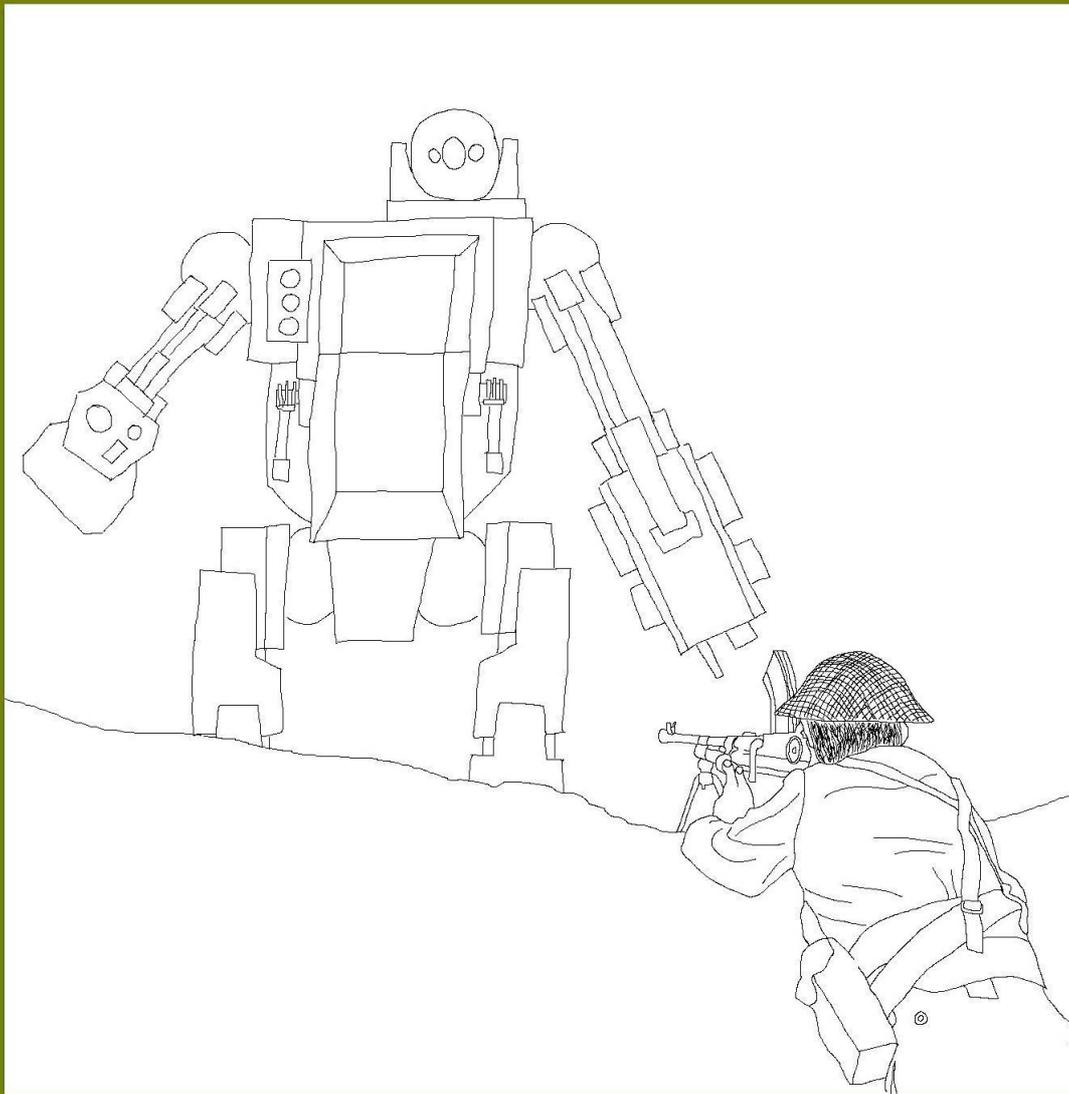


# 2728: BREAKOUT



**BY STEPHEN J DUTTON**

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# PROLOGUE

March 1941. The sky above the Netherlands.

The drone of the Junkers Ju-88C's twin engines filled the cockpit as Otto looked out into the night sky. Somewhere ahead was the target that his night fighter was being directed towards. Quite what the target was or why it was here, no one seemed to know. This was not the typical route taken by British bombers heading for targets in Germany and it was alone. Otto's co-pilot had suggested that it was a reconnaissance aircraft, though the weather conditions were too poor for any high altitude photography to reveal much.

"Target thirty degrees off your port wing." The ground controller signalled, "Range five thousand metres, altitude two thousand metres above you."

Otto's co-pilot looked in the direction indicated while Otto himself brought his aircraft around to bear on the intruder.

"See anything Hans?"

"Nothing." The co-pilot replied, "The British are keeping above the clouds tonight."

"So much for a spy plane then. All they could do up there is take pictures of the clouds."

"There!" Hans sudden shouted and he pointed as an aircraft moved rapidly between clouds above them, caught briefly in the beams of the spotlights being shone up from the ground below. Otto looked up just as the aircraft disappeared and did not see it.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hans replied, "I didn't get a good look."

"Well let's get closer then." Otto said and he pulled back on the night fighter's control column, lifting the aircraft's nose.

The intruder appeared for a brief moment once again, appearing from behind one cloud only to disappear behind another one almost straight away before the spotlights could catch it.

"My God! He's fast!" Hans exclaimed.

"It must be a prototype." Otto said, "That's why its here. The British want to see if they can sneak their new wonder weapon past our defences."

"Well we'll just have to show them they can't. Won't we?"

Otto said nothing, instead he just smiled as he piloted the night fighter into the cloud bank. Seconds later the night fighter broke through the cloud and the enemy aircraft was revealed in the moonlight to the two Luftwaffe crewmen. For several vital seconds they stared in wonder at the aircraft, for it resembled nothing they had seen before. There were no distinct wings, fuselage or engines. Instead it seemed to be a large featureless disk that was hovering in place as the Ju-88C approached it.

"Fire! Quickly! We can't let it get away." Hans yelled. Recovering his senses, Otto fired the nose mounted two centimetre cannon and a line of tracer rounds lit up the sky between the German fighter and the strange aircraft ahead of it.

The intruder suddenly shot straight up, but not before part of the burst of cannon fire had pierced its body towards the rim. Anxious not to allow the aircraft to escape, Otto turned the night fighter after it and fired again. Though moving quickly, the pilot of the intruding aircraft was following a straight course and once again Otto's burst found its mark and this time instead of just clipping the aircraft the attack struck near to the centre of the circular shape.

There was a bright flash and the flying disc wavered in the air before it began to loose altitude rapidly.

Otto turned his night fighter around and he and Hans watched as the disc dropped below the clouds now beneath them. Otto also descended, wanting to make sure that the intruder really was destroyed and not just limping back to England at low altitude. Below the clouds, Otto and Hans saw the flying disc still loosing altitude and trailing fire, with the spotlight beams now focused directly on it.

"I see no parachutes." Hans said, "The crew must still be aboard."

"Not for much longer." Otto said and moments later the disc slammed into the ground. There was a bright flash and the countryside was lit up by fire where the aircraft had crashed.

"So much for the British super weapon." Hans said, "Do you think they have more?"

"It doesn't matter." Otto replied, "The army will have the wreckage of this one within a few hours. It won't take our engineers long to figure out what it was."

Late September 1944. The Netherlands.

SS Standartenfuhrer Kraus, equivalent to a colonel in the Allied armies, knew that the Allies would be arriving at his airfield in days, if not hours. An allied spy plane had been shot down by ground fire only that morning. Though a recent attempt to capture the bridge across the Rhine at Arnham had been fought off, the Allies were now trying to build on what gains they had made and drive the Germans out of the Netherlands altogether. Colonel Kraus had even heard some of the Luftwaffe personnel voicing doubts over whether Germany would even win the war now.

The airfield lay right in the path of the Allied advance and though it pained Colonel Kraus to admit it, he did not have enough men to hold them back for long. Instead of sending him the reinforcements he had requested, his superiors had instead removed more than half of his forces and instructed him to withdraw the rest after making sure that nothing was left behind for the Allies to make use of. This brought more problems for the colonel. The airfield was not a typical posting. In addition to the hangars and buildings visible above ground there was a network of underground facilities where scientists and engineers were studying the remains of the mysterious flying disc that had been shot down here over three years earlier. Withdrawing meant determining what could be safely removed and what had to be destroyed. Then it would have to be determined if what was to be destroyed could be.

A hammering on Colonel Kraus's office door caused him to look up from the papers on his desk. Before he could say anything the door burst open and a man in the uniform of an army captain burst into the room.

"Colonel!" he yelled.

"What is it captain?" Colonel Kraus asked him, just as he heard the sound of men screaming in the distance, followed by the ominous sound of sub-machine gun fire.

"It's the prisoners sir! They've broken out of the containment area!"

Without speaking, Colonel Kraus stood up and drew his pistol. He drew back the slide to check that it was loaded before looking at the captain.

"Lead the way." He said and he went with his subordinate to see what was happening.

# CHAPTER 1

Squadron Leader Hayes had allowed his men to dismount when he halted the squadron.

"Thank you sergeant." He said as the enlisted man handed him a hot cup of tea and he sipped at the drink as he studied the map he had been provided with for the mission.

The force he commanded was 2728 Squadron, a standard rifle squadron of the RAF Regiment, the ground combat force of the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force that had not long been reformed from a light anti-aircraft squadron. Most of this force was mounted in Bedford OXD trucks or jeeps but the support flight of three inch mortar teams was transported in the ubiquitous tracked universal carrier, known more informally as Bren gun carriers thanks to the light machine gun they mounted in the front. It had been bolstered by a flight of half a dozen armoured cars, a medical unit as well as bomb disposal experts from the army's Royal Engineers. All in all it was a suitable mobile force for seizing control of a German controlled airfield that could then be put to use by Allied forces. The problem was that there was no sign of the Dutch resistance fighters who had supposed to have been here to meet him over an hour ago.

"The Dutch boys not here yet then?" a voice said from outside the truck and Hayes looked out to see Lieutenant Grey of the Royal Engineers standing there.

"Hang on a moment." Hayes said and he put his drink on the dashboard of the truck before climbing down from the cab so that he stand face to face with the army officer. Then he continued, "No. There's no sign of them. I was just rechecking our position, just in case we're in the wrong place."

"Here was me thinking that the RAF could find a mole hill in the dark." Lieutenant Grey replied with a smile.

"Depends on how much ack ack there is around it." Hayes said and he too smiled before he reached back up into the cab of the truck and took hold of his drink. "But seriously," he then went on, "if the Dutch don't turn up then we're going to be a bit stuck. Our latest intelligence on this place dates from before Market Garden. A Spitfire from three-oh-eight squadron was supposed to do a fly over a couple of days ago, but the damn Jerries shot it down. So we need the locals to tell us what's going on there right now."

"So how long do you intend to sit here waiting for them?"

"Actually I'm thinking about moving into the town here." Hayes said and he held his map out towards Lieutenant Grey. After the lieutenant took the map Hayes pointed to a settlement not far away. "That's where the resistance is based and I was given the address of one of its members. So if they're not coming here we can try to find them ourselves."

Lieutenant Grey was about to reply when there was a shout from inside the woods that lined the road.

"Get your bloody hands up you bosh bastard!" the voice yelled. At the sound of this most of the soldiers in the column reached for their weapons and looked towards the source of the shouting, "I said get your hands up!" the voice shouted, "That uniform's not fooling anyone! Good, now move!"

After that a man stepped from the tree line onto the road with his hands raised over his head. He was wearing the blue-grey uniform of the Royal Air Force with a bright yellow life jacket over the tunic.

Repeatedly he glanced over his shoulder to look at the soldier following close behind with his rifle levelled at the man. All the time he was ranting in a foreign language.

"What's going on here?" Hayes demanded as he strode towards the man, followed by Lieutenant Grey.

"Caught him spying on us sir." The soldier replied.

"You can take your hands down now." Hayes said to the man in the RAF uniform.

"Careful sir," the soldier said, "he's got a gun."

"I noticed that aircraftman The RAF issued it to him."

The soldier looked puzzled.

"He's Polish." Hayes went on, "You've just arrested one of our own pilots."

The soldier's face turned red and there was laughter from many of the other RAF regiment troops.

"I'm Squadron Leader Hayes, two seven two eight squadron RAF Regiment. I'm terribly sorry about this." Hayes said and he held out his hand to the Polish pilot who took it and shook it.

"Pilot Officer Jerzy Skalaski." He said in accented English, "Three-oh-eight squadron, Royal Air Force."

"You must be our surveillance man then."

"Yes sir. My plane was hit by ground fire and I had to bail out. When I heard you approaching I came closer to see if you were Germans coming to reinforce the airfield."

"Are they getting reinforcements?" Grey asked him.

"I don't know." The Polish pilot admitted. I was able to make a single pass over the airfield before I was shot down, but the camera is still with my plane."

"Do you know where it crashed?" Hayes asked.

"Yes. I took a note of the position after I landed."

"Good." Hayes said and he turned to face the column, "Pilot Officer Jenson!" he shouted and one of his junior officers ran up to him.

"Yes sir?" the young man said as he salute.

"Jenson, this is Pilot Officer Skalaski of three-oh-eight squadron. I want you to take one of your flight's sections to accompany him to where his plane crashed. There you will see if the surveillance camera is intact and if so bring its film back to us. We will be advancing on the town, so you can meet us there. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Jenson replied and he saluted again before rushing off to gather men for the assignment given to him.

Hayes looked back at Skalaski.

"Hopefully there will be the necessary materials to develop your film somewhere in town." He said.

"I would think so," Skalaski replied, "but Squadron Leader..."

"Yes? What is it pilot officer?"

"Might I be able to get something to eat and drink before we leave?"

Hayes smiled.

"Be my guest pilot officer."

Squadron Leader Hayes joined the rifle flight that took the point position for the advance on the town, though he let the pilot officer in charge keep control.

"I don't like this sir." The officer said as he observed the edge of the town from the tree line, his strong accent betraying his Irish nationality.

"No it doesn't look good does it O'Neill?" Hayes added as he too scanned the area through his binoculars.

The fields between the woods and the town presented a wide-open area that would be a deadly kill zone should the Germans be waiting for them. With the high number of automatic weapons their enemies were known for using, the results could be devastating.

The town itself appeared unremarkable, a collection of several hundred buildings that did not appear to have sustained any damage in the four years of German occupation. Aside from a church steeple and a clock tower none of the structures of the town looked to be more than two or three floors tall.

"I can't see any movement at all." Pilot Officer O'Neill said, "As if people have been forced away from this side of town."

"Which is exactly what the Germans would do if they'd taken up positions to ambush us. No sense hiding yourself if the locals can point you out is there?"

"No sir."

"Right then," Hayes said, "we'll have to use the armoured flight."

"What if they have anti-tank weapons?"

"We'll set up our machine guns and mortars here. I don't see any tanks, so anything the Germans have to take out our armoured cars will have to be man portable. We can cover their advance."

The six Morris armoured cars were only lightly armed and armoured, but they offered enough protection from small arms fire to allow their crews to drive along the road leading to the town without fear of being killed by a German machine gun hidden in one of the buildings ahead of them. The Morris had an unusual seating arrangement in that it placed the three crewmen in a line side by side with the driver in the middle being the only one who could see through the narrow vision block in front of him while the other two were forced to stand up to be able to see anything outside the vehicle or operate the light machine guns and anti-tank rifles mounted above their seats. Given the possibility of an attack by the Germans all of the gunners in the flight were stood up and looking down the sights of their weapons, ready to open fire at the first sign of the enemy and it was one of these men in the lead vehicle that first raised the alarm.

"Sergeant! Look!" the crewman assigned to operate the Bren light machine gun of the lead armoured car shouted to its driver and he pointed into the field they were driving past. The sergeant slowed his vehicle down and did his best to look in the direction indicated by the gunner, his vision restricted by the armour in front of him.

"What is it?" he said, raising his voice over the sound of the armoured car's engine.

"The cows sir! They're all dead!"

The sergeant looked again and this time he noticed a black and white shape lying motionless nearby. Concerned, he brought the armoured car to a halt. He opened the hatch above him and stood up for a better look. There he saw that the gunner was correct, every cow in the fields around them was dead. But what was more worrying was that there did not seem to be any explanation for how they had died. The corpses were not bullet-ridden and there were no craters left by explosives. To the sergeant that left only one possible explanation.

"Masks on lads!" he shouted and as the three men in the armoured car began fumbling with the gas masks they had been issued with, but had never had to use until now he switched the armoured car's radio to transmit and yelled, "Gas, gas, gas!"

"Fox two this is fox leader. What's going on?" a voice demanded over the radio.

"Fox leader, fox two." The sergeant said, his gas mask now muffling his voice somewhat, "The cows are all dead, the Germans could be using poison gas."

From their position in the trees Squadron Leader Hayes and Pilot Officer O'Neill looked at one another, both clearly concerned with what they had heard over the radio. So far in the war the Germans had resisted the use of chemical weapons such as phosgene or mustard gas, but now that the tide was against them there was no telling how far they would go to keep the Allies out of Germany.

"Gas?" O'Neill exclaimed as both officers lifted their field glasses to their eyes and studied the fields more closely, "The Germans wouldn't dare." Then they saw the bodies of the cows as well and like the crew of the armoured car they saw none of the typical signs of injuries inflicted by conventional weapons.

"Send one of your runners back to the column." Hayes ordered O'Neill, "Make sure that every man has his mask ready and tell Doctor Weston to be ready to treat casualties from poison gas. Tell him we don't know what the Germans are using yet."

Pilot Officer O'Neill turned towards one of his men.

"Aircraftman Hooper. Go." He ordered and the man stood up and sprinted off in the direction of the main body of troops. "What about the men in those armoured cars sir?" O'Neill then asked Hayes. And Hayes took the radio microphone from its operator beside him.

"Pilot Officer Barton." He signalled to the leader of the armoured car flight, "You are sitting ducks out there. Continue your advance and report any further signs of chemical weapons use."

Reluctantly, the crews of the armoured cars brought their vehicles back into motion and drove closer to the town. Around them they saw no signs of life at all, not a single person or creature moved anywhere that they could see. Pilot Officer Barton brought his force to a halt when they drew close to a farmhouse that sat right on the edge of the seemingly abandoned town.

"This is Barton," he signalled over the radio, "we have reached the edge of town. No enemy presence detected."

"Very good Barton." Squadron Leader Hayes answered, "Hold your position. I'm sending a rifle flight to reinforce you now while the doctor takes a look at those cattle."

Doctor Weston advanced slowly and cautiously across the field, his breathing heavy inside the mask that covered his face. Technically he should have kept low and moved quickly to avoid fire from any snipers that may have been hiding in the buildings nearby, but his fear of being exposed to poison gas was greater than his fear of being shot. If it was mustard gas then he knew that his mask could offer only limited protection, as that particular agent could also be absorbed through the skin. Behind him followed a pair of orderlies, both holding their Lee-Enfield rifles to their shoulders just in case any snipers were waiting for them.

The doctor halted when he reached the nearest of the dead cattle and looked down at the corpse, worryingly he could make out blisters scattered all over its body.

"Sir," one of the orderlies said when he too saw the blisters, "those blisters. Its mustard gas isn't it?"

"Possibly." Doctor Weston said and he knelt down for a closer look. Sure enough there were blisters that appeared to be very much like those inflicted by the chemical burns of mustard gas, but the colour was wrong. As the name suggested, mustard gas caused blisters filled with a yellowish fluid. Additionally, for every single cow to have died must have meant they were exposed to an enormous amount of the poison gas. Most soldiers exposed were crippled instead of killed, even without gas masks. Doctor Weston turned his attention to the dead beast's eyes. Mustard gas caused swelling of the eyelids, but the creature had no such swelling. Instead its eyes were closed.

Carefully, Doctor Weston used his thumb and forefinger to prise open the cow's eye and he saw that the eyeball was shrunken and shrivelled, the moisture drained from it. He let go of the eyelids and they snapped shut again.

"Is it gas sir?" an orderly asked.

Doctor Weston said nothing. The use of a chemical weapon seemed the most likely explanation for what he saw here, but if it was then it was a new type. Then he noticed something else, an odour that his mask could not quite keep out. Pausing for a moment, Doctor Weston reached up to his mask and pulled it from his face and took a deep breath.

The smell of cooked meat filled his nostrils.

"Its not mustard gas." He said, "I've no idea what killed these cattle."

## CHAPTER 2

Pilot Officer Skalaski led Pilot Officer Jenson and his section through the woods in the direction of his crashed aircraft. Of course, there was no guarantee that either the aircraft or the surveillance camera film would still be there. Both the Germans and the local resistance would have had cause to investigate the crash site for anything useful to them and there had been plenty of time following Skalaski's bailing out for someone else to have beaten them to it.

But as it happened, luck was on their side and the wreck was where Skalaski had plotted it to be.

"There it is!" he called out excitedly when he first saw sunlight glinted off the smashed glass of the cockpit canopy and he pointed.

The Spitfire FR Mk IX fighter had come down in a shallow river and was the right way up. The structure of the plane was largely intact apart from the propeller which had been ripped apart in the crash and the engine that had several holes in it from the anti-aircraft fire that had brought it down. This damage resulted in fuel leaking out of its damaged engine that dribbled down and was producing rainbow patterns on the surface of the water as it flowed downstream. The aircraft carried two twenty millimetre cannons and four .303 machine guns in its wings, but these held little interest for the RAF section. Instead they just wanted the sideways facing camera that was mounted just behind the cockpit and its precious film. "Okay lads," Jenson called out, "let's wait here while our Polish friend recovers his film."

The men of the rifle section crouched down, facing in various directions to prevent anyone sneaking up on them unobserved. Covered by Jenson's men, Skalaski waded through the river towards his plane. Having crashed nose first, the aircraft's tail and the camera it contained was clear of the river and Skalaski was easily able to open up the cover and remove the camera within.

"I have it!" he called out and he held up the camera with both hands, "It seems to be undamaged."

"Good." Jenson called back, "Now let's get going. Being out here with only a handful of men is making me nervous."

"Are we just going to leave this aircraft for the Germans to find?" Skalaski asked.

"Good point." Jenson replied, "We need to disable it."

Skalaski nodded and set down the camera so he could remove his scarf. Jenson then moved forwards to pick up the camera himself as the Polish officer made his way to one of the fuel tanks caps and removed it. Now that he had access to the fuel that remained inside the tank Skalaski lowered his scarf into it before pulling it back out most of the way and draping it over the wing. Looking around he confirmed that the section of RAF Regiment troops had taken cover and took out a cigarette lighter that he held to the end of his fuel soaked scarf.

"Down!" he yelled as he lit the scarf and ran, diving to join the others just as the flames reached the remaining fuel in the wing and the Spitfire exploded, the initial 'Boom!' followed by the cracks of gunfire as the cannon and machine gun ammunition also stored in the wings cooked off.

Jenson looked at Skalaski and smiled.

"Do you think anyone would have heard that?" he asked.

Jenson's nervousness at the prospect of having to fight the Germans with only a single section at his command paled in comparison to the nervousness of the bulk of the squadron as they advanced through the deserted streets of the Dutch town. Life in the town seemed to have just come to a halt. Not only were there no people around, despite it being the middle of the day but also there were no sounds of animals either. Just as it had appeared from a distance the town was also undamaged, with not so much as a single bullet hole visible to suggest that there had been any sort of struggle here. This eerie silence kept the RAF troops on their toes. They could have interpreted the lack of people as a sign that there was also no one around to attack them, but after having seen what happened to the cattle in the fields they now expected to be attacked at any moment. This fear became all the more real when one section saw something familiar.

"Panzer!" the section sergeant hissed as he ducked back behind the building corner he had just looked around. His men came to an immediate halt as their sergeant took another quick look around the corner. The tank was parked on the far side of a square, side on to the RAF troops. Like everything else in the town it was silent and unmoving, its engine obviously not running.

"Davis." The sergeant whispered.

"Yes sarge?" one of the other soldiers replied, keeping his voice low so as not to give away their position.

"Head back to the command section and tell them we've encountered German armoured forces. Looks like a mark four panzer. We'll need their PIAT bringing up."

"Yes sarge." The soldier replied before running back the way they had come. The knowledge that there Germans close by inspiring him to keep low and check anywhere that an enemy could be hiding as he went.

"Okay lads, bring that Bren gun up here." The sergeant whispered and a trio of soldiers brought up their light machine gun and began to set it up by the corner. "Careful lads," the sergeant warned them, "no need to rush. Better not to let fritz know we're here."

"Do you want us to fire on them sarge?" the Bren gunner asked as he lay down.

"Only if you see someone to fire at." The sergeant replied. The Bren gun fired the standard British .303 calibre bullet and was no use against the heavily armoured Panzer IV, even from the side and at close range. However, should any of the crew be foolish enough to show themselves the Bren would be lethal to them.

After a few tense minutes of waiting, during which time there was no sign of any movement near the German tank the command section of the rifle flight arrived, bringing with it the officer in command of the flight, Pilot Officer Milton and also their PIAT anti-tank weapon.

"What's happening sergeant?" Milton asked.

"German tank sir."

"Just the one?"

"So far. No signs of movement either."

Pilot Officer Milton glanced around the corner to see the armoured vehicle for himself. Sure enough it was just as the sergeant had described it, a stationary Mark IV Panzer. It was one of the more modern versions with a long barrelled 75mm gun and armoured skirts attached to its sides designed specifically to defeat weapons like the PIAT that used a shaped charge to penetrate armour. Just as the messenger had said there were no signs of life around it. Milton reached to his side where he kept a map case and looked at a map of the town.

"We're here," he said to the sergeant, pointing to the map, "and the tank is just across from us."

The sergeant nodded, he already knew all of this.

"Now I'm going to take my section around this way." Milton went on and he traced a line across the map with his finger, "That should bring us around behind the tank where we can get a much better shot."

"Providing it stays put sir." The sergeant said.

"Yes I know." Milton replied, "If the crew starts up the engine, or if you are threatened in any way by it I want you to open fire and fall back. We'll try and loop around behind to engage from the rear."

"Yes sir." The sergeant said, knowing that if the tank started up his men were bait.

"Good." Milton said and he turned to his men, "Section, with me." And he got up and ran off down a side street.

Weighed down by the heavy PIAT in addition to his Lee-Enfield rifle, the anti-tank gunner struggled to keep up as Pilot Officer Milton moved as quickly as he could through the narrow side streets that he hoped would lead them around the German position to be able to attack them from their most vulnerable side. By the time they reached this location the man with the PIAT was gasping for breath.

"Get ready man." he said as he looked around a corner at the back of the tank in the square.

While the PIAT gunner cocked the spring in his weapon his loader removed a projectile from the set of three cardboard tubes that hung at his side. The gunner lay down and braced the weapon in his shoulder while the loader inserted the round into the front of the weapon.

"Ready to fire sir." The gunner reported.

"Good." Milton replied, "On my command."

The gunner took careful aim, intending for the round to strike the tank's engine covering where it was most vulnerable.

"Wait!" the officer suddenly called out, his voice no longer a low whisper. Confused, his men all looked at him as he pulled out his field glasses and took a more detailed look at the tank. "What does that look like to you?" he asked the PIAT loader and he handed the man his field glasses, "Just to the right of the tank on the pavement."

The loader took the field glasses and looked at the tank for himself, then he moved his field of view slightly so that he was looking at the pavement beside the stationary vehicle.

"Is that a body?" he asked.

"That's what it looks like to me." Milton said and he pulled his revolver from its holster, "Wait here while I get closer and keep me covered."

