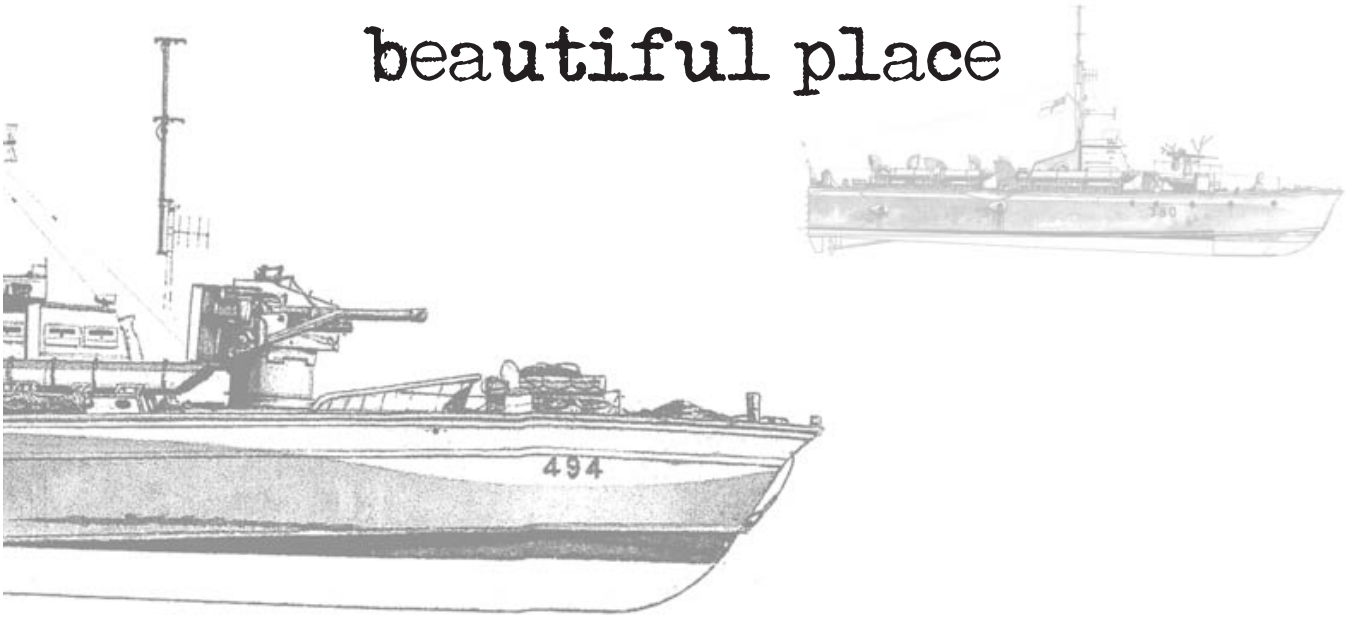
One

This remote and beautiful place



Silently, in the dark, the two canoes slipped away from the parent motor gunboat, as the two hunched figures in each paddled in unison for the distant shore. With well-practised rhythm, their twin-bladed paddles created a regular, synchronised succession of phosphorescent flashes, as they cut in and out of the oily black sea.

"There's the answering signal from the reception party, Number One." Tremayne spoke quietly, little above a whisper, to his First Lieutenant. "Three white flashes, followed by a green one."

The night sky was already just beginning to lighten. The previously invisible outline of the Brittany coast started to take shape as an indistinct, but emerging, darker mass, as the first signs

of the early spring dawn gradually began to appear in the black sky. The relatively calm sea was similarly dark, swelling and subsiding gently like slowly moving, glistening black treacle. Through their binoculars, the eyes of the two anxious young naval officers on the MGB's cramped armoured bridge, strained to follow the phosphorescent wake of the disappearing canoes as they steadily made their way, under cover of darkness, to the dangerous rock-strewn beach some five hundred yards away.

Tremayne suddenly became conscious of their proximity to the shore, as the gentle evening breeze carried the characteristic, yet indistinct, smells of the land mass across his vessel. For a moment, he thought about how often people become aware of the smell of the sea when on the coast and yet so rarely experience the reverse effect on their senses. A quick, instinctive glance at the luminous face of his watch brought him back to their immediate reality and the need to leave the area as quickly as possible.

Within a matter of minutes now, MGB 1315 would start to become visible to any keen-eyed sentry, awake in the German blockhouse at Pen Enez and, all-too-quickly, be a sitting duck for the adjacent battery of 88mm anti-aircraft guns, sited in their adapted role as coastal defence weapons.

The thought of those long, menacing barrels and the devastating impact of their flat trajectory, high-velocity shells on his vulnerable boat, sent a shiver down Tremayne's back as he slowly lowered his binoculars. The mounting tension was evident on the bridge and among those at action stations, on deck, manning the MGB's weapons and compulsively checking their

guns' cocking mechanisms for the umpteenth time.

"Thank God there's no moon, Number One, but it's high time we took our leave. We'll make our move now. If we're seen, it could mean trouble for our recent guests. It wouldn't take a genius to work out why we're standing off, so close inshore." Turning to the other silent, duffel-coated figure beside him on the bridge, Tremayne, in hushed voice, gave the order to return to base.

"Take her home, Cox'n. Gently does it. Run her quietly at first until we've cleared Le Libenter, then lively as she goes, if you please, back to New Grimsby."

"Aye aye, sir. Course set for 0-four nine," Petty Officer Bill Irvine's clipped response, quiet though it was, immediately confirmed his East Belfast origins.

A stocky, strongly built man of forty-one, Bill Irvine had progressed from boy's service to able seaman through the course of the Great War. He had served in Admiral Beatty's *Lion* at Jutland and had been a contemporary of boy Jack Cornwell who, at sixteen years of age, had been awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for gallantry in that costly, but inconclusive engagement against the German High Seas Fleet twenty-five years ago.

As he eased the brass-trimmed wooden wheel round the final five degrees to starboard and the boat's engines throbbed into life, Irvine glanced briefly at Lieutenant Richard Tremayne, RNVR, the youthful, but already battle-experienced skipper of their motor gunboat.

The dimmed glow of the masked light on the chart table emphasised the shadows of the lines of pain etched around his

young captain's eyes and mouth. Though more than a year had passed since that fateful air raid on Plymouth, Irvine knew that the grief and heartache of Tremayne's terrible loss remained with him.

As a regular, who had completed a twenty-two-year engagement and who had then, within months of leaving the service, re-joined the Navy on the outbreak of war, Petty Officer Irvine viewed many RNVR officers with a disregard bordering on derision.

'*Really Never Very Ready*' was how many of the regulars interpreted the initials and Irvine had recently expressed the commonly-shared view, with customary forthrightness, to his fellow long-serving, regular petty officer colleagues:

"Bloody amateurs, most of 'em. Gentlemen playing at being naval officers. And some of 'em don't even qualify as gentlemen these days, so they don't. God help us, one even came straight to the Andrew from being a second-hand car salesman. Wouldn't know a Fairmile from a bloody Ford, so he wouldn't."

This skipper was different, mused Irvine – very different. He was 'pusser' and he was professional. He had quickly established a balance, Irvine felt, between maintaining naval discipline and the automatic expectations of a commanding officer while, at the same time, showing the level of concern and personal interest in his crew so necessary in such a small, close command as an MGB. He both looked and sounded the part but – most important of all, felt Irvine – he acted the part, day-to-day, both on board and ashore. The crew liked him and, above all, they respected him for the competent leader that undoubtedly he was. More understated than obvious, in his approach to the role

of boat captain, Tremayne exuded a quiet, personal authority and aura of capability which created confidence amongst the members of his crew.

In a vessel of that size, there was little personal space and even less privacy. Typically, two or three officers and fourteen petty officers and ratings would be thrown together for hours on end – often in the harshest of conditions – and soaked to the skin. Many MGBs and motor torpedo boats (MTBs) – including the earlier Fairmiles – were notoriously wet boats in rough seas and Tremayne's vessel was no exception.

In action, mutual trust and support were critical, and there was no substitute for total reliability – and no excuse for a lack of it – in a crew where interdependence is vital to survival. Being able to rely on others and depend upon their ability – and readiness – to take the right action, at the right time, could be a matter of life and death, for officers and men alike, in the tight-knit community of a motor gunboat crew.

Richard Tremayne, at twenty-six, was mature beyond his years – despite the engaging boyishness, which only a few had been lucky enough to see, especially during the last thirteen months.

