The Interrogator

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Extract

2210 GMT
HMS *Culloden*
16 September 1940
55˚20N, 22˚30W

At nightfall the rhythm of the storm quickened and by the middle of the first watch the sea was surging knee-high across the quarterdeck. Sharp plumes of spray swept along the ship's sides into the darkness astern as she cut the top of one wave and raced to the bottom of the next. Douglas Lindsay – the *Culloden*'s first lieutenant – stepped into the shelter of the gun platform and hoisted himself clear of the tide foaming white towards him. He had made his way through the ship from bridge to quarterdeck and everything was secure, the lifelines rigged and the watch as vigilant as it could be on such a night. It was North Atlantic foul, and yet he was glad of the excuse to be on the upper deck, salt spray stinging his face and hands. On the bridge, the atmosphere was thick with failure, the captain restless and ill tempered.

Bent almost double, he stepped out from beneath the canopy on the port side into the wind. Spray rattled against his oilskins and he reached for a lifeline to steady himself. It whipped from his grasp. At the same moment he heard a noise above the storm that was quite foreign. It was a deep hollow boom like the sound of a heavy door slamming in a cathedral cloister. The ship shuddered and heeled violently, pitching Lindsay forward on to his hands and knees. Thin blue smoke was rising from the starboard side below the funnel, ragged chunks of steel falling through it like a fountain. The wireless mast, the bridge and fo'c'sle were toppling to starboard and above the wail of the Atlantic Lindsay could hear the screech of grinding metal. Someone at his shoulder was moaning, 'Please God no, please.' Then

it was over, over in a terrifying, bewildering instant. The entire forepart of the ship had gone and with it close to two hundred men.

Through the spray and smoke, Lindsay could see the for'ard section drifting away, the dark outline of stem and bow uppermost, the bridge and most of the mess deck beneath the waves. A torpedo had torn the ship in two and men he knew well were struggling below against a dark torrent. He could see them there, a savage kaleidoscope of images, but he could do nothing to help them.

A seaman pushed roughly past, forcing him to look away. The deck trembled beneath his feet as the wreck of the stern pitched awkwardly, tumbling from wave to wave. Then a torch light flashed across his face.

'Thank God, sir . . .' The junior engineer, Jones, sounded close to tears. 'The captain's . . .' but his words were lost to the wind.

Lindsay ordered a headcount beneath the quarterdeck canopy. There were twenty-five seamen – the depth-charge party, the after-gun crew, engineer and stokers shivering in only their oily singlets and trousers.

'They'll miss us, sir,' one of them chattered, 'the other escorts, they'll miss us soon, won't they?.'

'Yes,' he said with as much conviction as he could manage. But their convoy and its escort ships were seven miles to the east and steaming away. The waves were twice the height of an ordinary house, rolling out of the darkness, their crests breaking into straggly white spindrift. The wreck was without power, the wireless and the lifeboats gone. Their best, their only hope was to cling to its heaving deck for as long as they were able. 'My first command,' and he almost laughed out loud.

Lindsay was twenty-four years old – tall, slim, with straw-blond hair, light-blue eyes, a soft voice and the faintest of Scottish accents. Before the war, he had considered a career in the quiet smoke-filled rooms of the Foreign Office. It might have suited him well – he was clever, articulate, close by disposition – but he had joined the volunteer reserve – the gentleman's navy. Many times in the last two years he had reflected ruefully on this choice – diplomats never died in war.

Shoulders hunched, spray driving hard against his face, he staggered as far for'ard with the engineer, Jones, as he dared. A little more than a third of the ship had gone, ripped apart at the break of

the fo'c'sle. The sea was pounding the flat steel bulkhead of Number Two boiler room.

'It won't hold for long,' shouted Jones. As if to prove his point a huge wave thundered against it, forcing them to cower at the foot of the funnel, eyes stinging, salt spiking their throats.

Lindsay tugged at Jones's arm and pointed back along the deck. There was a rumble and seconds later a crack as a star shell burst over the sea to starboard and began to fall slowly back. Half a dozen seamen were gathered about the anti-aircraft gun, their faces turned intently upwards like Baptists at a Sabbath prayer meeting.