Keeping low and with his pistol aimed towards it, Pilot Officer Milton approached the German tank. As he drew closer to the deadly machine he saw that there was indeed a man lying on the pavement beside it. It was of course quite possible that the Germans had just shot one of the locals and left him there, but Milton saw that the man was wearing the uniform of a member of the elite SS and it seemed unlikely that the Germans would just leave one of their own lying dead in the street. Specifically he was a tank crewman and Milton guessed that he had been one of the crew of the apparently lifeless armoured vehicle beside him.

When he reached the end of the street that opened out into the square Milton halted. He looked towards the corner where he had left the rifle section covering the tank with their Bren gun. The last thing he wanted as he stepped out into the open was to be machine-gunned by his own men. Milton raised a hand and waved towards the soldiers with the Bren gun and he saw the gunner raise a hand himself. Then Milton ran towards the tank.

He slid to a halt and leant up against the far side of the tank where the body lay face down and looked around. There was still no sign of anyone around either in the streets or watching from any of the buildings that surrounded him. Then he reached out to the man lying on the ground beside him and pressed a finger against the man's throat. He felt no pulse and instead moved his hand down to the man's waist where a pistol was holstered. Milton took the pistol and looked at it. It was one of the Luger pistols common to the German forces. Not as modern as the Walther P38 pistols, but still popular. Milton set his own gun down for a moment as he checked the German gun was clear before he tucked it into his pocket. Then he smiled.

If nothing else, he thought, he had a souvenir.

Milton then picked up his own gun once more and stood up. He reached up and grabbed hold of the tank as he pulled himself up onto the vehicle. All of its hatches were closed and Milton took hold of the handle of the nearest one and wrenched it open. Immediately he recoiled backwards at the smell of burnt flesh that had built up inside.

"It's all clear!" he shouted to men as he jumped down from the tank, "But call this in. We need the doctor to see this."

Elsewhere in the town, Squadron Leader Hayes had taken his flight to the address given to him before the mission as the home of a member of the local resistance. Leaving his men in street covering the area he walked calmly up the garden path towards the front door and pressed the bell. He heard it ring and took his finger away. Then, as he waited for a response he realised that he had no idea if anyone in the house spoke English. He spoke no Dutch so this had the potential to get somewhat awkward.

As it happened there was no answer to the doorbell, so Hayes knocked instead but still there was no reply. He gave the door a gentle push to see if it was open, only to find that it held fast. Turning around he beckoned to one of his men and the soldier came running towards him.

"Sir?" the man said.

"Aircraftman, break this door down." Hayes ordered and he stepped back.

There was a 'crash' as the soldier brought the butt of his Lee-Enfield rifle down against the lock of the door. Then another as he did it a second time. On the third attempt there was a splintering sound as the door gave way and swung open. Drawing his pistol, Hayes stepped into the house.

"Royal Air Force." He called out, "Anyone inside this house should identify themselves immediately."

"Err, excuse me sir." The aircraftman said, "Do you smell that?"

Hayes nodded.

"Inside." He called to the men still waiting on the street outside, "Search this house."

The camera from the Spitfire was now being carried by one of Jenson's men as they followed the course of the river towards the town. At the head of the group the flight's sergeant led the way with his Sten gun held at the ready.

Suddenly the sergeant came to halt and signalled for the rest of the section to do likewise. The sergeant himself dropped into a crouch and brought his sub-machine gun up to his shoulder. Jenson tapped Skalaski on his shoulder and beckoned for the pilot to come with him as he moved to find out what the sergeant had seen.

"What is it sergeant?" Jenson asked in a whisper.

"Ahead of us sir." The sergeant replied, "There's something in the river."

Jenson looked for himself and he saw a pale grey cylinder sticking up out of the water. The end of cylinder that was visible as it protruded from the river tapered slightly until it came to a gaping hole at the

very end. There were smaller holes arranged in a ring around this larger hole, each one pointing away from the centreline of the object.

"Is that a rocket?" Jenson said.

"That's what I thought." The sergeant said, "Like the ones the Germans have been firing at London."

"It does look like one." Skalaski agreed, "Though it's obviously a new type."

"You didn't see anything like this when you flew over the airfield then?" Jenson asked and Skalaski shook his head.

"No, I've never seen anything like that before now." he said.

"Well I'm not getting any closer than I have to. Just because it hasn't exploded yet doesn't mean it isn't going to." Jenson said, "Perhaps we should let Lieutenant Grey take a look at this. He's the bomb disposal expert." Then he looked over his shoulder at the men behind him, "Aircraftman Cooper, stay here with Sergeant Brown and stand guard over that thing." Then he looked back at his sergeant, "But don't get too close to it whatever you do." He added. Leaving the two men to guard the mysterious object, Jenson then led his men on their way towards the town.

The family were all found in their beds and each one of them displayed the blisters that had been evident on the cattle. One of Hayes men sat on the top step of the staircase, still pale after vomiting when he discovered the children. But the significant find, the one that proved they had come to the right place was found in the cellar.

"Four of them sir. Plus ammunition already loaded into magazines." The aircraftman said as he laid out the Mark II Sten sub-machine guns on a table, "They were concealed behind a false wall. Do you think the Germans found out he was resistance and killed the entire family as a reprisal?"

"I doubt it." Squadron Leader Hayes replied as he picked up one of the Stens, "If they knew they'd have arrested them and taken them in for questioning and ripped this place apart. They certainly wouldn't have left these here for us to find." Then he picked up some of the magazines of ammunition. He inserted one of them into the Sten gun he was holding before tucking the others into his webbing. Sten guns were of notoriously poor quality, but it gave Hayes more firepower than his puny .38 Enfield revolver.

"Keep searching." Hayes said, "See if there's anything that might give us a clue about what the Germans did here."

"Squadron Leader?" a voice called out from above.

"Down here." Hayes replied, "What is it?"

"It's Pilot Officer Milton sir. His men have captured a German tank."

Hayes ran up the stairs.

"Where?" he demanded of the soldier standing at the top.

"In the town square sir."

"Take me there."

Still armed with his 'acquired' Sten gun, Squadron Leader Hayes followed the aircraftman through the streets of the deserted town to the square. In addition to the captured German tank, Pilot Officer Barton had brought his flight of armoured cars here. The crews of these vehicles were now clambering over the more powerful German one. Beside the tank Hayes saw a row of bodies covered in blankets. Doctor Weston was standing beside them.

"How many did we lose?" Hayes asked, walking up to the doctor.

"These aren't our men," the doctor replied, "they're Germans. They were the crew of this tank and I think you should see them."

The doctor bent down and lifted one of the blankets so that Squadron Leader Hayes could see the body beneath it. It had been one of the men removed from the tank itself and its skin was badly burnt and covered in blisters.

"We found a Dutch family dead in their beds." Hayes said, "They had the blisters and some burns, but they didn't look this bad though."

"One of them isn't so bad." The doctor said, "We found him lying on the pavement, but all the ones we pulled out of the tank are like this. Its like they've been cooked - and I think they were cooked alive. There are no other injuries."

"Men wouldn't just sit still while they were cooked," Hayes said, "and their clothing isn't burned. Look at them, their uniforms aren't damaged at all, neither were the beds we found the civilians in. Anything hot enough to kill them that quickly would have burned clothes and bedding as well surely?"

"Possibly." Doctor Weston said.

"What do you mean 'possibly'?"

"Well before the war, when radar was first being looked at, the government thought that radio waves could be used to shoot down aircraft. The idea was that the radio waves would build up inside the target and shatter it. It was also thought that they could be used as an anti-personnel weapon. A requirement was even made concerning the required strength and range. Nothing came of the experiments of course, but we still got radar out of it. Perhaps the Germans succeeded where we failed."

"So they were killed by radio?" Hayes said to the doctor. Near to the pair of officers an enlisted man looked down at the radio set resting on the armoured car beside him and took a step away from it. "But why would they kill their own men?" he then added.

"Perhaps it was an accident."

"That's some accident doctor." Hayes replied, "Cooking every man and beast in the area it would seem."

"Maybe, but it would explain what happened here."

"Are we in danger?"

"Unlikely. Like you said they died quickly enough to avoid inflicting any other injuries on themselves, so if the radio emissions that I think killed them were still present we'd already be dead."

"Well that's something then. Is it possible that anyone could have survived?"

"Perhaps. Though if the radio waves were strong enough to penetrate this tank then I don't know what could possibly keep them out. If someone sheltered underground perhaps. In a sewer maybe."

"Well I need to know." Hayes said and he turned away from the doctor towards the other troops scattered around the town square. "Pass the word," he called out, "I want this entire town searched. Every street and every building." Then he paused and looked around. At one side of the square he saw what looked like the town hall with the clock tower Hayes had seen when he first studied the town extending upwards from its roof, "We'll set up headquarters in there." He said, pointing to the building, "If there are survivors then bring them back here."

There were more bodies inside the town hall, starting with a pair of soldiers in SS uniforms just inside the front door who displayed the same characteristic blistering as all of the other victims of whatever had happened to the town and Hayes frowned, crouching down beside one of these bodies while his men began spreading out to search the rest of the building two of them rushing to the large swastika flag that was hanging from a balcony to rip it down.

"Something wrong?" Doctor Weston asked.

"These men are SS." Hayes replied and he looked over his shoulder through the doors at where more of the squadron looked to be busy removing the panzer's two machine guns for the squadron's own use,

"Just like the tank crew were."

"So?" the doctor asked.

"So why are elite SS troops guarding a small town like this? We've seen no signs of regular army troops."

"To be fair we haven't seen that many Germans at all." Weston pointed out.

"Nevertheless," Hayes said as he got back to his feet, "I don't like anything about what we've found so far. None of it makes sense."

Then came shouts from upstairs in the building as the RAF soldiers found more bodies. This time they appeared to be Dutch civilians, specifically women who seemed to have been cleaning the building at the time they died. This lack of bodies in what would have been an important building, coupled with the near empty streets indicated that the town had been struck down some time during the night.

With the building rapidly secured the men of 2728 squadron began to move equipment inside. One of the meeting rooms was promptly designated as the command post itself and maps of the area were brought in and unrolled and pinned to the table, overlapped to form a single larger map of not only the town but also the airfield that was 2728 Squadron's ultimate target.

Reformed from a light anti-aircraft squadron in June of that year, 2728 Squadron no longer had any true anti-aircraft guns available to it. Instead one of the rifle flights deployed its three Bren gun groups to the roof of the town hall, setting them up on their anti-aircraft stands just in case there were any operational aircraft deployed at the German airfield. This was considered an unlikely possibility, if the Germans had any aircraft there then they would have likely used them against the Allies during Operation Market Garden but nothing had been seen by the forces involved in that action. But the possibility could not be entirely ruled out, especially given the mysterious deaths of everyone in the town and so Squadron Leader Hayes gave the order to prepare their defences.

## CHAPTER 3

Travelling on foot and across uneven terrain, Pilot Officers Jenson and Skalaski arrived in town more than two hours after the rest of the squadron. The group of troops they encountered searching the area directed them towards Squadron Leader Hayes' chosen headquarters. Inside they found the Squadron Leader, Pilot Officers O'Neill and Milton and Lieutenant Grey studying maps of the area.

"Mission accomplished sir." Skalaski said as he put the camera down on the table the officers were gathered around.

"Excellent." Squadron Leader Hayes said, "I don't know how much you've heard, but if the film in that survived it could help answer some very important questions."

"You mean about people being roasted alive?" Lieutenant Grey asked.

"Indeed." Hayes replied, "Now I take that neither of you knows how to develop that film?"

The two newly arrived officers both shook their heads. "I thought not. Skalaski, take it to Doctor Weston. I'm sure he can develop it for us. Providing our men have found the necessary chemicals in their search of course."

Skalaski took the camera from the table again and left in search of the doctor. Meanwhile Pilot Officer Jenson remained with the others studying the map.

"We found something else in the woods sir." He said and both Hayes and Grey looked up at him, "About here." And he pointed to a spot on the map.

"What?" Hayes asked.

"I'm entirely sure sir." Jenson answered, "But it looked like some sort of rocket. It looked to have crash landed in the river without exploding so I left two of my men guarding it."

Hayes looked at Lieutenant Grey. The engineer looked at his watch.

"If we take a couple of jeeps my men and I can be there and back before it gets dark hopefully." He said looking back up at Hayes.

"Do it." Hayes replied with a nod, "But take care. Where there's one Panzer, there are probably more. Take a wireless set with you. If you encounter the enemy don't try and fight it out with them, it looks like we're dealing with the SS after all. Get out of there and I'll send reinforcements."

Grey nodded back at Hayes and left the room while the RAF officers turned back to the map.

"Well without the Dutch resistance to help us this is all we have to guide us to our target." Hayes said, looking down at the map.

"Just one road." Milton commented, "And the terrain is far to flat for my liking."

"Welcome to Holland." O'Neill said, "We're below sea level here you know."

"Yes and that poses problems all of its own." Hayes responded, "If the Germans decide to they can literally open the flood gates and all this area here will fill with water." and he moved his hand over the map between the town and airfield.

"Then we need to get to the airfield as quickly as we can." Milton said, "The Germans won't flood their own position."

"We can't just go in blind though." Hayes replied, shaking his head, "Too much has happened that we weren't expecting for us to take stupid risks like that." and he looked up at O'Neill, "Pilot Officer O'Neill, I want to scout out the airfield with a single flight before we decide how to continue. I want you and One Flight to accompany me there. We'll head in on foot to try and avoid being noticed."

"Yes sir." O'Neill responded, "We can be ready to go in under an hour."

"Not just yet O'Neill. Let your men rest for now. I think it may be a good idea if we can take a look at those reconnaissance photographs first."

Then there came a knock on the door and looking around Hayes saw his sergeant standing the doorway.

"Sergeant Moyles." Hayes said, "What is it?"

"Aircraftman Trent still hasn't been able to contact headquarters on the wireless sir." Moyles told him.

"Is the set damaged?" O'Neill asked.

"No sir." Moyles replied, "Trent's checked it all out and he can still get signals through to the other sets we have in town. But something's stopping us from getting word out of here."

"Doesn't sound like jamming." Milton said.

"No it doesn't." Hayes agreed, "At least not like any ordinary jamming."

"Another of those unexpected happenings you were talking about." O'Neill said.

"Yes." Hayes replied with a frown, "Another."

"Doctor!" Skalaski called out to Weston. Doctor Weston was inspecting a group of bodies that his team of orderlies were carrying out of a row of houses and making notes about his observations. So far every last one had shown identical marks but he still considered it a worthwhile task to check each one in turn. So far all that he could tell was that they had died quickly and that was more due to the various places they had been found in than anything he had found from examination of the blistered corpses.

"Skalaski, how may I help you?" he asked, getting back to his feet and facing the Polish pilot. Then he noticed the camera that he was carrying, "Ah, I take it that that is the camera from your aircraft."

"Correct doctor." Skalaski replied, lifting the camera, "Squadron Leader Hayes has suggested that you would be able to develop the film it contains."

"Well I think I ought to be able to manage it." Weston replied, "There's a small hospital in town and according to the search teams it has an X-ray machine. If they were taking X-rays then they must have had the ability to develop them."

Leaving Weston's orderlies to continue the task of removing bodies Skalaski and Weston headed for the local hospital. This was not a large structure intended to hold and treat hundreds of patients like a large city hospital, instead it was just large enough to allow a small number of doctors treat around a dozen people suffering from relatively mild ailments and carry out a few minor surgeries while more serious cases would be sent elsewhere. However, as Doctor Weston had stated the RAF team that had searched the building had discovered, it did feature an X-ray machine to help diagnose patients and this meant that not only was it equipped with the chemicals necessary to develop photographic film but also had somewhere fitted out specifically for that film to be developed. The chemicals for developing the film were stored in an unlocked cupboard and although the labelling of these was in Dutch each jar featured the chemical formula of the contents, allowing Doctor Weston to identify them all.

"Yes, these should do." he said, removing the jars from the cupboard, "Now would you like to assist me?" "It would be my pleasure doctor." Skalaski replied.

Brown and Cooper had positioned themselves about a hundred yards upstream from the mysterious object and when they heard the sound of engines they both raised their weapons.

"Is it the Germans?" Cooper whispered.

"Stay here while I find out." Brown told him before darting forwards to conceal himself behind a tree that he then peered around towards the source of the noise and he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw a pair of jeeps heading towards him through the woods. Though the markings on them were of 2728 Squadron the occupants of the two vehicles were the army bomb disposal personnel attached to the squadron for this mission but Brown still recognised them and so he stepped out into the open with his Sten gun lowered and waved.

"Over here!" he called out to them and the driver of the lead jeep turned towards him, bringing it to a halt just in front of him.

"Sergeant Brown." Lieutenant Grey said from the passenger seat, "Flight Officer Jenson says you've found something for me to take a look at."

"Yes sir." Brown replied, "Not that we've any idea what it is, but it's back there by the river."

"Then let's go and take a look at it shall we?" Grey said as he climbed out of the jeep, "London and Groves stay with the jeeps." he ordered, "Everyone else with me."

Brown then led the Royal Engineers back to where Cooper still waited and from there to where the mysterious cylinder was located, stopping as soon as it came into view and pointing towards it.

"There it is sir." he said, "Just as we found it."

"Very good." Grey replied with a nod, "Now everyone wait here while I investigate. Take cover just in case it does have a warhead of some sort." he added before he began to move towards the cylinder. He kept low, ready to dive to the ground at the slightest sign that the mysterious object was about to explode but as he continued towards it, it seemed totally inert. When the cylinder was just a few yards away Grey circled it, examining it for any signs of markings that would give some indication of what it was or even who had made it. In the years he had spent dealing with unexploded munitions of both Allied and German manufacture he had seen nothing like what he was looking at now. Standing so that he faced the opening that stuck up into the air, Grey tried to peer inside but it revealed nothing about what may be contained inside the cylinder. Setting his bag down on the riverbank, Grey took a stethoscope from it and crept right up to the cylinder before crouching down beside it. Then he fitted the stethoscope's earpieces into his ears and as gently as he could he placed the diaphragm against the cylinder close to where it was embedded into the ground and held his breath.

Silence.

If there was any form of mechanical timing device inside the cylinder then it was not currently running, nor was there any other form of mechanical action that Grey could hear. Carefully, not wanting to disturb the way the cylinder was resting just in case he triggered any sort of booby trap, Grey moved his stethoscope further along the cylinder and paused to listen again. He repeated this several times, each time getting further towards what he considered to be the 'rear' of the cylinder where there was the large opening surrounded by the ring of smaller ones. But each time the result was the same, nothing inside the cylinder was making any noise at all.

With a sigh he was just about to remove his stethoscope when he had an idea and he gently knocked the side of the cylinder with his knuckle beside where he had placed his stethoscope and listened to the sound it produced. Then he began to work his way back towards the 'front' of the cylinder, knocking against it and listening carefully.

The first few times he did this Grey heard a dull 'clunk' through his stethoscope, changing to a more hollow echoing sound as he continued. Much to his relief there were no ticking sounds at all, indicating that he at least had not triggered any sort of delayed action timer. But the hollow sounds were significant. If this was any sort of weapon even remotely similar to any other then there should have been a warhead filling the section near to the front that would have produced a similar sound when knocked as what Grey took to be the engine at the rear did. But as far as he could tell the front half of the cylinder was largely empty inside.

Putting his stethoscope away, Grey stood up and turned to where he could make out a row of heads wearing the familiar wide brimmed helmets of British forces.

"It's not going to explode." he called out, "Now come and give me a hand with this."

One by one, the rest of Grey's bomb disposal team and the two RAF men emerged from their hiding place and made their way to join him by the cylinder.

"What is it?" Grey's sergeant asked.

"A very good question Sergeant Martin." Grey responded, "Sadly not one I can attempt to answer yet. All I can say is that there does not appear to be an explosive warhead to worry about."

"Sir, could this have been used to disperse the gas that killed the people in the town?" Cooper asked nervously, the aircraftman standing towards the back of the group.

"Doctor Weston has discounted gas already." Grey told him, "So we don't need to worry about any traces of that being left inside either. But what I want to find is some way of getting inside this thing without having to cut or drill it."

"Okay men, you heard the lieutenant." Martin said as he slung his Sten gun over his shoulder and knelt down beside the cylinder and placed his fingertips against it. The others in the bomb disposal team did the same and while Brown and Cooper watched they began to examine the surface of the cylinder for any imperfections that may indicate some form of access point.

Initially this seemed fruitless, the curved surface seemingly one single piece, but then Grey himself felt something under his fingertips.

"I've found something." he said with a smile, "Quick, someone pass me a knife." and keeping one finger pressed against the imperfection he had felt Grey held out his hand while one of his men produced a pocket knife and handed to him, "Thank you." he said, unfolding the knife and then using the compact blade to scrape away at the cylinder while his men watched closely. The pale grey colour of the cylinder was revealed to be a thin layer of paint that came away as the knife blade scraped at it to reveal a more metallic shine underneath. As he had expected, Grey found that when he scrape the paint away from the imperfection he had felt a small circle was exposed. This appeared to be a screw of some type, its head filled with more of the paint to smooth it off. But like everything else about this cylinder the screw head differed from what Grey was used to, possessing a star shaped indentation for a screwdriver rather than a simple slot or cross. But by using the pocket knife to dig out the paint Grey was able to get the point of the blade into the indentation and he turned it, feeling the screw turn as well.

"I think we've found our way in lads." he said as he went back to scraping the paint off the cylinder until he found a paint filled join between two adjacent parts of the cylinder's construction and he followed this to expose what looked to be a rectangular panel about twelve inches long and eight wide that was held in place by six of the star-headed screws, "Okay everyone other than Sergeant Martin better get back again." Grey said, "I'm going to try removing this panel and if it is booby trapped I want you all clear of it." then as the other men withdrew back to their hiding place Grey looked at the sergeant, "I want you to hold this panel down while I release the screws," he said, "Then we'll remove it in one go rather than let one side lift before the other. Understood?" and Martin nodded, reaching down and pressing on the panel, "Okay, here goes. Let me know if you feel anything shift."

Slowly, Grey undid each of the screws in turn and placed them on the ground beside his bag. Then when he had finished with the last screw he looked at Martin again.

"Okay, now let it go." he said and Sergeant Martin lifted his hands from the panel.

Immediately the panel just dropped out of its position, sliding to the ground and both Grey and Martin flinched. In their experience of dealing with unexploded bombs when anything happened suddenly it was bad and their hearts pounded in their chests while they waited to see if anything would happen. When nothing exploded or otherwise did anything harmful to the two men Grey rummaged through his bag and took out a small battery powered lantern that he turned on and shone into the cavity exposed behind the panel.

"This is definitely no bomb." Grey said as he looked inside the cylinder. Rather than the explosives and triggering devices that he was used to dealing with the cylinder contained several flat sheet arranged vertically and as Grey shone the light across them he saw numerous tiny objects that looked to be fixed to the sheets that had lines emerging from them and running to other similar objects, "These look like some sort of printed circuits." he said.

"But why are there so few components?" Martin asked.

"There aren't." Grey answered, "It's just that whoever made this can make electronics far smaller than we can. Look, see these tiny black blocks? I think that these are some of the components." and he pointed to a cluster of black box shaped objects smaller than a finger nail.

Martin frowned.

"But how could the Germans build something like this sir?"

"I'm not so sure that they did sergeant." Grey replied, "There are absolutely no markings on it at all that suggest it was made in Germany or anywhere else in Europe for that matter."

"Then where did it come from?"

"I'm afraid that is a question I can't even attempt to answer right now sergeant. But now that we can see what's inside it we can at least try to figure out what it does. Look, do those look like batteries to you?" and Grey shone the light further towards the back of the cylinder to illuminate a cluster of silver blocks that each had two wires of different colours connected to them.

"Yes sir, batteries."

"Then either this device requires little power or those batteries are as unusual as everything else about this is." Grey said. Then he focused the light on what lay at the bottom of the cylinder, beneath the frame that the circuit boards were mounted in and he saw what looked like several lengths of bent wire all pointing straight down at the bottom of the cylinder's casing, "An antenna." he said to himself.

"I'm sorry sir?" Martin responded.

"I said that there's an antenna in here sergeant. Like what we use on our wireless sets but smaller like the rest of the electronics on those circuits. Sergeant I think that this is the source of Doctor Weston's fabulous radio death ray. The Germans flew it over the town to test it. Then it crashed here."

"But we found dead Germans in the town as well sir. The tank-"

"They may have wanted to find out how well it would work on armoured forces." Grey interrupted, "Perhaps they thought that their men would be safe in the tank and the town hall. Killing them may not have been intentional. Which would at least mean that the Germans aren't ready to deploy this weapon operationally yet."

"So what do we do with it now sir?" Martin asked, "Do we destroy it?"

"Destroy it? Of course not. No sergeant this needs to be studied properly back in England and for that we're going to have to dig it out of the ground and carry it back to the jeeps."

Hayes watched as some of Barton's men examined the MG34 machine guns that had been taken from the Panzer in a courtyard behind the town hall where several of the squadron's vehicles had been parked with a view to using them themselves. The belt fed weapons offered significant advantages over the thirty round magazines of the RAF troopers' Bren guns, but the fact that they were more familiar with the British built light machine guns as well as the ability to share ammunition with their Lee-Enfield rifles still made the Brens of more use overall and it was Hayes' opinion that the captured machine guns would be better used with one of the armoured vehicles. Ideally he would have preferred to have them sent up to the roof of the town hall for use in the air defence role, but neither of the machine guns had the appropriate mounting or sights for that.

"Ah squadron leader." Doctor Weston's voice called from the doorway and Hayes looked up to see him exiting the building with a brown paper file in his hand, "Milton said I'd find you out here."

"I was just taking a look at these machine guns from the tank." Hayes replied as he approached Weston. Then he glanced down at the file, "I take it that those are the photographs from Pilot Officer Skalaski's aircraft?" he added.

"Indeed they are. One copy at least. I thought it prudent to make two just in case we needed them." the doctor said and he held out the folder for Hayes to take. Accepting the offered folder Hayes opened it up and began to glance through the images contained within. As expected they all showed the German airfield taken from an oblique angle due to the sideways mounted camera of the Spitfire. However, despite the various buildings blocking the camera's view at times the images still gave a clear picture of most of the area. The only problem was the level of magnification that made it difficult to see details with the naked eye.

"You say you made more than copy?" Hayes asked.

"Yes, the other is in your command post. Skalaski is going through them with the others." Weston answered and as he saw Hayes trying to make out details he added, "And they had a magnifying glass." "Then I think we should join them." Hayes replied, closing up the folder again.

The pair made their way inside and upstairs to the command post where they found the five flight commanders and Skalaski had cleared one wall of all furniture and hanging decoration and were in the midst of drawing a large scale map on the now clear wall in pencil.

"Ah, squadron leader." O'Neill said as he took the pencil away from the wall, "We thought it may be useful to be able to see what we're all talking about without needing to all use the same magnifying glass at the same time."

"Good idea." Hayes replied, "So can anyone tell me what we have?"

"Not much sir." Jenson told him. He currently had one of the surveillance photographs in one hand and the magnifying glass in the other, "It doesn't look like the airfield is in use at all."

"There are no planes in any of the pictures." Skalaski added, "Not even transports."

"Still a few Germans about though hey?" O'Neill commented, "It'd be a bit embarrassing to get shot down by no-one."

"Are the anti-aircraft guns visible on any of the photos?" Hayes asked and Milton nodded.

"Right here." he said, stepping up to the hand drawn map and pointing to a small square that had been coloured in, "And here as well." he added as he pointed to a second.

"They're both twenty millimetre weapons." Jenson commented.

"Well that's a relief I suppose." Hayes said, "No eighty-eights to worry about."