In his two and a half years as a naval officer, since his enlistment in September 1939, Tremayne had already seen active service in several theatres of war. He had served under Captain D, Philip Vian, in *HMS Cossack* during the *Altmark* incident in Sognefiord, Norway; manning a Lewis gun when the gunner was injured in the brief firefight with the German crew. Subsequently, he had seen repeated action, while still a Sub-Lieutenant, on convoy escort duty in the Western Approaches – the U-boats'

sickeningly profitable Atlantic hunting grounds. There he had served as a Junior Gunnery Officer on board the modified Grimsby class anti-submarine corvettes, HM ships *Fleetwood* and her sister-ship *Portree*.

In command of *Portree*'s anti-aircraft guns, Tremayne's leadership, initiative and devotion to duty should, many believed, have earned him a DSC, but through lack of eyewitness verification of his contribution in fighting off two Focke-Wulf Condors, the coveted blue and white ribbon had eluded him on that occasion.

Twice mentioned in despatches, in anti-submarine and anti-aircraft engagements in the Atlantic, Tremayne's professional credentials and personal courage were already established beyond doubt.

In Bill Irvine's eyes, his young skipper's credibility also stemmed from his calm authority in an emergency and his consistent commitment to his word.

"If our skipper says he'll do something, then he'll do it, so he will," announced Irvine one night at dinner in the petty officers' mess. In what is one of the closest clubs in the world, where acceptance is invariably earned the hard way and rarely given freely – to superiors or colleagues alike – that was praise indeed.

Sub-Lieutenant David Willoughby-Brown, Tremayne's Number One, a twenty-two-year-old RNVR officer was, in Petty Officer Irvine's sceptical view, "still wet behind the ears – but there's nothing wrong with him that a gelignite suppository wouldn't cure. Green as grass so he is, but he's right enough and the skipper will soon lick him into shape."

On their first memorable encounter – which had rapidly become part of the petty officers' mess folklore at the flotilla base – the fresh-faced reservist officer introduced himself with proffered hand to the grizzled Coxswain with the words: "Willoughby-Brown. How do you do, PO?" A stranger to reverence, if not protocol, Bill Irvine saluted, gripped the outstretched hand and, parodying the young officer's double-barrelled name, muttered in reply: "Well-I'll-be-buggered," giving his response theatrical timing for full impact before adding, "Petty Officer Irvine, sir – Coxswain."

Ever since that first meeting, Willoughby-Brown had regarded the older man with something approaching undisguised awe and the hushed, guarded respect that the innocent often give to the worldly and supremely confident. He was well aware, too, that the Coxswain took great delight in exaggerating his Shankhill Road accent and vocabulary to a level that was quite incomprehensible to his young English ears. "Quare an' thran" and "great craic" were terms as divorced from the King's English to Willoughby-Brown as would be Lithuanian, or Cantonese.

Willoughby-Brown's family traditions were rooted, over generations, in the Light Cavalry and so the Royal Navy, its people and its customs, were still a source of both amazement and mystery to the very recently commissioned officer – "the young lad" – as Irvine generally referred to him.

Tremayne, however, was quick to sense the potential in his new First Lieutenant and showed Willoughby-Brown both patience and consideration, as he took the younger man under his wing, to develop his experience and confidence as second-

in-command. Willoughby-Brown had the enthusiasm, as well as the inexperience of youth, and he was anxious to learn all he could and keen to be a success as First Lieutenant.

Already, Tremayne had seen in Willoughby-Brown both a ready, perceptive sense of humour and flashes of insight that revealed a degree of acuity, rare among such junior officers.

Willoughby-Brown – or WB as his fellow officers quickly dubbed him – was a language graduate who hailed from Sussex and who had obtained a first class honours degree in French and German at Durham University. He spoke both languages fluently, including several dialects, which was the reason for his secondment to Rear Admiral Hembury's so-called and newly created 'secret flotillas'.

The appointment of an officer of Flag Rank as Director of Coastal Forces Operations was welcomed by those who had been pushing for units capable of making the Strategic Operations Executive's (SOE) plans for clandestine warfare on the Continent of Europe a reality.

Operating under cover out of Tresco in the Isles of Scilly – twenty-five miles west of Land's End – the Admiral had assembled a small, but motley collection of MTBs, MGBs, fast motor launches and various fishing vessels, whose role involved covert operations along the coasts of northern and western France, but especially Brittany.

"Now we need to go on the offensive and begin hitting the enemy hard," he had told officers and ship's company at his first, memorable meeting with them at Tresco:

"Churchill has demanded that we 'set Europe ablaze', so let's

start doing just that. Our small coastal craft and our role are not the stuff of major set-piece battles. We're going to become 'hit-hard-and-run-fast' specialists – and we've got to become bloody good at that. We have a major part to play in undercover warfare on mainland France – particularly around their naval bases along the coast of Brittany. Our role will be to 'out-guile' the Abwehr – who are not to be underestimated. We're now going to take the war to the enemy. Your 'secret channel' will be from here to Brittany, gentlemen."

Hembury was both something of a visionary and an opportunist, ready to exploit any possibility of his flotilla hitting and hurting the enemy in his own backyard. Already he could see – and was preparing plans to develop his ideas – how the role of the Tresco flotilla could be progressively exploited and expanded, as officers and ship's company gained in both competence and confidence, through increasing operational experience and the necessary specialist training in the arts of sabotage and subterfuge.

Earlier passive reconnaissance missions had progressively given way to the active insertion and extraction of agents, at various points along the coast, to support – and give impetus to – both espionage and sabotage against German naval and military installations in Brittany. Already, it was recognised that the endgame was the eventual invasion and re-occupation of Europe and that intelligence gathering in preparation for that longer-term objective was vital.

Hembury's intention was to raise his game with clandestine operations, but he recognised that in doing so, there were likely

to be some very costly lessons to be learned. There were, he knew, no easy routes to gaining the experience and capability critical to success in this form of covert warfare.

Along with carefully vetted and selected officers, ship's company and specialist support personnel picked, variously, for their language skills, intimate knowledge of the Brittany coast and in-shore navigation skills, Admiral Hembury had recruited several French naval personnel, including those fluent in the Breton language.

"I'll get the talent we need for this job anywhere that I can find it," Hembury had declared, as he accepted his appointment from the Director of Naval Intelligence at the Admiralty. "All I ask sir is that, at times, you will be prepared to put the telescope to your blind eye, as it were…"

Gathering both the people – and the vessels – that he needed for increasingly dangerous and sophisticated clandestine operations had forced Hembury to employ levels of subterfuge and skulduggery that would make many a Balkan politician blush – and had certainly given his chief many a sleepless night.

Despite the recent daring and success of the Bruneval and St Nazaire raids, some members of both the War Cabinet and higher echelons of the Admiralty still regarded unconventional units and special service operations with scepticism and suspicion. Added to that were the self-defeating battles and frustrating lack of necessary collaboration between the SOE and British official Secret Intelligence Services – the SIS.

Beyond the direct intervention and personal initiatives of Churchill and Mountbatten, there was still much ignorance and

many bureaucratic blocks to creating – and financing – the mobilised resources and talent for organised clandestine warfare.

As a consequence, Admiral Hembury had been forced to persuade, threaten, cajole and manipulate, as appropriate, in order to assemble his flotillas of small boats and specialists. Much-needed stores, equipment and weaponry were begged, borrowed and stolen to equip the flotillas, using levels of guile – and bare-faced audacity – that even the most hardened victualling and supplies officers had neither experienced before, nor ever imagined were possible.

Similarly, Hembury had short-circuited and circumvented RN drafting procedures to recruit the officers and ratings that he so desperately needed.

In senior naval circles, at Queen Anne's Mansions, he had earned the nicknames "The Artful Dodger" and "The Body Snatcher" – which both made him, privately, very proud. They not only appealed to his own wry sense of humour, but also reflected the measure of success that he had achieved in cutting through unnecessary service bureaucracy and red tape.

Because of their similarity in profile to German E-boats, especially in conditions of poor light, Hembury had concentrated on acquiring as many Fairmile Class C boats as he could – in both MTB and MGB format. It was one of the latter craft, one hundred-and-ten feet long and weighing in at over seventy tons, that Lieutenant Richard Tremayne commanded.

In addition to the three Fairmiles, which were inclined to be top heavy when fully loaded and tended to roll alarmingly in heavy seas, Hembury had also acquired for the Tresco flotilla, two Vosper MTBs and one Camper and Nicholson MGB, as his

most powerful and heavily armed boat. Three Breton fishing boats, brought over by their defecting crews from Concarneau and Roscoff, together with two British Power Boat harbour motor launches, completed the flotilla operating out of New Grimsby harbour on Tresco. Flotillas of similar makeup had been established on the River Helford in Cornwall, at the Royal Naval bases at Plymouth and Dartmouth, and along the Channel and East Anglian coasts round to Lowestoft.

What lent uniqueness to the Tresco flotilla were the relative remoteness of its idyllic location; the absence of a large, major, traditional naval base – apart from a few vestiges of the former Royal Naval Air Service base remaining since the First World War; and the presence of several French naval personnel, familiar with Brittany and the Breton fishing industry.

