



BEST OF ENEMIES

★ TOP SECRET ★



# BEST OF ENEMIES

1940, and a Plot Which Will  
Torpedo the Special Relationship

Iain Parke

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# **Best of Enemies**

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We may therefore be sure that there is a plan, perhaps built up over several years, for destroying Great Britain.

Winston Churchill, 14 July 1940

### **Führer Directive 16**

#### **Preparations for the Invasion of England**

As England, in spite of the hopelessness of her military position, has so far shown herself unwilling to come to any compromise, I have therefore decided to begin to prepare for, and if necessary carry out, an invasion of England. This operation is dictated by the necessity of eliminating Great Britain as a basis from which the war against Germany can be fought and, if necessary, the island will be occupied.

I therefore issue the following orders...

Adolf Hitler, 16 July 1940

## **.Beginnings**

### **Late October 2007**

We had a dank grey day on the outskirts of Leatherhead for it, just after lunchtime, not that any of us had eaten.

I'd never carried a coffin before, none of us had. So as the mourners settled into their seats inside the crematorium, outside under the porch the undertakers gave us a quick and experienced briefing as they matched us up in height. I wasn't really taking much of it in, I realised, as we hoisted the weight onto our shoulders, but since they put me as a one of the back pair I guessed it didn't matter too much. All I had to do was follow the figure in front of me and not trip over his, or my, feet.

It was all about just getting through it.

They had reserved the front rows for family and having bowed to the coffin and turned away, I slotted into my allotted place beside Mum while Johnny Cash faded and the celebrant

stepped up to welcome us all and set out our agenda for remembering and saying goodbye.

And then I was on my feet again. Stepping up to the lectern where my words were already laid out ready for me to read, I turned to face back into the room.

I looked up and out at a sea of faces, some familiar, many not, quickly registering who of the family were where in the hall.

His killers were out there, I thought. They and their paymasters. There would be someone here today, in the room, watching me even now. I was sure of it, but what could I do?

Then taking a breath, I began to speak the three pages of words I'd laboured over for the last week or so without glancing down.

The authorised version.

And tried to shut out of my mind the unauthorised one.

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### **A lifetime ago**

Some left during the day, some left at night, but one by one over the last two weeks in November, the ships slipped their moorings, each setting out to sea on their own apparently unrelated missions, only to disappear under complete radio silence.

Not that their radios were silent. Indeed, each ship had deliberately left its assigned radio operator behind in port so that anyone monitoring the airwaves would hear normal levels of radio chatter and the distinctive keys of the individual wireless men.

Once out on the dark and wary winter ocean however, each ship set course to join its companions as the fleet began to assemble in the cold, remote, northern harbour. Meanwhile beneath decks, men worked furiously on fitting the special wooden fins and noses which had been developed through a frantic programme of testing and trials, knowing they had little time to complete the modifications

required to the equipment to ensure there would be sufficient quantities on hand for their mission.

Eventually every vessel, from the huge battleships and carriers, to the tankers, screening cruisers, destroyers and outlier submarines, nosed its way safely into the anchorage to begin loading their supplies for the journey. Security on the surrounding desolate islands was extraordinarily tight as they did so. No one went in, no one went out. There was no shore leave, no radio messages, even no garbage overboard. Absolutely nothing could be left to chance that might endanger the secrecy of their mission.

Then at last they were ready, every nook and cranny stuffed full of the fuel and provisions that would enable the force to complete its task, assuming they received the final order to go. It was a call which would not be transmitted until they were already well en route to the target, a destination known at that stage only to a very small clique of senior officers across the fleet.

But for now, the instruction was to proceed, to set sail to reach their assigned jumping off point almost two weeks steaming away on a route designed to keep them far away from the normal shipping lanes and any chance detection. So, at dawn, while a bitter breeze billowed fog across the freezing waters, the armada weighed anchor, and led by their shepherding pilot boats, began to file slowly and menacingly out of the harbour.

They were on their way.

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## **September 2007**

The hotel was in the seedier backstreets just behind Paddington station. At the centre of a short terrace of tall Georgian high fronted townhouses that had seen better days. And better clients I guessed.

Ask for room six at reception the letter had said, and so I did.

‘Ah, room six,’ said the receptionist with a hint of a Polish lisp from her dingy cubbyhole. ‘The gentleman left a message for you. He asked if you would wait for him in his room upstairs.’

This all felt very strange, I thought, as I walked up to the first floor. I almost hadn’t come, but there was no denying it had piqued my curiosity. After all, it’s not every day you get an unsigned letter in the post, at an address that isn’t yours, inviting you to a meeting in a hotel room and demanding that you come alone and don’t talk to anyone about it.

At least it didn’t happen to me anyway.

And then to find that he, whoever *he* was, wasn’t there, but I was to go up to the room alone. As I stood outside the door to number six, key card in hand, I wondered what on earth was going on? All sorts of half remembered film noir clichés ran through my mind. Was I being set up for something?