The eighty-eight millimetre anti-aircraft gun was one of the most feared in the German arsenal by the Allies. As well as being able to fire a high explosive shell thousands of yards into the air it was capable of firing at ground targets using armour piercing rounds that could penetrate the armour of any Allied tank or even used to bombard the town while 2728 Squadron was unable to respond.

"Those twenty millimetre guns will still tear our armoured cars and Bren carriers to pieces." Milton pointed out.

"Yes, but my flight can use our mortars to take them out without worrying about being shelled in return."

Pilot Officer Riggs, the commanding officer of 2728's support flight answered from by the window.

"There are a few armoured cars as well." Jenson said.

"They look like half track troop carriers." Barton added.

"No more Panzers?" Hayes asked.

"Not that we've found." Jenson answered.

"Unfortunately the Germans were able to shoot me down before I was able to circle around for a pass from the other side." Skalaski said.

"And that means we've got great big gaps in what we can see." O'Neill added and he waved his hand over the wall, the gesture intended to indicate the places that had not been included in any of the photographs, "Especially behind this building here. We're assuming its a hangar, but its big even for that." and he pointed to a large rectangle drawn on the wall.

"It looks about fifty or sixty yards in each direction." Milton added, "Big enough for a squadron of German fighters or bombers."

"Or dozens of Panzers." Barton commented.

"Well we'll just have to go with what we've got." Hayes said, "We can find out what's in those blank spots for ourselves when I take One Flight to scout out the area."

"And what if the Germans are hiding more tanks out there?" Weston asked.

"The Boys rifles on my armoured cars can deal with the half tracks." Barton added, "But Panzers like the one we found out there are another matter." and Hayes sighed.

"If there are too many for us to stand a reasonable chance of taking them all out with our PIATs we'll have to withdraw." he admitted, "We're not equipped to fight a tank brigade. But one or two shouldn't be an issue."

The sound of an engine was then heard coming from the square outside and Riggs turned around to see what was going on.

"What the devil is that?" he said out loud when he saw the two jeeps that had taken Lieutenant Grey's bomb disposal unit into the woods now returning with most of the army personnel crammed into one jeep while the other held just enough of them to hold onto the mysterious grey cylinder they had brought back with them.

"I don't believe it." Jenson exclaimed when he went over to the window to look for himself and saw the familiar cylinder, "That fool's brought that damned rocket right here."

"Then I suggest we go and see why." Hayes replied before the group of officers hurried out of the room and down the stairs, dashing out into the square just as Grey's men were starting to unload the cylinder from the back of the jeep.

"Doctor Weston!" Grey exclaimed, "Behold your death ray." and Weston frowned.

"It looks more like a big cigar to me." he said.

"What is it lieutenant?" Hayes asked.

"Well it does appear to be a rocket of some form sir." Grey answered, "There's an engine at the back."

"How does it steer?" Riggs asked.

"I think with these smaller holes around the side." Grey said, "By diverting some of the thrust out of them the whole thing could be turned or tilted. I can't be sure of course. It'll need to be sent back to England for examination."

"What makes you think that it's the source of the death ray?" Hayes asked and Grey slapped the cylinder's casing where the antenna was located inside.

"There's an antenna right here." he said, "This thing is full of printed circuits and what look like batteries to power them. There was no explosive content at all. I think that this thing is just a big radio, one that works on a frequency unlike anything that we use and is far more powerful."

"And the Germans built this?" Weston said, "Could they have more?"

"I think we have to assume that they do have more doctor." Hayes responded.

"But I don't think they built it." Grey added and Hayes stared at him.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Look at this." Grey said and he walked up to the open panel and reached inside to detach one of the circuit boards from its mounting, "See?" he said, holding it up, "In all my experience of dealing with German munitions I've never seen components like these before. Nothing that comes even remotely close. If they had developed this themselves then I'd at least have expected to have seen some sort of intermediate stage in other weapons before now. Someone else made this and the Germans are just making use of it I'm sure."

"So who did make it then? O'Neill said.

"Well not us, that's for sure." Grey answered, "And I don't think the Americans have got anything like this either."

"The Soviets?" Riggs suggested and Skalaski snorted.

"Soviets are animals." he said, "They need an instruction manual just to tell them which end of a hammer to hold."

"Now then," O'Neill replied, "didn't anyone tell you that the Soviet Union is our friend?"

"Yours maybe. But never mine." Skalaski said sternly, the memory of how the USSR allied itself with Hitler's Germany to invade and occupy his native Poland.

"Squadron leader I don't think that this was made by the Soviets either." Grey said.

"Well whoever made it, the Germans have this technology now and it's up to us to stop it being deployed against our forces." Hayes said. Then he looked at O'Neill, "Pilot Officer O'Neill, I want your flight ready to move out at oh four hundred hours. Moving on foot that should get us to the airfield just before dawn tomorrow. Once the airfield is ours we'll find out exactly who made this thing and how the Germans got hold of it."

## CHAPTER 4

One Flight, joined by Squadron Leader Hayes' own squadron command section left the town under cover of darkness, hoping to avoid detection by the Germans before they reached the airfield. This was just a token force, enough men to take care of themselves if ambushed by a German patrol but not sufficient to overcome the defences that the surveillance photographs indicated that the Germans had in place. At most Hayes hoped to find a small group of Germans outside the perimeter that could be captured without creating too much of a disturbance and then taken back to the town to be interrogated. Rather than risk the road which was likely to be watched closely by the Germans protecting the airfield, the force of RAF troops instead made their way across country. With few hills to provide cover they stuck to the wooded areas as much as they could but every so often there was no choice other than to make a quick dash across open country. Rather sensibly though, the area around the airfield perimeter had been cleared of trees by the Germans to prevent an enemy from being able to sneak right up to the barbed wire fence without being seen and as the sun was starting to appear over the horizon Squadron Leader Hayes found himself crouched near the edge of the woods cradling his Sten gun in his arms and looking out over a stretch of open ground that had the sole road connecting the airfield to the town running across it and looking at the main gate to the airfield. Ideally he would have liked to use his field glasses to get a better view of the airfield and its defences but with the sun rising he was aware that it would take just one unfortunate reflection off the lens to alert the German sentries to the RAF troops' presence here and so instead he made do with his own eyes.

The airfield gate was blocked by a simple wooden bar across the entrance and defended by two prominent sandbagged bunkers, each of which had a narrow slot in the front with the barrel of a machine gun, most likely either MG34s like those that had been taken from the Panzer in the town or newer MG42s. Whichever it was these two guns alone could cut down every last man in One Flight before any of them could get close enough to try getting a grenade through the firing slots of either bunker if they were to attempt a direct frontal assault. The two bunkers could probably be destroyed using the PIATs that both O'Neill's and Hayes' own command sections possessed but attacking the airfield right now was not what Hayes had planned in any case and he turned his attention to the rest of the airfield.

As far as Hayes could tell the barbed wire fence went all the way around. There were no obvious signs to indicate whether it was electrified or not but it was still a possibility that could not be ruled out. Inside the fence he could just about make out narrow trenches dotted around where the German troops could take shelter if the airbase came under attack and further beyond these were the structures of the airfield. Most prominent among these were the control tower that stood higher than any of the others and also the massive building that Hayes guessed was an aircraft hangar of some form. It was only to be expected that the Germans would enforce a black out at night to reduce the risk of being attacked by Allied bombers but as far as Hayes could tell this black out was still in operation even now that the sun was coming up and not one light shone through any window that he could see. Then he realised that lights were not the only things missing from what he was looking at and he leant towards O'Neill. Like Hayes, the Irishman had supplemented his .38 calibre Enfield revolver with one of the Stens found in the home of the dead resistance fighter though he held the weapon against his shoulder ready to fire it at a moment's notice.

"If this is a German airfield," Hayes said softly, "then where are all the Germans?"

"You Brits really are fussy aren't you squadron leader?" O'Neill replied, "Not satisfied with a German airfield, you want it full of damned krauts as well." then after a moment's pause he added, "But I know what you mean. If I left the main gate of an RAF airfield without a sentry then I'd expect you to be down on me like a ton of bricks. Those bunkers don't offer enough visibility to be any use for watching for visitors."

"And there's no one walking the perimeter that I can see." Hayes added, "In fact I'd say that there isn't a single German soldier down there at all."

"You're not about to suggest we wander over to those gates and ask if anyone's home are you sir?" O'Neill asked.

"No. but I want to get a better look." Hayes replied, "Which I think can be done better from over there." and he pointed off to the side.

"Why there?" O'Neill replied as he tried to make out any difference in the terrain between that position and the one that they now occupied.

"The sun will be behind us." Hayes told him, "No reflection from my field glasses." and O'Neill nodded.

"Okay boys, let's move out." he said, looking round at the men of his flight who were gathered in the woods behind them.

"No." Hayes said, "Just my section. But I'll leave the PIAT crew here. If we get spotted then those bunkers are likely to start shooting and I'd like them taken out as quickly as possible. I'm trusting you to take care of that."

"You can rely on me sir." O'Neill said.

Hayes turned to his section and nodded.

"Mitchell, Dunn, stay here with Pilot Officer O'Neill's flight." he said, "The rest of you come with me."

Hayes and his section then began to make their way around the airfield, retreating a short distance back into the woods to avoid being seen by any Germans who may have gone undetected. At one point the road that ran past the gate turned into the woods and Hayes' section crossed it, moving one at a time while the rest kept watch for any enemy activity. They continued like this until the shadows indicated that they were positioned directly between the airfield and the sun and Hayes then headed back towards the open ground between the woods and the bare wire surrounding the airfield. Again Hayes halted just inside the woods and dropped into a crouching position. This time however, he took out his field glasses and began to search the airfield.

Just as when he had studied it from outside the front gate, Hayes saw no signs of life at all. Every building was dark and silent and the wide open spaces between these that provided enough room for multiple aircraft at once to manoeuvre as they prepared for take off or landing were devoid of all human life. The main doors to the massive structure that had attracted the attention of 2728 Squadron's officers were visible from this angle and Hayes focused on them, hoping for some hint of what the building housed. Unfortunately the folding doors were closed, concealing what, if anything, was inside the hangar and so Hayes moved on to another part of the airfield.

The anti-aircraft guns intended to protect the airfield against Allied air attack were both placed in open areas so that they had the widest field of fire possible. In keeping with everywhere else Hayes had observed on the airfield, neither of these was manned but this was not unusual. If warned about an impending air attack guns crews could be in position in a very short time. But one thing that Hayes noticed was that one of the guns had been levelled, pointing directly towards one of the airfield buildings rather than at the sky and he could see a drum of twenty millimetre rounds in place. Regardless of whether there was any ammunition left inside the drum or not this should have been removed for basic safety.

Then he caught sight of one of the half tracked troop carriers that had shown up on the aerial surveillance photographs. Or least what was left of one. The front mounted engine looked to have exploded, the wheels used to steer the vehicle were twisted and the engine cover had been blown off. The rest of the open topped but armoured vehicle looked to be completely burnt out, the original grey paintwork having been stripped away. The MG42 machine mounted to the top of the half track was still visible and thanks to the ammunition belt being made from metal rather than fabric he could see that it had been loaded when the vehicle was destroyed.

Satisfied that the half track was out of action Hayes moved on again and as he searched for something else of significance his view passed by the massive structure again. At first he paid it no further attention, having already studied the building and he moved on. But then something made him stop, his subconscious telling him that something he had just seen was not right and he turned back to the large structure. He studied the front of the building again and everything seemed the same as it had been. Then he noticed a door in the side of the building. Unlike the massive folding doors that dominated the front face this was an ordinary door designed for one person at a time to be able to pass through. And it was open.

When Hayes had first studied the building it had appeared to be sealed up tight, with every door and window closed. Now though the door was definitely open, extending outwards at an angle that still prevented Hayes from seeing what lay within.

"Maybe someone's at home then." he muttered to himself before deciding to search elsewhere and he turned his attention to the barbed wire fence itself.

Here he saw something that made him smile. The barbed wire ran all the way around the airfield as far as Hayes could see but there was a section where a pole carrying telephone lines back towards the town had fallen through it, flattening the wire against the ground and creating a way to get through the wire that was out of the field of fire of either of the machine guns positioned by the main gate.

O'Neill turned as a runner from Hayes' command section arrived.

"Where's the squadron leader?" he asked.

"Squadron Leader Hayes has found a breach in the barbed wire sir." the runner announced, "He wants One Flight to join him for an advance through."

"He's going to try and take the airfield with just one section?" O'Neill exclaimed. Then he looked at his men, "Come on then lads," he told them, "the squadron leader has summoned us."

Hayes' section had positioned itself as close to the breach in the barbed wire as possible while remaining within the woods.

"Ah, Pilot Officer O'Neill." Hayes said, "I want to take a look around the airfield."

Yes your runner said so." O'Neill replied, "But is that wise with barely fifty men?"

"I think the Germans are gone. Or at least most of them." Hayes answered, "I think something drove them away in a hurry."

"Are you saying that it's deserted squadron leader?"

"Not quite. There could still be someone around. I saw a door hanging open that was closed the last time I looked at it. It could have been the wind but I can't be sure."

"I don't like the sound of that." O'Neill commented before he looked at the breach in the barbed wire fence, "So how do you want to proceed?" he then asked.

"We'll move by sections." Hayes explained, "A rifle section first, then my command section, another rifle section, your command section and we'll finish off with the last rifle section."

"Leaving one section by the wire?" O'Neill suggested and Hayes nodded.

"That's what I was thinking, yes." he replied.

"Corporal Frost." O'Neill called out, "Take Number One Section in first. Everyone else cover them. I want those Brens up front."

The first section moved up while the Bren gun groups from the other two set up their weapons and aimed them towards the airfield, one pointing either side of the breach in the wire.

"Go!" Frost suddenly exclaimed and he leapt up with his Sten gun pointing forwards the barbed wire and he charged across the open ground, followed by the other men of his section. They ran towards the breach in the fence, leaping over the flattened section of the barbed wire before spreading out into a semi-circle and diving to the ground with their weapons held at the ready.

"Here goes." Hayes said to O'Neill and then he too led his section through the fence. The rest of the flight followed, one section at a time until the entire force was crouched and lay inside the perimeter.

"Okay so now what?" O'Neill asked.

"We split up." Hayes replied, "You and I will investigate the main gate to start off with. If it is undefended then I want to know what happened to the guards. Leave one section right here and the other can go and check out the buildings."

The flight split up, with Frost's section staying by the fence. Hayes led his and O'Neill's section back towards the main gate where they could see the sandbagged bunkers positioned to defend it from behind. The two sections slowed down and began to move more cautiously when these came into view just in case there was anyone hiding inside that could turn the weapons mounted within on them. The two soldiers armed with PIATs and their loaders stopped short, cocking their weapons and dropping to the ground as projectiles were loaded into them. If anyone was hiding inside the bunkers and planning to ambush the advancing RAF troops then they would not find their victims completely helpless. Meanwhile the rest of the sections spread out, not offering anyone inside the bunkers a single dense target that would make it easy for them to wipe out a large portion of the advancing force with a single burst from an automatic weapon or a well thrown grenade. Fortunately the machine guns remained in their mounts pointing outside the gates and when the RAF troops reached the bunkers and looked inside they found that they were empty. Each MG42 was mounted on a fixed stand to stabilise it for sustained fire and was loaded with a belt of ammunition from a metal box beside it. In both cases there was a lack of empty bullet cases on the floor of the bunkers and the weapons looked to have been abandoned without even being fired.

"So whatever happened here happened quick enough that the Germans didn't have the time to even take these with them." Hayes commented.

"Leaving them for us." O'Neill added and he nodded to his men who instantly darted forwards, slinging their weapons before starting to dismantle the MG42 mounts.

Hayes lent up against one of the bunkers to watch the weapons be dismantled and frowned when he felt something strange beneath his hand.

"Something wrong sir?" O'Neill asked.

"Maybe." Hayes replied, pulling his hand away from the wall of the bunker and looking at it closely.

Several of the sandbags had been punctured it seemed and some of the contents had spilled out, but what really caught Hayes' attention was the spot where his hand had rested for just a few moments.

There he saw what looked to be a small hole in one of the sandbags that appeared big enough for his finger to poke through. Or at least it would be if there hadn't been something already sticking into the sandbag. From what Hayes could see the object stuck into the sand had a rounded, bulbous end and was transparent, "What is this?" he asked out loud as using his thumb and forefinger he took hold of the object and tried to pull it free. But the object remained stuck in place and Hayes pulled harder. He fumbled in his pocket for a knife and after unfolding the blade he stabbed it into the sandbag, using it to cut around the mysterious object before he tried pulling it free again. But still it remained in place. Watching this, O'Neill stepped forwards and leant his head through the doorway of the bunker. "It's sticking out this side as well." he said and he held out his hand. Hayes handed him the knife and he promptly cut through the sandbag from the inside as well, "Okay, try it now." he said and Hayes pulled the object as hard as he could, dragging it free of the sand that surrounded it. Then he looked at it and frowned.

"I still have no idea what this is." Hayes said as he stared at the object, turning it around in his hands to view it from multiple angles.

Roughly cylindrical, the object was caked in sand and appeared to be merged with the fabric of the sandbag at both ends.

"It looks melted." O'Neill commented.

"Yes it does." Hayes agreed and then a thought struck him. Grasping the object in both hands he twisted it as hard as he could and all of a sudden it snapped into two major pieces with smaller fragments splintering off harmlessly. Hayes then looked at the broken end of one half before handing the other to O'Neill, "Glass?" he said.

"Yes, glass." O'Neill replied, "But how did it get in there?"

"I think the sand melted." Hayes told him, "It turned into glass and stuck to the sandbag."

"But how would you melt a narrow channel through a sandbag like this?" O'Neill asked.

"The same way you'd build a rocket that could cook a town full of people in their beds." Hayes answered.

"Another death ray sir?" O'Neill responded, frowning and Hayes nodded.

"It looks that way." he said in agreement, "Only this one seems to be able to heat inanimate objects as well as people and animals."

Then, before O'Neill could reply there was a burst of distant gunfire.

## CHAPTER 5

The two rifle sections advanced towards the airfield buildings. So far the airfield had proved as deserted as Squadron Leader Hayes had suggested, but the advancing troops were taking no chances. Corporal Tanner, the leader of Two Section looked at his opposite number in Three Section.

"Ball, I'll take my men that way, you take yours over to the control tower." he said quietly, pointing out the routes he thought they should take. Ball nodded in response and the two sections split apart.

Tanner took his men towards a row of identical single level wooden huts, each of which was raised about a foot off the ground on stilts. There were windows running down the sides of the huts but there were curtains drawn on the inside that made it impossible to see what lay within. A quick glimpse underneath showed a handful of narrow pipes leading from the hut down into the ground but it was obvious that there were no extra levels hidden underground.

Up close it became clear that some of the huts had been damaged, with groups of small holes that looked like damage from bullet fire spread across them. Looking more closely at some of these, Tanner noticed that while some were clearly produced by bullets going into the huts, other had the tell tale splintering around the hole that indicated that bullets had also exited the huts through the lightweight wooden walls.

"Ready." Tanner said as he stood beside the steps leading up to the door of the first hut and reached up to take hold of the door handle. Immediately two of his men, both armed with Lee-Enfield rifles stepped up and stood in front of the door. Tanner nodded once and pulled the door open, allowing his two men to rush inside, leaping either side of the door to allow the rest of the section to follow them.

It was immediately clear that the hut was intended as a barracks for some of the German troops assigned to the airfield, with a row of beds down each side of the long interior with lockers positioned between each one. At each end of the room there were posters in German pinned to the walls. Two of these were aircraft identification while the others were both propaganda images, one showing a picture of Hitler while the other showed ranks of German troops. However, the room did not have the tidy appearance that it should have had. Instead of properly made beds and closed lockers the bedclothes were scattered about and lockers hung open as if the occupants of the barracks had been suddenly roused from their sleep and called into action.

"Corp, over here." one of Tanner's men called out, waving him towards a spot between two of the beds. Here Tanner saw a cluster of holes in the wall surrounded by trails of dried blood that ran down the wall to a large pool on the floor. But of the man who had obviously died here there was no sign.

"We'll do a full search later." Tanner told his men, "Next hut."

The section moved from hut to hut. Most they found to be in a similar situation to the first, disorderly and damaged. Only one was left in an orderly fashion, suggesting that whatever had befallen the German defenders of the airfield it had occurred while they had been on duty. Then, with the barrack huts confirmed clear Tanner led his section towards the airfield's main buildings.

Meanwhile, Corporal Ball and his section had made their way towards the control tower. Along the way they came across an armoured car parked between two other buildings, apparently undamaged. The wheeled vehicle appeared undamaged and the section watched it carefully for a short time, focusing on the MG42 mounted on top of it. But no belt of ammunition appeared to be loaded into the weapon and Ball beckoned for his men to follow him towards the armoured car, still keeping their weapons trained on it just in case one of the crew made an appearance.

As well as the machine gun, the armoured car had a large wireless antenna mounted on its roof, marking it out as a specialised communications vehicle. But when Ball climbed up to take a look inside he saw that the radio equipment had all been ripped out of its mountings inside.

"Somebody's ripped the guts out of this thing." he commented.

"Should we take the gun corporal?" one of his men asked.

"No." Ball replied, "No, we don't have time. Let's get going." and he jumped back down from the armoured car and turned back towards the control tower. This sat on top of a two storey building that the section gained access to via a door that had been left closed but unlocked. Ball split his men into two groups of five, leading one group himself while splitting two of his riflemen off to join the lance corporal in charge of the Bren gun team while they conducted a room to room search.

It became rapidly apparent that the ground floor of the building was used to conduct most of the day to day running of the airfield, with a wireless room, briefing room and meteorology office being the most significant rooms. There were propaganda posters almost everywhere, with assorted images of German

soldiers and Nazi leaders captioned with phrases in German. The main exception to this was in the meteorology office where the walls were instead lined with maps that were used in weather forecasting. But this was not the only way in which the meteorology office differed from most of the other ground floor rooms. In addition to the notes that had been marked on some of the maps in pencil there were splatters of blood and several bullet holes in the walls. Only the wireless room was more badly damaged, with every wireless set ripped open and the internal components ripped out. However, none of the wirelesses had been knocked off the benches they rested on and none showed any signs of having been externally damaged. An Enigma decoding machine also sat among the wrecked communications equipment and it too had been opened, its mechanical parts tossed aside and the electronics ripped out. There were easier ways of destroying such a machine to prevent its capture by the Allies so it seemed unlikely that it had been the German operators who had inflicted this damage and yet anyone else would have wanted the Enigma especially to be left intact. Whoever had done all this clearly had no interest in the intelligence value of any of the equipment whatsoever but it was as if someone wanted to preserve the electronics that lay inside the equipment within before ripping it out.

Two staircases led up to the first floor and satisfied that the ground floor was secured, Ball stood at the bottom of one of these and looked up it.

"Come on Keating," he said to the young soldier behind him, "Let's go see what's up there." and he began to make his way slowly up the stairs.

Officially Sten guns were issued to the leaders of rifle sections while their men carried bolt action Lee-Enfield rifles, typically the No. 4 variant. But with the sheer number of the simply made sub-machine guns available many ordinary soldiers had also been able to acquire them and Keating was one such soldier which was why Ball had selected the youngster to accompany him up the stairs, the short automatic weapons were ideal for use in room to room fighting.

At the top of the stairs the two soldiers paused while Ball looked down the corridor that it led up to. This turned a corner a short distance ahead and there were doorways on both sides, most of which stood open. From the top of the stairs it looked as if these led to offices but it was impossible to tell for certain without examining them more closely and so Ball began to advance down the corridor, his Sten gun held ready just in case anyone should burst out of one of the rooms. Keating followed him and as Ball paused to peer into each room in turn he kept watch on the corridor. In searching the rooms Ball favoured making a rapid entry over keeping quiet and he kicked each door wide open in turn before sweeping his Sten gun around the room as he checked to see if there was anyone hiding within, all the time trusting in Keating to deal with anyone in one of the unsearched rooms who appeared in response to the noise.

This continued until Ball kicked open a door to find an office drenched in blood. The presence of several glass fronted cupboards filled with bottles and anatomical diagrams on the walls suggested that this had been the office of the airfield's medical officer. The cupboards and their contents were all smashed with traces of blood visible on the broken glass and some of the lighter furniture had also been overturned and smashed while there were splashes of blood across most of the walls as well as larger pool in the middle of the floor.

"I don't like the look of this," Ball said, slowly advancing into the office as he looked around. Behind him Keating left the corridor and followed him inside the office, "Careful lad, that floor's a bit-" Ball cautioned him but he was cut off as Keating lost his footing where some of the spilled blood had yet to dry fully and slipped.

As he fell Keating attempted to grab hold of something to steady himself and as he did so his also lost his grip on his Sten gun and the weapon fell to the floor.

Sten guns were notoriously poorly made. Produced purely to provide the British armed forces with as many weapons as possible in the shortest time, many left the factories with defects and this made accidental discharges all too likely. Keating's dropped Sten landed butt first on the hard wooden floor and bounced once before landing on its side and with each impact the trigger mechanism released its grip on the bolt, allowing to move forwards, pick up a round from the magazine and fire it.

"Damn it!" Ball snapped as he dived clear when the weapon discharged, throwing himself to the floor to avoid the bullets, both of which promptly punched their way through the window opposite to the doorway and exited the building.

Outside, Tanner's section was just approaching from the direction of the barracks huts when the sound of the two shots rang out and was followed by the sound of them ricocheting off the hard tarmacked ground between the control tower building and the rifle section.

"Down!" Tanner yelled as he ducked and pointed his Sten gun back towards the control tower and fired a short burst towards the broken window.

Around him his men took aim and fired their rifles while the Bren team set up the weapon and joined in. Then with the light machine gun continuing to provide bursts of covering fire the rest of the section advanced towards the tower.

"Stop shooting you stupid bastards!" Ball yelled as he lay on the floor with bullets whizzing overhead. He was familiar enough with the sound of the Bren gun to know that it was his own side firing on him, having mistaken the two accidentally discharged rounds for German fire and the idea of being killed by friendly fire was not one he found at all appealing.

With Tanner's Bren team unable to hear the shout, the gunfire from outside continued and Ball crawled across the floor towards the doorway before leaping up and running down the corridor towards the stairs. He moved so quickly he practically tumbled down the stairs before joining up with the rest of his team at the bottom.

"What's happening corporal? Who's shooting at us?" one of them asked.

"Tanner's section." Ball replied, "That kid Keating dropped his bloody Sten and it went off. Now they think we're the bloody Germans." and then he pushed past his men as he ran for the doorway out of the building, "Hold your damned fire!" he shouted towards Tanner as he burst outside, waving his arms and Tanner ground to a sudden halt.

"Cease fire!" he shouted, turning back towards the Bren team and the rattle of gunfire came to a stop, "What's going on?" Tanner called out to Ball.

"What's going on is that you were shooting at us." Ball replied angrily.

"We were just returning fire. Some up there shot at us first." Tanner said and he pointed to the broken window that was now also surrounded by more bullet holes from where the wall had been struck by fire from Tanner's section.

"It was Keating." Ball told him, "He slipped and dropped his Sten. The thing went off by accident."

"Then teach him to clean it properly." Tanner replied.

"Corporal Ball! Corporal Tanner! What's going on here?" Pilot Officer O'Neill's voice called out and the two section leaders turned to see both their flight commander as well as Squadron Leader Hayes heading towards them with their sections. The two German machine guns had been left at the gate while the officers brought their sections to investigate the gunfire they had heard.

"It's alright sir." Tanner replied, "One of Corporal Ball's men had a weapons malfunction, that's all."

"A weapons malfunction?" Hayes repeated, clearly unimpressed, "Can I at least take it that no one was hurt by this accident?"