This departure from Royal Navy traditions was to prove crucial to the success of covert operations, in a theatre of war still dominated by the Luftwaffe and the Kriegsmarine. The flotilla motto '*Labore et ingenio*' was freely translated by officers and ratings alike as *'By brute force and low cunning'*, in recognition of the Machiavellian tactics adopted by Admiral Hembury to equip his Special Forces for their demanding and increasingly perilous role.

Two and a half miles off the jagged north-west coast of Brittany, with L'Aber Wrac'h now well behind them, MGB 1315 increased speed to her maximum twenty-seven knots.

The three Hall-Scott supercharged petrol engines, with their combined thrust of 2,700 horse-power, lifted the MGB's bow clear, exposing the black anti-fouling paint on her lower hull as she surged forward at full throttle. Her course was north-west by

north for the island of Tresco and her anchorage there at Braiden Rock in New Grimsby Sound. Tremayne felt the sudden increase of speed transmitted through the boat's hull and the now vibrating wooden decking beneath his feet on the floor of the bridge.

Built by A. M. Dickie and Sons, of Bangor, North Wales, MGB 1315 possessed a range of five hundred miles, at a constant twelve knots, and carried 1,800 gallons of high octane fuel – 'a potential flaming coffin – so she is', was Irvine's laconic description of her.

Commissioning trials confirmed that she was capable of a maximum speed of twenty-eight knots but, to her 'Chief', Engineer Petty Officer Alastair Duncan, she was a surrogate child on whom he lavished constant loving care, within his central domain of the permanently gleaming engine room with its constant, familiar smell of warm oil and high grade petrol. During a recent refit, to equip her for her new, clandestine role with Naval Special Forces, she had been given dual steering – one wheel in the small, but well laid out wheelhouse, immediately forrard of her bridge, and the other – which Irvine now steered her by – in the armoured upper bridge itself.

Along with the Coxswain, the bridge was now occupied by Tremayne, the First Lieutenant and Leading Seaman 'Brummie' Nicholls. The latter three were each slowly sweeping the gradually emerging horizon with binoculars, on the lookout for marauding E-boats and destroyers, travelling to and from their bases in and around Brest.

Another major danger of the early dawn were predatory Junkers Ju88s patrolling the area, searching for British submarines

and light coastal craft, themselves out on speculative seek-and-kill missions, as they sought vulnerable, unescorted German merchantmen, or slow-moving armed trawlers. Heavily armed and fast, the versatile, powerful Ju88s were a feared hazard, both at sea and on the land.

The course steered for Tresco took MGB 1315 across the Germans' coastal convoy route and there were often rich pickings to be had for fast, well-armed hit-and-run MGBs and MTBs close to the Brittany coast. Closed up at defence stations, the duty watch was on the lookout for both possible prey as well as potential threats – the natural role and lot of the hunter.

As Tremayne warmed his numbed hands in his duffel coat pockets, his fingers found – and held – the small silver photo frame with her photograph. Turning aside from the others, her name – Diana – silently crossed his lips as the desperate feeling of her loss engulfed him, which it so often still did. The picture had been with him every day since the bombers had so suddenly and brutally taken her from him on that terrible night in Plymouth. Tremayne had come to dread the silent, lonely watches in the dark, when his thoughts – and his heart – inevitably turned to her.

He was suddenly jolted out of his very private and painful reverie by a noisy, sing-song, adenoidal Midlands voice: "Gentlemen, a cup of kye, steamin' 'ot and luvly. Not yo', Nicholls, yo' idle bastard – yo' can get yer own bleedin' cocoa."

"Thank you Watkins, that's a real life-saver and very welcome at this time of the morning." Tremayne and the First Lieutenant gratefully took the steaming mugs of hot, glutinous, pussers-issue

drinking chocolate – known throughout the Royal Navy as 'kye'.

As Willoughby-Brown sipped the boiling brew he looked quizzically at Leading Seaman Nicholls. "Don't worry yerself about 'im, sir. Me an' 'im's real oppos. 'Pablo' Watkins an' me was at the Austin at Longbridge together, before we joined the Andrew in '37 an' we've stuck together ever since. Just yo' see, sir, Pablo'll come creeping back up in a couple of shakes, mekking out 'es doin' me a favour, with a mug, all for meself."

Moments later, true to Nicholls' prediction, Able Seaman 'Pablo' Watkins appeared on the bridge. "Ere yer are, yo' idle sod. Your ol' lady would kill me if I didn't give yo' a mug of kye on a night like this," he said, with mock solemnity, as he handed the mug of hot chocolate to a grinning Nicholls. "I didn't ferget yo' neither, PO," added Watkins, passing another mug to the Coxswain of his 'torpedo propellant', as Tremayne called it.

"It would be more than your life's worth, so it would," said Irvine as he reached for the proffered mug, with just the hint of a smile softening his normally craggy face.

" 'Ot breakfasts ready in an hour, sir," Watkins said, addressing Tremayne.

"Thank you, Watkins. We'll all look forward to that. Carry on please."

"Aye aye, sir." With a broad wink at Nicholls, his fellow Brummie, Watkins disappeared below in the direction of the boat's cramped galley, with its precarious paraffin cooker and the limited facilities which never seemed to daunt the redoubtable AB.

"Well Number One. I wonder just what sort of culinary miracle Watkins has in store for us. This night's work has made me ravenous

– I'll be ready for anything Watkins throws at us by then."

"Absolutely, sir. But why ever do they call him 'Pablo'? Do you know, sir?"

"Haven't a clue, Number One – do you know Cox'n?" inquired Tremayne, turning to Irvine.

"Yes sir. When they were in Panama together, on a goodwill visit in '38, Watkins bought himself a Mexican sombrero on a run ashore, so he did, and insisted on wearing it at every opportunity. It was Nicholls there who dubbed him 'Pablo' and the name has stuck ever since. Isn't that right, Brummie?" he said, addressing Nicholls, who was still searching the sea and sky to starboard with his binoculars.

"Right, 'Swain," came the laconic reply, without any interruption of his continuing visual sweep of the horizon.

Any further light-hearted conversation was abruptly cut dead by Irvine's urgent call to Tremayne. "Sir. Aircraft, bearing red five-o. Two of 'em sir – both twin-engine jobs."

Speaking into the voice tubes, Tremayne called "action stations" and pressed the klaxon alarm button. "All guns bring to bear, red five-o. Stand by to fire."

Almost as one, the two-pounder, the twin Vickers and the Oerlikons traversed round to the indicated line of sight.

He quickly swung round to Irvine. "Thank you, Cox'n. Well spotted. Stand by to zigzag, on command. Maintain maximum revolutions."

"Aye aye, sir." Petty Officer Irvine gripped the wheel, straining his eyes to follow the flight of the now rapidly approaching aircraft.

"Stand by, all guns. Gun crews – MARK YOUR TARGET!"

Tremayne's strong, clear command focused everyone's attention on the two planes coming in fast, at around one hundred feet above sea level – the right height to make aerial torpedo attacks and to rake a vessel with devastating close-range cannon fire.

The two planes were now down to just above mast height, their engines shattering the still dawn air and whipping up the surface of the otherwise calm sea. To those on the bridge and the crews manning the guns, the next few nerve-straining seconds felt like an eternity, with everything seemingly happening in unnatural, agonising slow motion. Tense fingers nervously curled around triggers and thumbs hovered in urgent anticipation over firing buttons as gun muzzles were zeroed-in on the two menacing, fast approaching aircraft...

"Hold your fire. ALL GUNS – HOLD YOUR FIRE – they're ours." Tremayne's urgent order cut through the tension like a knife, as the two dark Beaufighters roared low overhead, waggling their wings in a salute of recognition.

"Good luck lads," muttered Irvine, as he stared over his shoulder at the disappearing aircraft.

"They must be looking for early morning prey, Number One. With that concentration of weaponry up forrard, they'll make a mess of most things smaller than a cruiser," said Tremayne, following their departure through his binoculars.

MGB 1315 continued her course for home, with the shivering gun crews and watchkeepers maintaining action stations in the cold, damp dawn, as the freezing spray of her bow wave cascaded over her deck. Chances were that their next visitors might not be Beaufighters.

"Number One, make sure everyone has kye, with a tot of rum – make it 'neaters' please," called Tremayne, seeing the forrard two-pounder gun-captain blowing into his freezing hands, while his colleague, the gun-layer, repeatedly jumped up and down to fight off the light, but bitter early morning wind that penetrated the thickest jersey and duffel coat.

"Aye aye, sir," replied Willoughby-Brown, as he moved to leave the bridge to initiate the distribution of that potent, but cheering concoction, for the shivering watchkeepers.

