port of Spain, Trinidad, just two days away. Until then, the men busy themselves with prescribed duties or lounge in their quarters, sometimes entertaining the five children among the few passengers also on board.

For two of these children—Robert Bell, age 11, and his companion, Richard Shaw, 13—their voyage so far has been a boy's fantasy come true. For more than two weeks they have enjoyed the run of the ship, exploring from the bridge to the engine room, making the acquaintance of the crew, keeping a pact between them not to share the rights of their masculine privileges with the girls—Robert's 13-year-old sister Mary and Richard's younger sisters Georgia, 10 and Carol, 7.

Robert's widowed mother, Ethel Bell, age 49, is a veteran missionary to the Ivory Coast (now Côte d'Ivoire). Richard's parents, Harvey and Vera Shaw, are also experienced missionaries. However, because of the outbreak of World War II in Europe and the Pacific, followed by Germany's occupation of European colonies in Africa, missionaries from hostile nations, such as Mrs. Bell and the Shaws, are no longer safe and must be evacuated to their homes in the United States.

Although these missionaries expect their crossing to be uneventful, they are aware that German U-boats have been attacking both merchant and military shipping in the Atlantic.

Just yesterday, August 29, 1942, the *West Lashaway's* radio operator, known to the crew as Sparks, received a suspicious message so troubling that he asked the first assistant engineer, Joe Greenwell, to double-check its decoding. The message had directed the *West Lashaway* from its course toward Trinidad with orders to proceed to St. Thomas.

"Sounds funny to me," said Greenwell as he took it to the United States Navy intelligence officer on board.

"Sure this is for us, Mr. Greenwell?" the Navy man had asked.

"Seems to be, sir," Greenwell replied. "They knew our radio call letters—W-R-E-A. What does it mean, sir?"

The Navy intelligence officer had paused, squinting once more at the message.

"Looks like Jerry's up to tricks again, trying to lure us off course and right into a pack of U-boats. They've been pretty active all around the Windwards and Leewards."

"So the message is phony?"

"As a three-dollar bill, Mr. Greenwell! This isn't from our Merchant Marine; it's straight from OKM, the German Naval High Command. Show it to Captain Bogden and tell him to ignore it."

But Captain Benjamin Bogden had done more than ignore the fraudulent message. As a precaution that very afternoon, he had required each person to prepare for any possible

emergency by placing all valuables in a ditty bag to be kept on hand in one's quarters. Furthermore, the captain had ordered a new round of lifeboat drills, just in case the boats or the four additional rafts also on board might be needed.

The Shaws, Ethel Bell and the only other adult passenger, a British customs official named Pearson, are enjoying the leisure of the voyage. In these tropical latitudes in late August, deck chairs offer an ideal opportunity to read or to relax and take the sun almost without any thought that nearby are those constant reminders of wartime readiness—a four-inch, 50-mm gun mounted on the poop deck and a detachment of United States Navy personnel to use the weapon if necessary.

On this Sunday morning a worship service conducted by Rev. Shaw and attended by several members of the crew precedes Captain Bogden's sumptuous noonday dinner. After a memorable slice of pumpkin pie, Robert Bell and Richard Shaw ask to be excused from the captain's table.

"Permission granted." The captain smiles. "More coffee, ladies? Mr. Shaw? Mr. Pearson?"

The Shaw's family cabin sleeps only four, so Richard has been assigned to a bunk with the Navy gun crew below deck, making him feel like a man among men. Of course, Robert, who shares a cabin with his mother and sister, is still a boy! Together Richard and Robert hurry be-

low deck to visit with Richard's companions. This afternoon as usual they find the men spending their off-duty hours relaxing with letter writing or card games. The armed guards welcome the boys to join them.

The three girls—Mary Bell, Georgia and Carol Shaw—are also excused to find their afternoon's entertainment—playing with the animals and waiting for the boys to come back from their exclusive visits with the crew. Their mothers, Vera Shaw and Ethel Bell, are lingering over their coffee, while Captain Bogden and Harvey Shaw discuss the voyage.

"The radio room tells me that Jerry's U-boats have been pretty busy recently in these parts," says the captain.

"So I understand from yesterday's little incident," replies Shaw. "But if they've let us come this far, I don't suppose they're much interested in a cargo of cocoa beans."

"Let's hope so," Captain Bogden answers as the men rise and leave the dining room.

Still sipping their coffee, the women's conversation has turned to a topic altogether remote from their comfortable circumstances on this tranquil summer day. They are discussing the suffering and martyrdom of early Christians.

"It seems as though God doesn't call on as many people to endure suffering today as in the past," Ethel Bell muses.

"You're right, I guess," Vera replies, "though

the important thing isn't whether we're called to suffer but whether we're ready and willing to accept whatever God brings into our lives."

The women separate and go to their respective cabins for a Sunday afternoon nap. Ethel removes her dress and hangs it in the wardrobe, then stretches out on her bunk.