"Yes sir, I mean no sir." Ball answered, "I mean the only thing that was hurt was people's pride."

"Very well then." Hayes replied, "Now have any of you found anything?"

"The barracks over there are a mess sir." Tanner told the squadron leader and he pointed towards the row of wooden huts, "I'd say that they were abandoned in a hurry. Though not before someone shot them up."

"Shot them up with what corporal?" Hayes asked and Tanner frowned, confused.

"Can't say sir." he replied, "The holes were pretty small and in clusters so I'd say something automatic. But the huts are wood so it could have been an SMG or a machine gun."

"But it was an ordinary weapon?" O'Neill commented, "No more signs of any mysterious death rays?"

"No sir." Tanner answered, "But there weren't any bodies either."

"No, there were none by the gate either." Hayes added. Then he took a deep breath and looked at the control tower where he could see members of Ball's section stood by the doorway, "Anything else to report corporal?" he asked Ball.

"It's the same story here sir." he replied, "Bullet holes and blood stains but no signs of any bodies from what we've seen so far. Though we only got half way through the first floor."

"Has anyone checked that hangar yet?" Hayes asked, looking at the massive structure where he had noticed an open door.

"Not yet sir, no." Tanner said.

"Well we'll finish off the search of the control tower first and then I want to see what the Germans thought was so important they needed a hangar that large." Hayes replied.

The entire group was just heading back towards the control tower when all of a sudden Trent dropped to one knee and raised his Lee-Enfield, pointing it between two other buildings. Both of these looked to be either storage sheds or workshops of some kind but lacked the massive doors that would allow an aircraft to fit inside.

"Contact!" he yelled and the group spun around.

"Trent, what's wrong?" Hayes asked, aiming his Sten gun in the same direction.

"Sir I saw movement." Trent answered.

"Ball, get back to the rest of your men and get into the control tower." Hayes ordered, "See what you can see from up there and send a runner if you spot anything. I'll take my section straight that way while Pilot Officer O'Neill and Corporal Tanner's head round the sides. If there is anyone there we'll box him in."

The force split up once more and hurried towards the two buildings, Hayes leading his men between them while the other two sections circled around them to cut off the escape of anyone behind them. As Hayes' section ran between the two buildings there was the sound of breaking glass to the right of them. "He's gone that way." Hayes said, waving and when he reached the far end of the building he turned and aimed his Sten gun. But he found no one there and just in case he turned around to see if he had been mistaken and their quarry had gone the other way. But yet again he saw no one there. Then he looked back to the right and this time also looked upwards and he saw that one of the long row of windows that ran around the buildings about twelve feet off the ground was broken, presumably the reason for the sound the section had heard when they were running between the two buildings and significantly there were several wooden crates dumped just below this window where someone could have used them to climb up high enough to break the glass and pull themselves through.

"Where is he?" O'Neill called out from behind Hayes as his section appeared from around the other building and the squadron leader pointed to the broken glass.

"He's gone inside." Hayes replied just before Tanner's section appeared at the other end of the building, "Get over here." Hayes told them, "Watch that hole just in case anyone tries coming back out." then he looked back towards O'Neill's section, "Bring your section with me pilot officer. We're going inside to flush this rascal out. I've got questions and I'm certain he's got answers."

The two command sections rushed back around to the front of the building to the doors that were large enough to allow a truck to be driven straight inside it. The wooden doors were locked with a padlock and Hayes stood back as one of his men pressed the muzzle of his Lee-Enfield against the lock and fired, shattering it and unsealed the doors that two of the RAF troops then pulled open while the others aimed their weapons towards them, ready to open fire if there was anyone waiting right inside.

Despite the darkness inside the building its purpose became clear the moment that the doors were opened. Apart from an open area just inside the doors where a vehicle could be parked the rest appeared to be filled with row after row of shelves loaded with boxes. These did not appear to be the spare parts needed to keep the airfield running however. Instead the labels, though written in German, appeared to be more mundane things such as dry rations, blankets and spare clothing. Essential to keeping a force of soldiers operating perhaps but not of any real immediate interest to the RAF troops.

"Royal Air Force!" Hayes yelled, "Come out now and surrender yourself. I guarantee you will be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war. Make us come after you and you could get hurt." then he paused, listening to see if he could hear any activity that would tell him whether his call had been understood and what reaction it had provoked. But heard nothing and so he glanced at his men, "We'll have to split up." he told them, "We need to sweep this entire building. But no one goes anywhere on their own."

With weapons held at the ready, the two command sections began to move between the rows of shelves, with two of Hayes' runners staying by the door just in case whoever they had followed into the building was able to slip past the search teams and tried to escape by the most obvious means of exit.

Hayes himself was leading a group that consisted of Trent, Mitchell and Dunn when they heard a clattering from above them and as they looked upwards they were just in time to see a box filled with mess tins come toppling down from the top shelf and they jumped backwards.

"Above us! He's on top of the shelves!" Hayes shouted.

"I see him!" a voice called out, "He's -" and then there was a short burst of gunfire, followed by the screams of two men.

The two shot men were from O'Neill's command section and he was first to reach them with his wireless operator and mortar team. He found one of his runners dead from a bullet wound to the head while his section sergeant was clearly badly injured, a row of bullet holes across his tunic leaking blood from his chest and more came from his mouth with every breath.

"Morten." he exclaimed as he came to a halt beside him and dropped to his knees. His instinct was to treat the wounds it was clear to O'Neill that Morten would be dead within moments and he needed information, "Where's the German?"

Morten's lips moved as if trying to speak but no sound came out because of the holes in his chest. But he was still able to shake his head slightly and he lifted an arm as if to point but before he was able to identify the direction in which his assailant had gone he suddenly coughed up one last spurt of blood and went limp, his eyes staring straight up.

O'Neill snarled and as he got back to his feet he looked upwards and raised his Sten gun. Then another shot rang out from directly ahead of O'Neill and his men and the Irishman swung his weapon down just as he heard the sound of the wireless carried by one of his men hitting the floor, its operator having been hit by the latest gunshot. O'Neill was just in time to see someone's foot vanish beneath a shelf and he squeezed off a burst from his Sten.

"He's here!" he yelled and he rushed forwards, firing again.

Heading for the sound of gunfire, Sergeant Moyles and the third of Hayes' runners turned down another row of shelves just in time to see boxes falling from one as a figure that appeared as little more than a silhouette in the gloom of the warehouse effortlessly clambered up it and Moyles fired. The burst from his Sten went wide, peppering several nearby boxes with bullets and the figure drew its weapon. Because of the initial burst of fire, Moyles had expected it to be armed with a sub-machine gun but instead it held its weapon in just one hand like a pistol. However, when it pulled the trigger the weapon still produced a short burst of fire rather than a single shot this time and Moyles fell back, a cluster of holes in his chest and neck. The runner reacted quickly, firing two shots from his rifle as rapidly as he could work the action. But the figure was already gone, the sound of boxes falling from shelves suggesting that it had leapt across the gap to the next set of shelves.

"Get out from the shelves! Back towards the doors!" Hayes shouted as he realised that this single enemy was able to use them to keep his men isolated from one another while he picked them off a few at a time. "Got him!" a voice that Hayes recognised as one of his section's two mortar crew and there was the sharp 'Crack!' of a Lee-Enfield firing before another burst of automatic fire followed by more screams.

Clearing the shelves the remaining troops looked back between them, waiting to see if their enemy would reveal himself.

"Come on." Hayes said, slinging his Sten gun over his shoulder, "We need to tip these shelves over." and he pressed his weight against the shelf nearest to one of the walls. Joined by Trent they pushed against it and there was a creaking before it toppled, smashing into the wall and smashing, the boxes stacked on it spilling off and coming crashing to the floor.

His men began to repeat this, pushing over one set of shelves after another and each one came crashing to the floor, scattered its contents. This continued until the sound of the falling shelves was accompanied by a sudden high pitched shriek and the RAF troops froze.

"I think he's hurt." O'Neill said softly as he searched for the source of the cry. But before the status of their opponent could be determined there came the roaring of sustained machine gun fire from behind the warehouse where Tanner's section had been left to cut off their opponent's retreat back through the window. The only automatic weapons that Tanner's section carried were the Bren gun and a pair of Stens and, being fed from detachable magazines rather than belt, none of these were capable of such sustained fire so it was obviously not them doing the shooting.

"Outside!" Hayes snapped and the two sections ran from the building. But the moment they were outside in the daylight they saw something unlike anything any of them could believe.

Armoured fighting machines had been a part of warfare for decades now, but not one designed by man resembled the pair advancing towards the RAF troops from the direction of the large hangar where the folding doors had been partially opened. Each of the identical machines walked on a pair of legs rather than being carried along on tracks or wheels and they appeared to be a crude imitation of the human form. Standing more than twice the height of a man these machines had boxlike bodies with a pair of narrow manipulating arms folded up beside them while a pair of much heavier limbs was mounted at the top of the machine while in place of a head a sphere about the size of a football was mounted to one side on top of the body. Both machines were painted a plain dull grey and bore no markings to suggest that they were of German manufacture, in fact the typical black cross insignia that was universal on German military vehicles whether or not they were made by the Germans themselves was missing altogether. Whether these machines were entirely mechanical or if they had a pilot concealed somewhere inside was not clear, but what they did next left little doubt about what they did when both machines raised one of their heavier arms, pointing the two tubes that they ended in towards the RAF men.

"Back!" Hayes shouted, instinctively knowing what was coming and his men retreated back into the warehouse just before there was the rattle of machine gun fire from the narrow tubes that blasted chunks from the walls around the doorway.

There was a break in the fire and Hayes leant around the door frame and fired his Sten gun, emptying the magazine at one of the machines only to see every round that actually hit it bounce off harmlessly. But Hayes was not alone in returning fire and there came the sharper if slower sounds of Lee-Enfield rifles firing. However, yet again the result was just sparks as even the more powerful .303 calibre bullets failed to penetrate the machines' armour.

"Bring up that PIAT." O'Neill ordered his anti-tank team and while the gunner of the heavy weapon unslung and cocked it his number two unpacked a round from his carrier. However, just as the round was being loaded into the front of the weapon there was another shot as the figure that the RAF men had ignored when they retreated back into the warehouse made his presence felt again and the loader fell dead as a bullet struck the side of his head.

Both Hayes and O'Neill spun around and as Hayes tried to reload his Sten as quickly as possible O'Neill opened fire, spraying bullets into the gloom. At least one of the rounds hit something though the sudden screech that came out of the darkness was like nothing produced by a human mouth.

Whether or not the figure was dead, O'Neill's actions bought enough time for the PIAT to be loaded and the gunner dropped into a prone position to steady the weapon on its built in mono-pod. Aiming dead centre of the body of closest machine the soldier fired and the explosive round was hurled towards it. However, before the round could strike its target there was a sudden flash of light from the sphere mounted on its upper surface and the PIAT bomb briefly glowed brightly before it exploded in mid air. The failure of this attack did not stop the PIAT team from Hayes section from also attempting to use their weapon to destroy the machine though and almost at the same moment that the first bomb exploded they fired a second one. This was able to bypass the defensive system that had intercepted the first round but the gunner's aim was poor and although the round clipped the shoulder of the machine it failed to detonate, instead tumbling into the ground where it exploded without damaging its target.

The sound of gunfire attracted Ball's attention and he and one of his men rushed up into the control tower itself from where they could see the two walking machines as they strode towards the warehouse and he saw Hayes and O'Neill's teams fire at them ineffectively.

"Get that Bren up here!" Ball yelled and the three man Bren gun section came rushing up the stairs behind him, "You see those things down there?" Ball then said, pointing to the rear of the two walking machines outside.

"Yes corporal." the lance corporal in charge of the Bren group replied.

"Good. Then let's see if their rear armour is thin enough for us to penetrate." Ball ordered and while the lance corporal and section number two pulled extra magazines from their webbing the Bren gunner unfolded his weapon's bi-pod and set it down pointing out of the window. Then bracing it against his shoulder he took aim and opened fire at one of the machines.

The burst of gunfire shattered the glass between the Bren gun and the walking machine, barely slowing or deflecting the bullets before they struck their target. But even from behind the .303 rounds just bounced off, or at least they did until the gunner's aim shifted just enough that one of them lodged in one of the machine's shoulder joints. Though the bullet lacked the penetrating power to pierce the joint completely it was able to lodge itself in the joint, jamming it in its present position. For a moment the machine halted, repeatedly attempting to move its arm but without success.

"You did it." Ball exclaimed as the fire from the Bren gun ceased when the last of the thirty round magazine was expended and the gunner was handed another to load into the weapon. But before the light machine gun was ready to be fired again the damaged walking machine turned on the spot and raised its fully functional arm, aiming it directly at the control tower, "Oh no." Ball said before a single projectile burst out of the wider of the two tubes at the end of the arm and as it flew through the same window that the Bren gun had shattered it exploded with enough force to blow the control tower apart.

## CHAPTER 6

Two more explosive projectiles were fired at the control tower building, these aimed for windows further down and the building began to burn. At the same time the other walking machine opened fire on the warehouse again with both of its arm mounted machine guns.

"We need to get out of here before they decide they can use those cannons on us as well." Hayes told O'Neill.

"There's no cover out there." he replied.

"Then we make our own." Hayes said.

Understanding exactly what their commanding officer meant the men equipped with smoke grenades reached for them.

"One at a time." O'Neill said, "We need a path towards the fence so make them last and for God's sake keep them away from us."

The No.77 grenade contained a charge of white phosphorous used primarily for laying down smoke screens, the volatile chemical contents igniting as soon as it came into contact with the air. But this also made the weapon difficult to use as the chemical also had incendiary effects and would burn any flesh that it came into contact with.

One of O'Neill's men hurled his grenade, the percussion fuse triggering as soon as it struck the ground just in front of the lead walking machine. Immediately the white phosphorous was spread around and began to burn, producing a thick impenetrable white smoke.

"Go!" Hayes yelled and the remaining RAF troops in the warehouse ran out into the open, heading towards the perimeter fence where Corporal Frost's section would hopefully still be waiting. The two men carrying PIATs struggled to keep up and the officers both knew that they would never make it as far as the fence carrying the heavy weapons.

"Ditch the PIATs." O'Neill called out, "They're no bloody good to us right now anyway." and the two gunners let go of their weapons.

Meanwhile on the far side of the cloud the remnants of Ball's section evacuated the burning building, narrowly avoiding another burst of machine gun fire from the damaged walking machine. The men rushed behind another of the airfield buildings where they heard the pounding of the walking machine heading towards them. Pulling a fragmentation grenade from his webbing, one of the soldiers pulled out the pin and then hurled it around the corner.

There was a 'clang' as the grenade bounced off the front of the machine followed by the sound of the explosion. But this was soon followed by the sound of yet another heavy footfall and the soldiers knew that the machine was still in action.

"Run!" one exclaimed.

"Where to?" Keating asked nervously.

"Where else? Back to the hole in the fence."

The other machine opened fire with its machine guns again, spraying bullets through the cloud randomly in an attempt to hit some of the fleeing RAF troops but with the cloud of smoke obscuring them none were hit. However the group was now getting so far away that they had reached the edge of the cloud where it was less dense and they became visible to the machine once more. Rather than just turn to face them the machine rotated the sphere mounted on top of it and there was another flash. Unlike the previous occasion when the RAF troops had witnessed the use of the energy weapon they also saw the beam this time as it passed through the cloud and was reflected off the airborne particles. The beam swept sideways as the machine turned both its body and the turret and even without the bulk of his weapon slowing him down the PIAT gunner from O'Neill's section was too slow to avoid it. There was the sudden aroma of cooked meat as the beam cut through the soldier, setting fire to his tunic as it burned through him.

"Another smoke!" Hayes yelled and another grenade was tossed in the direction of the walking machine so that it landed between it and the RAF troops to create a thick smoke screen that they could use to cover their escape, "Down here!" Hayes added, leading his men between a pair of corrugated metal sheds.

"Give me a couple of those smoke grenades." O'Neill said, snatching some from his men before tucking one into his pockets while keeping hold of the other and he continued to run in the same direction as before.

"Pilot officer! What are you doing?" Hayes called out to him.

"Buying you time sir." he replied, "When that thing figures out we're not behind the cloud any more it'll soon figure out where we went. Don't worry, I'll catch you up." and while Hayes led the others behind the cover of the lightweight buildings O'Neill continued to follow their previous path. The Irishman paused only when the smoke concealing him began to thin and he primed the smoke grenade that he held before throwing it ahead of him to lay down more smoke.

The remains of Ball's section ran as quickly as they could. None of them carried any unusually bulky or heavy equipment and as the walking machine came after them they saw that the grenade detonation had in fact inflicted some damage, albeit minor and its walking motion now displayed a distinct limp. There was a loud 'Pop!' as the machine raised its functional arm, followed by a whistling.

"Down!" one of the aircraftmen shouted and the five soldiers dived to the ground as the grenade passed overhead and exploded ahead of them, the blast showering them with dirt. One of the group then pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and primed it. But just as he sat up to throw it there was a flash from the walking machine's turret that burned through him and caused him to slump backwards, letting go of the grenade and allowing it to roll out of his hand and onto the ground. The force of the impact was insufficient to make it go off but the other soldiers stared at it in horror for a moment as they imagined being consumed by the burning chemical it contained.

"Move!" one of the survivors snapped and the group pulled themselves back to their feet and continued to run as the walking machine followed after them. Another burst of machine gun fire tore clods of earth from the ground and the soldiers briefly hurled themselves back to the ground to avoid being hit. One rolled over and fired his Lee-Enfield, working the action as fast as he could in the hope that one of his rounds would find another weak point. But the group's salvation instead came as the walking machine reached the body of their dead comrade and as one of its heavy feet came down it landed on the unexploded smoke grenade and crushed it. The moment that the foot was raised again the phosphorous charge was exposed to the air and burst into flames, generating an instant cloud of smoke that enveloped the walking machine.

"Come on quick! While it's distracted." one of the soldiers called out and again they got back to their feet and ran as fast as they could.

While O'Neill continued to divert the attention of the walking machine Hayes had led his men between the sheds and then used the airfield buildings as cover, checking between each of them as they darted from one to the next in the direction of the perimeter fence. At one point they saw the rear of the warehouse where they had been ambushed by the mysterious unseen figure and as Hayes had feared the bodies of Corporal Tanner and his entire section lay dead beside it, presumably victims of another of the powerful walking machines. Eventually they reached the open ground between the outermost of the buildings and the hole in the fence and Hayes looked around carefully before deciding precisely how to continue. He could just about make out Corporal Frost's section inside the barbed wire and the fact that they had not appeared to have come under fire suggested that the way was clear.

"Okay this is it." Hayes said to the men around him, "We just need to make it to Frost's section and we're out of here. Now is everybody ready?" and there were nods, "Then let's not wait any longer. Go!" and the group broke into a sprint, each man running as quickly as he could across the open ground towards the perceived safety of the perimeter fence.

"Squadron leader, what's happening? We heard shooting and there's smoke over there." Frost said as Hayes ground to a halt right beside him.

"We came under attack." Hayes replied.

"The Germans ambushed you?" Frost asked and Hayes shook his head.

"I don't think that they're Germans." he said, "I don't know what they are. Some sort of walking machine with weapons on it. Like a humanoid armoured car almost. Incredible firepower, including some sort of death ray as well."

Hayes' wireless operator, Trent, was among the last of the group to reach the fence but the moment he did the squadron leader turned to him.

"Get me the town." he said, "I need to warn them about what we've found here."

Still trying to get his breath back following the run Trent turned on his wireless and held one of the microphones to his mouth as he started to transmit.

"Sir, look over there." Frost said suddenly and he pointed to where four figures could be seen running towards them.

"Looks like some of Ball's section." Hayes replied and then he got to his feet, "Over here!" he yelled, waving, "Hurry up."

The four men kept on running towards him and the first of them saluted as he came to a halt in front of Hayes.

"We're all that's left of the section sir." he said, "Half of us were in the tower when it blew up and Carter was hit by – by – I don't know what it was sir but it burned right through him."

"Yes, I've seen the weapon in action as well." Hayes told him, "Now how many of the machines did you see?"

"Just the one that came after us sir. But we damaged it enough to slow it down."

"Damaged it? How?"

"I think the Bren did something to one of its arms and a grenade damaged a leg. But it didn't stop until it trod on a smoke grenade."

"Then they're not invulnerable." Hayes replied with a smile, "If we can hurt them we can kill them."

"Sir I have Pilot Officer Barton for you." Trent then said, handing the wireless set's second handset to him.

"Thank you aircraftman." Hayes replied as he lifted the microphone and earpiece to his head.

"Squadron leader, what's happening? Over." Barton's voice asked.

"The airfield looked abandoned so I took One Flight in to investigate closer." Hayes told him, "But we were ambushed by something and are falling back to town. I need you to tell Riggs to deploy his mortars and Bren gun carriers on the road to block it. Tell him to expect light armour but that it is possible to damage it with small arms fire if you're lucky. Got that? Over."

"Yes sir. I'll tell him right away. Over."

"Good, we'll be with you as soon as we can. Over and out." and Hayes returned the headset to Trent. He was just about to give the order to withdraw back into the woods when all of a sudden Keating point and called out.

"It's O'Neill!" he shouted and sure enough Hayes saw Pilot Officer O'Neill rushing towards them. But behind him came the ominous shapes of two of the walking machines, neither of which looked to have sustained any damage at all.

With his own mortar team killed in the warehouse and both PIATs discarded to aide in their escape, Hayes turned to the two men who carried O'Neill's section's two inch mortar and its ammunition.

"Preston, King, give him some cover." he ordered them, "Maybe we can take one of those things out." and as Preston unslung the mortar tube his ammunition carrier took out a mortar round not much larger than a hand grenade and waited for the weapon to be placed on the ground.

The two inch mortar lacked a true sight, instead relying on a simple line for the gunner to align with the target, angling it by eye. King dropped the round down the tube but it did not go off immediately. The weapon was too short for the conventional means of firing a mortar and so instead there was a trigger that Preston pulled when he was sure that he had the weapon properly targeted at one of the walking machines.

The mortar bomb shot upwards and arced through the air and even before it landed the two walking machines halted. Then came another flash from the spherical turret of one of the machines and just as had happened with the PIAT bomb earlier the mortar round glowed brightly before exploding.

"Keep firing." Hayes ordered, "Keep their attention away from O'Neill."

The mortar team fired again, sending another bomb into the air. But once again the energy weapons carried by the walking machines were able to intercept it before it could hit either of them. The walking machine that was further away from the RAF soldiers then halted and focused on shooting down the next mortar round that was fired while the lead machine continued after O'Neill. Initially reluctant to use its machine guns on a solitary target the walking machine now raised an arm and there was a burst of fire.

"O'Neill! Get down!" Hayes shouted but the warning came too late and several of the rounds clipped his arm and shoulder and he fell. But O'Neill was not done yet and he began to get back to his feet, "Cover him!" Hayes yelled and all of the men around him opened fire, aiming over and around O'Neill at the much larger walking machine. For a moment the steadily advancing walking machine came to a halt as it evaluated the fire being directed against it. But then it turned back towards O'Neill and pointed an arm at him once more. There was another burst of machine gun fire but O'Neill was now trying his best to dodge it, moving from side to side and only one of the bullets passed through his side just above his waist. He staggered a few more steps before dropping to his knees and then as he stared at the hole in the fence that was now so close there was a final burst of machine gun fire and he fell face down onto the ground. "We need smoke." Hayes said, looking around at the killing zone the Germans had created outside the perimeter fence.

"Got it sir." one of Frost's men said, producing a smoke grenade.

"Do it." Hayes told him and the aircraftman hurled the grenade at the ground between them and the two walking machines. As soon as the grenade burst open and the thick cloud of smoke began to expand, blocking the walking machines' line of sight Hayes backed towards the hole in the barbed wire.

"Fall back to the trees." he ordered and the remaining men from One Flight followed him. From behind them there was the sound of machine gun fire accompanied by several more explosive rounds and several flashes of energy fire that lit up the cloud of phosphorous smoke. But none of this was properly aimed and by the time the first of the two walking machines came striding out of the dense white cloud the survivors of One Flight had already reached the tree line and taken cover in the undergrowth, waiting to see whether or not the walking machines would try to follow them into the woods.

In a dimly lit chamber two figures watched images on monitors that were mounted on flexible arms descending from the ceiling above them, one of them seated while the other stood just behind. In particular they watched two monitors that displayed similar images taken from two slightly different sources. Each of these images showed the woods outside the airfield perimeter but coloured to indicate the heat being given off by what was being looked at and because of this the survivors of One Flight were visible as glowing red, yellow and orange shapes where their body heat was enough to penetrate the undergrowth.

The standing figure produced a sound, a drawn out string of clicks and whistles and in response the seated figure reached forwards to a console with an arm that ended in a hand that had one finger too few for a human being while those that it did possess were longer than a human's. With one finger the figure pressed a glowing green square on the console and it changed to become another display that showed a map of the area around the airfield and the figure then tapped the representation of the town on this.

With no one around to hear it, there was a whirring sound from inside the large hangar and from between the partially opened doors a flat disc about three yards across that was painted the same grey colour as the walking machines that had preceded it floated out and hovered motionless for a few seconds. Then the machine promptly rose up into the sky and began to head towards the town.

## CHAPTER 7

The two walking machines turned around and began to walk back towards the airfield buildings while Hayes watched them. He was tempted to order his remaining men to engage them from the rear in the hope that there would be more vulnerable points from this facing. But there were times that discretion was the better part of valour and Hayes believed that this was one of those times. He needed to get what men he had left back to the town where they could prepare a proper defence should whatever force was occupying the airfield decide to launch an attack while waiting for reinforcements that would allow him to take the airfield.

"Give them a couple of minutes to get out of sight." he said to his men, keeping his voice low just in case the walking machines were capable of overhearing what he said, "Then we'll head back to town."

The three mortar sections of 2728 Squadron's support flight were transported in six universal carriers, with each carrier carrying one four man mortar team while Pilot Officer Riggs' own command section was carried in a pair of jeeps. Riggs had the jeeps and universal carriers park behind the buildings on the outer edge of the town while the mortars were unloaded and carried out into the fields beyond them and set up behind the cover of hedges so that they covered the road that led to the airfield. Ammunition was brought forwards and stockpiled beside the weapons. In doing this the need for ammunition carriers as part of the teams was removed and two men from each team could be held back with the universal carriers, providing each one of the lightly armoured vehicles with a driver and gunner for its forward mounted Bren gun.

Meanwhile Riggs ordered his command section to break into one of the buildings being used to shelter the flight's vehicles, a grocery shop and then proceeded up to the small flat located above it. The smell of cooked meat led the RAF troops to bedrooms where more burned bodies were located. These were wrapped in their bedsheets and removed, placed where the sight and smell would not bother the soldiers while they carried out their duty. Riggs then had his men set up in a room located at the rear of the flat from where they could keep watch on the road as it led off into the woods.

"Move that table in front of the window." he ordered, pointing out the furniture to be repositioned, "Then set up the PIAT here."

One advantage of the PIAT over the equivalent American Bazooka and German Panzerschreck was that it did not possess the massive back blast that either of those two weapons had and that meant that it could be fired from inside an enclosed space without risking the crew and Riggs intended to make the most of that advantage. Of course the relatively low velocity of the round compared even to a pistol bullet meant that the window would cause problems if it was left intact and so the PIAT's ammunition carrier swung the butt of his Lee-Enfield at the glass to break it, clearing the remains of the broken window before stepping back to allow the table to be dragged into place. Taking out his field glasses Riggs then took up a position beside the PIAT gunner and began to wait. The information he had about the nature of the enemy was limited, but if what had been relayed to him was anything like accurate then Riggs knew that his men would have no difficulty in identifying them.