His return to the bridge some ten minutes later, was greeted by a plaintive, catarrhal wail, which rose from the boat's tiny galley:

"There is no snow in Snowhill,

Way down in Summer Lane

But when it's winter time in the Argentine,

It's summer in Summer L—a—n—e."

'Pablo' Watkins was in nostalgic mood, obviously homesick and singing about his beloved Brummagem as he prepared the watchkeepers' breakfasts.

"Should have been drowned at birth, so he should," muttered Irvine to no one in particular, his eyes fixed on the emerging horizon dividing sea and sky into two featureless shades of grey.

At which point Tremayne, pre-empting the start of any more verses of the mournful dirge, called down to the galley: "Watkins – any sign of that breakfast you've been threatening us with?"

"Aye, aye sir. It'll be with yo' in two shakes – brown sauce an' all, sir."

Tremayne smiled broadly as Willoughby-Brown winced, one

refined eyebrow raised in horror, at the mention of brown sauce. True to his word, Able Seaman Watkins duly appeared with a tray loaded with bacon, fried eggs, sausages, fried bread and beans – and mugs of hot fresh coffee, laced with pusser's rum.

"Watkins, you're a genius," said Tremayne. "Even the First Lieutenant will forgive your dreadful singing for a breakfast like that."

"Thank you sir, an' there's more brown sauce, should anyone want some!" he added, with a wink to Nicholls.

"Savoy Grill – eat your heart out," enthused Willoughby-Brown, as he speared one of the rapidly vanishing sausages.

"Here 'Swain, Nicholls, tuck in," called Tremayne, "before the First Lieutenant eats us out of house and home."

The atmosphere on the bridge and among duty gun crews was transformed by Watkins' breakfast which was, as Tremayne said, "a bloody gastronomic miracle."

Even the dour Coxswain was moved to exclaim that Watkins' culinary efforts were the closest he'd been to a genuine "Ulster fry" since he'd left Belfast.

About ninety minutes later, with MGB 1315 still at maximum revolutions, crashing through the 'white horses', Irvine called out: "Isles of Scilly dead ahead, sir, so they are. St Mary's to starboard and St Agnes and Annet islands to port."

"Right, Number One," called Tremayne, "duty watch to stand down from action stations and resume defence stations."

As they drew nearer, the sinister Western Rocks – which had seen many a ship founder on their terrible, jagged teeth over the centuries – gradually took eerie shape in the early morning light.

Tremayne began to identify them for the young First Lieutenant. "That's Melledgan, Number One, and then, further to port, you can see Gorregan, Daisy and Rosevean. Another mile further out, you can see Bishop Rock and the Crebinicks. Get to know them well. They are as dangerous as hell, but your life may depend upon your ability to play hide-and-seek with our friends, the E-boats, among these rocks, if they decide to try their hit-and-run tactics over this way."

Willoughby-Brown nodded silently, impressed by the mysterious, awesome-looking rocks, as is everyone who sees them for the first time.

"As far as we know, the Germans are completely unaware of our flotilla and its activities. But, if they ever do get wind of our clandestine operations, they'll come searching, in force, with aircraft, U-boats and most certainly fast, well-armed surface-craft. Some of these small off-islands and rocks are full of useful nooks and crannies to skulk in," said Tremayne, as he continued to name them for Willoughby-Brown.

"Thank you sir, I'd welcome the chance to spend time with the new crew when they start training in earnest and find my way round all these islands. I gather there are over a hundred of them, including the large rocks. It'll be quite a challenge, sir."

"So be it, Number One. We're all so new but, after three months here as a founder member of Admiral Hembury's flotilla, I'm considered an old hand. Last night's insertion of the four agents by canoe into Brittany was, in fact, my first real operation with Coastal Special Forces." Tremayne paused to check his bearings, as MGB 1315 began to clear the remaining Western Rocks, heading

north, passing close to St Agnes and Gugh.

"We all have a hell of a lot to learn, and this is certainly no job for amateurs and untrained enthusiasts – too much is at stake. Speak with Jock Donaldson, Number One. He's the regular RN lieutenant responsible for all training activities within the flotilla. We shall, in any case, be undergoing training as a complete crew, to prepare us for the next series of big operations."

Within a short time, the MGB entered St Mary's Sound, passing under the forbidding presence of Star Castle, the impressive looking Elizabethan stone fortress atop Garrison Hill on the western edge of St Mary's island.

Then, at reduced revolutions, carefully negotiating the shallow, remarkably clear emerald waters between, first, Samson and Tresco, then the island of Bryher and New Grimsby, they finally arrived off Braiden Rock, their anchorage in New Grimsby Sound, at 09.50 hours.

With hands mustered on deck, fore and aft, for entering harbour routine, MGB 1315 looked trim and purposeful and drew admiring looks from the shore as, under Irvine's experienced hands, she glided towards her mooring.

After three months at Tresco, Tremayne had formed a deep affection for what he called "this remote and beautiful place". As they dropped anchor, he looked at what had now become something of a familiar, homecoming sight in New Grimsby Sound – the reassuring, solid stone structure known as Cromwell's Castle, dating from the mid-seventeenth century, that silent, grey guardian of the channel between Tresco and her smaller island neighbour, Bryher. His greatest sadness was that Diana had not

lived to see him posted to this incomparably beautiful island, and that he was unable to share its ever-changing colours and moods with her.

In the little time that he had between routine patrol work, operational conferences, planning meetings and training in the highly specialised arts of clandestine warfare, Tremayne regularly walked the islands of Tresco, Bryher and nearby St Martin's and St Agnes, alone with his thoughts and his at times overwhelming, but always private, grief.

Each island was unique, with its own very special, distinctive beauty and scent-laden atmosphere, and he longed to tell Diana just how lovely they each were and how much their compelling charm was beginning to mean to him.

Almost invariably when walking the islands, Tremayne was accompanied by Bertie, his two-year-old black Labrador. Far greater on mettle and character than pure pedigree, Bertie had already proved to be a devoted and caring companion for one so young. He quickly sensed – and responded to – the changes in Tremayne's moods as, periodically, the finality of his loss swept over him as they walked together. Bertie would often briefly nuzzle Tremayne's hand and, as his master turned to him, look intently at him with his honest, gentle brown eyes showing mute concern beyond his tender years. The subtle bonds that can develop in the relationship between human beings and their dogs were proving to be a blessing to Tremayne, particularly the unconditional affection and sensitive, supportive companionship that only a dog, or a saint, are capable of giving.

Walking along the magnificent empty beaches, or tramping

over the heather and ling- covered hills, he would try to relieve the desperate pain of his wife's death by having imaginary conversations with her, until he returned to the officers' mess at HMS Godolphin, the flotilla's HQ and operations base.

Situated about half a mile from the Braiden Rock anchorage, HMS Godolphin occupied the site of a former anti-submarine seaplane base of the Royal Naval Air Service in the First World War, and telltale remains of the previous occupants and their equipment were a silent reminder of Tresco's role in that other war, which was supposed to end all wars.

It was located quite close to the ancient ruins of Tresco Abbey and the adjacent magnificent tropical gardens, overlooking the southern end of Bryher and the uninhabited island of Samson, with its characteristic twin humps of North Hill and South Hill. Surrounded by such dramatic and captivating scenery, it was sometimes difficult to imagine that there was a war on and that he was part of it. Stationed at Devonport or Portsmouth, Tremayne reflected, meant that the Navy and, therefore the war, were ever present and impossible to escape from. Here, in Tresco, away from the base, there was a sense of tranquillity and timelessness that provided regular, if temporary, respite from duty and the ever present threat of attack, when out on the open sea or close to the enemy coast.

Under Tremayne's supervision and the Coxswain's experienced hands, MGB 1315 secured and made fast alongside the big, rakish Camper and Nicholson MGB 1501. Leaning nonchalantly against the forrard six-pounder, her skipper, Hermann Fischer, a tall, blond, young South African RNVR

lieutenant, called out to Tremayne: "Hello there, Richard. How's that poor man's E-boat of yours? When *are* you transferring to the Kriegsmarine?"

Richard Tremayne grinned back at Fischer. "With a name like yours, you should be the prime candidate for the next Korvettenkapitän's vacancy! Anyway, *we* can play the furtive lurker to perfection, with our deceptive profile and Number One's impeccable colloquial Plattdeutsch! Remember our motto, Hermann – we're the 'low cunning bit', so we'll leave the 'brute force' to you and that amphibious removal van of yours!"

The banter ended in loud laughter, as Tremayne went below with his First Lieutenant to conduct captain's rounds, before all but the two duty watchkeepers went ashore for a second breakfast, some much-needed sleep and then the daily routines so typical of the highly regulated life of a Royal Navy 'stone frigate' such as HMS Godolphin.