I swiped the card and pushed open the door.

Well there was no dead body as far as I could see. Which was a good start, I supposed. You could tell I didn’t have high expectations.

As I looked around, the room was much as I had imagined it would be. A seedy, pokey slice divided out of what would originally have been a much larger high-ceilinged room, the cornicing cut off as it disappeared into the partitioning stud wall, while a corner had been chopped out of the space by more plasterboard walls to make a bathroom. Dull patterned wallpaper, heavy draping curtains to try and keep out the street noise and lights from behind the dirty windows, and a threadbare carpet that clashed with the patterned bedspread; not that you could see much of it in the sliver of space around the double bed.

There was an uncomfortable looking chair and a tiny desk in the corner. I opted for the bed and sat myself and my bag down to wait.

It didn’t take long. The telephone rang within a few minutes.

I let it ring. But then I thought, 'What the hell?' It had to be for me. It had to be him. I picked it up.

'Hello?'

'Hello,' said a voice, 'You are alone, I take it?'

# Chapter 1

## Bodyguard of Lies<sup>1</sup>

### The History of Operation Cassius – World War II's Greatest Secret<sup>2</sup>

By

**Commander Sir Tom Belvoir DSO Royal Navy (Retired)**

The personal award by the Emperor himself of an ornate katana, the ceremonial sword of a samurai, was quite simply the highest military honour that Imperial Japan could bestow. It was one they granted only three times during the whole of the war to members of their German allies. Two of the recipients were world famous; Reichsmarshal Herman Göring and Generalfeldmarshall Erwin Rommel.

And on 27th April 1942, a year and a half after the fall

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<sup>1</sup> Due to an injunction obtained by Her Majesty's Government in 2011 on grounds of national security and breaches of the Official Secrets Act, Commander Sir Tom Belvoir's memoir *Bodyguard of Lies* may not be published in the United Kingdom. All extracts used in this book are therefore taken from the original Australian edition.

<sup>2</sup> To quote the National Archives website:

The National Archives has records from the various military security and intelligence services as well as GCHQ, MI5 and (to a far lesser extent) MI6.

Historically, intelligence has been gathered by individual branches of the military as well as centrally by the government security and intelligence agencies.

Because of the sensitive nature of intelligence work, many files have been destroyed and others are retained in order to protect the identities of those involved in gathering intelligence.

This is particularly true of files relating to the Special Operations Executive (during the Second World War) and MI5 and MI6.

It is a matter of record that no British files relating to Operation Cassius have yet been declassified.

of Singapore, it was the turn of Kapitän zur See Bernhard Rogge to receive this signal honour. What had led this relatively unknown commander of a converted merchantman turned highly successful surface raider *Atlantis* to be honoured by the Chrysanthemum Throne were his actions in the Indian Ocean on the morning of 11th November 1940, for which he had already been awarded the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross.

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QQQ, code for I am being attacked by an enemy raider. The Norwegian wireless operator tapped furiously knowing he had little time. QQQ, QQQ, QQQ.

The British Blue Funnel Line ship *SS Automedon* was one of those solid and reliable merchantmen which were the backbone of trade across our far-flung empire of those days. Already approaching twenty years old at the outbreak of war, if all went well there had been no reason why she wouldn't have been expected to serve another twenty, plying her trade between home ports and our possessions on the other side of the world.

But of course, war had made differences to the *Automedon*. Now her appearance was different, a drab coat of Admiralty grey and a World War I vintage 4-inch gun mounted aft to be manned by one experienced gunner and a handful of hastily trained deckhands. Her route was different, it now avoided the Mediterranean and took her down the West Coast of Africa to Freetown, on round the Cape to Durban, before she set out across the wide Indian Ocean as she headed for Singapore. And her cargo was different, a mixed supply of all the things needed for war, from crated up vehicles, aircraft, instruments and machinery, to uniforms, cigarettes, whisky and mail, along with a pair of newly-weds returning to Singapore.

But life on board hadn't changed very much from peacetime. So far, the trip had been uneventful, peaceful even. The weather had been fine all the way, the war seemed a long way off under the clear blue skies of day, and

the familiar rhythms and routines of ship life as day followed day, gave a sense of security.

Until the evening of the 10th November, as they trailed their phosphorescent wake under the star-studded blackness heading towards the North West tip of Sumatra, when the radio operator picked up the Morse signal. QQQ, QQQ, QQQ.

It was partly an urgent call for help, and partly a warning, and the sender giving its location as somewhere 600 miles away from the *Automedon*'s current station was the *Ole Jacob*, a Norwegian oil tanker reporting an unknown ship coming after and then stopping them.

A little while later a message came through from the same transmitter, cancelling the QQQ message. Unbeknownst to the wireless operator on the *Automedon* and the officers now standing beside him in the cramped cabin, the *Ole Jacob* was already in the hands of a German prize crew whose chief had organised the cancellation message.