At that instant—precisely 2:31 p.m.—the shrieking alarm calling to general quarters pierces the Sunday stillness.

"Torpedo wake, starboard amidships!" screams the seaman on watch. Then, only seconds later, he calls again, "Second torpedo! Oh my God!"

In the placid waters of the tropical Atlantic, on an equally placid Sunday afternoon, an enemy submarine has found its prey.

On the same quiet Sunday afternoon, some 3,000 miles away from the *West Lashaway*, officers and crew of the HMS *Vimy* are enjoying the shore leave at Norfolk, Virginia. Lieutenant Commander de Chair and his V-class destroyer had arrived at the United States Navy Yard a few days earlier after escorting the British battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* from Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa.

Now the *Vimy's* task is to ensure the safe passage of troopships and battleships and their support oil tankers attempting to make it across the Atlantic from Canada and the U.S.A.

In a day or two, Lieutenant Commander de Chair will be heading the *Vimpy* out of Norfolk's great port, down the Hampton Road and into the Atlantic once again, making, this time, for Trinidad and anti-submarine protection for tankers plying those U-boat-infested waters. But today, de Chair and Sublieutenant R.B. Venables and the rest can relax for a few hours longer, enjoy a Virginia Sunday, write a few letters, admire the tidewater scenery and perhaps even put the war out of their minds, if only temporarily.

At the United States Naval Air Station near San Juan, Puerto Rico, Lieutenant Allen Smith, Jr., commands VP-31, a squadron of naval aviators with a mission. These men fly PBVs, the Navy's latest seaplane, in search of submarines and their shipwrecked victims. VP-31 also provides air support for convoys of ships leaving South America for England or the European theater.

Smith's flight crews are on constant alert day and night. The enemy's seemingly unstoppable success in destroying American and other Allied shipping up and down the east coast and through the Caribbean gives VP-31 all the business it can handle.

On this sultry Sunday afternoon, Lieutenant Smith sits in his operations center. In late August the hurricane season will peak upon

Puerto Rico and the rest of the Caribbean, making flying even more risky than it is already. Smith is studying the latest weather maps when his radioman calls to him.

"Looks like Jerry's been at it again, Lieutenant."

"Yeah?" Smith responds wearily. "So what else is new?"

"Another tanker's down. Name is *Sir Huron*. About 6,000 tons," the radioman answers. "Just before 0930 hours."

"Where?"

"Longitude 10° 50' north; latitude 54° even."

"That puts them almost 450 miles due east of Trinidad," Smith calculates. "Have you told Trinidad?"

"Yes, sir. They knew before we did. It happened right in their backyard."

"Yeah, well, it's a big pond out there," Smith says.

"By the way, sir, this is the same sub that took down the *Topa Topa* yesterday."

"What's its identity?" Smith asks.

"U-66, sir. We've got six sinkings credited to U-66 since early July."

"All in this same area?"

"All but one, sir, generally speaking. The first, on July 9, was almost mid-Atlantic."

"Just starting the mission," the commanding officer notes. "On the way over from Lorient, no doubt."

"The rest," the radioman continues, "have all

been from the Windwards south and east.”

“Early July and the Windwards,” Smith muses. “Probably the same U-boat that mined Port Castries last month.”

Rising from his desk, Lieutenant Allen Smith, Jr., points an angry finger at his radioman.

“Get on the horn and tell Trinidad they’d better get that son of a gun before he blows up the whole U.S. Navy.”

The tropical paradise discovered in 1498 by Christopher Columbus and named for the Holy Trinity had been turned into a garrison by the hatred of warring nations.

Trinidad, situated a dozen miles across the Gulf of Paria from the coast of Venezuela, was once dotted by cocoa plantations. Now oil derricks and petroleum refineries dominate the landscape.

Port of Spain is Trinidad’s principal harbor but offshore petroleum loading may be done at Point Fortin and at Pointe-a-Pierre. There the oil tankers stock up with black gold bound for foundries and factories, trucks and tanks throughout the Allied countries. Although located 5,000 miles from Europe’s war-ravaged civilization, Trinidad could not be any closer to the center of Allied efforts at turning back the Axis monster.

Near Port of Spain, the Trinidad Detachment of Patrol Squadron 31, also known as VP-

31, has its headquarters. Lieutenant Donald Gay commands 15 officers and 75 men, flying about a half dozen PBVs. In turn, Lieutenant Gay reports to Lieutenant Allen Smith, Jr., at the Puerto Rico headquarters.

Like their comrades at San Juan, the Trinidad Detachment performs search-and-destroy missions against German submarines preying on the vital oil link between Trinidad and American or British markets. VP-31 also conducts air-sea rescue work, as well as escorting ships within its flight range.

Donald Gay and his men work almost without sleep. At least two PBVs are airborne at all times, using their newly developed technology called "radar." This primitive, still-experimental device permits pilots to detect ships and surfaced submarines at distances up to 12 miles.

Lieutenant Gay has just come on duty with Lieutenant Tom Evert.