Tremayne looked around at the cosmopolitan flotilla of coastal boats and small craft anchored off Braiden Rock as he scrambled ashore onto the rocky, makeshift jetty.

Apart from the two MGBs, a Fairmile Type C motor torpedo boat lay off Hangman's Island, at low tide a promontory jutting out from Bryher across the Sound from Braiden Rock. Close to her, riding at anchor, were three fishing vessels – known to the island's local population as the 'mystery boats'. Intended for undercover work in broad daylight, these boats were being transformed from regulation RN grey vessels to bright and garishly painted fishing boats, in colours so beloved of the Breton fishermen.

About a dozen seamen were busy applying blue, brown and

white paint to the hulls and upper works, under the critical eyes of two Breton RNVR officers. Mixed in with the vivid colours were iron filings from Godolphin's workshops. A clever but necessary addition to the paint, these created a worn, distressed finish which produced an appropriately weathered appearance to the fishing boats.

In such a guise and skippered by French naval officers, or with similarly Breton-speaking Frenchmen as first lieutenant, these vessels were being prepared for clandestine insertion and extraction assignments, to transport intelligence agents back and forth between Tresco and Brittany.

All the French officers had been given RNVR commissions, together with British naval uniforms – complete with appropriate VR rank insignia. All, too, had been given the option of British identities to provide them, and their families in France, with some protection – albeit limited – in case of capture and subsequent interrogation. If caught, their fate would most certainly be brutal torture followed by execution by firing squad, were they to be identified as Frenchmen serving in covert British operations in their native country.

Able to take their place among the fishing fleets off the coast of Brittany, it was intended that these boats should escape all but close inspection. Modifications to their hulls and engines meant that they could sail at top speed from Braiden Rock, leaving at around 01.00 hours and seemingly drift into and mingle with the fishing fleets coming out of the many coastal ports of Brittany in the early morning.

Outside the traditional Breton fishing areas – or, when alone

and free from observation, within them – these vessels could open their throttles and make around thirty knots or more with their cleverly re-engineered underwater hulls and up-rated engines.

On sea-trials, one RNVR officer had almost given the game away, inadvertently, when he had taken on the challenge of a destroyer, coming out of St Mary's harbour, and eventually outpaced her when she was making thirty-one knots. Needless to say, the reprimand he received from the consequent Admiralty Board of Inquiry was monumental, memorable – and painful, in the extreme, for him.

Names and pennant numbers of Breton ports of origin painted on the hulls, along with the regulation tricolour currently demanded by German naval authorities of the OKM – the Oberkommando der Marine – meant that they were able to sail very close to, or even directly into, the drop-off and pick-up points to be used for various agents. The Bretons amongst the French naval officers at HMS Godolphin maintained close links with agents in Brittany who kept them informed of changing recognition codes and signals that the Germans forced the fishermen to use to confirm their identity.

With summer coming and less hours of darkness, it was felt that the MGBs and MTBs would have a decreasing role in covert operations and so would hand over, progressively, to the heavily adapted, but generally very lightly armed fishing boats.

Specialist Wren officers and French nationals from "Y" Service, were providing "crash" immersion courses in French and Breton for officers and ratings alike. Because of the similarities between Welsh and the Breton language, a proportion of Welsh-

speakers had been recruited amongst the ratings and petty officers.

They had already become adept at remembering the names of key locations along the coasts of Britanny and could pronounce them with sufficient Celtic lilt and confidence to fool any German and most French people – other than Bretons.

Led to believe that they were making Breton-style fisherman's clothes as spare dry clothing for sailors rescued from torpedoed vessels in the Channel, one small clothing company in Cornwall was busy producing smocks and trousers, in blue canvas, for Admiral Hembury's deliberately, but cheerfully vague Supplies and Victualling Officer. Once in Godolphin's victualling stores, the new sets of clothing were repeatedly washed and scrubbed to give them a suitably well-used appearance.

Following the rocky, narrow and heather-bounded coastal path from Braiden Rock, Tremayne and Willoughby-Brown made their way together to New Grimsby harbour and then on to Godolphin for debriefing of their night's activities off Pen Enez and their disembarkation of the four French agents.

"The Senior Naval Intelligence Officer here is Lieutenant Commander John Enever – he'll most likely conduct the debriefing," said Tremayne. "He's a charming chap who genuinely qualifies for the description – 'a gentleman'. You'll like him, I'm certain, Number One," added Tremayne, as they passed the saluting Royal Marine sentry on their way into the naval base and to hut 101, the debriefing centre.

Deliberately, Admiral Hembury and Captain Mansell, the officer commanding HMS Godolphin, had insisted on a universally low-key approach, to preserve the carefully fostered

anonymity of the Tresco base. Outwardly, Godolphin appeared as a small unit consisting of old, ramshackle buildings, ostensibly there to provide a base for local defence and coastal patrols.

Accordingly, numbers identified buildings and deceptively innocuous notices belied their true function.

John Enever's debriefing centre, hut 101, which doubled as an intended interrogation centre, was labelled 'Victualling Stores'. All other signs gave the impression, to the outside world, of a small, but conventional and local temporary naval base, hastily constructed and put together for the duration of the war.

"As you're about to discover, Number One, Lieutenant Commander Enever is no 'Jack Dusty'. In fact, he's much more like a university professor," said Tremayne as they entered the anteroom of the corrugated iron Nissen hut.

"Good morning, gentlemen – please seize a pew," beamed Enever, in response to the salutes from Tremayne and his First Lieutenant. As Tremayne had predicted to WB, the Senior Naval Intelligence Officer had an empty and unlit pipe clenched firmly between his teeth.

Tremayne's overriding impression of the interior of hut 101 was that it was more reminiscent of a university lecturers' common room, than a centre set aside for activities which included some of the less attractive aspects of intelligence work – particularly interrogation. Even Enever's SOE warning notice, an alternative to the more usual *"Careless talk costs lives"* and *"Be like Dad – keep Mum"*, had a deceptively non-threatening, incongruous, almost 'classical' flavour: *"Silence is of the Gods... only monkeys chatter"*. Enever's apparently benign – rather academic – style added to the seemingly

harmless and innocuous ambience of the centre. This no doubt deliberate stratagem was to pay off handsomely, as it soon transpired, in both the selection of people for intelligence roles – especially as agents – and in the uncovering of dangerous double agents.

Despite his own pivotal role and his high referential power-base, not only at Tresco but also within British Naval Intelligence and the wider arena of SOE and SIS, Enever tended to be informal to the point of egalitarianism. He seemingly abandoned rank – or mention of it – whenever he could, with the result that many people easily took him into their confidence and told him things that an autocratic, more status-conscious officer would never hear about.

"Jenny, please rustle up a couple of mugs of your magnificent tea for these gentlemen – they've had a busy and tiring night," said Enever to the young communications branch Wren, who appeared in response to the 'buzzer' on his ancient, leather-topped walnut desk.

"Please also bring some tea for Second Officer Fraser and Sub-Lieutenant Tabarly, Jenny. They'll be joining us for the debriefing," Enever added, turning to Tremayne.

"Emma Fraser is on Admiral Hembury's staff as an Intelligence Officer and is one of my immediate colleagues. Daniel Tabarly is from Brittany. He slipped out of Roscoff one evening in a local fishing boat – one of those you may have seen being repainted – and made his way over here some six months ago," said Enever. "You'll find them both very committed to what we're doing here and easy to work with," he added.

"Come in," called Enever, in response to the knock on his

door, as Tremayne and his First Lieutenant rose to greet the very attractive chestnut-haired Wren officer and her shy-looking, serious young Breton colleague.

"Richard, WB, let me introduce Emma Fraser and Daniel Tabarly." Enever smiled, taking the unlit pipe from his mouth, and waved his gathering visitors towards the assortment of vacant chairs around a large mahogany boardroom table which – like the walnut George II desk – was "rescued" anonymously in one of Admiral Hembury's many "seek and filch" operations.

"Emma and Daniel are both absolutely vital to our work at Tresco, and I'm delighted to have them on board," he said, smiling benignly at the two young officers.

"Richard here is one of our "star" Coastal Forces officers with a great deal of experience gained in the Atlantic, hunting U-boats and fighting off the Luftwaffe, while WB is an outstanding linguist – not only fluent in French and German but also, so I hear, a master of several dialects in both languages."

Having graciously introduced people to one another, Enever turned to Tremayne:

"Right, Richard, take us through the events of last night as they relate to the four agents that you dropped off Pen Enez. We need your first-hand account of the operation, up to the point where you left them in order to return to Tresco."

Tremayne, taking in each person sitting round the table, recounted, in detail, how the four – all Frenchmen – had assembled and checked their weapons and their radios, intently studied their maps, and spent most of their time on board the MGB huddled in conversation together.