Worse still, they had no way of knowing that the original message, sent in such haste, had been incorrect. The *Ole Jacob* had in fact been boarded less than 200 miles away from the *Automedon*, less than a night's sailing for a fast raider.

\*

## **June 2007**

He put the file down on his desk and rubbed his eyes.

The irony of at least somebody having had some recognition for their part in the operation, even if it was a role they had no way of knowing they'd been given, still gave him some grim satisfaction even after all these years. Although he doubted anyone else would see the funny side, not that they would ever get the chance; he sighed as he closed the file and slipped the folder back into his desk.

Christ, he thought to himself with a flash of irritation, if not bitterness, as he locked the drawer shut, how many war memoirs must there be out there, lying forgotten in dusty attics and dark cupboards? Old men and women's memories consigned to faded ink and yellowing curling paper. The best and worst years of people's lives, times of intense emotion, now silent and entombed in obscurity.

Once again, he asked himself why he'd taken the time and trouble to write it. After all, if there were some things that were destined never to be revealed, then one thing he knew for sure was by God – this had to be one of them.

But then that was his nature and the way he'd been trained. It was a report. For any operation there was always a report. And for this operation, this was his.

Even if no one was ever going to read it.

He glanced down again at the two letters on his desk. One typed on letterhead with its familiar logo, the other handwritten in a familiar scrawl from long ago. His hand automatically went to put them both through the shredder, to join the bag of strips to be burnt later, when something stopped him and he considered it again. Well, he thought, it could wait. After all, he didn't have to make a decision now.

And it certainly wouldn't be some BBC researcher, no matter who he was! He smiled to himself as he slipped the letter back into a file of pending correspondence, and the keys into his pocket, before lifting himself stiffly out of the chair, while the sound of small children's voices drifted in from the garden in answer to their father's call.

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As he stepped out into the hallway he heard the sound of Tim and Rosie, his great-grandchildren, being organised for the off at the end of the weekend and their father's leave. Toys were being checked as all present and correct, coats being gathered to go back in the car. Marshalling them and all their gear for the

drive down to Plymouth sounded like a military operation these days, but then, that ought to suit his grandson and his wife down to a T.

'Right,' he heard John say as he reached the hall and looked out onto the drive where the estate car's boot was being shut with a thump. 'That's it, I think we're ready to leave you in peace.'

'Assuming you've got everything?' he asked.

'Well there's always something isn't there?' Suzy laughed. 'Now then, Tim, Rosie, it's time to say goodbye isn't it?' and he knelt down in the doorway for a flurry of hugs.

With the children in the car, seatbelts fastened, and last chances to go to the loo taken before the off, the adults embraced. Promises were made for Suzy to come back up in a month's time, unless he wanted to come down of course?'

But he knew it would be six months at least before he'd see John again. His unit was being deployed the following week for an operational tour to Basra as part of the Royal Marine's contribution to Operation Telic, hence his embarkation leave and this visit. Security duties and training Iraqi forces was the formal mission. Laying the groundwork for a post occupation Iraqi Training and Advisory Mission was the official description.

Continuing to fight a highly effective and deadly insurgency was the unofficial one.

An overt mission for public consumption, and a covert one. It was always the way wasn't it?

He waved the car off down the gravel drive and stood for a few moments after it had disappeared out of sight beyond the rhododendrons. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the summer sun on his skin, smelt the scent of the flowers in the air, heard the quiet buzz of a bee going about its business.

Then he turned, and shutting the door behind him, went back to his study to collect a few bits and pieces to take through to the kitchen. He liked to keep the place tidy. It was another of those

long old established habits, never to leave anything lying around. A place for everything and everything in its place. It was one of those things the Services taught you.

Reaching up to turn off the light he glanced across to the line of family photographs on the mantelpiece and smiled.

It had been worth it. All of it.

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Looking back now it can be difficult for people to remember, or if they weren't there at the time, to imagine, the situation we were facing in the autumn of 1940.

People remember Sealion and the threat of invasion but leaving that aside there was the very real threat that we might simply be starved into surrender by the U-boats of the German navy.

Even in those days we depended on importing food and critical supplies like oil to keep the country going, but by late 1940 our imports had already fallen by about twenty-five percent from a rate of sixty million tons to forty-five million tons a year.

Bluntly, we had lost the land war on the continent and now we were losing the sea war in the Atlantic. Following the fall of Norway and France, Dönitz could concentrate all his U-boats on the Atlantic and the effect was truly devastating. Once they were able to operate from bases on the French west coast rather than from the North Sea, their ease of access and the length of time they could spend on station in the shipping lanes went up dramatically, and so did our losses.

In July 1940 the U-boats had sunk thirty-eight ships, equivalent to about two hundred thousand tons of shipping. In September 1940 we lost fifty-nine merchant ships and in October 1940 we lost sixty-three more. That represented something like six hundred and fifty thousand tons of shipping gone in two months. But that wasn't the worst of it.

Thirty-two of those vessels went down in a period of only three days starting on the 18th October when a Wolfpack of nine U-boats attacked two convoys on their way over from Nova Scotia.