But it was not giant mechanical walking machines that came down the road first. Instead Squadron Leader Hayes led the survivors of his own command section and One Flight towards the waiting support flight.

"Squadron Leader!" Riggs shouted from the window when he saw his superior, "You made it."

"Yes I decided to chance the road." Hayes responded, "I thought it would be quicker than the woods. Now do you have a jeep I can use?"

"Yes sir. Around the front of the building." Riggs told him.

"Good, I want to get back to the command post." Hayes said. Then he looked at Frost, "Corporal Frost, remain here with Pilot Officer Riggs' flight. Deploy your section to support them."

"Yes sir." Frost replied.

"Take one of the buildings on the other side of the road." Riggs called out and he pointed out of the window across the road from the building he occupied.

While Frost took his men to the building indicated by Riggs, Hayes and as many of the others returning from the airfield got into one of the support flight's two jeeps and set off for the town hall, leaving the others to follow on foot. As the jeep pulled up outside the town hall Hayes leapt out and ran up the steps to be met by Lieutenant Grey and Doctor Weston.

"Where's O'Neill?" Weston asked, "Isn't he with you?"

"He's dead." Hayes replied, "He'd almost made it to us and then he was shot by one of the machines we saw."

"So what do we do now?" Grey said.

"I'll explain inside." Hayes told him, "I take it that the others are in there already?" and Weston nodded.

"Planning the defence of the town." he said.

"Good. Because that's what I want to talk about." Hayes replied and he headed inside.

Upon entering the command post itself Hayes found his remaining flight commanders planning the deployment of their men to counter an attack on the town by a light armoured force.

"Squadron leader." Barton said, looking up from the map, "It's good to see you back safely."

"Thank you." Hayes replied, "I'm afraid that a lot of One Flight, including Pilot Officer O'Neill weren't as lucky."

"What's happening at the airfield?" Skalaski asked, "Barton told us what you told him but it doesn't seem believable."

"Whatever happened here, it seems to have started at the airfield." Hayes replied, "Gentlemen, the Germans are gone. They either fled or were killed by whoever is responsible for all of this."

"So it wasn't the Germans then?" Milton asked and Hayes shook his head.

"No. I don't know who could have produced the machines we encountered but it certainly wasn't the Germans." he said, "Now we need to focus on defending this position while we wait for reinforcements."

"We still haven't been able to contact headquarters sir." Jenson said.

"The signal between here and the airfield seemed fine to me." Hayes replied.

"It did to me as well." Barton added, "Whatever's interfering with our wirelesses doesn't seem to be affecting signals within the local area, just when we try to get a message to somewhere further away."

"Then we'll have to send some to headquarters in person." Hayes said.

"Risky." Grey said, "One or two people could be ambushed."

"We can't spare more than a handful." Hayes told him, "The machines we encountered are very resilient. We didn't destroy any of them and only damaged one by chance."

"Two of my runners could take a jeep." Jenson suggested, "It could get them to headquarters in a few hours."

"But how long until they can organise a relief force?" Weston asked.

"Market Garden's drawn in everything right now." Grey told him, "It could be days before a force can be put together and sent here."

"And in the mean time we need to hold this town on our own." Hayes said.

There were now several figures clustered around the seated one as they watched the live feed from the flying disc despatched towards the town. Flying more than a mile high it was too small to be noticed by any of the British troops on the ground, even those specifically watching for enemy aircraft. The disc came to a halt and hovered while it directed its various sensors down at the town. From this altitude the dead spots that could be created in the shadows of buildings were minimised and every street was visible at once.

Visual detection revealed the various vehicles that had transported the men of 2728 Squadron as well as the mortar crews deployed on the outskirts of the town to protect the approach from the airfield while thermal imaging indicated that the town hall was being used as their command post. However, beyond this there was little precise information available. Most of the RAF forces were indoors and their body heat alone was not enough to alter the temperature of the buildings they occupied for it to show up on the thermal imaging. Only the town hall where there was a much larger concentration of men and equipment that gave off heat was affected in this way.

But even this limited information was enough to point to a course of action and the leader of the gathered figures spoke, prompted the seated figure to reach for the same console that had been used to despatch the surveillance drone. However, this time it was not another of the compact flying discs that was launched. Instead out of the large hangar another of the rockets that had been used to eradicate the people of the town appeared and shot skywards.

"Pilot Officer Barton I want your armoured car flight ready to move at a moment's notice." Hayes said as he explained his strategy for defending the town. Given the relative invulnerability of the mysterious walking machines his plan was for most of the squadron to spread out amongst the buildings left empty when the town's inhabitants had been wiped out.

But before he could continue the door to the room was thrown open and one of the lance corporals from Two Flight burst in.

"A rocket has just been launched from the airfield!" he exclaimed and all of the assembled officers stared at him, their eyes widened.

"Are you certain?" Milton asked his subordinate.

"Yes sir. We saw it from the roof. It's heading this way."

"I think we better take a look at this." Hayes said, "Lead the way lance corporal."

The Bren group leader hurriedly led the officers back up to the roof where the three light machine guns were still set up on their anti-aircraft mounts, now all pointed in the direction of the airfield. In the distance the rocket was visible to the naked eye thanks to the bright exhaust flame trailing behind it. But the officers equipped with field glasses still took them out and stared at the approaching weapon with a mix of interest and concern.

"Yes, that's what we dug out of the woods." Grey said as he recognised the configuration of the rocket from the one he had determined had been used to wipe out the town's inhabitants.

"It's not moving very fast is it?" Milton commented.

"Or high." Barton added.

"Good." Hayes responded, lowering his field glasses and he turned to the trio of Bren gunners, "Shoot it down." he ordered them.

The three gunners already had their weapons trained on the rocket as it headed towards them and each of them began to consider how much leading distance they should allow for a target moving as the rocket was.

"Wait for it to come into range." Milton told his men as he continued to study the rocket, occasionally lowering his field glasses to get some idea of how close it was by looking at the ground beneath it. Then when he determined that it was close enough to be engaged by the Bren guns he suddenly yelled, "Now!" and all three gunners opened fire at the same time.

Each gunner fired sustained bursts from their weapons, pausing only when the magazine was emptied and their section number two hurried to swap it for a full one. But even with three Bren guns firing together the rocket kept on coming.

"It's over the town." Milton warned as he saw it pass over the first buildings.

Barton promptly rushed to the edge of the roof and looked down into the town square below where the six Morris armoured cars of his flight were all lined up with their crews close by.

"Incoming!" he shouted, pointing in the direction that the rocket was approaching from, "Man the Brens and bring it down!"

The armoured car crew promptly clambered into their vehicles as rapidly as they could. The gunners loaded their Bren guns and aimed them skywards before opening fire as soon as they saw the rocket that now looked dangerously close to the British position. A total of nine Bren guns now fired at the rocket, the gaps in firing any one gun now filled by the fire from the others as they desperately tried to shoot it down. The rocket was close enough now that the sound of its engine could be heard even over the sound of the light machine gun fire and, watching the rocket through his field glasses, Hayes briefly wondered how close it would have to get before it unleashed whatever energy was used to kill the townsfolk and whether he would even feel it before his flesh was cooked. But then there was a flash from the nose cone of the rocket as a round struck it and almost immediately it began to roll sideways. Something either within the rocket itself or possibly whatever was controlling it remotely obviously sensed this variation in its flight path and some of the steering motors fired to bring it back on course. But the rocket's speed was reduced by this manoeuvre and combined with the much reduced range from when it had first been spotted made it a much easier target. More of the .303 rounds fired by the Bren guns struck the rocket and unlike the walking machines its outer casing proved insufficient to stop them.

The rocket's main motor suddenly cut out and the sound vanished as it continued under nothing more than its own momentum and many of the watching soldiers were reminded of the infamous V1 rocket that cut its engine right before it plunged to the ground to bring death and destruction to whatever had the misfortune to be beneath it. But this was no controlled descent, the rocket's engine and guidance system had both been disabled by the gunfire and now it started to tumble as it lost both speed and altitude. At first Hayes expected it to drop out of sight as it fell below the level of the surrounding buildings. But then he realised that its path was still bringing it towards the town hall.

"Down!" he yelled and every man on the rooftop threw himself prone, clamping his hands over his ears as they waited for the inevitable crash. However, the falling rocket missed the town hall itself by only a few yards, instead coming down in the adjacent square where it crashed right into one of the stationary armoured cars and exploded.

The blast consumed not only the rocket itself but also the armoured car, producing a second explosion as the vehicle's petrol tank was breached and the fuel it contained was added to the expanding ball of flame that enveloped two more of the armoured cars. The flames found every possible gap in the vehicles' armour from vision slits to the hatches opened for the gunners to fire their weapons and fire flowed inside, killing the occupants in an instant. Meanwhile others who had not been inside their vehicles at the time but were stood nearby screamed as the flames ignited their clothing and they too began to burn. But the flames were not the only hazard from the rocket crash, the armour from the armoured car struck by the falling weapon flying in all directions like shrapnel from an artillery shell. This moved fast enough to pierce the armour of the remainder of the armoured cars and impale the crew before they could try to escape.

On the roof of the town hall Barton got to his feet and peered down into the square where he saw that in a matter of moments his entire flight had been wiped out and their vehicles reduced to nothing but scrap metal.

The destruction of the armoured car flight showed up like a flare on the display that the figures were all focused on. The rocket had been intended to wipe out the entire force holding the town but even the destruction of just the six armoured vehicles represented a significant achievement, denying the RAF squadron half of its armour and a significant amount of firepower. But it did not eliminate the threat as it had been supposed to.

There was always the option of sending another rocket of course, but the town's RAF defenders had demonstrated the ability to shoot them down and so that meant making use of their other resource. Using them would leave the airfield vulnerable to attack but with no other military forces within striking distance the risk was acceptable.

The leader of the gathered figures issued another order. But rather than his seated underling activating another drone or rocket the gathered group turned their attention to a secondary monitor where a small group of walking machines was displayed.

The bodies of the RAF men killed in the crash and subsequent explosion were recovered from the wreckage of the armoured cars and wrapped up before being laid out in a row. At the same time that one group was undertaking this grim task another was going over the wreckage itself hunting for anything useful that may have survived. As expected everything about the armoured car actually struck by the rocket as well as those consumed by the flames of the explosion was destroyed, all of the weapons left unserviceable while the stored ammunition and fuel had burned along with the vehicles and their crew. "We can't wait for reinforcements." Hayes said to the other gathered officers as they watched the recovery effort from the steps of the town hall.

"So we're withdrawing then?" Doctor Weston asked.

"No. Certainly not." Hayes replied and he shook his head, "But we have to take action before whoever is in control at the airfield decides to launch more of those rockets."

"You really think that rushing to attack will save us?" Weston said.

"It's not us I'm worried about doctor." Hayes told him and he looked around at the other officers in case they were harbouring similar sentiments, "We don't know exactly how many more of those rockets they have. We may be able to shoot down one or two more but it only takes one to get through and we'll be wiped out. And then there's the possibility that they could choose to launch the next one at a target other than us. We don't know their maximum range so they could hit Antwerp, Paris, Calais or even London. The casualties could be horrendous. The only option left to us is to attack that airfield with everything we've got. And I mean everything. I want every man and every weapon we have ready to attack that airfield as soon as possible."

"Made you a cup of tea sir." one of Riggs' men told him, placing a mug down on the table beside him as he continued to stare out of the window.

"Very good of you aircraftman." he replied as he picked up the mug and began to drink. The drink tasted awful and Riggs guessed that the water had been boiled on the engine of one of the universal carriers parked in the street outside. He still drank it anyway, he was thirsty and he did not want to waste it. But before Riggs could finish the drink he heard an unusual sound from outside and he set the mug down again as he looked along the road. At first he saw nothing but the sound was still there, a pounding as if there were men striking the road with sledgehammers somewhere just out of sight and Riggs continued to stare.

That was when the first of the walking machines appear, striding down the road towards the town and Riggs' jaw dropped. Though Squadron Leader Hayes had described the walking machines he and One Flight had encountered at the airfield Riggs had not truly appreciated how imposing they were until now he could actually see one of them for himself.

"Hold your fire!" he shouted out of the window just as more of the walking machines appeared behind the first until there were four of them advancing down the road in a diamond pattern, "Dent, get that PIAT ready." he ordered his PIAT gunner before reaching out a hand towards his wireless operator, "Mayer I need to talk to the squadron leader." he added.

Mayer passed Riggs one of the wireless set's headsets and he lifted it to his head.

"This Pilot Officer Riggs calling Squadron Leader Hayes. Do you read me squadron leader?" There was just static in response and Riggs began to repeat the signal, "This Pilot Officer Riggs calling-"

"Sir!" Dent interrupted, "Look at the machines."

Riggs lowered the headset and looked out of the window again. There he saw that all four of the machines had come to a sudden halt and rather than facing along the road they had now all turned to face directly towards his position. Then he stared at the wireless and realised his mistake, obviously the walking machines had some sort of radio direction finding capability built into them and by using the wireless he had inadvertently given himself and his section away.

"Riggs this is Hayes." Hayes' voice suddenly announced from the wireless, "What's going on? Over."

Knowing that the rest of the squadron needed to be warned about the approaching walking machines Riggs lifted the headset once more.

"They're here!" he exclaimed, "Four enemy-" but before he could get any further the lead walking machine raised an arm towards his position and fired a single explosive round that flew in through the window before detonating.

In another room of the flat Riggs' flight sergeant, Hurt, heard and felt the explosion and he knew that the five men in the other room were dead and with the loss of Pilot Officer Riggs command of the support flight now fell to him.

"Open fire!" he yelled and he aimed his Sten gun at the lead walking machine and emptied his magazine at it.

The moment the other troops hidden close by heard Hurt's command they also opened fire with rifles, sub and light machine guns and mortars firing in unison at the walking machines, prompting them to resume their advance. All four machines returned fire with their own arm mounted machine guns, attempting to seek out the various hiding places being used by the RAF troops while the spherical turrets mounted on top of them swivelled upwards. There was a succession of flashes from the turrets as they locked onto the three inch mortar rounds flying through the air towards them and one by one the explosive bombs glowed brightly and exploded in mid air, showering the walking machines with a multitude of tiny bits of shrapnel but inflicting no damage to them at all.

Seeing that the walking machines were not even being slowed down by the barrage, Hurt placed a hand on the shoulder of one of the two runners in the room with him.

"Bell," he said to the young man, "get down there and tell Gibson and the others to get those Bren gun carriers moving. Let's see how those things like facing up against our armour."

## CHAPTER 8

Bell hurried down the stairs, leaving the sound of rifle fire behind him and burst out onto the street where the flight's universal carriers waited with their engines running.

"Sergeant says you're engage the enemy Corporal Gibson." he called out, his voice raised so that he could be heard over the noise of the six engines. From the driver's seat of his vehicle Gibson just nodded before the carrier lurched into motion, driving along the street until it reached the junction leading out of town. Rounding the corner the six compact tracked vehicles advanced in a column and Gibson got his first look at the walking machines.

Now that they were engaging the British troops the walking machines had reformed from their diamond formation into a line abreast and were unleashing the full fury of their built in machine guns. These were directed mainly at the hidden mortar positions in an effort to slow down the rate at which the mortar crews were able to launch more explosives at them. But the RAF gunners had selected their positions well and they did not have to expose themselves to the enemy in order to attack them. None of the mortar rounds had yet been able to come close to hitting any of the walking machines but the continued barrage was forcing them to continue to use their turret mounted beam weapons to intercept the mortar bombs rather than turning them on the RAF troops themselves. The problem was that as the walking machines continued to advance across the fields towards the town they were approaching the point where they would be too close for the mortars to target them at all.

Seeing this state of affairs Gibson switched on his carrier's wireless.

"Spread out." he ordered, "Form a line and fire at will."

The moment he sent this transmission one of the walkers turned towards his vehicle and opened fire with both its machine guns simultaneously. The sound of the gunfire was followed by the rattle of multiple impacts against the front of the vehicle. But this was where its armour was at its thickest and not one of the bullets penetrated the steel plate.

"Well what are you waiting for?" Gibson said to the aircraftman sat beside him manning the forwards facing Bren gun, "Personal orders from the King? Return fire at the bastards."

The gunner opened fire, picking out the walking machine directly ahead of the carrier and firing a short burst aimed at its torso. Then when he saw every one of these shots bounce off he adjusted his aim for the limbs and instead switched to brief pulls of the trigger that let off just two or three rounds at a time. Behind Gibson's vehicle the other universal carriers began to spread out and as each one gained a clear line of fire at the walking machines their gunners began shooting at them. Now the two forces headed directly for one another, both firing automatic weapons that seemed to have no effect whatsoever on their opponents.

By this point the walking machines were closing in on the two forward mortar positions and their crews decided that it was time to abandon their positions. Leaving their heavy weapons where they were the mortar crews picked up their rifles and began to run. One team headed directly back towards the town, hoping that the advancing universal carriers would keep the walking machines distracted. But the moment they were out in the open one of the machines swung one arm around and fired a burst of machine gun fire that cut down both men before they could reach safety.

On the other hand the second mortar team did not retreat away from the advancing walking machines, instead moving along the hedge they had set their mortar up behind and when they had got about a hundred yards they lay down on the ground, pushed their Lee-Enfield rifles through gaps in the hedge and began firing at the enemy once more.

Seeing the ineffectiveness of their machine guns on the universal carriers one of the walking machines opted instead to launch another of its explosive projectiles. But the nimble tracked vehicle swerved right at the same moment that the grenade was fired and rather than landing inside the open topped vehicle it instead landed on the ground beside it. The explosion blew a small crater in the field and sent clumps of dirt and grass into the air but the carrier itself sped on towards the walking machines.

Then a fluke shot from another of the walking machines passed through the driver's vision slit of one of the carriers and inside it the driver jerked his head back as the bullet struck him in the forehead just beneath the rim of his steel helmet. He slumped forwards over the controls of his vehicle and it turned sharply, now out of control. The six carriers were still relatively close to one another and neither of the crew of the next one along noticed what had happened until all of a sudden the runaway carrier smashed into theirs and brought both vehicles to a complete halt.

"Back it up!" the driver of the other vehicle shouted as the gunner of the first got up to drag the body of his driver away from the controls. But being stationary made both vehicles vulnerable and there was another burst of machine gun fire at the gunner now standing up in the open topped carrier and he fell dead over the front of his vehicle. The walking machine then pointed its arm towards the second carrier and launched a single grenade towards it. Unable to avoid the explosive projectile while jammed against the other carrier, the vehicle was an easy target and the grenade landed in the rear of it right beside its engine before detonating and the resultant explosion blew both the carrier and its crew apart. The blast was also enough to destroy the other carrier and it left both vehicles as nothing more than burning wrecks in the middle of the field.

The unrelenting advance of the walking machines now brought them within the minimum range of the remaining mortars and their crews ceased firing. However, none of them abandoned their positions just yet, instead engaging the walking machines with more rifle fire. But while this did little to increase the weight of fire being directed towards the walking machines it did allow them to bring their turret mounted beam weapons to bear on the four remaining universal carriers.

Two of the weapons flashed simultaneously and the invisible beams struck another of the carriers, burning neat holes in through the side armour and out through the rear.

"What the hell was that?" the driver exclaimed as he turned his head towards the smouldering hole in the back of his vehicle. That was when there was another flash from one of the walkers only this time the beam struck the vehicle's fuel tank and it exploded, sending a ball of fire into the air.

"Hold on!" Gibson snapped at his gunner and he accelerated as fast as he could. Having seen how ineffective the Bren gun was against the armour of the walking machines and now aware that they possessed the ability to penetrate the armour of his own vehicle he decided that the best option remaining to him was to try and use the more than three ton weight of the universal carrier as a battering ram and smash into the nearest walking machine.

But the sudden change in manoeuvre did not go unnoticed by Gibson's intended target and the walking machine closest to his carrier turned on the spot and launched a grenade towards him. Fired without being properly aimed, the explosive landed just short of the carrier and detonated a moment later just as one of the vehicle's tracks rolled over it. The explosion was mainly contained beneath the carrier but it was still enough to rip through the track, instantly immobilising the carrier and both of its crewmen were thrown forwards as their vehicle came to an abrupt halt.

"Out!" Gibson yelled, knowing what would happen when the enemy realised that their carrier had been disabled and he grabbed his Sten gun from where he had placed it while he was driving. The aircraftman beside him reached for the retaining mount of the Bren gun but Gibson stopped him, "No time." he exclaimed, "Just get clear." and he leapt over the side of the carrier to take cover from the walking machines. Right at that moment he heard more machine gun fire from the walking machines and his gunner landed beside him. For a moment Gibson thought that the man had also made it safely out of the carrier but then he collapsed in a heap, his body riddled with bullet wounds.

Only two of the universal carriers now remained and the distance between them and the walking machines had closed to just a few yards. One of the carriers swerved to avoid running between two of them but one walking machine promptly directed its turret towards the carrier and the beam sliced through the forward compartment where driver and gunner were located, killing them both with a single blast. Slumping back in his seat, the dead driver released his grip on the carrier's controls and it ground to a halt in front of the walking machines. All four ignored it however, recognising that it was not a threat to them at this time and they instead all turned their attention towards the last of the universal carriers.

Anxious to try and avoid the fate that had met all five of the other carriers so far, the driver of this one tried to drive in an erratic pattern to avoid both the grenade launchers and beam turrets of the walking machines. But such manoeuvring could protect the vehicle for only so long until the four walking machines co-ordinated their fire. Volleys of grenades were launched by two of the walking machines, exploding either side of it and forcing the driver to follow a path that took it straight towards the other two walking machines. There were flashes of light from the turrets of both at the same time, each turret pointed at the front of the universal carrier and both beams cut holes straight through the frontal armour before burning their way through the men behind it.

Seeing the last of the universal carriers of his flight come to a stop, Sergeant Hurt looked around the battlefield from his vantage point in the building at the very edge of the town. From here he could make out the surviving mortar teams beside their now useless heavy weapons desperately firing at the walking machines with their Lee-Enfield rifles while Corporal Gibson was using his disabled carrier for cover. Then one of the mortar teams leapt to their feet, both men clutching Mills bombs that they promptly

hurled at the walking machine closest to them. Their sudden appearance from behind the hedge attracted an instant response from the walking machine and it fired a burst of machine gun fire that cut down both men before they could duck back into cover. However, their grenades were already flying through the air towards the walking machine. One went wide, detonating a few yards away and doing nothing but showering its intended target with mud and a handful of metal fragments that inflicted no damage. But the second grenade exploded just as it landed on top of the walking machine, right next to the spherical turret. The walking machine rocked from the force of the explosion but soon steadied itself. However, the lens of the turret mounted beam weapon was struck by multiple pieces of shrapnel from the exploding grenade and it cracked, rendering it useless. But despite this damage the walking machine continued to advance and Hurt knew that with the men remaining to him he would not be able to stop them.

"Bell, head back to the command post. Tell Squadron Leader Hayes that he's got company coming." the he paused and sighed, "And tell him he's lost his support flight."

Bell just stared at the sergeant and Hurt scowled.

"What are you waiting for lad?" he snapped, "Move it!" and he shoved the young aircraftman towards the door behind him.

Bell ran down the stairs and out into the empty street. Out here he could hear the familiar sound of Lee-Enfields firing with the occasional burst from a Bren gun thrown in but more ominously he could also hear the different pitch of the walking machines' own machine guns that seemed to be getting louder each time they were fired. He took one last look around as he tried to remember the fastest way back to the town hall before he broke into a run.

In the fields on the other side of the buildings the four walking machines continued their advance towards the town. Another of the mortar crews was killed when one of the machines got so close to their position that they saw no alternative to withdrawing and the moment they were exposed a single grenade round was fired and landed right between them. On the other hand the four walking machines had walked right past Gibson's immobilised carrier, ignoring the corporal and his Sten gun. Apparently the nine millimetre rounds fired by the compact weapon did not concern the walking machines at all or they could have easily dealt with him.

Then a burst of machine gun fire tore through the walls of the room Hurt and the remains of the support flight's command section were hiding in.

"Out!" Hurt yelled as he scabbled towards the door but a short cry of pain told him that at least one of the other three men had been fatally hit and looking around he saw that one of the mortar crew was clutching at a wound to his arm, "We need to fall back." he told the final man, the only one other than him to have escaped the room uninjured, "Higgins, go and tell Frost's section to get ready to withdraw."

"Down!" Frost yelled before a volley of grenade rounds blew in the wall of the house occupied by his section. Frost himself was hurled back by the blast, hitting the far wall of the room and landing in a heap. Picking himself up onto his hands and knees he looked around. The room was filled with smoke and debris from the destroyed wall and he could make out the bodies of two of his men under the rubble. Then he heard a groan and saw the Bren gunner roll over. The man had lost his steel helmet in the explosion and now there was blood pouring from a wound in his head. The Bren gun itself lay just beside its owner and Frost rushed to pick it up. Then he carried it to the edge of the room, standing beside the gaping hole in the wall and holding the weapon at his waist he opened fire.

"Come and get it you bastards!" he bellowed as rounds from the Bren gun bounced off one of the walking machines. But his defiant act was enough to convince one of them that the threat from his section remained and there was another burst of machine gun fire. Several struck Frost in the chest and he dropped the Bren gun before he fell forwards and landed in a heap at the base of the building.

It was then that Higgins came up the stairs to tell the section to pull back and discovered them instead half buried in rubble.

"Come on." he said as he pulled at the Bren gunner, "Sergeant Hurt says we're getting out of here."

"About time too." another man responded as he dragged himself clear of the debris. There was a large amount of blood on his tunic and Higgins stared at him.

"You're hit." he said.

"What?" the man replied and he looked down, "It's not mine." he added and he glanced towards the body of the man who had borne the brunt of the blast in front of him, now lying dead under the rubble.

Two more of the section were dead, including the lance corporal in charge of the Bren group while the Bren number two's arm looked to have been broken. This left Higgins and two uninjured men to help

them from the room and down the stairs towards the door. Exiting into the street they saw Sergeant Hurt and the injured man from his section coming out as well.

"Quickly." Hurt called out and he waved, "This way, we need to get out of sight before those machines get here."

The mixed group of RAF soldiers followed the sergeant as he smashed a padlock from a wooden gate with two blows from the butt of his Sten gun and then led them down a narrow alleyway between two houses.

"Okay now shut that gate again and everyone stay quiet." he said and the last man through pushed the gate closed again.

Too narrow for one of the walking machines, there was no way that one of them could follow the RAF troops in but it would take just a single burst of machine fire or one grenade round to finish them all off completely so the soldiers just sat and waited. Listening carefully they could hear the sounds of sporadic rifle fire as the remaining members of the support flight left behind in the field continued to fire at the walking machines. But strangely there was no longer any machine gun fire from any of them, nor were there the explosions of grenade rounds. The beam weapons carried by the walking machines were silent of course, but there were none of the cries of pain from men being hit by them.

"What's going on?" one of the troops asked, his gaze turning to Sergeant Hurt.

"Shush." Hurt replied, guessing what was about to happen and sure enough a few moments later he heard the pounding of the walking machines' feet on the hard surface of the road. Looking back down the alleyway and over the gate he saw two of them stride past, thankfully oblivious to the presence of the RAF men in the alleyway.

"There were only two of them." one of the other men said, "The others must have destroyed the other two."

"Don't be so daft." Hurt responded, "They've split up. Either they don't know where the squadron leader is and are trying to cover more ground or they know exactly where he is and plan to surround him before attacking. And my money's on the latter."

"So what do we do sarge?" someone asked and Hurt looked at Higgins again.