"From their conversation, sir, that I overheard, they spoke a good deal about routines and agreed procedures. They also talked about the people they were going to meet, and mentioned the names 'Jean-François', 'Muguette' and 'Louis'. Beyond this, I didn't really hear much more of their discussion, sir." Enever removed his empty pipe, placing it in the large ceramic ashtray in front of him, as he listened attentively to Tremayne.

"Just after embarking in the two canvas folboats, they signalled the shore and received the expected reply within seconds – three white flashes, followed by one green one."

Second Officer Fraser's steady, intelligent blue eyes studied Tremayne's face and controlled gestures, as he reviewed the agents' preparation and disembarkation.

"We were in place, to get them to their RV, with about five minutes to spare and we followed them through our binoculars, tracking the phosphorescence of their paddles and canoe stern-wakes towards the shoreline as far as we could," continued Tremayne.

"Were you able to see them make actual contact with the reception party?" asked Emma Fraser.

"No, that was impossible because of the darkness, and the shore was about five hundred yards away. Why do you ask?" queried Tremayne.

Lieutenant Commander Enever, looking uncharacteristically serious, cut in: "Because Richard, we have received no message from them since, and they have not replied to our attempted radio contacts at 06.00, 07.00 and, again, at 08.00 hours this morning. Sub-Lieutenant Tabarly, who worked with them on the setting-

up of their mission and who knows their contacts personally, is convinced that the operation has been "blown." Daniel, over to you, please," added Enever, looking earnestly at the young Breton, who wore the single wavy gold stripe of a RNVR Sub-Lieutenant on his uniform sleeve.

"Thank you, sir. Gentlemen, can you remember how long after the three white flashes, before you saw the green one?" asked Tabarly, turning to Richard Tremayne and his First Lieutenant.

"Hmm, good question, I would have said a consistent gap of about one second, between each of all four flashes," replied Tremayne, looking towards Willoughby-Brown for confirmation. Emma Fraser suddenly gave an anxious look towards Enever at Tremayne's response.

"Number One, what do you recall of the signal we saw on shore?"

"I agree, sir," said Willoughby-Brown. "All four appeared in pretty rapid succession."

"Aha", muttered Tarbarly. "But you see, there should be a delay of five seconds after the three white flashes, before they show the green light. The green one means 'all is OK, come on', and we use a red one if everything is not OK."

"Someone's slipped up somewhere sir," said Tremayne to Enever. "We were simply given the colour code and sequence, but no mention whatsoever of a time lag before the green light. What is more, as I recall events, the canoeists didn't appear to query the response from shore either and responded immediately."

Willoughby-Brown nodded, affirming Tremayne's reply. Again, Enever and Emma Fraser exchanged anxious glances.

"You *could* be right, Richard – someone *may* have forgotten to communicate the correct signal to all of us – me included," responded Enever. "We only learned of the intended delay between the last white flash and the green one through Daniel's radio contact with another agent today." Enever looked very concerned as he added, "But, equally, it could have been a deliberate omission and that's something Daniel, Emma and I need to pursue as a matter of urgency."

"Daniel made contact at 08.15hours today by radio with Jean-François, one of our principal agents of the Confrèrie de Saint Michel, which is the most important and effective Free French intelligence network in Brittany. The result was negative.

The four we dropped were due to contact Jean-François within thirty minutes of landing. Just before this meeting, Daniel again contacted Jean-François who, almost six hours later, had still heard nothing from the four," confirmed Enever.

"Presumably, you heard nothing unusual on shore – shouting or gunfire, for example – before you left the area and started back?" asked Emma, turning to Richard Tremayne.

"No. Nothing at all. It was completely quiet. We were closed up at action stations and obviously maintaining strict silence and would have heard any significant noise at that time of night, especially since it would have been carried over water to us. We would not have heard normal conversation at five hundred yards but shots, or shouting, we would most certainly have been aware of. The sea was calm and the night was quite still, with only the gentlest breeze. As we left the area," added Tremayne, "we kept watch on the shore, both from the bridge and from the after

Oerlikon position, in case Jerry woke up. We still neither heard, nor saw, anything untoward."

"We must find out what has happened, as quickly as possible," said Enever, "and establish just how far the Confrèrie – and our role in supporting it – may have been compromised. Daniel will maintain contact with Jean-François and Muguette, an agent who has infiltrated the OKM HQ in Brest," added Enever.

"You're our most experienced small boat skipper," said Enever, addressing Tremayne. "What we find out from our contacts will determine what action we take next, so it looks, Richard, as if you and your crew will need to go back to L'Aber Wrac'h within the next twenty-four hours. We must get Daniel ashore there – and extract him," said Enever, amid laughter, "once he's met with Muguette and Jean-François and obtained an up-to-date picture."

Turning to Tremayne and Willoughby-Brown, Enever added, "Richard, WB – you must be exhausted. Get some much-needed shut-eye, but stand by for a probable briefing at 21.00 hours."

Emma smiled as they left: "It was good to meet you both. I look forward to working with you again."

Following Lieutenant Commander Enever's debriefing, Tremayne returned to his quarters and quickly fell into a deep sleep. Confusing, seemingly inexplicable dreams began to disturb and disrupt the welcome peace that sleep should normally bring. At one point, Diana emerged, smiling, with outstretched arms, as she beckoned him to go to her. Then, as he eagerly approached her, in response to her laughing eyes, her image faded before him and vanished, just as quickly as she had appeared.

Anguish and panic at her disappearance caused him to call

out, sharply, in his troubled sleep, and he awoke to find an anxious Bertie, with a paw on each of his shoulders, licking his face and squeaking with obvious relief and pleasure, as Tremayne woke up and reached up to pat his dog's neck and ruffle his fur.

"Sorry old fellow – just a bad dream," murmured Tremayne, as he struggled to put the nightmare behind him and come to terms with reality and the need for the daily acknowledgement, yet again, of Diana's untimely death.

"Time for supper, Bertie: let's see what we've got in the locker for you tonight." Tremayne knew that both sanity and his salvation, as a person with a future, lay very much in his ability to involve himself with routines and activities of the moment, however mundane. He was coming to recognise the therapy of routine and the life saving value of regular immersion in simple details and regular procedures. They were fast becoming his link to daily sanity.

"Take each day as it comes, Richard. Concentrate on the detail of those things that have to be done, hour by hour," *Portree*'s navigator, Lieutenant Bill Mitchell, had told Tremayne. "Time may be a healer, but you've got to cope with – and get through – minutes, hours and days; not years, at the moment. That will come later."

Mitchell and Tremayne had become close friends during their time together on convoy escort duty in the Atlantic. Tremayne had found the older man to be an emotional sheet anchor during the unbearable early weeks and months following Diana's death. Mitchell's completely honest caring and concern, together with his sane, balanced perspective, had helped Tremayne to make at least some sense of what had happened,

and how he might survive the desolation of his loss.

It had been Mitchell who had first put the idea into Tremayne's head of a transfer to Special Operations.

"You have an intimate knowledge of the coastal water around Brittany from your university sailing days, Richard, and your French is pretty good, by most standards," Mitchell had told him.

"What's more, you won't have the same long periods of sea time, steaming back and forth across the Atlantic, with time on your hands, to reflect and fret. Instead, you'll have far greater variety, a lot of new challenges and much more to keep your mind occupied than you have maintaining station, for days on end, with slow-moving convoys. In a nutshell, Richard, you'll have a hell of a lot more to fill your life with than you have in your present role, and that's what you need more than anything else right now."

Tremayne had been grateful for Mitchell's genuine warmth and support, and he missed the navigator when he transferred to Scilly.

Shortly after Tremayne left *HMS Portree* to join Admiral Hembury's Tresco flotilla, she was torpedoed by a U-boat she was hunting off the south-west coast of Ireland and sunk by gunfire, when the submarine surfaced to finish her off. She was lost with almost all hands, apart from some picked up out of the water by the U-boat but, to Tremayne's distress, Mitchell was not listed among the handful of survivors.

It seemed to him that getting close to people was an experience that was destined to end in pain and heartache.

Tremayne cut short his own thoughts as he routinely

looked at his watch. It was 19.30 hours. Bertie's intervention had pre-empted his wake-up call – or "shake" as it is universally known in the Navy, by twenty minutes.

He shaved, showered and dressed with minutes to spare, before the knock on his door and discreet cough announced the arrival of the duty watch leading hand.

"Good evening, sir. Your shake, sir. It's 19.50 hours and 'ere's a cuppa tea for you, sir. 'Swain said to put a drop of 'neaters' in it, sir. It's a bit parky tonight out there an' 'e thought a spot of pusser's rum might 'elp keep the cold out, sir."

Tremayne looked at the amiable, gangling figure of Leading Seaman 'Lofty' Towers, a veteran of the Narvick campaign and now captain of MGB 1315's after twin Oerlikons.