Operation Sealion or no Sealion, it was plain that we simply couldn't last at such a rate of losses. It was agreed by all concerned that something had to be done.

\*

## **July 2007**

'In World War II we were America's essential ally. Now we're America's poodle. How did we get from one to the other? That's the pitch,' she'd told me when she'd brought me on board a few months ago to support her development work.

The producer wasn't needing to sell the concept to me. I was just a researcher, I just needed a briefing. Tell me what you need me to find, and I'll go away and find it. That's my job.

And she was still selling it to me every time we spoke about it, even now as she came back with the news. But I didn't mind, I was used to it by now. To get something like this commissioned she'd have needed to have been rehearsing, refining, honing and delivering her elevator pitch for so long now, to so many editors and channel heads that it had become second nature.

'It's something that's of huge public interest, so our plan is a major series. A landmark documentary, a historical overview across four hour-length episodes taking the viewer right up to the Iraq war. We'll be looking to explain the decline of the special relationship, what it meant then, what it means now...'

'And how it got us into the current mess in Iraq?' I had nodded when we first spoke, seeing how what she was planning could get current affairs and history to both sign up to the sort of budget this would be looking at.

'Exactly. All that sort of thing,' she looked pleased that I got it. But really it was hard to miss.

'We're kicking off with Suez is the plan,' she'd told me.

At which I must have looked a little surprised.

'No really,' she'd insisted, 'It's the perfect place to start. It plays both backwards and forwards. Eden and Eisenhower were both high up and worked together as allies leading up to victory in the war. By '56 Eden is Prime Minister and Eisenhower is President. It's the height of the cold war, they're NATO allies, so if anything, you'd be expecting them to be able to cooperate together closely, yes?'

I had shrugged an agreement.

'Yet then along comes Suez, and Eisenhower just hangs Eden out to dry. It's a great jumping off point. It's got everything we need to make it relevant to today. The writing really was on the wall with this one.'

I could see what she meant.

And obviously so could the commissioning powers that be who'd just signed off on her budget.

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### **Monday 21st October 1940**

Men were gathered in knots around the edges of the room when, having shown my pass to the MPs on duty, I slipped in through the double doors just after eight in the morning. Discreet conversations were being conducted in hushed tones as we waited for everyone to arrive and the conference to kick off. A gentle fug of smoke was already perfuming the room.

Unsure of the form as it was my first day, I collected a cup of NAAFI tea from a table manned by a couple of WAACs and stood back into one of the window bays to observe the room as I waited for my new boss to arrive. I wasn't meaning to eavesdrop, but given the brief I'd been given by my old section chief on taking the secondment it was difficult not to, I did need to think about the job I'd presumably be going back to in due course, after all.

And it was particularly difficult, given the nature of what I realised I could just about overhear of the two men's conversation in the alcove next to where I had perched myself out of the way.

'Surrender?' my ears pricked up at the word.

'Seek terms is what I said. You heard yesterday's news about SC7 and HX79?'

'The convoys?'

'Yes. Over thirty now isn't it?'

'Thirty-two all told.' The unfolding U-boat disaster off Nova Scotia. It was all anyone was talking about in Whitehall's corridors over those first few days.

'Jesus.'

'Well then, you know as well as I do how serious it is.'

They weren't whispering, I noticed. That would have been too obvious, the sort of mistake an amateur would make which would have risked drawing too much attention to themselves. Instead the tone was the sort of discreet and calm Civil Service murmur. It was a style designed not to carry too far, or to unwelcome ears, and one which I'd noticed seemed to become a natural way of speaking the more senior the user became.

These men were experts at it. Only the fold of thick curtain between where I stood and their position, not huddled in the next bay as such, but definitely tête à tête, meant I was close enough to hear, but also out of sight.

'Of course.'

'Have you seen the thing we've just had in from Stephenson?'

'The McCollum paper?'

'No, but I've heard the gist.'

'What do you think?'

‘It’ll come.’

‘But when? That’s the point isn’t it?’

‘Well, not for a while I don’t think. Our friends are losing patience and are starting to think about an oil and steel embargo as a way of forcing them to the table.’

‘Will it work?’

I wasn’t sure who they were talking about. Force who to the table? And who were our ‘friends’ in this instance? As discretely as I could, sliding forward a little, I let my gaze wander around the room as I raised my cup and took a sip, my eyes gliding towards where they were stood, and then naturally away again towards the far end of the room. They were deep in conversation, but seemed wary, as I guess they might well be given what I’d just over heard.

The man in a tweed suit was the elder of the two, I’d have put him in his late fifties, with a military moustache and distinctly Brigade of Guards air despite his civilian suit. The other man was slightly younger, around fifty or so and wearing a Fleet Air Arm uniform.

‘It may do. But once it’s in place the analysts think they’ll only have six months’ worth of supplies. So that will leave them a choice won’t it? To knuckle under to negotiations or try and grab what they want by force.’

‘Which means?’