Chief Petty Officer Hyde was in command: 'No flares, sir, just twenty star shells.'

Lindsay glanced at his watch and was surprised to see that twenty minutes had passed since the explosion and it was almost half past ten. How long would the boiler room bulkhead hold? An hour, perhaps two, no more than two. 'One shell every six minutes, Chief.'

Hyde's face wrinkled in concentration as he counted: 'Two hours. Yes, sir.'

They made their way down dark companionways and passages, unfamiliar in the torchlight, intensely close, shuddering and bucking. The wreck's movement was sickening below and their mouths dry with fear that the bulkhead would collapse and catch them there.

'There's about three feet of water,' said Jones, his torch flashing about the boiler room. 'We're too late here. We'll have to shore up the engine room.' The atmosphere was thick with hot choking fumes and the sea rang in the boiler room like a temple bell. They stepped back through the watertight door and Lindsay watched as Jones and the stokers struggled in anxious silence to position a timber brace against the bulkhead. Wide-eyed, white, they flickered in and out of the torchlight like figures in an old film.

'It won't last long when the boiler room floods,' shouted Jones, the strain evident in his voice.

'You've done well,' said Lindsay with studied calm. They all needed some reassurance, some hope.

He left the engineer and returned to the quarterdeck where a second work party was trying to hoist depth charges over the side. They were

stacked in racks at the stern, a score or more of them, enough high explosive to scatter the wreck across the Atlantic. Another star shell burst on the starboard side casting a restless splinter of light. Number nine – it was almost eleven o'clock. The stokers were back on the upper deck, shivering uncontrollably, singlets clinging wet beneath their life jackets. None of them would survive longer than half an hour in the water, not at this latitude, even in September. He was on the point of ordering them below to search for clothes when there was a muffled shout from the lookout on the gun platform above. Jones raced up the ladder and was back in an instant: 'Flashing light to starboard, sir, perhaps two miles distance.' He was breathless with hope.

'Very good. Let's fire another then and quick about it,' said Lindsay as calmly as he could.

It was further twenty minutes before they could be sure, but as she pitched and rolled out of the darkness the seamen on the quarterdeck began to cheer. She was the dumpy little corvette HMS *Rosemary* from their escort group; there was no mistaking her open bridge and the sweep of her bow. Her Aldis lamp blinked madly at them.

'Signal from *Rosemary*, sir. She wants to get a line across to us and rig a bosun's chair.'

The wreck shuddered as a wave pounded against its makeshift bow, sending another drenching sheet of spray racing along the sides.

'Let's make sure we're ready to receive it, Chief,' shouted Lindsay.

The *Rosemary* turned to run on a parallel course and was lifted to the crest of a wave until she towered above them, her screws racing clear of the ocean. She was rolling unhappily, struggling to edge close enough to fire a line, the sea an unbridgeable broken white between them, the restless length of a rugby pitch. One pass, a second and then a third, and Lindsay knew it was impossible. Grim faces, sagging shoulders, the seamen about him were of the same mind. And at that moment, as if possessed by a contrary spirit, the wreck pitched forward with a vicious jolt, the sea sweeping along the deck to meet them.

'She's going,' shouted Jones desperately. No one needed to be told. Instead of rising with the next wave the *Culloden* was settling at a sickening angle, the sea boiling about its funnel.

'Signal to *Rosemary*, preparing to abandon ship,' shouted Lindsay. But the *Rosemary* was already hanging scramble nets down her sides.

Everyone was at the quarterdeck rail. To Lindsay's right was one of the stokers, eyes glazed, expression fixed, careless with the cold. It was too late to do anything for him.

'The *Rosemary*'s standing by.' He spoke as if to strangers, empty and distant. 'Stay with the Carley rafts and she will find you. Good luck.' And then, from somewhere, words he never thought he would hear, let alone have to say: 'Abandon ship.'