"Higgins, run straight back to Squadron Leader Hayes and warn him to watch for an attack from multiple directions at once. I'm going to go and see who's left out in that field."

When Bell arrived back at the town hall with the news that the walking machines were approaching town Squadron Leader Hayes immediately ordered his remaining troops to prepare for battle. The problem as he saw it was that if the walking machines made it through the support flight then they would have already have beaten the most powerful weapons he had at his disposal.

"I don't suppose there's any chance of us getting that panzer running is there?" Doctor Weston suggested as he looked out of the window at the stationary German tank but Hayes shook his head.

"It would need us to find someone who could drive it and someone that understood how to operate its main gun and turret doctor." he replied, "But still, we may be able to hide one or two people inside it. Perhaps with a PIAT, we still have a couple of them left."

"So you're planning on trying to ambush these machines then?" Weston asked.

"I don't really see any other choice." Hayes answered, "If we try and meet them head on with the weapons we've got they'll cut us to pieces. But if I split up what's left of the squadron and deploy them-" but as he waved his hand over the map of the town there was a knock at the door and Pilot Officer Milton burst in with Higgins.

"Another runner from the support flight sir." Milton announced.

"Yes, what is it aircraftman?" Hayes asked, looking directly at the newly arrived Higgins who saluted him.

"Sergeant Hurt sent me sir." he replied as Hayes returned his salute, "The enemy has broken through into the town. It looks like they've split up into two groups of two and may be trying to surround this position before attacking."

"Cunning." Hayes said, "They don't know exactly how much firepower we've got so they aren't concentrating their forces in one spot. Plus they think it forces us to split what we do have to defend from two directions at once."

"Doesn't it?" Skalaski commented from the side of the room. Like Weston he had been left with little to do while the squadron prepared for battle and so had waited in the command post with Hayes.

"Not this time pilot officer." Hayes said as a smile spread across his face, "Because I have no intention of trying to defend this position at all."

"You don't?" Milton asked, confused.

"On no. I intend to attack first." Hayes said, "Pilot Officer Milton, I want you to take your flight and deploy it in this area here." and he pointed to the map, indicating a residential area that lay between the edge of town where the walking machine were coming from and the town hall, "Spread them out and tell them to watch for the machines. Then as soon as you see any of them attack."

"Our weapons don't seem to have had much effect so far." Weston pointed out.

"No, but I'm hoping that the enemy will still slow down or even stop to engage us. The important thing to remember is that I don't want Two Flight trying to hold any ground. Shoot and then run, get them to follow you and waste fuel and ammunition."

"You're seeking to wear them down?" Skalaski said.

"Exactly." Hayes said, "I don't know how much fuel or ammunition those walking machines carry but it must be limited, just looking at the size of them tells us that. Now if you end up with all four of them after you I'll send Three Flight to help out. But otherwise I'll be deploying them right here." and he pointed to an area close to the town hall, "Since this is most likely the enemy's target we'll wait for them to get here before ambushing them from another direction."

"How will you make sure they're focused on the town hall sir?" Milton asked.

"The rest of us will be inside." Hayes told him, "We'll stay just long enough to fire off a few rounds and convince them that the building is occupied before slipping out the back way and moving around to encircle them."

## CHAPTER 9

The first pair of walking machines advanced through the deserted streets of the town, making their way towards the town square. They were alert for any signs of attack, with their weapon arms raised into a firing position. But when the first attack came it was not from the expected direction.

A two inch mortar shell came flying over a building behind the two machines and both instantly turned their turrets to face the incoming projectile. But before they even had chance to shoot it down a PIAT round came flying out of a nearby window. Both turrets fired at the mortar shell, incinerating it in mid air before turning their attention towards the PIAT bomb instead. This was closing too rapidly for them to be able to shoot it down and the anti-tank round slammed into one of the walking machines, striking it just above one of its elbows and blowing the machine gun and grenade launcher clean off. The walking machine staggered under the blow but did not fall and in the meantime the other stepped forwards, raised both arms and fired at the window where the PIAT had been fired from. But unlike the battle at the edge of town, the RAF troops had not attempted to hold their position and the moment that the PIAT bomb had been launched the crew had fled, leaving the walking machine firing its weapons at an empty house. Then came the rattle of machine gun fire as one of Two Flight's rifle sections attacked the rear of the walking machines with their Bren gun and the section commander's Sten, focusing on the already damaged walking machine. But as the two machines turned to face this new threat they retreated around the corner. The walking machines advanced, intent on hunting down the only RAF troop that they had actually seen but just as they rounded the corner and one turned its turret towards the soldiers a smoke grenade was hurled at them, breaking open as it landed in the middle of the road and rapidly creating a cloud of thick white phosphorous smoke that concealed the RAF troops. There then followed another volley of gunfire as all three of Two Flight's Bren guns opened fire from the other side of the smoke, spraying their .303 rounds about until their magazines were emptied.

Unable to acquire any targets through the smoke the two walking machines advanced into the cloud, ready to repel whatever attack came when they reached the other side. But the attack came sooner than they expected as a handful of men from the section to have fired on the walking machines first heard the sound of their footfalls and rolled Mills bombs into the cloud of smoke. Unable to see the grenades the two walking machines blundered right into them just as they exploded.

The RAF troops did not wait in the street on the other side of the cloud to see how effective their ambush had been and this was fortunate as both walking machines still came striding out, unaffected by the grenades but now set on a course of hunting down the men who had attacked them.

Milton and his wireless operator, along with the three men who acted as his flight's runners watched this from the upper floor of a nearby house.

"Pilot Officer Milton to Squadron Leader Hayes." Milton transmitted, "We have engaged the enemy and-" but then the damaged walking machine abruptly turned towards the building they occupied and raised its remaining arm, "Back!" Milton snapped and the RAF troops evacuated the room just before a grenade round smashed through the window and exploded, the blast catching one of Milton's runners just as he was in the doorway and throwing his body across the landing.

"How did they know we were here?" another of the runners exclaimed and Milton looked at the wireless set, "They must have some sort of radio direction finding built into those suits. We daren't use the wireless." then he grabbed hold of the wireless set itself, "Benson, switch this off." he told the operator. Quickly they shut down the wireless on Benson's back and then Milton looked at one of the runners, "Get back to the squadron leader and warn him not to use the wireless. We'll communicate with runners only."

"What about that?" the runner asked, pointing to the wireless set.

"We'll hang on to it for now." Milton replied, "Maybe we can use it to lure the enemy into a trap."

"Runner!" a voice called out from elsewhere in the town hall and from his position by the window Hayes saw the runner from Two Flight sprinting across the town square with his Lee-Enfield held in one hand beside him while the other hand was used to steady his helmet while he ran.

"Get in here." he shouted to the man, waving him towards the building and then he ran down the stairs to meet in in the hall where Lieutenant Grey and his bomb disposal team had set up a pair of Bren guns recovered from the destroyed armoured cars.

"Sir, Pilot Officer Milton sent me." the runner announced.

"Obviously." Hayes replied, "We got the first part of his signal. What's wrong with his wireless?"

"Can't use it sir. The enemy have RDF in those machines of theirs, they spotted our position the moment we tried to contact you using it even though we were inside and out of sight."

"Is Milton okay?" Grey asked.

"Yes sir, but he's turned off the wireless set and suggested that you do the same with yours."

Hayes smiled.

"Or maybe not." he said.

"I don't understand sir." Grey commented.

"Well we want them to think that the building is occupied so perhaps we should turn on our wireless when we evacuate, leave them shooting at it thinking they're taking out our command and control."

"Oh, I see." Grey replied. Then Hayes turned back to the runner.

"Pilot Officer Jenson has Three Flight's command section in that office building over there. Head over and warn him to make sure his wireless is turned off. Then get back to Milton and tell him we've got his message and are acting appropriately."

The runner just nodded before he turned around and ran back across the square, heading for the office building where Jenson's section was located. Meanwhile Hayes headed back upstairs and returned to the command post where Trent waited with his own section's wireless set.

"Get that out into the hallway." he ordered Trent, pointing to the wireless, "The enemy has RDF so we won't be using it to communicate. Instead we'll switch it on as we leave. But I want it clear of the enemy's fire for as long as possible."

Then while Hayes took his place by the window again Trent carried the wireless set out of the room and placed it in the hallway. The RAF men then continued to wait for the walking machines to arrive and the first indication that this was about to happen came just a few minutes later.

Now led by Pilot Officer Barton, the survivors of One Flight that had accompanied Hayes back to the town hall were now stationed on the roof of the building from where they could fire their two inch mortar the moment they caught sight of the approaching walking machines. The sound of this alerted the rest of the building's occupants to the enemy's approach and they all readied their weapons.

There was the sound of an explosion barely a second later as the mortar bomb was promptly shot down in mid flight before it could even come close to hitting the walking machines but this had always been expected and the mortar crew rapidly fired a second round to make certain that they had the walking machines full attention. This second projectile was also intercepted as it arced through the air but by this time the two walking machines had entered the town square. There was a brief burst of machine gun fire from one that was directed at the stationary German Panzer that was still exactly where the RAF troops had found it but when there was no reaction to the bullets bouncing off its heavily armoured hull the two walking machines decided that it was not a threat and continued to stride towards the town hall side by side so that they both had clear lines of sight to the building.

Taking aim with his Sten gun, Hayes squeezed the trigger and fired a burst at one of the walking machines. The attack was aimed dead centre of the torso and just as he had expected the pistol calibre rounds bounced off harmlessly. But this burst was the signal for the rest of the building's occupants to open fire as well and there was a mass volley of .303 bullets as well as a handful of pistol rounds from men armed with Sten guns or .38 Enfield revolvers.

The walking machines responded with a volley of their own, spraying the building with machine gun fire while also firing several grenades through windows where the heaviest fire had come from. However, this had been anticipated and even as they swung their weapons to take aim the RAF troops withdrew from the front of the building, rushing for the staircase at the back and heading for the exits and leaving the two walking machines firing at an empty building that thanks to the wireless set that had been switched to transmit by Hayes' section on their way out still appeared to be occupied by a command group.

It was then that Three Flight struck, a PIAT round fired from the rooftop of the office building that took the two walking machines by surprise. Unfortunately the gunner's aim was off slightly and the bomb landed in between the two walking machines and exploded harmlessly, its shaped charge warhead spraying them both with bits of stone blasted from the ground.

One of the walking machines immediately turned to face this new threat but Three Flight now held its fire, leaving it with nothing to shoot at until someone revealed their position. This happened when one of the flight's Bren gunners opened fire from yet another building, pulling back just as the walking machine turned to return fire only to have another volley of fire aimed at it from another direction.

As three flight continued to shift the angle of attack the other walking machine also turned around, having determined that the town hall was a lesser threat for now. This allowed the two walking machines to focus their defence over a narrower angle and when one of the Bren gun sections attempted to fire a rapid burst the gunner inadvertently exposed the section's position while one of the walking machines was

facing him and there was a flash from its turret as its beam weapon was fired, slicing through all three men of the Bren group.

When the first of the walking machines' return fire hit the front of the building Skalaski, Weston and his four orderlies were already making their way out of the back entrance. As they hurried one of the orderlies slammed into a stack of wooden boxes that had been left in the courtyard at the rear of the town hall and knocked it over. As the boxes came crashing to the paving stones of the courtyard one burst open and scattered the contents, around two dozen empty glass wine bottles, across the ground and several of them smashed.

"That gives me an idea." Weston said suddenly as he looked at the broken glass.

"What is it doctor?" Skalaski asked him.

"There was a grocery store nearby." Weston replied.

"Yes, I saw it." Skalaski said.

"I need as many glass jars with crew lids as you can find there." Weston told him, "Take my orderlies with you. Remember, glass and screw top lids. As many as you can find."

"Of course doctor. But what about you?" Skalaski asked and Weston turned the three Bedford trucks that the squadron had parked in the courtyard.

"There's something else we need in one of these." he replied.

At the side of the town hall Hayes peered out into the square to see the two walking machines standing with their backs to him firing at where they believed Three Flight to be positioned.

"They're staying in this fight too long." he said shaking his head, "We need a way of getting past their defences."

Behind him Barton looked out into the square as well and when he caught sight of the wrecks of his armoured cars a thought occurred to him. When the destroyed vehicles had been stripped of everything useful the Bren guns had been given over to Grey's section but the two surviving Boys anti-tank rifles had been left on the ground between two of the armoured cars and it was these that Barton saw now.

"I think I've got an idea sir." he told Hayes, "What about those?" and he pointed to the discarded rifles.

"Those might just work." Hayes agreed, smiling and he turned to Grey, "Lieutenant Grey, I want you to remain here with the rest of the men while Barton and I go and make those rifles ready for use. Then when I give the signal engage those machines and get them to come closer to us."

"Yes sir." Grey replied.

"Lead the way pilot officer." Hayes then told Barton and the flight commander suddenly darted out from behind the town hall, rushing towards the row of ruined armoured cars. Hayes followed immediately behind him and the pair came to a halt behind the wrecks before crawling towards the two Boys rifles.

Verging on obsolete even at the start of the war, in theory the Boys rifle was regarded as an infantry portable anti-tank weapon but it failed in both of these respects. At more than five feet in length and weighing thirty-five pounds empty, three pounds heavier than the PIAT that replaced it, it was too long and heavy to be easily carried by one man and the ability of its .55 calibre round was insufficient to penetrate the armour of anything other than a light tank or armoured car. What the two RAF officers were gambling on was that the round would not only be capable of penetrating the armour of one of the walking machines but also that it would be too small and moving too fast for the defensive beam turret on the top of them to intercept as they could with mortar and PIAT bombs.

As the two men were lifting one of the heavy rifles into position, setting it up on its built in bi-pod there was a scream from across the square and Hayes winced as he realised that the walking machines had located more of Three Flight. Meanwhile Barton lay down behind the Boys rifle and braced it against his shoulder with the vertical grip mounted beneath the rifle's butt.

"Here." Hayes said, picking up one of the small pile of five round magazines and loading it into the top of the Boys rifle, tapping it just to be sure that it was securely in place. Barton worked the bolt, chambering the first of the rounds and he focused down the sights.

"Ready." he said and Hayes crept towards the back of the wrecked armoured car beside them and waved towards Grey.

"There's the signal." Grey told his men, "Get those Brens up here."

The two soldiers now armed with Bren guns crept forwards, halting at the corner and both standing with their weapons at their hips. Then both men opened fire together, sending sustained bursts of .303 rounds at the backs of the two walking machines. As expected none of these shots inflicted any damage at all on the walking machines but it did provoke one of them, the one with the inoperable turret, into turning

around. Even as it was still turning the two men with Brens pulled back from the corner and with the source of the attack no longer visible the walking machine began to advance.

"Just a little closer." Barton muttered as he waited for the best possible shot.

"Whenever you're ready pilot officer." Hayes said as he lifted his hands to cover his ears.

"I have you now." Barton said with smile and he squeezed the trigger of the Boys rifle.

There was an almighty 'Boom!' and Barton winced as the rifle discharged, producing a massive recoil as the tungsten cored round erupted from the barrel and sped towards the advancing walking machine. The bullet hit the walking machine in its shoulder, producing a shower of sparks as the limb fell limp. Then as the walking machine started to turn in search of the source of the attack Barton worked the Boys rifle's bolt, chambering a second round from the magazine as fast as he could.

As Barton took aim once more he found himself facing the front of the walking machine and he lined up the sights on the centre of its torso and squeezed the trigger again, once again wincing at the force of the recoil. Barton's aim was dead on target and the armour piercing bullet struck the torso of the walking machine. For a moment it remained upright, perfectly still, but then it staggered backwards and collapsed. Reacting to the loss of its comrade the remaining walking machine turned and opened fire with both its built in machine guns towards the row of wrecked armoured cars.

Unfortunately, given the direction from which this second walking machine was approaching there was not enough room for the two RAF officers to swing the Boys rifle around without exposing themselves to fire from it. The tyres of the armoured car beside them had all been burst and the suspension collapsed, leaving no room underneath. Their only saving grace was that the walking machine did not appear to know exactly where the pair were hidden and was just using its machine guns for suppressive fire while it tried to locate them.

"Time to leave I think." Hayes said as bullets continued to bounce off the already destroyed armoured cars.

"If we run out into the open we're dead." Barton pointed out.

Skalaski and the medical orderlies returned with boxes filled with various glass jars, all of which had screwed on lids. The contents of these varied however and Skalaski rushed up to Weston as the doctor was rummaging around in the cab of one of the trucks and set down a box beside him.

"Here you are doctor." he announced, "Now what do we do with them now?"

"Empty out the contents." Weston replied, "I don't care what you do with them but hurry. Then fill all of them up from those canisters over there." and he raised an arm to point at several fuel canisters that the squadron had brought along for its vehicles. Then all of a sudden he exclaimed, "Oh where is that blasted thing?"

Turning to the orderlies Skalaski handed one of them the box that he held.

"Take this." he said, "empty the contents and refill them as the good doctor has instructed. I shall assist him in his search. I think I know what he is looking for."

On the far side of the square Jenson and his command section returned to a room that they had previously occupied and evacuated. Now the walls were riddled with bullet holes and grenade fragments from when the walking machines had targeted it in the hope of killing them.

"Get that PIAT ready." Jenson ordered as he rushed to the ruined window and looked outside. In the square below him the walking machine was heading away from him, currently focusing its fire on the wrecks of the armoured cars while the second walking machine lay motionless on its back near to the German Panzer.

The PIAT crew cocked and loaded the weapon before resting it on the window sill and firing the bomb. Then they leapt back, rushing for the exit while Jenson remained just long enough to see a flash from the walking machine's turret and the projectile glow brightly before exploding. This time however, the interception came late and several red hot fragments peppered the upper surface of the walking machine though they appeared to do no damage. Then when the walking machine turned and began to raise an arm towards the window Jenson was looking out of the pilot officer also pulled back, running from the room just in time to avoid a burst of machine gun fire and also just a few seconds too soon to see several men suddenly appear on the roof of the town hall opposite.

"It is still there doctor!" Skalaski called out when he looked down at the walking machine. It had taken up a position not far from the row of wrecked armoured cars and was alternately firing at the wrecks and at the buildings on the far side of the square.

"Good." Weston replied, "Now throw."

The boxes of fuel filled jars were set down on the roof and Skalaski and the four orderlies each began to remove jars from the boxes and them hurled them at the walking machine. Meanwhile Weston undid the catch on a bulky leather holster and from it he pulled a pistol that bore a passing resemblance to the Enfield revolvers that 2728 Squadron's officers were issued with. But rather than a rotating cylinder containing six rather puny .38 calibre bullets this particular pistol had only a single chamber an inch and a half across and from his bag Weston produced a tin that was labelled '6 SIGNALS, DOUBLE STAR, YELLOW MK1', opened it and removed one of the bulky cartridges it contained.

"How is it going?" Weston asked as he closed the chamber of the flare pistol and walked to the edge of the roof.

"Very good doctor." Skalaski answered, "The machine has not responded to our hurling these jars at it, not even to try and shoot them down."

"But you hit it?" Weston said.

"We sure did." one of the orderlies replied just as Skalaski hurled another fuel filled jar that broke against the walking machine.

"Howzat!" he yelled and when he saw the British troops staring at him he smiled and added, "I didn't just learn to fly Spitfires when I arrived in your country."

"I'm glad to hear it." Weston said, "Now let's see how accurate this thing is." and he raised the flare pistol, pointing it towards the walking machine in the square below.

The pistol kicked when he fired it and there was a bright flash from its muzzle. But that was nothing when compared to what happened when the flare struck the walking machine and ignited. All of 2728 Squadron's vehicles used petrol engines and now the walking machine was soaked in the volatile fuel and the instant that the flare ignited the whole thing burst into flames.

"Run!" Hayes snapped as he and Barton felt the heat from the flames. The walking machine was now staggering about as it burned, its limbs flailing wildly though none of its weapons were firing any longer and the two officers saw their chance to try and flee. Leaving the Boys rifles where they were, the two men ran back towards the town hall as more of the RAF troops nearby began peering from their hiding places to watch the stricken walking machine burn. Then came another burst of machine gun fire and Barton and Hayes threw themselves to the ground. Fortunately the burst of fire was not aimed at them, instead it seemed to be directed randomly as if whatever controlled the actions of the walking machine was no longer able to function properly.

Meanwhile Jenson saw an opportunity to bypass the walking machine's defences and he waved his PIAT crew to the nearest window overlooking the square.

"Get that PIAT over here. Quickly." he exclaimed and the two man crew hurried to bring the weapon into action, cocking it and loading another bomb in the front. Bracing the heavy weapon on the window sill the gunner lined it up on the walking machine that still burned furiously and fired.

Jenson waited, half expecting the deadly beam weapon in the turret to intercept this bomb just as it had with so many of the others so far. But this time the walking machine's defences failed to respond and the PIAT round struck the torso from behind and its shaped charge warhead detonated, sending the directed blast of superheated metal right into the walking machine's torso and it exploded. The blast sent pieces of burning debris flying all across the square and into the buildings around it. One chunk of an arm landed close to Hayes' head and he flinched before rolling over and looking at the remains of the walking machine now burning furiously.

"Squadron leader!" Weston called out from the roof of the town hall, "Are you alright?"

"Indeed we are doctor." Hayes replied as he got back to his feet, "I take it that we have you to thank for that flare?"

"That's right. Though I'm guessing the PIAT is down to Pilot Officer Jenson and his men."

"Then I'm grateful to you all." Hayes said.

Four monitors had relayed images of what the walking machines saw back to the figures watching. Or at least they did until one of them went blank, followed by a second one belonging to the other walking machine paired with it suddenly flaring brightly as flame enveloped it before it too went blank. The status updates from the second pair of walking machines indicated that one of them had suffered damage as well, having lost the weapons mounted in one arm. It was becoming clear that the RAF troops defending the town were using the built up area to their advantage, striking from places too small for the much larger walking machines to follow with an assortment of weapons that were capable of damaging or even destroying the walking machines. Unwilling to put the airfield's defences at further risk the figure in command of the others uttered a few short sounds and the seated one reached out for a console.

## CHAPTER 10

The two walking machines were just crossing a stone bridge over a stream that ran through the town when two members of Two Flight appeared from underneath and tossed grenades at them, ducking back underneath the structure before the walking machines could respond or the grenades detonate. There were two explosions in rapid succession as the grenades went off and watching from a nearby window Milton smiled as he saw the damaged walking machine topple over the side and come crashing down into the stream.

For a few moments it looked as the fallen walking machine would be stuck, unable to raise itself back to its feet. But then it pushed its one remaining gun arm into the ground and used it to lever itself back into a standing position while its comrade appeared to be keeping watch for any signs of attack. Milton expected the two machines to start hunting for the two men hidden under the bridge but instead they remained motionless for a moment.

Then they both did something unexpected. The two walking machines turned around to face the way they had come and set off at a run, ignoring the various volleys of rifle fire or bursts from Bren guns that were fired at them to try and keep luring them on. Milton was about to send a runner to warn Squadron Leader Hayes that the two walking machines may have grown tired of chasing after his flight and may instead be heading for his position when he realised what lay the direction that the walking machines were heading. The edge of town they had come from.

The handful of survivors from the support flight took cover amongst the wreckage of the universal carriers when they heard the sound of heavy metal feet on the road and waited.

"Hold your fire." Hurt hissed, clutching the Sten gun he knew was practically useless against the armoured walking machines.

Then the two surviving walking machines appeared from within the town, moving at a much faster pace than they had been when they had fought their way through the support flight into town. Significantly one of the two walking machines had been damaged, having lost the weapons on one arm. Ignoring the universal carriers the walking machines continued along the road at their faster pace, following the road as it led back into the woods towards the airfield. Hurt turned to watch, his hand reaching for a grenade just in case they stopped within throwing distance. But if either of the walking machines noticed any of the survivors then they clearly did not consider them worth slowing down for and they kept on running along the road until they were out of sight.

"Sarge, where are they going?" one of the survivors asked, but it was Corporal Gibson that answered.

"Back to the airfield I'd guess." he said, "I'm guessing that its all over."

"Yeah." Hurt added, "But who won?"

As the remains of the second destroyed walking machine continued to burn the soldiers surrounding the town square began to emerge. Wary of approaching a burning fighting machine of any description just in case any fuel or ammunition still inside cooked off the troops kept their distance while Hayes looked around at them.

"How many did we lose?" he asked out loud.

"I lost half a dozen men. Plus two injured including Corporal Yates." Jenson replied.

"That looks to be it." Grey added, "Not bad all things considered."

"They're still dead lieutenant." Weston commented, "Will you telling be their families that their deaths weren't significant?"

"Doctor there are always casualties in war." Hayes responded before Grey could, "And we should be grateful that we didn't lose more men than we did. Our success in fighting these machines until now has not been terribly effective."

"At least we know how to take them out now." Barton said.

"Yes, yes we do." Hayes said.

"There are still two more of them out there." Skalaski commented.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Grey replied, "Listen."

"Listen to what pilot officer?" Weston asked.

"Exactly." Grey replied, "No gunfire."

Looking around Hayes saw one of the runners from his command section.

"Aircraftman Jones." he called out, "Go and find Pilot Officer Milton and Two Flight. I want an update on their status. And providing that he's got at least one full section's worth of men left I want him to take them to the edge of town where the support flight was stationed. He is to see how many survivors there are and position his men to watch for any further enemy activity." Hayes then turned to Weston. The doctor still held the flare pistol and the squadron leader reached out for it, "May I have that please doctor?" he asked and Weston nodded.

"Of course." he replied, handing over the pistol and then the tin with its remaining flares. In turn Hayes passed these to Jones.

"Give these to Milton. If the enemy move towards town again then he is to fire a single flare to warn us. If he considers that he has the advantage then he may engage them, but he has my permission to withdraw or scatter his men if outmatched."

Jones took the flare pistol and flares and set off to search for Milton's flight. In the mean time Hayes turned his attention to the walking machine that Barton had shot with the Boys rifle.

"As for us," he announced, "I think that we may be able to learn a lot from this machine."

The disabled walking machine was too big to move so instead the RAF officers present gathered a short distance away from it while Lieutenant Grey and his section carried out initial checks to try and determine whether there was any risk of explosions. However, even now that they were able to walk right up to it the walking machine was so far beyond their understanding that they could not say for certain what state it was in without attempting to open it up first. At the same time cameras recovered from the town were used to photograph the walking machine, placing items of equipment beside it for scale. Then after Grey had completed his initial examination of the walking machine he wandered over to where the RAF officers were waiting.

"There's not much to tell from an initial look." he told them, "I'm pretty sure that the two boxes attached to the main forearms contain the ammunition for the weapons and I don't think that anything's about to explode but that's about it. We need to try and open this thing up."

"As you wish lieutenant." Hayes said with a nod and he and his subordinates followed Grey back towards the walking machine.

"Lift that arm." Grey told his men and between them they were able to raise one of the walking machine's arms off the ground, "Good, now hold it there." Grey said as he stepped closer to inspect the two octagonal shaped boxes mounted beneath the forearm that housed a machine gun and grenade launcher, positioned one behind the other. The two boxes had the same cross sectional area but the one to the front was much deeper and it was this one that Grey looked at first, "There are latches." he announced, "But I think I'll need something to pry them with."

Another of his men handed him a large screwdriver and Grey pushed it against what he took to be one of the latches.

"Okay someone get hold of this." he said and he waited while the same man that had given him the screwdriver supported the box underneath before he used the screwdriver as a lever to release the latch, "Got it?" he asked the man holding box as he saw it drop at his side.

"Yes sir." the soldier replied with a nod as he took the weight. Then Grey moved around the arm to release the second latch on the other side and released this as well. No longer connected to the walking machine's arm, the box now dropped free and the soldier attempting to support lost his grip and the box fell to the ground with a 'Crash!' Immediately all of the British troops leapt backwards, unsure of whether it was about to explode and in doing so the bomb disposal team also let go of the arm they were holding, allowing it too to drop to the ground.