‘Well they’ll want oil, they’ll want rubber, they’ll want iron ore, they’ll want coal...’

‘All right, all right...’

‘And it’s obvious where they would go looking for them.’

‘We’re only just clinging on here as it is against the Germans. Can we really afford a threat in the Pacific as well?’

So, the Empire of Japan was the subject of discussion.

‘But that’s my point. We were facing a threat in the Far East anyway. That piece of paper doesn’t change the problem one jot. You know as well as I do we’re weak out there. You’ve heard about the memo to Brooke-Popham?’

‘Just rumours.’

‘Anyway, Hitler has postponed Operation Sealion so the immediate threat here is off.’

‘Postponed it, yes. Cancelled it, no. It’s a breathing space, nothing more.’

‘But how long do you think?’

‘Well as far as Sealion is concerned, for a cross-channel invasion they are going to want to wait until they can be reasonably sure of a long enough period of good weather. So my chaps think it wouldn’t be before say, June of next year.’

‘If we can hold out that long.’

‘Well quite.’

‘Do you really think that’s what this meeting is about then? Surrender?’

‘Coming to terms, I said.’

‘*England is not our natural enemy*. Do you really believe that or that he could be trusted?’

‘It would be the sensible choice.’

‘Even if it were, he would never countenance it for a moment. You know how he feels about it.’

Up to that point, in some ways what I’d heard being discussed hadn’t come as much of a surprise. This was a conference of extremely senior advisors and at that level of necessity there is a substantial degree of freedom of expression. After all HMG’s policy makers have to have the best advice available, advice which takes account of, and objectively explores, all the options to help them decide what is in the nation’s best interests.

So, for the sake of assessing the position on any issue, even and especially the life and death ones of wartime, nothing whatsoever could be off the table when it came to taking a view, whether they accorded with current policy or not.

But the next things I heard were of a different order altogether.

They really shocked me.

‘Perhaps he’ll have to, whatever he feels about it.’

‘He’s the Prime Minister for God’s sake.’

‘Prime ministers come, prime ministers go. Particularly when they’re making mistakes.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Our duty is to the country, not to him.’

‘He is the country.’

‘Says who? Not the electorate. They never got a say, did they?’

‘Maybe so. But we aren’t the ones with the authority to do anything about it, that’s parliament’s prerogative.’

‘What, with a national government and any general election postponed until all this is over one way or another? The reality is that we’re in an elected dictatorship with no constitutional prospects of changing the prime minister.’

‘Are you suggesting unconstitutional means should be used?’

‘I’m not suggesting anything.’

Just then they were interrupted by noises from outside. I could hear the crunch of gravel, doors banging, the sound of voices and boots stamping to attention.

‘Is that a car?’

‘Yes. I’ll just check.’

‘And?’

‘Yes. It’s them.’

‘Who’s coming? Winston?’

‘Yes. And the others.’

‘Right.’

‘Well I wonder what they want us for?’

‘This should be interesting.’

‘Shouldn’t it just?’

Well quite, I thought to myself, as I hung back amongst the general gathering for action presaged by the noise of the arrivals on the drive outside. I waited until the two men had left their alcove and watched as they made their way down the room, splitting up to take their seats, before I made my own move towards my appointed place.

\*

‘Eden?’ Dad asked that evening, as I told him we’d got the greenlight at last after all our prep and the series was definitely now on. There was no way I could afford to live in London, so it was lucky that Mum and Dad could put me up when I needed to work down here. As a researcher I wasn’t usually tied to an office, it was a matter of going where the information took me on a project so even though it wasn’t ideal, I’d got used to a life where I was away all week, and back up north to Salford at weekends where I’d bought a flat close to the new BBC hub.

‘Anthony Eden? During the war? Well he was Foreign Secretary, wasn’t he?’

He’d poured out a cup of hot water for me and handed it over with an Earl Grey tea bag for my swift dunk. Then he went back to warming the pot for what he regarded as a proper cup of real tea.

‘Any chances of you finding a scoop?’

I laughed, ‘Out of fifty, sixty, and seventy-year-old papers? I

don't think so.'

'Well you never know.'

'I mean it's all ancient history now. There can't really be anything much that we don't already know, can there?'

'Still it's the war,' he mused, 'People are still interested. Otherwise why are they paying you to look?'

'True. Here's to an ongoing fascination with the era!' I said, raising my mug as he pulled out a chair opposite me and sat down with his cup and a couple of Rich Tea biscuits.

'Mind you, I doubt that anything you'd find would surprise me that much about Eden.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'Well you'd have to say he had form, don't you?'

'Oh, Suez you mean?'

'Absolutely. Faking a pretext for war and selling the invasion of a middle-eastern country to the public under false pretences.'

'Well thank God no one else would ever think of making that sort of mistake again,' I joked.

'Well quite,' he agreed, 'Amazing isn't it? Nothing much changes does it?'

'No, I guess not.'

That was the thing about Eden, the producer had said when I'd queried whether he was really a strong enough hook to hang the start of our series on.