A few feet below him, the sea was surging white up the side, in constant terrifying motion. 'Go. Go now,' and with a great effort of will he stepped forward. The shock of the cold water left him breathless. He was struggling to keep his head clear, gasping, panicking. Swept to the crest of a wave, he could see the grey side of the corvette two hundred yards away and, close by, a Carley raft with men hanging round its sides. Heart pounding, he struck out towards it and welcoming hands pulled him in and on to a rope. At that moment, the wreck gave a deep groan and as the raft swung about he saw its stern rise from the sea to hang there, its screws glinting darkly.

'Swim, swim.'

They were too close. It would drag them under. There was a frenzy of splashing and the raft raced forward. Then with a blinding yellow-white flash, the sea lifted in a huge dome beneath them. Confused, only half-conscious, Lindsay let go of the raft. His eyes were stinging, his arms heavy as if he were swimming in treacle. The wreck had gone and the sea was on fire, shrouded in choking black smoke. A dark shape floated close by and he reached out to touch it. It half turned, a body, face burnt black, features unrecognisable, and he could taste its sickly smell. Through the smoke he glimpsed another seaman waving frantically. He was lost between waves for a moment but reappeared only feet away. His face was oily black and almost all his hair had gone.

'Where's the *Rosemary*?' Lindsay shouted, but the sailor was too frantic to listen or care. After a few seconds his head slumped forward on to his life vest. Lindsay tried to support him, to keep his mouth and nose clear of the water, but he felt weak and cold to his very core. 'I'm

going to die,' he thought, and was surprised by how little it concerned him. He could see himself drifting on, pushed from wave to wave, held upright in the Atlantic by his life jacket, and he wondered if he had the strength to take it off.

And then someone was pulling at his arm and shouting, 'Give me your fucking hand.' More hands were pulling at him, lifting him up and over the side. And the last thing he remembered was his cheek against cold steel.

PART ONE

MARCH 1941

In the spring our U-boat war will begin at sea,
and they will notice that we have not been sleeping . . .
the year 1941 will be, I am convinced,
the historical year of a great European New Order.

Adolf Hitler Speech at Berlin Sports Hall 1941

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The Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre
The Citadel
London

Mary Henderson woke to a splitting headache, her sheets damp with condensation and every muscle in her body stiff. It was morning but the room was as black as the grave. She lay there listening to the rumble of sleep. The Admiralty had squeezed three bunk beds – six women – into a narrow concrete corridor with no windows and no ventilation. Could it have been worse on a slaver? Mary wondered. Fumbling for her torch, she dived beneath the bedclothes and shone the light on the face of her watch. Seven o'clock. No time for breakfast – a small sacrifice – the canteen cooks boiled and battered the taste from everything they touched.

One of the bunks creaked threateningly. Mary surfaced, grabbed the bag at the bottom of her bed and swung her legs into the darkness. The bolt on the bathroom door slid into place with a satisfying clunk. She turned reluctantly to the mirror. Her sandy-green eyes were red-rimmed and weepy. Two days without sunlight had cast an unhealthy shadow on her white, even skin and her thick black shoulder-length hair fell in unruly curls about her face. Her girlfriends told her that she should make more effort with her appearance; she was pretty and, at twenty-six, too young for sensible shoes and badly cut tweed. Perhaps it was acceptable in the university libraries she used to frequent, but naval officers preferred a little glamour. Mary knew her friends were wrong. A spring frock from the collection at Adèle's might turn a head or two above ground but it would do nothing for her authority in the subterranean world of the Citadel.

Huge, featureless, it was a cruel brown block of concrete just a stone's throw from Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and Downing Street.

The Citadel was a little like a submarine with its squat tower on the Mall and its deck stretching aft to Horse Guards Parade, and rather like a submarine, it was larger below the surface than above. Mary had visited her uncle at the House of Commons the autumn before and he was the first to mention it to her. Hitler's bombers were pounding London by day and night and it had struck her as strange that a small army of workmen was busy throwing up a new building when so many were in need of repair. In the time it had taken to complete, she had abandoned her academic post at an Oxford college to become part of its secret life. Workmen were still crashing about the upper floors and there was the sharp smell of wet concrete in the corridors but the Navy's Operational Intelligence Centre had moved into its new home next to the Admiralty

By the time she felt presentable enough to leave the ladies' room it was almost half past seven. A couple of cross-looking Wrens were shivering in their dressing gowns in the dimly lit corridor. She gave them her sweetest smile. Room 41 was in the bowels of the building, down drab cream stairs and corridors, past the convoy wall-plot, the signals girls in Room 29 and the watch-keepers in 30. At its blue door, she paused to catch her breath, then turned the handle and stepped quickly inside.

