

CHAPTER 9

BLUE MURDER

August 18, 1942, 2220 hours

I went out on the stern deck to prime my two grenades. Each of us was taking turns doing this. It always made me nervous, as it was a ticklish job. I took a deep breath and inserted a detonator into the first grenade. I paused and then did the same with the second one. Neither exploded. I put them into grenade pouches and attached them both to my webbing.

A sliver of moon broke through the clouds and I could just make out the shapes of the other ships advancing silently across the sea. It was rare for the Channel to be as calm as this — as flat as a millpond, I'd heard people say. Maybe it was a good omen. I looked out in the darkness and wondered just how many ships were crossing with us. There had to be at least two hundred, carrying about six thousand men into battle. Some of those men aren't coming back, I thought — that's what happens in war. For them, this warm summer night

will be their last night on earth. Could I be one of them? Will my life be over tomorrow? I wondered if everyone was thinking this or whether some men just blocked it out. These thoughts made my guts start to churn, so I decided to rejoin the others inside.

My Lee-Enfield and bayonet and two bandoliers of bullets lay against the bulkhead where I'd left them. The other men in the platoon were sitting quietly; there was none of the usual joking and chatter. Tea and a washtub of sandwiches had been put out for us, but nobody seemed hungry. A few were still writing letters that would return with the *Astrid*.

I sat down next to Mackie. He passed me two metal hand mirrors.

"Put one in each pocket," he said quietly, pointing to the breast pockets on my battle jacket. "A little extra protection."

"What about you?" I asked. He just smiled and looked away. I took one and put it in the pocket over his heart.

Just before midnight, we heard a change in the throbbing noise of the ship's engines.

"We must be entering the minefield," said Turnbull.

We knew that minesweepers were out in front to

lead us through the mines the Germans had laid off the French coast. This minefield was designed to provide a safe channel down the coast for their convoys going into French ports. We also knew that a large ship like the *Astrid* was more at risk of hitting a mine than some of the smaller ones. For the next hour we sat silently, listening for every noise. Finally we heard the ship's engines pick up speed, indicating that we'd made it through the minefield.

Around 0230 hours, Sergeant Hartley told us it was time to get ready. We began picking up our weapons and strapping on our webbing and ammo bandoliers. When I put on the inflatable lifebelt over it all, I felt like a bulky, shuffling robot. Out on the deck I saw that the moon had disappeared and we were in almost total darkness. Silently, we crept forward in single file, holding on to the bayonet scabbard of the man ahead. The landing craft had been swung out over the side and we were helped across the gap by British sailors. We took our seats in rows — one row down the centre and two on either side. I was in the stern on the port side and I could see a line of helmets ahead of me and feel the breathing of the men around me. With a whirring noise our landing craft was lowered down the side of the ship and into the water. Then I felt a rumble as its engines started

up and we began to move away from the *Astrid*. The sky was dark, with a few stars overhead. I let the breeze cool my cheeks, as I was sweating underneath all my gear.

Our landing craft moved forward for about fifteen minutes, then abruptly changed direction. I later learned that we had lined up behind the wrong gunboat. When the British naval officer in charge of landing us discovered his mistake, the boats picked up speed to make up for lost time. I remembered how we had been put ashore in the wrong place during the Yukon I exercise, and hoped that this kind of confusion wouldn't happen again.

Suddenly, a white flare shot up into the sky.

It reminded me of the first rocket at the start of the Victoria Day fireworks show in Toronto. Then we heard the crackle of gunfire and some loud explosions. I turned to give a what's-up look to Mackie, but couldn't see him in the darkness. For the next ten minutes we listened to the sounds of a firefight at sea. It was hard to tell how close it was to us. Was this a part of Operation Jubilee? Only later would we learn that the gunboat leading the British commandos towards Yellow Beach had run into a German convoy. By the time the firing stopped, the boats carrying the commandos had

been scattered and the gunboat severely damaged. Crouched in our own landing craft, we simply wondered whether our attack had been discovered.

Soon I saw the harbour lights of Dieppe on the horizon. As they came closer we changed direction once again and headed east towards Puits and Blue Beach. But the sky was beginning to lighten behind the looming cliffs on the coast. If we didn't attack before dawn, the Germans would see us coming! I could feel my heart thumping against the steel mirror in my pocket.