"Thank you, Towers – just what the doctor ordered. That'll set me up nicely. Is the First Lieutenant awake?" asked Tremayne. "Yes sir an' 'e said to tell you that 'e'd be 'ere in a few minutes, sir. There's 'am an' eggs an' enough coffee to float the *Renown* in the wardroom when you're ready, sir, so steward tells me."

"Thank you. That will be more than welcome. We'll all need a good lining in our stomachs before tonight's tangle with the elements – and possibly Jerry. Have duty crews had their supper?"

"They 'ave, sir, an' duty boats are being fully victualled, ready for the off, right now, sir. Commander Rawlings 'as been seein' to that, sir."

Shortly after Towers left the wardroom, Willoughby-Brown arrived and tapped politely on Tremayne's cabin door.

"Good evening, Number One. Come in – I hope you slept well. Supper awaits us, so the duty killick tells me. Let's grab a

bite to eat and get our thoughts together, before we meet up with Lieutenant Commander Enever and his team."

Their route to the officers' mess took them past the First World War seaplane hangar, which now served as the ratings' NAAFI canteen and bar – that unashamedly anti-gourmet institution, yet source of salvation for many a soldier, sailor and airman.

The raucous singing was in full flow, as the two officers approached the building:

"You've got to walk up, walk up, see the tattooed lady,
See the tattooed lady at the fair
In went the lads and gave a mighty cheer,
'Cos tattooed on her arse was every town in Lancashire."

"Hmm, in good heart – and in good voice, too, sir," said Willoughby-Brown, with one dramatically elevated eyebrow.

"Just listen to the rest, Number One. This is 'Jolly Jack' at his choral best," laughed Tremayne.

Peering in through the open window, they saw Able Seaman 'Pablo' Watkins conducting the sing-song, standing on a table, waving his sombrero in time to the music:

"There was Oldham, Bolton and Ashton-under-Lyne
The coalfields of Wigan were doing mighty fine"

At this point, the forty or so voices rose to a deafening crescendo, as Watkins beamed at his 'choir' with his sombrero pointed heavenwards:

"Till some dirty bootneck shouted "don't go down the mine"
At the Rawtenstall a-n-n-u-a l f-a-i-r."

"Heavens. Half of Tresco must have heard that," said the First Lieutenant, with what Tremayne was coming to recognise as a

characteristic wince of mock dismay.

"Half of Cornwall too, no doubt, Number One. But thank God. We're most probably going to need something of that spirit and camaraderie before the night's out," said Tremayne, as they entered the spartan, makeshift wardroom for supper together.

At 21.00 hours, they began their briefing with the Senior Intelligence Officer, Second Officer Emma Fraser and Sub-Lieutenant Daniel Tabarly.

They were joined by Commander Julian Rawlings, RN, the Operations Director of the base, who was a career naval officer, typical of the Royal Navy of yesteryear.

Rawlings was a large florid-faced man, of exaggeratedly clipped speech, who frequently added a rather querulous "what?" to his already emphatic, usually judgemental, pronouncements. His principal battle experience had been gained during the First World War, variously, at the battle of the Falklands, the hunt for the cruiser *Emden*, the battle of Jutland and in support of the great St George's Day raid on Zeebrugge by the Royal Marines in 1918. Subsequently, he had served both in Trincomalee in Ceylon and on the China Station.

His time had been spent mainly in cruisers and destroyers and always in the role of an executive officer – his major command being *HMS Worcestershire*, a six-inch gun cruiser based at Hong Kong in the early thirties. His style was to test – and to hector – people and he showed neither patience nor sympathy with those who failed to measure up to his standards and expectations. Something of a martinet, Rawlings was low in tolerance and high on criticism, which made him a difficult and, at times, unpleasant

man to deal with. He worked strictly according to the book and possessed neither the imagination nor the flexibility to adapt to circumstances that demanded intelligent initiative, rather than unthinking compliance.

Commander Rawlings was "old school Navy" through and through and, on the lower deck, he was known as 'that Anchor-Faced Bastard' – and frequently something far less charitable. Though he neither understood – nor approved of – much of the work and clandestine role of the Tresco flotilla, he recognised that it was his task to ensure that all operations were given maximum logistics support and back-up to guarantee their success.

Admiral Hembury's unequivocal demands for an efficient, effective and well run unit, 'Naval Party 1798' as it appeared in Admiralty records and returns, were clearly Commander Rawlings' operational priorities and he had been left in no doubt whatsoever, by the Admiral and Captain Mansell, that this was his primary role at HMS Godolphin.

Lieutenant Commander Enever, DSO, made an interesting contrast, reflected Tremayne. He was small by comparison, with deceptively mild grey eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles and possessed the enviable combination of intensity of intellectual focus with an apparently incongruous, easy-going manner.

He dealt with Commander Rawlings' bluster and bullying by seemingly ignoring it and talking as if the large, more senior officer simply wasn't there. It was an approach to which Commander Rawlings had no answer, but at least he was bright enough to recognise that he and Enever came from – and largely lived in – very different worlds.

In a strangely non-engaging way, the two managed to work well together – principally because of Enever's well-developed art of making soothing noises, while being completely single-minded and ruthlessly committed to his role and the success of whatever assignment was on hand.

As Willoughby-Brown subsequently described the relationship to Tremayne: "It's a curious encounter – rather than a meeting – of minds sir: a matter of the artistic collaborating with the autistic!"

Enever opened the meeting by confirming that there was to be an operation that night, departing from Braiden Rock at 23.00 hours.

The object was to put Tabarly ashore, to make contact with Jean-François, to obtain an up-to-date picture of the fate of the four agents whom Tremayne had taken over, and to determine the extent of compromise of the Confrèrie de Saint Michel.

"We suspect," said Enever, "that Jerry may have cracked the code used in our radio transmissions to the Confrèrie. We must know, as a matter of urgency, if this is true and I want to know how this has happened if, in fact, it is the case. We have organised a fresh RV, close to L'Aber Wrac'h," continued Enever. "Daniel, here, will paddle ashore after being launched from 1315. He will have, as stern paddler, Corporal Kane of the Royal Marines who has been training with a small group of specialist canoeists and frogmen, based over at RM Eastney, in preparation, we believe, for some major clandestine operation. Admiral Hembury managed to secure Kane's release to join us temporarily. Corporal Kane's role is to provide protection for Daniel. In effect, Richard, he will be 'riding shotgun' as it were."

"He's a damn good paddler, an excellent swimmer, as well as a crack-shot with most small arms," cut in Commander Rawlings. "Kane has had battle experience with the Royal Marines on Crete and in Norway, where he won the Military Medal. He will be carrying one of the silent CO2 pistols, developed by our friends in SOE, for quietly eliminating any sentries who happen to get in the way, what? He's among the best we have for a job like this."

"Thank you, sir," said Tremayne. "At what distance from the shore do we launch the canoe?"

At this point, Enever came back into the discussion: "When you arrive at the RV, Richard, there will be an incoming tide so stand off from shore, as before, at about five hundred yards and make that your point of launching. If all goes according to plan, the tide will not have turned when you begin your return journey. So, if conditions allow, you may need to get in close to help the canoeists who will obviously be paddling back to you against the tide. They will be using what the Royal Marines refer to as a 'Cockle Mk2' which is a substantial, seaworthy canvas and wood canoe, built for carrying-capacity – not speed. It depends on how the tide is running, but they'll be hard-pressed to make more than three knots even in a calm sea and, unfortunately, the 'Met' boys, based at Devonport, have promised us wind and waves tonight."

"Where exactly is the RV, sir?" asked Tremayne. "You referred to a 'fresh RV'. How far is it, for example, from Pen Enez and that battery of 88s?"

Enever turned to Second Officer Fraser: "Emma, the details, please, for Richard."

"Aye, aye sir" – the soft, crystal clear accent of someone born and bred in the Western Highlands was only just discernible. "Gentlemen," she began, "your new RV is contained in sealed orders, which will be given to you at the end of this briefing and which are to be opened once you are underway and clear of Scilly. This may seem rather tiresome drama to you, but we have reason to believe that German counter-intelligence have known in advance much of what we have been doing in Brittany. Since we suspect – but have no real evidence of – the source of any leaks, we are simply being careful and sensible. Using the existing codes, we have radioed Jean-François that the RV is to be off Pen Enez as previously." Emma Fraser almost smiled to herself as she saw the rapt attention with which the others were closely following her.

"As before, the French language was used in the radio transmission. Using totally different codes and frequency we sent a message, in Breton, giving him the real location, which you will find in your sealed orders. One factor we hadn't allowed for in selecting the actual RV is that a trainee Panzer battalion moved into the area two days ago for manoeuvres and gunnery practice. In addition to twenty or so heavy tanks with 76mm weapons, they have several Sturmgeschutzen – large self-propelled guns – which are capable of making a terrible mess of an MGB should a shore-to-ship firefight develop."