'He used to be the fresh hope. At thirty-eight our youngest ever Foreign Secretary, the idealist, the man who resigned on principle over Munich,' she'd told me. 'And yet what's the only thing he's remembered for these days? A disastrous failed adventure in the middle-east.'

At the time I'd thought she'd been laying it on a bit thick. But

now I had to admit from a focus group of one, she had been right.

‘Where are you tomorrow? Here or up in town?’

‘Neither. I’m off out Oxford way somewhere.’

‘Oxford? What for?’

‘It’s my first interview.’

‘Oh yes, of course.’

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Dad was partly right as well. Scoop no. Opportunity yes. I was excited and very conscious that after the last half dozen years at the Beeb, this could be my big break.

Your career at somewhere like the BBC is all about building the right track record, your CV of credits on successful projects ticking up on IMDb, and by making the right contacts, preferably ones who are on the way up and whose coat tails you can latch onto.

The producer was definitely one of those people who was going places, a rising star. You could see she was being groomed for bigger things and this was her planned breakout primetime series, her first major project designed to enable her to show what she could do, make her mark.

A lot of big players had a lot of expectations riding on this series. And success would roll downhill by association.

Where to start is always one of your first questions as a researcher, but for a project like this the producer has always had to do some digging for themselves which you can take advantage of.

‘I’ve fixed you up with an interview,’ she’d told me. ‘Sir Tom Belvoir. He’s military, ex naval intelligence, he worked with Eden for years during the war, and afterwards was into the Suez debacle up to his neck. Must be ninety if he’s a day but still has all his marbles I’m told. He’s never talked before but we fired

him an invite and surprise, surprise, he's said yes, so I need you to head over to see him. In fact, make him top of your list before he changes his mind.'

I nodded as I scribbled down the details she was giving me.

'Oh, and I've got you a research pass for Curzon Street,' she added.

It took me a moment to work out what that meant. But then I got it.

Curzon Street. One of the Secret Intelligence Service's old homes before they built themselves their James Bond green glass lair on the South Bank, and nowadays their archive reading room.

'I'm going to look at the Service's files?'

'Yes, it's where it started,' she'd confirmed.

Dad was just going to love this, I'd thought.

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And what needed to be done in the first instance was all we could do, to attack the U-boats at source in their bases. Which as I knew only too well from personal experience, was a task for Bomber Command with its woefully inadequate equipment.

Charlie had been on his first bombing raid. On the 19th March he'd climbed into his Hampden bomber and taken off from somewhere in England, in fact RAF Hemswell in Lincolnshire, for a night time raid on the dock facilities, seaplane hangars and slipways of the port of Hörnum, in Sylt, Germany.

He had always loved flying Hampdens he'd told me. The narrow aircraft was more like a fighter in some ways, only three feet wide and nicknamed the flying tadpole. Once you were strapped in, you were in, with nowhere to go until you were back on the tarmac. But for its time it was fast and manoeuvrable, popular with pilots so long as the mission

wasn't too long.

But as a fighting aircraft it had its limitations. The defensive armaments were woefully inadequate, while the pilot had to not only fly the aircraft but also had the bomb release catches to deal with on his run into the target.

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Of course, once I'd printed a map off of where the house was and got out the road map to work out how to get there I realised that while it was in Oxfordshire, it was actually nowhere near Oxford. It was easy enough to find, with the map propped open on my knee as I drove. I've got a sat nav facility on my mobile but I've never been arsed to set it up and of course the only times I actually want it are when I'm running late or lost or usually both, and by then I don't have time to even think about trying to make it work.

So I was about ten minutes behind schedule as I drew up to a pleasant looking house of honey coloured Cotswold stone, right on the edge of a tiny village, a hamlet really, called Spelsbury, which was in rolling countryside close to Chipping Norton. Set on a corner plot behind neatly clipped hedges, the house fronted onto the road across a green well-tended garden. Just shy of the corner was a turning, a lane running past the back of the house and the neighbouring farm's barns on the other side. As instructed, after a few yards I turned into a gravelled driveway and pulled up, leaving my ratty P reg Toyota next to a relatively new BMW and a slightly older but brightly polished Volvo estate.

As a researcher, I've interviewed hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people in my time. My field has always been politics and history so I've spoken to the great and the good, as well as the not so great and the fairly bad. Even so, as I pushed open the garden gate and crunched down the gravel path towards the conservatory that ran along the back of the house, I was excited today about what I was going to do. After all, this was my first proper interview for what was looking like a major

series that could get its makers noticed. And where better to start than with Commander Sir Tom Belvoir, DSO Royal Navy (Retired)?

Having read up on him in the afternoon after my meeting with the producer, I had honestly been surprised that he had agreed to see me. She was right, I couldn't afford to miss the chance to make the most of what was probably a once in a lifetime opportunity.