As we drew in towards the shore, a light flashed out a signal. Were we friend or foe? A moment passed and blinding lights swept out towards us. Then came the rattle of machine guns from onshore. Searchlights were sweeping the beach where the first boats were arriving. The gunfire died down briefly, then picked up again as the first men hit the beach. They won't stand a chance! I thought. Are we still going to land?

As we drew closer, bullets began hitting the side of our landing craft. It sounded like hail on a tin roof. The man beside me recoiled as the bullets pinged the steel hull only inches from him. There was smoke and men yelling and engines roaring as they tried to bring the landing craft closer to the beach. When the engines stopped, Lieutenant

Whitman stood up in the front of our boat with his pistol drawn. A bullet hit his helmet and knocked him back into his seat. The landing ramp was kicked down and Whitman stood up again, but as he turned his head towards us and raised his hand, a sniper's bullet sliced through his throat. A puzzled look crossed his face. Blood blossomed from his neck. Then he crumpled and fell into the water.

A second later machine-gun fire ricocheted right down the centre row of our boat. Men howled and fell over; blood began running in the channels on the floor.

Sergeant Hartley was a few rows ahead of me on the same side. He turned and yelled to us, "Stay and we're dead! Up and go! Let's go, go, GO!"

We grabbed our weapons and stumbled over the men lying in the boat. On the landing ramp were more bodies so I jumped off the side. The water was so cold! I sank to the bottom and gulped in salt water. Spitting and choking I kicked upwards, holding my rifle aloft. Dawn now fully lit the sky.

I spied a landing craft ahead that could provide some cover and waded forward. Suddenly I saw Smiler, his head leaning against the side of the boat. He gave me a wan version of his customary smile. I looked down and saw blood seeping into

the water. Smiler was holding onto his stomach, trying to keep his intestines from coming out through a gaping wound. "Smiler!" I called out. "I'll get help! Wait here!"

Groggily he replied, "No, Allie, no . . . it's no good. You save yourself . . . You just go . . . You go."

As I hesitated beside Smiler there was a sudden screaming roar overhead. One of our Spitfires swooped down to strafe the gun positions onshore. This is my chance! I thought, splashing onto the pebbled beach past bodies rolling in the surf. Then I spied Sergeant Hartley lying below a hummock of beach stones, firing a Bren gun. I raced over and flopped down beside him. "Get to the seawall," he yelled just as a bullet tore through my battle jacket, grazing my side. As I crawled forward I heard another plane overhead and spotted heavy smoke dropping down from it. A smoke-screen! Thank God! I thought. Through the smoke I ran towards the seawall, stumbling over the bodies that lay in twisted positions in front of it. I noticed an officer crouched next to one of the stone buttresses that jutted out at right angles from the wall. I flopped down beside him.

"Aim for the white house!" he yelled over the noise, pointing to a two-storey house on the cliffs.

I threw off my life jacket and set my rifle on my shoulder. I could see the flash of machine-gun fire coming from the upper windows of the house. I fired a few rounds but the building seemed to be out of range. Then a mortar shell thudded down on the beach beside us, throwing a geyser of beach stones and dirt in our faces.

"Grab that Tommy gun!" shouted the officer, a lieutenant named Wedd. He motioned towards a weapon that lay next to a body on the beach. I waited out the next volley and then dashed towards the gun. Just as I grabbed it, bullets kicked up the stones around me and something raked across the back of my hand. I grabbed the gun and scurried back to the shelter of the buttress. On the way I leapt over a white, dead face with its mouth open. In a flash I realized it was Turnbull. Another of our men killed! In a blinding rage, I leaned out and fired the Tommy gun at the black slit of a pill-box gun nest that lay beyond the seawall. When I'd emptied the magazine, I stopped and licked the blood running down the back of my hand, and wiggled my fingers. Apart from a few deep cuts, the hand was fine.

"Give me a grenade!" Lieutenant Wedd yelled. I passed him both of my grenades and he attached one to his webbing and placed the other in his

palm. He crawled around our buttress and started to inch along the seawall. The pillbox spat bullets at him whenever he moved. Each time, he flattened himself against the wall. I watched in amazement as he worked his way from one buttress to the next. Finally he made a dash towards the pillbox and threw a grenade into its dark slit. His body jerked upwards and then fell forward as bullets tore into him. He twitched on the ground and then lay still. A second later the pillbox blew out in a shower of flame and smoke. I was stunned, and humbled, by Wedd's courage.