"Our forrard pom-pom, which is our heaviest weapon, is going to be about as useful as a pea-shooter against armour like that," said Tremayne. "What are we supposed to do – form a blue-jacket landing party and charge them with bayonets?"

The steady blue eyes gave no hint of a reaction to Tremayne's outburst.

"No, Lieutenant Tremayne," Emma's response was controlled and measured. "You will be accompanied by Lieutenant Fischer in the Camper and Nicholson which, as I'm sure you're aware, mounts a very useful six-pounder, forrard and a 40mm Bofors, aft. His role is to provide the firepower that you lack, in order to give any covering fire necessary to allow you to return with Sub-Lieutenant Tabarly and," she added with a smile, "Corporal Kane. The 'Royals' would never forgive us if we left him behind!"

Tremayne already regretted his tetchy response and the fact that he'd made something of a fool of himself in front of the others. He was very conscious of both Emma Fraser's calm, neutral handling of his ill-tempered rejoinder and also his First Lieutenant's mobile eyebrows which, for once, registered genuine surprise. "Thank you, Emma," said Enever. "Will you now confirm for Richard the recognition signal code that he must use, once at the RV?"

"Aye, aye sir. Your ETA is 04.00 hours. You will make full revolutions for most of the way, but at around five miles short of the RV, we recommend that you reduce speed to minimise engine noise. The new signal, agreed with Jean-François, will be two white flashes, a pause of exactly seven seconds, then the green one. After a further ten seconds, the complete signal will be repeated. Thereafter, if you have not received an identical response from them, you will wait five minutes, then repeat the complete procedure again. If still no response, wait exactly fifteen

minutes more, then repeat the two-step signal only. If no answer at this point return to base, maximum revolutions."

"Is that perfectly clear Richard?" asked Enever. "It's quite possible that some young and eager Panzer duty officer may be up and about with his Zeiss binoculars, searching the sea for mermaids, when he suddenly comes across you and young Hermann Fischer hove-to offshore. I don't want any dead heroes, Richard. At the first sign of trouble go about, signal full speed ahead, and the pair of you zigzag like hell and get back to Tresco."

Emma Fraser continued the briefing at this point.

"Two of the other Fairmiles will accompany you for the first fifty miles and then set course for Pen Enez. Their role is both to act as a diversion to concentrate the Germans' attention on them – not you – and also to allay any suspicion that we believe that the Germans may have cracked our codes. If we turn up as announced, we do what they expect us to do, which allows us to regain the initiative in the battle of wits with the Abwehr. Maintain R/T contact with them when out of sight, as well as with Lieutenant Fischer, and agree your RV to meet up to return as a flotilla."

Once again, Enever took over.

"You, Richard, will act as Flotilla Commander. Hermann, of course, will command 1501, while 1316 will be skippered by Lieutenant Mick Taylor." At the word "skippered", Commander Rawlings showed all the signs of incipient apoplexy and a distinct reddening of both ears.

"Taylor has a four-pounder forrard while Sub-Lieutenant

Bower, who will command 1317, has, as you know, a forrard-mounted six-pounder like Fischer. Their role is purely to show the expected presence – and then act as if they were meant to be there. To invest their presence with some significance, the RAF will send in four rocket-firing Beaufighters to "soften up" the coastal batteries. Their attack will precede the Fairmiles' arrival off Pen Enez at 04.00 hours by just three minutes. They will strafe the batteries with both rockets and 20mm cannon fire. As they pull out, so Taylor and Bower will pound the batteries – or what's left of them – at full speed ahead, presenting as small a target as possible to any German gunners still left alive. This diversionary attack – because of its intended ferocity – should, we hope, concentrate Jerry's attention on Pen Enez, as they try to cope with the shambles and chaos that we – and the RAF – expect to create.

"As a result of this diversionary raid, there will inevitably be a lot of both E-boat and Luftwaffe activity in the area, so remain closed up at action stations for at least an hour after you leave your RV. Good luck gentlemen, and a safe return home. Do you have any questions?"

"Only one, sir," replied Tremayne. "Should the Fairmiles get into serious trouble for any reason, can I go to their assistance once I have retrieved Sub-Lieutenant Tabarly and Corporal Kane?"

"Your primary task, Richard, is to get information back to us, which is why this operation is being mounted," answered Enever. "That, quite simply, is my response to your question. Don't do anything that is likely to deny us the answers we must have for future operations in Brittany to succeed."

"Here are your orders, gentlemen," said Emma Fraser, handing Tremayne a large, sealed Admiralty official envelope.

Tremayne took the buff envelope and hesitated, briefly, before he said quietly: "Emma, I apologise about my rudeness – that was unforgivable and quite unjustified."

"Och, dinna fash yerself," she replied, laughingly exaggerating her usual, barely perceptible Scots accent. "Come back safely – both of you."

Tremayne turned to Commander Rawlings, as Enever's Intelligence Team briefing broke up.

"At what time will your ops briefing for boat captains take place, sir?"

"At 22.00 hours, promptly, in the Operations Room – I take it you know where that is, Tremayne. I'll conduct the briefing. It is now 21.55 hours, so look lively there and make sure you're not adrift, what? First Lieutenants to take charge of boats immediately."

"Aye aye, sir." Tremayne bit back any further words that he might regret and winked at Willoughby-Brown.

"Number One, I'll rejoin you as soon as I'm able. In the meantime, I leave 1315 in your capable hands. Carry on please."

Rawlings began his operations briefing at exactly 22.00 hours, labouring the obvious and dwelling on the minutiae of sea-going routines. At times, he appeared to be quoting the most elementary instructions from the Service standard issue *Manual of Seamanship* – the nautical equivalent of the Ten Commandments. His excruciating exploration of the mundane soon had all four boat captains struggling to remain awake.

Hermann Fischer's imaginative doodlings were rich pickings for any psychoanalyst and would have provided scope for the most forensic of Freudian diagnoses. The miniature score card on Fischer's note pad showed that he was also counting the number of times that Rawlings uttered a peremptory "what?"

Fischer acquired his Germanic name from his father, who hailed from Hamburg but who had gone out to South Africa, well before the outbreak of the First World War. There he had met and married a girl from Cape Town who was of English origin. As a consequence, Fischer often appeared to be more British than the British. He had a ready, ribald sense of rather 'black' humour, and he and Tremayne had become close friends in their short time together at HMS Godolphin.

Lieutenant Mick Taylor, RNVR, boat captain of MGB 1316, a likeable, highly intelligent and sensitive, somewhat introverted man, had completely switched off from Rawlings' stupefying monologue and was preoccupied with his own thoughts and the forthcoming operation. A talented musician and an outstanding piano player, Taylor frequently gave the impression that he lived, for much of the time, in a world of his own. He was a man with a dry, engaging sense of humour, and was extremely popular among the younger RNVR officers.

By contrast, Sub-Lieutenant Bob Bower was a lively extrovert and a brilliant mimic. On more than one occasion, he had telephoned the Master-at-Arms Office, the PO's mess and the NAAFI manager, imitating Commander Rawlings and threatening a detailed personal inspection within the hour. The resultant terror and chaos had provided his brother junior officers with a

great deal of amusement – usually at the expense of some of the most unpopular and starchiest people at the base.

Apart from being a very adept practical joker, Bower was also a highly competent boat captain and commanded another of the Fairmiles – MGB 1317.

Using the occasion primarily as a vehicle for his status and vanity, Rawlings added little to what Lieutenant Commander Enever and Second Officer Emma Fraser had already given at their briefing. It was, therefore, with considerable relief that the meeting broke up at 22.45 hours and the four RNVR officers left to resume command of their boats.

In a quick, three-minute quayside briefing, Tremayne, as acting Flotilla Commander, emphasised the need not only for clear communication and co-ordinated action, but also for common sense and flexible, intelligent initiative should things not go according to plan.

With his light-hearted professionalism and obvious competence, Tremayne restored the energy level and focused concentration on the task facing the boat captains, which Rawlings' turgid oration had all but killed. His short briefing meeting broke up with laughter and amiable banter, which helped to dispel the inevitable pre-operational tension.

"Follow me, sir – I'm right behind you!" called out the exuberant Fischer through his loudhailer, as Tremayne signalled '*start engines*' then *'slip*' and finally *'half speed ahead'*.

Forming up in line astern, exhausts belching high octane fumes as engines burst noisily into life, the small flotilla moved slowly out of New Grimsby Sound. Picking up speed, they moved

purposefully through St Mary's roads, by-passing St Agnes and out into the open sea on a course set for north-west Brittany – and whatever…