'Good morning, Dr Henderson' – it was the duty officer, Lieutenant Freddie Wilmot. He liked to tease her with her academic title. 'Sleep well?'

'No.'

Wilmot frowned and shook his head in mock sympathy: 'Sorry to hear that but then I didn't sleep at all.'

'You'll be off duty in an hour – you'll be able to breathe again.'

Heavy pools of smoke swirled beneath the droplights like winter smog. The atmosphere was always impossibly thick in the Tracking Room. Everyone smoked – everyone but Mary. It had the stale smell of a room that was never empty. With the smoke, the half-light and the clatter of typewriters, at first her head had throbbed continually. But she was used to it now and perversely it helped to induce a strange, exhilarating mental clarity.

Mary Henderson was the first woman to be given a senior role in Naval Intelligence. Her crustier male colleagues had grumbled that

the Submarine Tracking Room was no place for a 'female', an Oxford archaeologist. In her first weeks, they had made her feel as useful as a village bumpkin press-ganged into service on a man-of-war. What with the shrugs and snatched conversations, she had floundered in a sea of acronyms and potent initials: 'Put DDOD (H) on the distribution list'; 'don't forget DNOR and please be sure to ring the SOI. to FOS'. It seemed like a ritual designed to confuse the interloper in the clubhouse. She found it easier to nod and pretend, then secretly search the Citadel's telephone directory for clues. Her head of section, Rodger Winn, caught her with one on her knee, like a naughty schoolgirl with a crib sheet in an examination. But Winn was an outsider too, a clever lawyer with a twisted back and a limp. The Navy would have classified him as 'unfit' in peacetime but now the heavy duty of tracking the enemy's submarines in the Atlantic rested on his awkward shoulders.

Winn took Mary's education upon himself. Calling her into his office, he roughed out the structure of the Naval Intelligence Division on a blackboard. 'At the top, the Director or DNI, that's Admiral Godfrey in Room 39, entrance behind the statue of Captain Cook on the Mall. Under the Director, nineteen sections dealing with everything from the security of our own codes to propaganda and prisoners of war.' For more than an hour, he shuffled back and forth in front of the board, presenting the facts with the austere clarity of a High Court barrister. 'We'll only win the war at sea if we win it here in the Citadel first,' he told her.

The Citadel was the heartbeat of the Division, where threads from fifteen different sources – enemy signals, agents in the field, photographic reconnaissance – were carefully gathered. A thousand ships had been lost in 1940 and with them food, fuel, steel and ore. The country was under siege. The Germans held the coast from Norway to the Pyrenees and were busy establishing new bases for their U-boats. 'They're playing merry hell with our convoys. If we can't stop them, they'll cut our lifeline west to America and the Empire and we'll lose the war.' Winn was not a man to gild the lily.

Mary settled behind her desk and lifted a thick bundle of signals and reports from her in-tray. The first flimsy was from HMS *Wanderer* in the North Atlantic. At 0212 the destroyer had registered

a 'strong contact' with a submerged submarine on her echo detector. Two hours later and fifteen miles to the west, HMS *Vanoc* reported another. Was it the same U-boat on a north-westerly course? Perhaps the enemy was preparing a fresh pack attack on convoys south of Iceland. A timely warning would save ships and lives. Mary's task was to pursue the German U-boat as mercilessly on paper as a destroyer might at sea. It was careful work that called for a trained mind and the memory of an elephant. My sort of work, she thought with the self-conscious pride of a novice.