\*

I saw a porch off to one side of the conservatory, so I stood at the door and rang the bell. There was a noise inside and then the sound of footsteps coming to the door before it was pulled open by a young slim woman, neatly and conservatively dressed.

'Hello. Can I help you?' she asked brightly.

'Hello there, I hope so, yes,' I said, proffering one of my Beeb business cards, 'I have an appointment with Sir Tom.'

'Oh, right then, yes he's expecting you. Well you'd better come inside,' she said, opening the door wider to let me in and holding out her hand in greeting, 'I'm Suzy Belvoir, his grandson's wife.'

'Thank you,' I said, stepping inside.

'Tom!' she shouted down the hallway as she closed the door. 'It's your BBC chap here to see you.'

'This way,' she said, leading me into the house. 'He's in his study and don't worry, I was just visiting, I'll take you through and then I'll get on my way and leave you two to it.'

'Thank you very much,' I told her, 'but don't let me interrupt if you are talking.'

'No, it's fine, I was just here to deliver some bits and pieces and I'm done anyway,' she said, as she pushed open the door into a smallish room lit by a large window where the walls were

completely lined with precisely filled bookshelves, the only decoration a row of family photographs in silver frames.

Sir Tom was a spry, wiry white-haired man sitting at a desk arranged in front of the window and a view out over the garden at the side of the house. He was aged ninety-two according to my files, but was looking bright as a button, with piercing clear blue eyes, what I assumed was a naval tie and sharp upper-class voice. He stood up as Suzy ushered me into the room and gave me a firm, if a bit frail, handshake, before indicating with a wave that I should pull up one of the other chairs.

‘Right then, I’ll be off,’ Suzy said, after the introductions had been made and Sir Tom had sunk back down into his chair by the green leather topped desk which was bare, other than a pair of neatly piled in and out trays for correspondence, and an envelope lying open in the centre, with the letter and some photographs that it had obviously contained lying face down on top of it.

They hugged in parting. ‘Can I get you anything before I go?’

‘No, no thank you, Suzy. I’m sure we’ll manage. And thank you for bringing these over,’ the old man added, tapping the envelope as she turned to go.

‘Of course. Think nothing of it. Well I hope it goes well and you get what you want,’ she said to me by way of farewell, as she picked up her handbag from where it had been resting on a small sofa.

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘So,’ Sir Tom said, settling back into his chair and considering me with a penetrating stare as the sound of her feet on the parquet departed down the hall towards the front door, ‘what can I do for you, young man?’

‘Well firstly thank you for making the time to see me,’ I said, sinking into a very clubby armchair opposite his desk.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ he said, reaching for the glasses

that hung on a chain round his neck before peering at the details on my card which Suzy had handed him. 'I'm retired.' He looked back up at me and smiled, 'So you see, I've got nothing but time these days.'

He placed the card on his desk where he could see it as though he might want to refer to it and fixed me with a stare. 'So young man, tell me, why do you want to talk to me?'

And so it began.

'I'm not sure how much my producer has told you,' I looked for guidance but all I got was that quiet stare, 'but we're researching for a history programme and she came across your name in the files at Curzon Street...'

'The files?' he interrupted, seeming genuinely surprised, 'You are being allowed to look at Registry files? To film a documentary?'

'Oh yes. We've been cleared, obviously and only have restricted access...'

'Oh really? But even so, you've seen files with my name in them, have you?'

'Well yes, Sir Tom,' I said, 'It can hardly come as a shock now can it? After all you were in the Service throughout the war which is the period we're researching at this stage. You were right at the heart of some of the key decisions and committees of the time and so your name is going to crop up in relation to many of the things we'll be looking at.'

He still looked concerned, 'Well I'm not sure at my age that I really want to be in any sort of programme at all, you know. I've generally managed to avoid it this far after all.'

'I'm surprised at that, Sir Tom,' I said, in all sincerity, 'I would have thought that lots of people would have wanted to interview you over the years to ask what you knew?'

'Some have tried,' he conceded, 'but I put most of them off.'

Which was interesting in itself, I thought as I pulled my notebook out of my bag. So why had he decided to talk to us, I wondered? I'd have thought there wouldn't have been anything special about the producer's request, but I decided, this probably wasn't the time to ask that question in case he changed his mind.

'So what is it going to be about then?' he asked, 'this series of yours?'

'Well the overall subject is the special relationship in the post war world, but to give the context and a lead in we're starting at the outbreak of war and the areas of diplomacy, deception and intelligence,' I answered. 'I'm interested in how the three became intertwined, and what conflicts and contradictions that would have caused.'

'Really? And what are you going to call it?'

'I think that's still being workshopped,' I saw him wince, 'but the working title for this episode is *Perfidious Albion*.'

'That's a bit judgemental isn't it?'

'I hope not, but it has to be something that will interest people enough to watch it.'

'Well that's true enough, I suppose,' he smiled. 'So well then, what do you want from me?'

I was doing well, I thought. We had managed to secure an interview with the man who didn't do interviews, off the back of the producer's frankly speculative letter that I wouldn't have thought had a chance of working. But here I was, he was talking to me, and I hadn't been thrown out on my ear. Yet.