But despite the worst fears of those around it the box did not explode and the nearby troops peered into the opening revealed at on top where it had fitted into the arm. This was located at the rear of the box and extended about a third of the way forwards.

"It is ammunition." Skalaski said.

"Those are explosive rounds from the looks of them." Hayes added.

"They look like rounds for a pom pom gun." Weston commented, referring to the lightweight automatic cannon that was little more than an enlarged version of the common Vickers water cooled machine gun, "The projectile part at any rate."

This last comment was significant. The round visible at the top of the magazine lacked any form of case to contain propellant, instead being nothing more than a stubby bullet about an inch and a half in diameter.

"There must be some sort of separate propellant." Grey said.

"Like a naval gun?" Hayes asked.

"Yes, I suppose so." Grey said as he knelt beside the box and carefully removed the top round, sliding it forwards. As soon as this first round came loose a second one popped up into the position it had occupied.

"Careful man! You may arm it." Weston exclaimed and he flinched.

"I doubt it." Grey replied, "I would think that there was some part of the weapon's mechanism to do that. Just in case the rounds needed to be cleared without being fired." then he looked back at the walking machine, "Now let's take a look at the other box. I'm guessing that contains the ammunition for the machine gun." and Grey turned back to the walking machine's arm.

Repeating the procedure that he had used to remove the magazine for the grenade launcher, Grey detached the forward magazine and examined what this revealed. Again there was a small hole on the top of the magazine where it fitted into the arm and through this the ammunition it held could be seen. As expected this was ammunition for the machine gun and the bullets looked much like those fired by the British troops' Lee-Enfields and Brens but somewhat narrower, about a quarter of an inch in calibre rather than the .303 of the standard British round. Like the grenade rounds these bullets also lacked any form of case or obvious propellant and Grey frowned as he removed several from the magazine for the other officers to inspect.

"Not much remarkable about these." Barton said.

"Apart from the lack of propellant." Skalaski added.

"Yes that is strange." Grey agreed and he looked at Hayes, "Squadron leader, providing a separate propellant for a machine gun is way beyond anything I understand. The complexity of-" and then he stopped as the bullet in his hand that he was rolling about with his screwdriver suddenly moved of its own accord, the base suddenly sticking to the screwdriver.

"Now that's interesting." Weston said as Grey lifted his screwdriver and the bullet lifted up with it, dangling below the tool.

"Yes it is." Hayes added and turning around he strode towards the nearest of the wrecked Morris armoured cars and held the base of the bullet he held against it before releasing his grip, only for the bullet to remain in place.

"Magnetic." Skalaski said and he held the bullet he had been given towards the one Weston held, aligned base to base only for the other one to move away.

"They're magnetically propelled." Grey said and he looked back at the walking machine, "The weapon must produce a magnetic field of the same pole as the base of the ammunition and that hurls it out of the barrel. No propellant needed."

"One would assume that the explosive rounds work the same way." Weston said and Grey walked over to where he had set down the grenade round and touched his screwdriver to its base. Sure enough it stuck and he had to force it free. Then he looked back at the other officers and smiled.

"I think we can call that proof of the theory." he replied.

"So we know that the weapons work magnetically." Hayes said, "Now what about weak points?"

"Ah." Grey replied, "Well I'm guessing that whatever makes this thing work is housed right in here." and he returned to the walking machine and slapped the front of its torso where there was a coffin-shaped protrusion that the second Boys round had struck, creating a small hole. Grey started his examination with this hole but found it too small to be able to see anything through so instead he began to hunt for a way to get it open.

At the top and bottom of the coffin-shaped section Grey saw that there were what looked like hinges running all the way along and on closer inspection he found a seam about half way up it.

"I think I've got it." he said, "This is an access panel of some kind. I just need to force it open."

"Are you sure forcing anything on this is safe?" Weston asked.

"Oh I think so doctor. Nothing has exploded so far."

"That other one did." Jenson said, glancing at the wreckage of the second walking machine that his flight had destroyed.

"Yes but that got hit with a PIAT. That's what PIATs do." Grey said as he tried forcing his screwdriver into the seam but without success and he sighed, "There must be some sort of release somewhere." he said and looking up at his men he added, "Help me look."

Together the men of Grey's section searched the torso of the walking machine until one of them found a lever located beneath one of the manipulating arms folded either side of the protruding coffin.

"I think I've found it sir." he called out, "There's a lever here."

"Pull it." Grey ordered and the soldier pulled down on the lever. The moment that the lever locked into place with a 'Clunk' there was a hiss and the coffin split open along the seam, the top and bottom halves

unfolding to reveal what lay within.

And only then did the gathered soldiers see their enemy.

"Good God!" Grey exclaimed as he stumbled backwards away from the machine, "It has a driver."

"Had a pilot I think is the correct term lieutenant." Weston replied, gathering his composure faster than anyone else and as he approached the machine to inspect the body of its occupant he added, "It would seem that that Boys round Pilot Officer Barton shot this machine with went right through his chest.

"But what is it doctor?" Hayes asked.

The body was not human, let alone a German soldier. It was bipedal like a human but the proportions were not what would be considered normal. Instead its limbs looked elongated while each hand was missing a finger. The skin of the pilot was a pale grey in colour and when Weston pressed a finger against it it felt rubbery to the touch but held firm under the pressure. At under five feet tall the body of the pilot was more childlike in size except for its head which was more bulbous. Two massive black lidless eyes dominated what little the pilot had in the way of a face, there being no sign of a nose or mouth beneath them and as Weston gently touched one of these it felt hard to the touch. The pilot was naked aside from a harness that looked remarkably similar to the webbing worn by the British troops and at its waist was what was obviously a pistol holster that held a weapon with a grip. This lack of clothing meant that it was clear to see that the face was not the only part of the body that was lacking in orifices, there were none to be seen anywhere at all and quite how the pilot would have ingested food or expelled waste was not clear.

"Is it some sort of monkey?" one of Grey's men suggested.

"Of course not." Weston told him, "There's nothing like this anywhere on earth. Not that came from here anyway."

"Doctor, are you saying that this is some sort of Martian?" Hayes asked.

"Well this suit does have a heat ray doesn't it?" Jenson added.

"I don't know where this thing comes from squadron leader." Weston said, "But I can guarantee you that it is not of this earth and I think that explains everything that has happened in this town."

"You mean Martians killed everyone? Do you know how crazy that sounds?" Jenson said.

"Look at that." Weston said, pointing to the body of the pilot, "have you ever seen anything like it before? Because I haven't and I've spent years studying life on this planet. And what about everything else? The walking machines, guns fired using magnets and death rays. I think all of this comes from a world other than our own." then Weston turned towards Hayes, "I need to do an autopsy. My orderlies can move the body to the hospital and I can perform it there."

"Yes of course." Hayes replied.

"I'd like to be able to record it if I can." Weston added, "This is an amazing discovery."

"My men found cameras in a newspaper office, including a film camera." Jenson said, "Along with a tape recorder."

"Those ought to do." Weston said.

"Perhaps I can assist with the cameras." Skalaski said, "I know something about their operation."

"Then get to it." Hayes said, "I want to know everything about our enemy that you can give me."

The body of the alien pilot was laid out on its back on the operating table while Skalaski and Weston concentrated on setting up the camera and tape recorder to make sure that everything done here was recorded for future reference. In addition a photographic camera with a flash had been brought along so that still images could be taken whenever Weston asked for them. This would be operated by one of the orderlies while the others assisted the doctor with the autopsy and Skalaski ran the film camera.

"Okay we're ready." Weston said as he pulled on a white gown and surgical mask, "Start rolling."

Skalaski switched on the tape recorder and started the film camera.

"You are on doctor." he said.

"Excellent." Weston said, "Today is October the first, nineteen forty-four and it is approximately seventeen hundred hours. My name is Doctor Abraham Weston, flight lieutenant of His Majesty's Royal Air Force. Today I am about to carry out an autopsy on what I believe is a being from another world. This creature is fifty-seven inches in length and I estimate that it weights approximately ninety pounds. Cause of death was a gunshot wound from a Boys anti-tank rifle used to disable the vehicle it was operating." then he looked up at the orderly with the camera, "Get a picture of this wound." he said before stepping back to allow the aircraftman to get into the best position to take the photograph.

While the picture was being taken Weston picked up a scalpel and when the orderly stepped back he leant over the body again, focusing on the bullet wound.

"I will now see what can be determined from an inspection of the wound." he announced for the benefit of the tape recorder, "The dermis is grey in colour and has a rubbery feel to it. There are absolutely no orifices that I have been able to locate, suggesting that respiration, absorption of nutrients and the excreting of bodily waste all takes place directly through the dermis. As mentioned the dermis has been penetrated by a point five five calibre round that lodged within the body. The area around the wound is stained a dark red, suggesting blood chemistry based on iron much like human blood. I have yet to examine a sample under magnification to confirm this though. As for the wound itself-" and Weston gently poked the bullet wound with the tip of his scalpel before stopping speaking.

"Doctor?" Skalaski said, "Is there a problem?"

"I'm not sure." Weston replied as he poked the wound again, trying to get the tip of the scalpel under the skin to peel it back. Then he withdrew the blade and using the thumb and forefinger of his other hand pinched part of the alien's body, pulling back the skin and letting it snap back into place, "It's a suit." he said to himself. Then more clearly he added, "It appears I am mistaken. I am not looking at the creature itself but rather the creature inside some form of all enclosing suit." then he put the scalpel back with the other surgical instruments and looked at one of his men that was standing close by, "Orderly help with this. I want to see if I can find a seam."

Hayes was still watching Grey and his men dismantle the alien battlesuit when Jones returned with news from Two Flight.

"Sir." he said, saluting and Hayes returned the salute.

"Did you locate Pilot Officer Milton?" Hayes asked.

"Yes sir. He reported that he took only one casualty against the enemy forces and that his men were able to damage one of the machines before they both retreated. It looks like the enemy withdrew at the same time as the two here were destroyed."

"So they know what happens to one another." Barton commented.

"They probably have wireless sets built into these things." Hayes commented and then he turned back to Jones, "Continue aircraftman." he said.

"Pilot Officer Milton has taken Two Flight to the edge of town as you ordered sir." Jones continued, "I went with them and they met up with survivors from the support flight."

"How many are left?" Hayes asked.

"I'm not sure sir. But Pilot Officer Riggs has been killed and Sergeant Hurt has assumed command. He said that three of their Bren gun carriers were destroyed while the other three suffered either some damage or the loss of their crews but can be brought back into action. He said that the carriers could withstand hits from the enemy machine guns and shell blasts but that their ray guns could cut through them."

"Looks like we've still got some armour for you to command then Barton." Hayes said. Then he looked at the row of wrecked armoured cars, "In fact I want you to go and take command of the support flight. Take the two Boys rifles and those em-gee thirty-fours we took from that Panzer."

"You're thinking we should mount them on the remaining Bren carriers sir?" Barton asked.

"Yes I am. Those weapons are some of the most powerful we have and it makes sense to have them mobile. Put one of each on two of the carriers and we'll use the other to move a PIAT team. Between them that may give us a fighting chance against these things." and he pointed to the battlesuit that lay in front of them.

"I think this is it." Weston said as he peered closely at the neck of the alien and he carefully grasped the rubbery covering there and pulled on it. Just as before this pulled the covering away from the alien's body but rather than just stretching it Weston exposed an edge of the section of the suit covering the alien's head that came away and he pushed his fingers under this before pulling the hood upwards. It took some force to pull the hood back, it had a size that was naturally smaller than the head of the alien that wore it and so it gripped the alien tightly. But with a sound similar to a rubber glove being removed from someone's hand the hood came free and Weston found himself looking into the true face of the alien. Rather than the featureless oval with large black eyes the alien's head was covered in exposed bone and possessed two multi faceted eyes. There was no nose to speak of, just a cluster of holes located between the eyes and above a larger one surrounded by mandibles that ended in tiny sharp claws that appeared to take the place of teeth.

"The creature has a more insectoid appearance beneath its suit." Weston announced, remembering the tape recorder and once more he stepped back and waved the aircraftman with the camera in closer to

photograph the alien's face, "Right then," Weston added when the photograph was taken, "let's get the rest of this suit off."

The alien's suit stretched at the neck enough that the RAF medical team were able to pull it down the corpse and remove it as a single piece to reveal the entire body of the alien. In keeping with the insectoid head, the rest of the corpse was covered in a bony exoskeleton. This had splintered where the round from the Boys rifle had penetrated it but looked otherwise intact.

"The exoskeleton covers every part of the body," he said for the recording and he lifted one of the alien's legs and began to move the knee joint, proving that could be bent in either direction, "The bony plates appear to fit neatly together and overlap at the joints allowing freedom of movement beyond the range of a human limb. Whether this is typical of the species is unknown though."

"How would you like to proceed?" one of the orderlies asked when Weston set the limb down and stood back. In response to this question the doctor just frowned. This body was the only example of an alien life form that the Allies had in their possession and as such was priceless from a scientific point of view. He had not been worried about slicing open a body with exposed soft tissue but the thought of having to cut through a toughened exoskeleton without any knowledge of what else he could be damaging in the process was another matter entirely.

"We'll end here," he announced as he lowered his surgical mask, "I want every part of this body filmed and photographed. Then get ready to wrap it up and place it in the morgue. We'll take it back to England with us and let someone with access to better resources than we've got here decide what to do with it. But I get the feeling that Squadron Leader Hayes will want to see it first."

At that moment Squadron Leader Hayes was inspecting the final item of alien origin captured by 2728 Squadron, the alien soldier's sidearm.

"Have you ever seen one of those Beretta sub machine guns?" Jenson asked him as he held out the pistol and a magazine of ammunition that had been taken from the alien's webbing, "The ones with two separate triggers?"

"You mean one for semi-automatic and the other for full?" Hayes asked and Jenson nodded.

"That's it sir," he said, "Well this weapon uses something similar to switch between single shots and automatic."

Hayes studied the gun but could see only one trigger inside the trigger guard, a solid block with a curved front face that extended all the way back into the grip and he frowned.

"Selecting semi or fully automatic is done by the strength of trigger pull," Jenson explained, "Just pull it back partially and you fire one shot per pull but pull it all the way back and you'll fire a burst."

"Let me try," Hayes said and he looked at the open top of the magazine. Here he could see the top round of ammunition and just like the projectiles fired by the battlesuit machine guns there was no sign of a case, just the projectile itself. Looking at the butt of pistol he saw that although the magazine was inserted just as one from most human self loading pistols would be, into the bottom of the grip, the magazine well only came part way back. Hayes inserted the magazine and gripped the top of the weapon.

"There's no slide sir," Jenson told him, "There's a block at the back you pull instead," and Hayes located the ribbed block and drew it back to chamber a round. Then he tried gripping the pistol and pointing it away from any of his men.

Doing this turned out to be awkward and uncomfortable. The overly long nature of the alien's hands meant that the grip was much longer than it was on any human pistol and Hayes could not wrap his hand all the way around.

"Try a two handed grip," Jenson suggested and Hayes placed a hand either side of the grip. This was not perfect by any means, or even comfortable, but he was able to hold the weapon firmly between the palms of his hands now at least.

"I take it there's no safety?" he asked.

"We think it's built into the trigger," Jenson answered before Hayes gently squeezed the trigger.

There was a sharp 'Crack!' that sounded much like the noise made by the weapon used by the unseen alien in the airfield warehouse and the bullet struck the stone wall that Hayes had been pointing the gun towards, producing a hole about an inch across. Then he pulled the trigger again, only this time he pulled it all the way back and instead of just one bullet a whole stream of them erupted from the muzzle and Hayes felt the gun climb rapidly, putting a diagonal line of holes into the wall instead of just one before he released the trigger and the weapon stopped firing.

Hayes stared at the pistol again, impressed by the firepower it offered in such a relatively compact package. Humans had tried making machine pistols on a handful of occasions over the years but they

had never caught on. The aliens appeared to have developed the concept properly, however.  
“Sir!” a voice called out and Hayes looked up from the machine pistol to see one of Weston's medical orderlies rushing towards him.  
“What is it aircraftman?” Hayes asked as the man came to a halt and saluted.  
“It's the alien sir. Doctor Weston thinks that you ought to come and take a look at it. It's not what we thought it was at all.”

Hayes crouched beside the body, looking at it closely but not touching it at all.  
“So they look like this but wear some sort of rubber suit?” he said, looking up and Weston nodded.  
“Well this one did at least. Until we see more of them we can't be certain that they all wear those suits.” While Hayes had been looking at the body, Skalaski had been inspecting the hood that Weston had removed from it.  
“Squadron Leader.” he called out, “I think you ought to see this.”  
“What is it?” Hayes replied, straightening up and turning around.  
“The alien wore this on its head,” Skalaski said, “and I think that there is more to it than just a hood.”  
“How so?” Hayes asked as the two men walked towards one another, joined by Doctor Weston.  
“See here? Right where the creature's mouth would be?” Skalaski said, holding out the hood and stretching it so that the region of the inside that he wanted them to see was more easily visible and they saw a small circular grill set inside it.  
“Is that some sort of gas mask?” Weston asked.  
“I do not think so doctor.” Skalaski answered, “A gas mask would require some form of detachable filter. I think that this is a microphone of some sort and if you study the sides you will see two more similar features that I believe are speakers.”  
“Incredible.” Hayes said as he took the hood and inserted his hand to get a feel for the amount of room inside, “Given that there are no sockets on this thing it must have a wireless set built into it.”  
“But the size.” Weston responded, “It would need to be about the size of a packet of cigarettes to fit in there.”  
“Indeed it would doctor.” Hayes agreed, “But so far all of the electronics we've seen in their devices have been much smaller than our own. It makes sense that they could shrink a wireless set as well.” then he handed the hood back to Skalaski, “Now I want all of this packed up ready to be sent back to England and then I want the pair of you in the command post in half an hour and I'll explain our next move.”

## CHAPTER 11

Hayes gathered together all of his surviving commissioned officers for his briefing. The command post had suffered damage during the fight with the battlesuits in the square but it remained largely intact and apart from a few bullet holes in the wall it was drawn on, the map of the airfield was still visible on the wall.

"This will be our primary target." he announced, pointing to the large hangar building, "The machines we encountered there last time appeared to have come from inside this building and I believe it is where they are being kept."

"Do you think they have many more sir?" Milton asked.

"I can't be certain but I'd say that about half a dozen is a likely number, including the two we've damaged." Hayes answered.

"How did you come to that figure?" Weston asked.

"The aliens sent four machines against us." Hayes explained, "So they thought that a number sufficient to deal with us. Now if I was in their place I would be unwilling to commit more than half my forces to such a mission so that would suggest they have at least eight such machines. But if they had much more than that then why withdraw their forces instead of reinforcing them? So I'm basing my plan on there having been a total of eight to begin with, two of which we have already destroyed and two which we have damaged to varying degrees."

"We don't actually know how easy those things are to repair." Barton commented, "They could be fully operational again by now."

"Yes, that is a possibility." Hayes responded, "But it doesn't make much difference to my plan of attack." and he pointed to a spot where the airfield buildings came closest to the perimeter fence, "We will penetrate the wire here." he said, "One section from Three Flight will enter the airfield perimeter and scale these buildings, concealing themselves on the roofs. They will take with them as many jars of petrol as they can as well as two flare pistols. Their job will be to attempt to destroy any alien machines as possible using the technique invented by Doctor Weston."

"Sir, how will we get the aliens close enough?" Jenson asked.

"A wireless set will be positioned between the building and the fence." Hayes replied, "The aliens do seem to have some form of radio direction finding so I'm hoping that this will lure them out to investigate. Now its entirely possible that the aliens will not respond with any of their walking machines and will instead send infantry. If this happens then the rest of Three Flight, that will be waiting in the woods right here is to engage them but the section on the roof should endeavour to remain hidden. I doubt the aliens will be able to ignore a direct attack on the airfield for long and they'll have to send in their walking machines."

Hayes then moved his hand to another part of the map, on the far side of the airfield from where he intended Three Flight to attack.

"The main gate will be the target for the rest of the squadron and Lieutenant Grey's section. My initial aim is to recover the two em-gee forty-twos that we left there. Since the aliens showed no interest in them before our arrival I'm hoping that they won't have bothered to remove them since and we'll be able to add their firepower to our own. At this point we'll dig in and attack the airfield buildings directly using our remaining mortars. This should convince the enemy to commit their remaining forces and we'll engage them directly. We still have three of the support section's Bren gun carriers available to us and two of these have been modified with the em-gee thirty-fours and Boys rifles. The third will be made available to Two Flight's PIAT team and together they'll give us our own mobile armoured force with the firepower to take on the enemy machines."

Hayes paused at this point and turned his attention back to the large hangar that he had already identified as the the squadron's target.

"When we have dealt with the enemy's armour we'll advance on the target together and establish a perimeter around it. At that point I will assess what forces we have left and determine how we will go about entering it." he said, "I know we could just use our heavy weapons to destroy it and that will remain an option. But my hope is that there will be something in there worth us taking intact."

The chamber held all of the remaining battlesuits, each one standing in one of the alcoves that ran down either side. There were four battlesuits in total, while two of the alcoves stood empty. Members of the engineering crew worked on all four battlesuits, in the case of two this just meant making sure that the

fuel cells were charged and magazines for the machine guns and grenade launchers were filled to capacity. For the other two however, far greater attention was required. One battlesuit had been damaged by chance, with small arms fire and a hand thrown explosive affecting some of the moving parts and serving to slow down the machine. The second battlesuit was more seriously damaged though, having lost the use of one of its weapon arms and there were no spare parts available to replace it. Instead the engineers working on the heavily damaged battlesuit to modify its control systems to take into account the lost limb when determining movement and balance while on the less seriously damaged battlesuit they worked to free the moving parts. The commander hated to have his engineers occupied with this menial work rather than the primary task he had assigned his crew but he could not afford to have the airfield undefended if the humans returned.

The alien commander walked along the chamber, looking up at the battlesuits as he considered his strategy now that the plan to eliminate the human forces in the area had failed, costing him two battlesuits and the warriors that operated them.

A buzzing sound made the commander halt just as the display built into one the eyepiece lenses of his suit's hood brought up a small window to show the feed from the surveillance drone that had been left hovering above the nearby town, fed to him via the control room where one of his crew was monitoring it. The fading light level made no difference to the drone that was equipped with both light amplifying and thermal imaging equipment and what this showed was disturbing to say the least. The humans had started the engines of their vehicles and were preparing to move. Their recent victory against the battlesuits sent to wipe them out would have left them confident so it was highly unlikely that they were intending to withdraw and that left only one other possibility. They were coming here.

Hayes watched as the injured troops from his squadron were helped aboard one of the Bedford trucks that had brought them here. The weaponry used by the aliens had produced only a handful of injuries compared to the number of men killed and Hayes had decided to evacuate them while he took the healthy men to attack the airfield.

"Here you are sir." Weston said from beside him as he walked up to the squadron leader and the doctor held up a cardboard box. Behind him his four orderlies each held similar boxes that looked to have been taken from a grocery store.

"That's all of the notes and photographs we have regarding the aliens and their technology?" Hayes asked.

"Yes sir, from myself and Lieutenant Grey. Though there'll be plenty of room on that truck for the body and-"

"No doctor." Hayes interrupted, "I'm sending these notes with the injured men but I want the physical evidence leaving right here. Right way if anything happens to one then there's still the other for headquarters to examine."

"As you say sir." Weston replied.

"Doctor I want two of your orderlies to escort the injured." Hayes went on, "The other two will accompany you with the rest of us to the airfield. I would like to think that we'll have no further need of your skills but I have the feeling that that will not be the case."

"Of course squadron leader. I'll bring along one of those extra number fours if you don't mind." Weston replied and Hayes smiled.

"Carrying a weapon other than for self defence doctor?" he asked.

"My oath is to preserve human life squadron leader." Weston answered, "And those things slaughtered an entire town full of people. I burned one of their machines and you can bet I'll take a shot if I see one."

"Very well doctor. You may take a rifle as well as your revolver if you wish. But don't let it slow you down." Hayes told him in reply.

The sun had set by the time 2728 Squadron was ready to move out for the airfield. Even with one of its trucks used to get the wounded to safety the losses that the squadron had suffered in men meant that there was still enough transport left for those who remained. In accordance with Hayes' instructions the three universal carriers that were still serviceable had been armed to act in a combat role rather than the transports they had been, with two of the forward facing Bren guns having been replaced by the Boys rifles recovered from the destroyed Morris armoured cars. There were just enough men left from the support flight trained to operate the three tracked vehicles while their three inch mortars and what ammunition was left for them had been moved to one of the trucks just in case they were needed later. This was necessary because each of the universal carriers now had a secondary weapon in its rear

compartment. In the case of the two armed with Boys rifles this was one of the two captured MG-34s taken from the Panzer and now operated by survivors from One Flight while Two Flight's PIAT team had been placed in the third carrier. In theory this made the three lightly armoured vehicles potent weapons, but against a foe like the one 2728 Squadron now faced there were no certainties at all. Given that the plan of attack called for Three Flight to leave the road and travel through the woods they had been given the support flight's two now unused jeeps in addition to their own to allow the entire flight to travel in the smaller vehicles that were better suited to cross country travel than the Bedford truck that one of their sections had been equipped with originally. The rest of the squadron however, remained mounted aboard the trucks, the only modification being the canvas cover over the rear cargo section having been removed so that the troops being transported could watch for any more of the rockets used to wipe out the inhabitants of the town and act accordingly.

2728 Squadron's vehicles advanced along the narrow country road in single file with the three universal carriers positioned at the front and Three Flight's jeeps right behind them. Hayes himself occupied the cab of the first of the Bedford trucks that followed and he smiled as he saw the jeeps suddenly pull off the road and head into the woods, rapidly disappearing from view owing to the fact that none of the squadron's vehicles had their headlights turned on, the chance of encountering any other road users was nil and it was hoped that by maintaining a blackout they would be harder to spot.

When the alien commander had seen the first human vehicle begin to head away from the airfield he had considered the possibility that he had been wrong in his assumption about the humans being too confident to withdraw but as the other vehicles began to move they all turned in the opposite direction, heading towards the airfield and being joined by three of the lightly armoured vehicles that his warriors had reported engaging. The force soon reached the woods where the cover offered by the trees growing over the road made them impossible to follow with the passive night vision system carried by the drone. On the other hand the heat of the engines still penetrated this layer of vegetation sufficiently that the convoy could be followed using thermal imaging as they got ever closer to the airfield.

The feed from the drone also revealed when all of the convoys smaller vehicles broke off from the rest to cut through the woods, suggesting that the humans intended to launch an attack from two directions at once. But the question remained as to which direction the main attack would come from. One of the two groups of humans was clearly larger and the smaller one could just be intended as a distraction. On the other hand the humans could be planning to attack with the larger force while hoping to sneak the smaller one through unnoticed.

But regardless of their precise strategy the intent of the humans was the same and there was only one possible response to this. Activating the communications built into his suit the alien commander ordered his four surviving warriors to the battlesuit bay.

The simple wooden bar that had blocked the main gate had been smashed apart when 2728 Squadron arrived and their vehicles came to a halt just outside while the soldiers disembarked from their transports, covered by the watching gunners aboard the universal carriers.

"Robertson!" Milton hissed, "Take your section and secure those bunkers." and the corporal nodded before leading his section towards the gate, grinding to a halt beside the two sandbagged bunkers and checking that they were clear.