A few feet from her, Wilmot was dictating the night's 'headlines' to a typist and at the far end of the room, the plotters were clucking around a wall chart of the British coast. Room 41 was long and narrow, bursting with map tables and filing cabinets, too small for the fifteen people who would be weaving up and down it within the hour. It resembled a shabby newspaper office with its rows of plain wooden desks covered in copy paper, black Bakelite phones and typewriters. The main Atlantic plot was laid out on a large table in the centre of the room: a crazy collage of cardboard arrows, pinheads and criss-crossed cotton threads. At times the enemy's U-boats could be tracked with painful certainty – a distress call from a lone merchant ship or a convoy under attack – but at other times the plot was marked with what the section called 'Winn's Guess'.

'Good morning to all. A quiet night I hope?'

Rodger Winn had shuffled through the doorway, peaked cap in one hand, brown leather briefcase in the other. He blinked owlishly at the room for a moment, then began to struggle out of his service coat. The well-tailored uniform beneath was embroidered with the swirling gold sleeve-hoops of a commander in the volunteer reserve. He was in his late thirties, short, stocky, with powerful, restless shoulders, twinkling eyes and a good-humoured smile. Wilmot stepped forward with his clipboard to hover at his elbow: 'Good news, Rodger – Berlin has confirmed the loss of the *U-100*.'

'I heard that on the BBC,' replied Winn brusquely.

Mary bent a little closer to the signals on her desk in an effort to disguise an embarrassingly broad smirk.

'It's the only good news. I was trying to spare you the rest.'

'Don't.'

Wilmot led Winn to the plot and began to take him through the night's business. A tanker and three freighters had been sunk in the North Atlantic and four more ships damaged. 'But here the news is worse.' Wilmot's hand swept south across the table to a cluster of pinheads off the coast of West Africa. 'Homebound convoy from Sierra Leone – SL.68. Six more ships sunk – three of them tankers – that's twelve ships in three days.'

Winn groaned and reached inside his jacket for his cigarettes. He shook one from the packet and lit it with a snap of his lighter: 'Any idea how many U-boats they've sent into African waters?'

'Perhaps three,' said Wilmot with a doubtful shrug of his shoulders. 'A French source in the naval dockyard at Lorient thinks one of them is the *U-112*. The crew was issued with warm-weather clothes.'

Winn half turned from the plot to blink over his glasses at Mary: 'Dr Henderson, what do we have in the index?'

Mary reached up to a small box on top of the battered filing cabinet beside her desk. She flicked through it, found the *112*'s file card and handed it to Winn.

'Kapitän zur See Jürgen Mohr: a very capable commander,' he grunted. 'What's our source – can you check?' He paused to remove a thread of tobacco from his lip. 'The most senior U-boat officer still at sea. The darling of the newsreels. They've credited him with twenty five of our ships – perhaps after last night's attacks, a few more.'

Winn handed Mary the card: 'You'll need to update this.'

He turned back to lean over the plot, resting his weight on his hands. He had suffered from Polio as a boy and found it uncomfortable to stand unsupported for long. The pile of signals and reports on Mary's desk seemed to have mysteriously grown. She would have to work her way through it before the midday conference.

'He's winning, Mary. Winning.'

She looked up in surprise. Winn was gazing intently at a small portrait photograph on the wall above the plot table. It was of a thin, severe-looking man who sat primly upright, hands held tightly in front of him. He was wearing the rings and star of a German admiral and the Ritterkreuz – the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross – hung at his

throat. It was the face of the enemy, their particular enemy, the commander of the German U-boat arm:Karl Dönitz.

'Always a step ahead of us.' Winn drew heavily on the last of his cigarette, then squeezed it into an ashtray at the edge of the plot. 'A step ahead.'

Mary did not speak to Winn again that morning but she was conscious of his presence at the plot. He shuffled out of his office three, perhaps four times, to stand beside it, stroking his cheek thoughtfully, cigarette burning between his fingers. After an unpleasant lunch in the Admiralty canteen, she returned to her desk to find a note from him in her in-tray.

An interrogator from Section 11 visiting tomorrow at 1100. He says he has something for us. Talk to him.

Mary groaned and glanced resentfully at Winn's office but he was out. She pushed the note away. Who was this interrogator and what was so important that he could not send in a report like the rest of his Section?