"Anything going on out there?" Gay asks.

"Always," one of the officers replies. "This place is like Grand Central Station!"

"You know what I mean—any action? Any subs?"

"Yeah, we got word of a sinking this morning," another answers. "Same place as yesterday."

"What's the location?" inquires the commanding officer as he moves toward a large wall map of the region.

"We already marked it, Lieutenant," says an officer. 10° 50' north, 54° west. Called *Sir*

Huron, I believe.”

Evert goes to look at the map with Gay.

“Say, that’s right next door to the *Topa Topa* yesterday,” Evert notes. “Do you think it’s the same sub?”

“Do chickens lay eggs? You bet your boots it’s *U-66* again.”

“Maybe we’d better find *U-66* and send him a greeting.”

“What do you have in mind, Tom?”

“Oh, something simple like ‘God bless America!’ ”

The navy pilots laugh and Gay and Evert prepare to fly. Just as they leave the hangar for their planes on the tarmac, the Trinidad base radioman calls out to Gay. “Message from San Juan, Lieutenant.”

Gay pauses and turns around.

“Shoot.”

The radioman reads, “‘San Juan VP-31 to Trinidad Detachment. *U-66* active in your zone. Get him or scare him away. Smith.’ ”

Gay nods to acknowledge the message, then says to Evert, “Let’s go get him!”

A perfect Paris afternoon is shimmering toward the sunset. On the boulevard northwest of the Arc de Triomphe and overlooking the Bois de Boulogne, stands a luxury apartment building. Empty of its former tenants, this building is now the headquarters of the Ger-

man Submarine Commander-in-Chief.

There, Vice-Admiral—soon to become Grand Admiral—Karl Dönitz keeps his 24-hour watch over the daily exploits of his prized forces, eating and sleeping where he works. They are his dedicated heroes at sea in submarines, which he knows and understands better than anyone else in the world.

Dönitz loves these men like his own sons. They are young and reckless, wholly committed to the Fatherland, proud to be submariners, proud to be the envy of every red-blooded German. As for Der Führer and his promised Third Reich to last a thousand years, neither Dönitz nor his men care greatly. Hitler and his lackeys are politicians; Dönitz is a German Navy officer; his men are German submariners.

To keep his pride, Dönitz ensures that his men receive the best of everything, from instruction and discipline to shore leave and recreation. He has subordinates, including his own son-in-law, Commander Gunther Hessler, chief of operations. But Karl Dönitz carries the Submarine Service on his own back.

Ignoring the ornate chandeliers of the apartment, Dönitz keeps his operations center dimly lit, wishing to duplicate the gloom of a U-boat's control room. Each map on the wall is dotted by colored pins to represent the current position of every submarine on patrol. Other pins mark the graves of sunken ships. Dönitz knows each U-boat's every move.

Because the bulk of Germany's U-boat action has occurred in the North Atlantic and Caribbean theaters, it is this map at which Karl Dönitz most often stares as if absorbed vicariously in the thrill of each submariner's experience. No one speaks to him while he gazes at his maps, even though he may do so for an hour or more at a time. His underlings wait for Dönitz to summon them.

"What is the name of the new commander of U-66, the man who replaced Zapp?"

"Kapitänleutenant Friedrich Markworth, Herr Admiral."

"Of course! How stupid of me!" Dönitz exclaims. "A very promising young officer. And, I see, making a good start as a U-boat commander—a very good start. I see he has five kills already, the first time out!"

A communications officer approaches and salutes Dönitz.

"With respect, sir, make that seven sinkings for U-66. We have just received confirmation of two more today."

Dönitz celebrates this news with a gleeful laugh. The communications officer steps to the map and adds two more black pins just east of Trinidad.

"This morning the *Sir Huron*," he reads from his notes. "This evening, European time, an American freighter."

"Send U-66 my congratulations," Dönitz orders and walks away from his maps. "Yes, in-

deed, Hessler! A young commander to be reckoned with, this Markworth!"

In the Toronto, Ontario home of the Reverend Alfred Roffe and his wife Mary, the elderly couple has returned with their older daughter Nell from the morning worship services at The Christian and Missionary Alliance Tabernacle on Christie Street. As founder and matron respectively of the Missionary Rest Home—a guest house for transient missionaries on furlough—Alfred and Mary Roffe are also the parents of five children, four of whom are missionaries. Their younger daughter Ethel is on her way home from Africa, bringing with her their grandchildren Mary and Robert.

Over a traditional Sunday dinner, made somewhat skimpy by wartime rationing, Alfred Roffe pauses to give thanks for the food.

"And we also pray, oh Lord, thy special care and blessing upon our daughter Ethel and our grandchildren Mary and Robert as they journey home. Bring them to us in safety, we beseech thee," he prays. "In the name of Jesus Christ, we ask this, Amen."

Mary Roffe raises her bowed head and, smiling at her husband and daughter, says, "Just think, next Sunday Ethel and the children may be sitting at this table with us."

"The Lord willing," her husband adds.