A number of men who had been pinned down on the beach now made a rush for the seawall. Hartley was one of them, with Pullio running right behind him. Just as Hartley jumped down beside me, Pullio let out a howl and fell over. "I'm hit, I'm hit!" he screamed, clutching his leg. Hartley and I reached out and pulled him in towards us. One leg was shattered below the knee and blood was pouring down over his boot. Pullio's thrashing around drew enemy fire. Bullets thudded into the bodies lying nearby.

"Morrison! Get a stretcher, get him outta here!" yelled Hartley.

I looked around and saw a stretcher lying about 30 yards down the wall. Imitating what Wedd

had done, I crawled around the buttress and then inched down the seawall, flattening myself against it as bullets pinged off the beach stones. Unlike Wedd, I was moving down the wall and away from the worst of the gunfire. As I crept around buttresses and edged farther along the wall, the firing towards me slowed. Finally I ran and dropped down next to the stretcher. The man who had been carrying one end of it was dead. I asked the other stretcher-bearer, McCluskey, if he could help me move someone and he nodded. I folded up the stretcher and slung it under one arm. McCluskey followed me as we inched our way back along the wall.

Ahead of us, I caught a glimpse of two of our men attempting to scale the wall. I knew they were aiming to lay an explosive charge in the rolls of barbed wire stretched on top of it. Their activity was drawing heavy machine-gun fire, which allowed us to move along the wall fairly unnoticed. Just as we reached Pullio I heard a cry from one of the soldiers climbing the wall. I glanced up to see him slide down to the beach, where he lay still. Hartley was trying to give the climbers some cover with his Tommy gun. Then I heard a small explosion and saw that a hole had been blown in the barbed wire. One man was already scrambling

up to go through it. I motioned to McCluskey and we put Pullio on the stretcher and headed down the wall as quickly as we could.

When we reached the end of the seawall, we saw Lt-Colonel Catto with about twelve men. They had put a tube ladder up where the wall met the cliff. One man at the top was trying to hack through the barbed wire with cutters. Suddenly a mortar shell landed near us and we scurried against the cliff face for cover. Pullio whimpered as we ran with him, but otherwise lay still.

“There’s a medic station down there,” one of Catto’s men yelled, “down with the Black Watch.”

We moved on to where he pointed, staying close to the cliff face. Soon we started to see the men of the Black Watch who had landed at this end of the beach as reinforcements. We passed a signalman with his radio on his back and heard him repeating, “Attack on Blue Beach stalled, can you get us off? Over. . . . Attack on Blue Beach stalled . . . ”

We were directed along the cliff to a medic station that had been set up in a small cave. There we found an officer doing his best to treat the wounded as quickly as he could. His white apron was drenched with blood. I showed him Pullio’s leg and he immediately gave him a shot of morphine and began cutting away at his pant

leg. I patted Pullio on the shoulder, gave him a thumbs-up and left.

McCluskey and I came out of the cave to more gunfire. A few mortar shells exploded nearby. The Black Watch tried to return fire but their weapons were out of range. McCluskey decided to stay with them but I thought I should try and rejoin Hartley. I also wanted to find Mackie. I was worried that I’d seen nothing of him that morning. As I moved along the cliff face some rocks tumbled down and I looked up and saw German soldiers running along the cliff-top. They began throwing down stick grenades. One of them landed near me. I scooped it up and threw it out onto the beach, where it exploded in a shower of stones. I was relieved I hadn’t hit anyone with it.

As I scrambled along to the beginning of the seawall I noticed that the tube ladder was still there and spotted a small hole in the barbed wire. No soldiers were nearby so I hoped that they had gotten through. As I moved along to the first buttress, I noticed that it had suddenly gone quiet. The relentless firing had stopped. Then I heard some bellowing in German through a loud hailer.

“They’re telling us to surrender,” said a man crouched nearby.

“Tell them to go to Hell!” shouted another voice near the wall.

As if on cue we heard the loud, distinctive bark of the Royals' regimental sergeant-major. "Go . . . To . . . Hell!" he shouted back.

"You tell 'em, Murray!" called a couple of men.

The bellowed order in German was repeated a few minutes later. This time there was a long silence in response. Twisted bodies lay all along the beach. We could hear the moans of wounded men. The tide was coming in and some of the men were being drowned in the surf. There was no sign of any boats coming to rescue us.

The third time the command was given in heavily-accented English. "Zis is your last chance to surrender."

Silence followed. Then we saw a white undershirt being raised on a bayonet. It was slowly waved back and forth three or four times. I heard a man near me sobbing.

It was over.