I hadn't been joking when I'd told him why we wanted to speak to him. From what I'd picked up already, the producer had been right on the money. If Eden was the thread that we were going to follow, then Sir Tom, or Royal Navy Lieutenant Tom Belvoir as he had been at the start of the war, ran consistently alongside it. He would only have been in his early twenties or so at the

outbreak of war, yet as I was seeing from the files, just like Eden, he had served on a series of key committees that seemed to have been at the very heart of Britain's intelligence and diplomatic operations throughout the war.

He was there for anyone to see who cared to look, and yet he had never as far as my researches had been able to discover, given any interviews. But even so, here I was, and I knew I needed to make the most of the chance.

The thing with an interview, I'd learnt over the years, is to get them talking. About literally anything to start with if you have to, anything at all. Nothing happens without them talking. With it, everything is possible. You need to establish a flow and in time a habit, of communication, conversation and even eventually in some cases, of confession.

'Well,' I had thought carefully about how to begin. 'One of the areas I'm looking at first is the period just after Dunkirk. The time when there was a serious and immediate threat of invasion. From what I understand, how we responded to that then and the sorts of deceptions we used to fool the Germans...'

You have to judge where to start, to ease them into it. So you try to pick on something they'll find easy and interesting to talk about, usually something non-threatening, nothing contentious. Safe and comfortable does it.

'Dirty tricks you mean?'

'If you like. That and camouflage. They seemed to be the starting point for all the deception operations that followed.'

'Well I suppose they were...'

\*

I had heard him speak before. Of course I had, the whole country had hung off his words on the radio that past summer as the Battle of Britain had raged above us in those clear skies. But it was something else to be addressed

directly by him in the room as he spoke to us without notes.

*Gentlemen.*

*Good morning and thank you for coming. I won't take long to say what I have to say and then I shall leave you to it.*

*As you all know, through the courage and sacrifice of our brave airmen, we have defeated the Nazi menace that is drawn up against us across the channel.*

*For now.*

*But great though this victory has been, we must be realistic. What we have won is time, and not the war. Winter is now approaching and with it the weather will deteriorate. The Germans, having had a bloody nose, will not risk a seaborne invasion in the coming months.*

*But does anyone here think that one defeat in the air will stop Hitler, he who has crushed the armies of Poland and France, who has occupied the continent from the Arctic Circle at the tip of Norway to the Mediterranean at the foot of the Pyrenees, from advancing against us as soon as he is ready?*

*Indeed, won't a defeat, the first he has ever tasted, merely infuriate him and make him even more determined?*

*We believe that he fears that in the event of invasion, the home fleet will sail and fall upon his barges and transports making a horrid slaughter. And indeed, in the event of invasion we would have very little option but to order such an attack.*

*But in this age of modern warfare, we would only do so with a heavy heart, as we know that we would be sending the fleet, upon which our security as a seafaring nation has always depended, into deadly danger.*

*It would be assaulted by the enemy's Luftwaffe from its bases in Norway and across the Channel.*

*It would face his submarines slipping from their pens*

*and his battleships ready to sally forth into the North Sea.*

*And it would run the risk of minefields he would undoubtedly stretch in depth across the sea lanes to defend his flanks.*

*Gentlemen, we have to face the fact that if and when the invasion does come we may have no option but to cast the fate of our nation, and of our empire, on the single throw of the dice, sending our fleet into a battle that it may not survive or even succeed in, to protect our shores against the Hitlerite hordes.*

*And if he does land, what then?*

*It is true that if he comes next year we will have had time to be better prepared. But how much better prepared will we be, based on what we can produce on the home front available to us, set against the fruits that Germany will be reaping from a conquered continent?*

*Does any of us here today, really believe that we, this island nation, ranged alone against Hitler's might, sundered from the support of our Empire and the very lifeblood of supplies of the fuel and food we need to support our people and to continue to fight on by the sea and a siege of U-Boats, can survive and win?*

*But gentlemen, does any of us here really believe that for the sake of the world and for history, we cannot afford to do anything else but survive and win?*

*That then, gentlemen, is the situation that faces us. One of unbelievable threat to our very survival as a country and as an empire, one where we face seemingly impossible choices, and one where time is clearly against us.*

*But by God's help I believe that we shall win through and that impossible choices demand impossible solutions.*

*And so, I charge you gentlemen, with thinking the unthinkable and devising the impossible strategies with which we will face and overcome this situation.*

*History, gentlemen, and the fate of our country and*

*empire, is in your hands. In my view this has been willed where what has been willed must be. And so you have my completely impossible blessing and good wishes for your work, whatever that might be.*

And with that, his contribution to the meeting was over, and he was gone, disappearing from the room to be scooped up by his escort down to the waiting car and his next engagement.

We had our mandate, and with my new superior Eden in the chair, The Meeting began.

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ISBN: 978-0-9930261-5-7