"With me." Hayes told his section when there was no hostile reaction to this and he led his own section through the gates as well, directly to where the two MG42s that he had ordered be removed from the bunkers were still leant up against the rear of one, "Mitchell! Dunn! Jones! McReady!" he yelled at his men, the former PIAT team and two of his runners, "Take those machine guns and make sure they're ready for use."

"Yes sir." Jones replied as the four men slung their rifles over their backs and rushed to pick up the two belt fed weapons and quickly inspected them. While this was happening the rest of the force came through the gates, including the universal carriers. They advanced just far enough that they could deploy without being too bunched up and vulnerable to explosive projectiles and waited.

"Come on Jenson." Hayes said to himself, "We're waiting for you now."

Slowed by having to travel through the woods, Three Flight arrived at the edge of the woods closest to the spot where they were to penetrate the perimeter fence after the rest of the squadron had made it through the main gate onto the airfield. They brought their jeeps to a halt within the treeline and Jenson quickly surveyed the area ahead through his field glasses.

"The area is clear." he announced, "One Section move in."

The nine remaining men of One Section ran forwards, four of them carrying two wooden crates filled with jars of petrol between them. Halting at the fence the corporal in command began to cut through the wire while his men kept watch. Then as soon as the hole in the fence was big enough the section crawled through, darting across the narrow gap between the fence and the nearest building, a low brick structure with a flat roof and they hurled grappling hooks up so that they could scale the wall. When the first men reached the roof they dropped ropes down for the crates to be tied to and pulled these up while the rest of the section followed them up to the roof as well. When the entire section was crouched on the roof the ropes they had used to scale the walls were drawn back up and they waited in silence for the aliens to respond.

The plan called for the aliens to be drawn in using a false radio signal and to provide that Three Section's wireless operator, Aircraftman Perry, ran towards the hole in the fence and crawled through. He struggled more than the men of One Section had done thanks to the bulk of the No 18 wireless set on his back but he still made it through without help. Removing the wireless from his back he set it down at the base of the building wall and turned it on, pressing the transmit switch on the microphone and using a stone from the ground to keep it depressed as he placed the microphone on top of the wireless set before he turned to run back to the trees outside the fence.

The hovering surveillance drone that had followed the humans from the town had already alerted the aliens to the fact that there were now two groups within the airfield perimeter itself while a third remained just outside. But when the wireless set was activated it still produced a reaction from the detection equipment, locking onto the source and providing an aerial image of the location immediately.

At first the alien commander assumed that the various groups of humans were communicating with one another to co-ordinate the actions of the various groups as he watched from his command centre. But then he noticed that the output of the radio source was steady. The signal being produced by the transmitting radio was a fixed frequency, indicating that it sent data using amplitude modulation. But the amplitude of the signal was barely varying either and the alien commander realised that the transmission was a hoax. Clearly the humans had determined that their radio transmissions were well within the capability of even the limited alien force present and that using it was tantamount to inviting death.

But what the commander could not determine was why the humans were so eager to draw his forces to that part of the airfield. The small number of them located on the roof of the structure beside the source of the radio transmissions was no better armed than any of the ones previously defeated by the battlesuits which would suggest that whatever the so far unidentified weapons used to destroy the two battlesuits near the human base of operations was instead located with the larger group that had been held back in the woods.

The alien commander considered ignoring what was an obvious trap to lure his few remaining battlesuits to a part of the airfield that lacked any tactical value. But then he considered the group of humans on the roof of the structure. They were most likely unaware of the drone hovering high above and believed themselves undetected. That meant that a battlesuit that approached from within the shadow of the structure could assault this group while still remaining hidden from the larger force in the woods that was obviously meant to destroy any battlesuit that responded to the radio transmissions.

Satisfied that he could at least reduce the numbers of humans his forces faced the alien commander gave the order for his warriors to get to the functional battlesuits and for two of them to move to attack the humans.

## CHAPTER 12

The men of Three Flight positioned on the roof kept away from the edge, totally oblivious to the fact that they were being observed from above and that real time images of them were being fed to the alien warriors piloting the two battlesuits now heading towards them. The advance of the battlesuits could not be hidden like the surveillance drone, however and the men on the roof heard the pounding of their feet as the two alien machines strode towards them.

"Corporal Sykes!" one of the soldiers of One Section hissed as he peered from the roof, lay prone to keep his silhouette to a minimum.

"What is it Prescott?" Sykes replied as he crawled forwards.

"Two of them corporal." Prescott said.

"Then get back. We can't let them see-" Sykes began before one of the battlesuits raised an arm and sent a grenade round hurtling towards them, "Down!" Sykes yelled and his men threw themselves to the roof as the projectile came arcing down and exploded, blasting a hole in the roof that dragged two men screaming into the darkness below, "Back! Back from the edge!" Sykes shouted as he retreated, grabbing hold of Prescott and pulling him back as well just as there was the rattle of machine gun fire from the aliens that began striking the edge of the roof. All of a sudden Sykes felt Prescott go limp and he was left pulling the full weight of the soldier across the roof until he finally let go and looked to see a cluster of bullet holes in Prescott's chest.

Now down to just six men Sykes looked at the boxes of jars and then at the edge of the roof that was still being struck by machine gun fire as the battlesuits continued to advance. It was clear that as things stood the section could not even attempt to douse the battlesuits in petrol without being exposed to enemy fire and a way was needed to allow them to get to the edge of the roof without being seen.

"Okay, who's got a smoke grenade left?" Sykes asked and he looked around at his men.

"Just the one." the lance corporal commanding the Bren group replied as he produced a grenade from his webbing.

"Use it Lenton." Sykes ordered.

"I can't see them from here." Lenton replied.

"That doesn't matter. Just throw it that way so lands between us and them. Then we can wait for them to come blundering through it." Sykes said and Lenton promptly armed and hurled the grenade over the edge of the roof. Exactly where the explosive landed was unknown to the soldiers on the roof but all that mattered to them was that it burst open exactly as it was supposed to and within seconds a thick cloud of billowing white smoke rose up, blocking the battlesuits' line of sight to the building.

"Okay, everyone grab a couple of jars." Sykes said as he took two jars from the nearest crate and headed for the edge of the roof, "Spread out." he told his men as they followed him, "And when those alien bastards appear don't wait for an order from me, just throw."

The cloud of smoke also obscured the line of sight of the hovering drone and so the two battlesuits advanced through it unaware of what was waiting for them on the far side. The first suit was not even fully clear of the cloud when the first of the petrol filled jars was hurled at it and the glass shattered as it struck the coffin that housed the alien pilot. More jars followed this, most breaking against the hull of the machine while a few missed and instead spilled their contents over the ground. The battlesuit raised both arms and opened fire again, spraying bullets at the soldiers who leapt back into cover before any could be hit.

The machine gun fire increased as the second battlesuit emerged from the cloud of smoke but this did not deter Sykes as he drew the flare pistol and loaded it before crawling back towards the edge of the roof. He halted as soon as the battlesuits came into view and studied them carefully, not wanting to waste the flare on the battlesuit that was not covered in petrol. Then as quickly as he could he held the pistol out over the edge of the roof and fired, rolling back before waiting to see the effect of the shot as the battlesuit pilots both saw the sudden flash and turned their fire towards him. Forced to take the shot quickly and with insufficient time to aim carefully, Sykes missed the battlesuit with the flare and it shot passed the machine. However, it struck the ground where one of the petrol filled jars had also landed after missing the battlesuit and there was a 'Whoosh!' that was drowned out by the sound of gunfire as the pool of highly flammable fuel ignited. In turn the flames ignited the fumes coming off the petrol soaked battlesuit and it was instantly turned into a burning torch that lit up the night.

The battlesuit staggered as it burned, its various sensors suddenly disrupted by the heat of the flames. But unlike the battlesuit lit on fire in the town square there was no one standing by with an anti-tank

weapon to take advantage of its distress and although the battlesuit was effectively incapacitated as it burned the fire was not enough to instantly destroy it.

Knowing that there was nothing he could do to help his burning comrade in the short term the pilot of the other battlesuit launched another pair of grenades onto the roof, aiming them in different directions so that the blasts would affect the greatest area possible. This happened to bring one of the rounds down above the hole already blown in the roof and the grenade flew down into the building before exploding. The second grenade however, went off on the roof as the alien pilot had intended it to and a second hole was blasted in it. This time only one of the section fell through, the number two man from the Bren group, but the worst was yet to come. With the roof weakened by having two large holes blown in it and the internal superstructure of the building weakened by the grenade that had gone off inside it the roof was no longer able to support even the weight of the handful of remaining soldiers on it. This weakness first manifested itself as a groaning sound and Sykes knew what was about to happen.

"Off the roof!" he yelled and he got up and ran towards the back of the building.

There was a crash from behind him, accompanied by a scream and Sykes did not need to look around to know that another of his men had just fallen to his death. Instead he rushed all the way to the edge of the roof and looked over.

"Guns over the side." he said to his remaining men as he removed the magazine from his Sten gun to ensure that it would not go off when it hit the ground, "And get these ropes over as well." and he kicked one of the ropes that the section had used to scale the wall.

With their weapons thrown to the ground below, the survivors then began to descend the ropes after them. But the alien battlesuits were not finished yet and the one not currently engulfed in flames continued to fire at the building. This time a pair of grenades directed at the wall facing it were used to blast open two great holes in the brickwork that allowed a second volley of explosive rounds to enter the building directly. One of these struck a support that triggered a further collapse of the roof above and started a fire that began to spread immediately but the second instead impacted against the rear wall and the explosion hurled debris outwards right where the RAF troops were attempting to get to safety. One of them, the lance corporal in charge of the Bren gun group was thrown backwards with fragments of the wall embedded in his chest while another suddenly felt the rope he was holding on to snap and he cried out as he suddenly dropped the rest of the way to the ground. This cry of alarm became a scream of pain as he landed and the bone in his shin snapped and tore its way out through his uniform.

This left just Sykes and the Bren gunner to reach the ground uninjured.

"I've got Penn." Sykes called out, "You just get that Bren." and while the Bren gunner retrieved his weapon Sykes ran to the injured Penn and lifted him up and the three men began to struggle towards the breach in the barbed wire fence.

"Come on!" Jenson shouted at the three men doing their best to retreat and he got to his feet and waved them towards him. Though the rest of Three Flight had been unable to see anything that had happened thanks to the now burning building blocking their line of sight but the sound of gunfire and explosions made it obvious that the aliens had responded to the radio signals but that they had unfortunately attacked the section on top of the roof rather than circling around the building so that they would be caught between the two groups of soldiers.

The other soldiers of Three Flight also began calling out to the fleeing survivors of One Section. But just as they reached the fence an alien battlesuit came striding around the side of the building. Seeing this the Bren gunner dropped to the ground, unfolding the bi pod from his weapon and chambering a round. Then he fired a burst of automatic fire at the battlesuit, hoping that he would somehow find a weak spot that would at least distract or slow down the alien machine. But one round after another just bounced off the front of the battlesuit until the bolt of the Bren gun moved forwards onto an empty chamber and the gunner realised that he had emptied the entire magazine and achieved nothing.

"Leave it!" Sykes snapped as he finished dragging Penn through the hole in the fence and abandoning his Bren gun in place the other soldier turned to crawl through the gap himself.

"Give them some cover." Jenson ordered and the rest of Three Flight opened fire, small arms fire erupting from the woods towards the still advancing battlesuit.

Beside Jenson the two man crew of his command sections two inch mortar loaded and fired a smoke round, hoping to lay down a curtain that would obscure the retreating soldiers long enough for them to reach the woods but before it could land there was a flash from the battlesuit's turret that sent the round tumbling away and when it hit the ground the cloud of smoke did nothing to mask the three men at all. Before the round even struck the ground however, the pilot of the battlesuit responded and locking onto the position of the mortar he fired a grenade towards them. The explosive round passed over the fence

and landed right in front of the mortar team before it exploded. The fragments tore through the two man crew, killing them instantly. More shrapnel travelled further and Jenson himself felt a sudden burning sensation in his chest. He opened his mouth to cry out as he collapsed and dropped his weapon but all he could manage was to cough up a mouthful of blood.

"Pilot officer!" Sergeant Brown exclaimed as he scrabbled towards his flight leader but by the time he reached him Jenson was already dead leaving Brown in command of what was left of Three Flight. "PIAT ready sarge." the PIAT gunner told him, obviously eager to try his luck with the anti-tank weapon. But given the ability of the alien battlesuits to shoot down such projectiles Brown hesitated to order its use and in this moment of hesitation the battlesuit pilot opened fire again, directing both arm mounted machine guns at Three Flight, ignoring the fleeing men in the open for now.

Brown was one of the first to be hit, falling forwards and landing face down as the machine gun fire continued to sweep the woods. With Brown dead the PIAT gunner opened fire anyway but just as Brown had feared when he gave the order to hold fire there was a flash from the battlesuit's turret as it shot down the PIAT bomb in mid flight. Worse still, in firing their weapon the PIAT team had given away their own position and in under a second they were torn to shreds by another grenade fired into the vegetation they were using as cover. This was followed by more machine gun fire and another flash from the turret as the deadly beam of energy sliced through men and their cover as it swept through the woods, eliminating what remained of the command section as well as two men from Three Section.

Then there came another burst of machine gun fire as a badly scorched but no longer burning battlesuit came around the other side of the building and opened fire, cutting down Sykes and his men in the open and both battlesuits now advanced towards the woods.

Command of Three Flight now fell to Corporal Brent, the leader of Three Section, but now this amounted to just eleven men with small arms and hand grenades only. Facing two of the alien battlesuits, even though one looked to be moving in a sluggish manner after having been set on fire, the situation was clearly hopeless and Brent saw no point in continuing the fight.

"Back to the jeeps." he ordered, "We'll fall back and join up with the rest of the squadron."

Without needing further prompting the surviving men of Three Flight began to withdraw, heading for the vehicles parked a short distance away. But as they were falling back the two battlesuits were still advancing and the undamaged one tore its way through the barbed wire fence without effort. In the woods the first of the RAF troops reached the jeeps and jumped in. But the moment they started the engines of the vehicles the heat showed up on the thermal imagers built into the battlesuits and the aliens opened fire. A blast from the turret of one battlesuit struck the fuel tank of a jeep, burning straight through it and igniting the fuel it contained and in an instant the jeep and the three men it held were incinerated in a ball of fire. The second battlesuit pilot opted to use his grenade launchers again, firing four rounds in rapid succession that destroyed a second vehicle and killed the occupants including Corporal Brent himself.

Only four men of Three Flight now remained, all from Two Section and including the Bren group. Having seen how easily the two jeeps had been picked off along with their occupants the lance corporal in command of the Bren group, Stevens, called his men back.

"Get away from the jeeps!" he ordered as he took cover behind a nearby tree trunk.

"What do we do now?" the Bren group's number two man asked.

"We wait." Stevens replied, "They may think that they've got us all and leave."

"And if not?" the Bren gunner responded and Stevens pulled a Mills bomb from his webbing.

"Then maybe they'll get close enough for us to try using these." he answered.

However, although the two battlesuit pilots guessed that there were humans still alive in the woods they had no intention of going into the dense terrain after them where the bulk of the battlesuits would make them vulnerable to the more agile humans. Instead they advanced to within a short distance of the treeline and came to a halt. Then in unison they opened fire with all of their weapons, sending bullets, grenades and beams of energy into the woods. The battlesuits slowly adjusted their aim sideways to spread the destruction they wrought over a wider area. Having determined the arc in which the humans would likely be hiding the battlesuits went back and forth, blasting through the undergrowth and destroying all of the remaining jeeps. The pilots continued like this, emptying the magazines of their grenade launchers and firing their machine guns until their on board systems alerted them that they were down to their last few rounds one each gun. When both battlesuits reached this state with all of their arm mounted weapons they finally ceased fire before turning around on the spot and heading back towards the gaping hole they had left in the barbed wire fence.

In the woods behind them they had left no one alive.

The alien commander had mixed feelings about what had just happened. The data transmitted by the two battlesuits and the surveillance drone hovering high overhead confirmed that all of the group of human troops that the battlesuits had been sent to deal with had been wiped out. But to achieve this the two warriors piloting the battlesuits had expended almost their entire supply of ammunition and one of them had suffered damage from being set on fire. According to the data feed this damage was not critical but it would reduce the battlesuit's effectiveness. Out of the four battlesuits left only one was now fully functional and the alien commander was starting to wonder whether it would be enough to defeat the remaining human forces in the area.

"I don't like the look of that." Hayes said as he looked towards the orange glow in the distance along with the other officers in his force. The building that had been supposed to be the ideal location for an ambush was now burning furiously and the flames were visible even from the far side of the airfield.

"Could Three Flight have set some of the alien machines on fire?" Weston suggested.

"If they have then they managed to get plenty of them." Grey replied.

"Squadron leader I think we need to assume that Three Flight's diversionary attack has failed." Milton said.

"In which case the alien machines could already be on their way here." Skalaski added.

"Then we need to move." Hayes said, "If we hurry we may be able to reach the hangar before whatever forces attacked Three Flight make it back and we'll only face what's left."

The feed from the surveillance drone showed that the remaining humans were now advancing. The alien commander had gambled that the two battlesuits could wipe out the smaller force and return in time to help defend against the larger one. Now though it was clear that the humans would reach the hangar first and only one warrior remained to pilot one of the damaged battlesuits against them. Even if the other two battlesuits could increase their speed they had only the last few rounds of machine gun ammunition remaining and no grenades. Reloading the battlesuits was relatively straight forwards but getting them into and out of the battlesuit bay would be time consuming and time was the thing that the alien commander had the least of. But then a thought occurred to him. If he could not get the battlesuits to the replacement ammunition in time then the commander could instead send replacement ammunition out to them.

The doors of the hangar slid open for two of the alien engineers to dart out. Each one carried a pistol on his equipment harness but no ammunition for the battlesuits they were being sent to meet. Instead another walking machine appeared behind them. Unlike the armoured battlesuits this machine had an open frame around the third engineer that acted as its pilot and it carried no weapons. Each of its two arms ended in large lifted claws and in cargo nets dangling from these it carried the magazines of machine gun and grenade launcher ammunition for the two battlesuits. Along with the two engineers on foot the loading machine headed in the direction of the two battlesuits. If all went to plan then when they returned to the hangar they would be fully reloaded and ready for battle once more.

As they headed away from the hangar the final warrior emerged in the battlesuit that had suffered damage in the first engagement on the airfield. The engineers had been unable to fully repair this battlesuit but for now it was the only thing available to keep the humans at bay. As soon as the battlesuit was out of the hangar the doors slid shut once more as a last barrier to keep the humans out of the hangar.

In keeping with the rest of the airfield, the hangar appeared dark and silent as the remains of 2728 Squadron approached it and this silence bothered Hayes.

"Stop here." he called out and the advancing line of infantry and the trio of universal carriers behind them came to a halt.

"Problem squadron leader?" Grey asked, moving over to where Hayes stood as he studied the hangar ahead.

"There should be defences." Hayes replied, "I'd expect two of those machines at the very least."

"Perhaps we got lucky and they sent them all to attack Three Flight." Grey suggested.

"I doubt it." Hayes said and then he looked towards where Two Flight waited, "Milton!" he called out.

"Yes sir?" the pilot officer replied.

"Take your section and one other from your flight and head around the back of these buildings. I want to know if there's anything back there." Hayes ordered then he looked at Skalaski, "And Pilot Officer

Skalaski I want you to command the rest of Two Flight in Pilot Officer Milton's absence."

"It would be an honour sir." Skalaski replied.

"One Section with me." Milton ordered, "Two and Three, stay here with Skalaski." and then he led his two sections around the back of some of the nearby buildings, intending to loop around behind the large hangar that was the squadron's target. The rear of the buildings was just as devoid of activity as the front but Milton and his men advanced cautiously. They could hear the sound of the universal carriers' engines from beyond the row of buildings as the rest of the squadron also closed in on the hangar but that was all. However, the threat to the squadron came not from behind the buildings but further along past the large hangar where another hangar building was located. Unlike the hangar that the RAF troops were heading towards the doors to this one were wide open and this had allowed the alien battlesuit to enter the building and hide there while the human forces advanced. Knowing that the darkness made him invisible to the humans while the light amplification technology of his battlesuit made them visible to him the alien warrior studied the enemy closely, attempting to seek out their leaders. There were several possible candidates for the human commander travelling on foot and there was also the possibility that he was travelling in one of the tracked fighting vehicles that had proven ineffective when defending the town. With nothing to offer conclusive proof of who commanded the human troops the alien warrior picked one of the potential candidates at random and raised both of his suit's weapon arms.

There were two brief flashes from inside the hangar as grenades were fired and Hayes called out a warning.

"Down!" he yelled as the explosive projectile flew towards the squadron.

One flew right over and exploded in mid air without causing any injuries but the second landed just in front of Grey's bomb disposal section before exploding and despite the warning they had been given two of the lieutenant's men were caught up in the blast.

"Suppressing fire." Hayes ordered and the RAF troops opened fire at the hangar, shooting into the darkness. Only the squadron's small arms were used for this, the two Boys rifles waiting for a target to show itself before their gunners risked using any of their limited ammunition.

This revelation came in the form of a flash from the battlesuit's turret that struck another of the men of Lieutenant Grey's section. Both Boys rifles fired back almost immediately but the hangar had been plunged into darkness again and there was no indication of whether they had hit anything until there was a burst of machine gun fire to indicate that they had not. This burst was not directed at the army bomb disposal team as the previous two attacks had been though. Instead the bullets were fired in an arc so that most of the squadron was forced to duck as they came under fire. One of the rounds struck the side of a universal carrier and bounced off, striking one of the men of Two Flight who had remained behind. Barton leapt up from the ground and rushed up to the nearest carrier, banging his fist on the side to attract the attention of the driver.

"Advance." he told Corporal Gibson, "And forget blackout, get those headlights on and find that thing for us."

"Yes sir." the driver replied as Barton stepped backwards and all of a sudden the vehicle's headlights came on, illuminating the area directly ahead and the carrier began to advance. Barton waved to the drivers of the other two vehicles and they followed suit, driving towards the hangar with their headlights now on to illuminate the way.

Aware that the headlights of the three carriers would reveal his position the alien warrior had his battlesuit stride forwards to meet them, firing his machine guns on the move in the hope that it would concern the crews enough to make them veer off. But Corporal Gibson had seen the universal carriers resist such attacks when attempting to defend the nearby town and he charged his vehicle directly towards the battlesuit now illuminated in the beams of his headlights.

"Nail it!" he yelled at the aircraftman sat beside him with the Boys rifle over the noise of both the engine and the MG-34 mounted in the rear of the vehicle.

The Boys rifle went off with a 'Boom!' but firing on the move spoiled the gunner's aim and instead of punching a hole right through the centre of the coffin that held the battlesuit's pilot the round instead struck the magazine for one of the grenade launchers. The ammunition it held was too stable to explode from such damage but inside the battlesuit the pilot's status displays alerted him to the fact that the ammunition feed for the weapon was now inoperable and the round currently chambered was the last that it could fire.

Turning his suit's turret towards the carrier that had just fired at him the alien warrior fired a blast of energy at it. Unlike the Boys gunner his accuracy was not impeded by firing on the move and using a weapon that fired a blast at the speed of light there was no need to lead the shot at all. However, although the beam struck the carrier, burning through the armour plating to the side it struck the rear

compartment of the vehicle rather than the front where the driver and Boys gunner were located. The beam then struck one of the two survivors from One Flight manning the captured MG-34 but the second man remained standing and even without his comrade to help feed the belt of ammunition into the weapon he was able to keep firing.

A shot from the Boys rifle mounted on the second universal carrier rang out. Fired at an angle the armour piercing bullet slammed into the battlesuit's knee and the alien pilot suddenly found it toppling over. The battlesuit crashed to the ground and its pilot desperately tried to right it. But the PIAT team in the third universal carrier saw their opportunity and they hurriedly loaded a bomb into the weapon. Just as the alien battlesuit was starting to right itself by using its weapon arms for leverage the PIAT was fired and the bomb hurtled towards the machine. The turret that had proven so effective on shooting down such attacks against other battlesuits lacked the necessary elevation to target the PIAT bomb and it struck the top of its torso right beside the turret itself before detonating. The blast punched a hole through the upper armour plating and the stream of molten metal went on to rip through the motors control lines that drove the two weapon arms, bringing the battlesuit crashing back down to the ground again.

"Hold on!" Gibson yelled as he accelerated as hard as he could, driving the universal carrier straight at the helpless battlesuit.

Inside the machine the pilot was surrounded by alarms and warnings of damage to key motive and defensive systems but all of these paled into insignificance when the collision alert sounded and the displays built into his hood gave him an image of the approaching universal carrier. The alien's instinct was to abandon his battlesuit and take his chances outside it. But it was stuck lying face down on the ground and this meant that the hatch was wedged shut between the ground and the battlesuit's own torso. Realising that there was no escape the alien let out a shrill scream moments before the universal carrier driven by Corporal Gibson slammed into his battlesuit. The initial impact pushed the battlesuit back but then some part of it got caught on the carrier's tracks, flipping the battlesuit over as the human vehicle drove over it. The more than three ton weight pressing down on the coffin shaped cockpit was too much for it to bear and it collapsed under the pressure, crushing the alien warrior within.

Clearing the battlesuit, Gibson brought the universal carrier to a halt and turned it around so that the gunner beside him would have a clear line of fire if it was needed. But in front of him the mangled remains of the battlesuit were silent and still and in the beams of the carrier's headlights Gibson saw the blood leaking out of the now collapsed coffin. Smiling, Gibson turned to the aircraftman sat beside him and was about to speak when all of a sudden there was a flash of light and the universal carrier exploded.

Hayes recoiled as the beam from a battlesuit turret burned through the rear armour of the universal carrier and into its engine, turning it into a ball of fire in an instant. Looking around in the direction of the attack he gasped as he saw not one, but three of the alien machines striding out of the darkness towards 2728 Squadron.

"Over there!" he yelled, pointing at the approaching threat "Open fire."

Immediately the two MG-42s attached to his section opened fire and they were soon joined by the rest of the squadron as the surviving universal carrier manoeuvred into position to be able to engage the battlesuits as well.

"Mayweather." Hayes said to the only runner in his section not helping with one of the captured German machine guns, "Go and get Milton. Tell him the aliens are all this side of the buildings after all."

Nodding, Mayweather jumped to his feet and was just starting to run towards the nearest gap between two of the airfield buildings when the command section came under fire. Everyone else lay prone and all that happened when the machine gun rounds started impacting the ground around them was that they paused in their shooting. But Mayweather was not so lucky and a row of bullet holes appeared in his back just before he fell dead. Weston scrambled to where Mayweather landed to confirm that there was nothing to be done to help him and after seeing that he had probably been dead before he even hit ground he looked back towards Hayes.

As he turned he saw the advancing battlesuits just as there were muzzle flashes from their machine guns followed by a volley of grenades that were targeted at one of Two Flight's Bren gun groups and the three men were torn apart. But it was not the deaths of these three soldiers that really caught Weston's attention.

"Squadron leader!" he shouted over the noise of the gunfire.

"What is it doctor?" Hayes responded.

"Why is that third machine not attacking?"

Hayes squinted, trying to get a good look at the three approaching machines and he saw that Weston was correct. Advancing in a triangular formation, the two battlesuits at the front had their weapon arms

raised as they continued to target the same section that had just lost its Bren group with another four men falling victim to them, yet the third machine following behind and between them looked to have its arms by its sides. Then he looked at the surviving two inch mortar team from One Flight that had replaced his own lost men.

"Give me a flare." he told them, "I want to see what those things are up to."

Quickly the two men set down their Lee-Enfield rifles and readied an illuminating flare round for the mortar. Fired into the air this ignited to flood the area below with bright white light and immediately revealed that the third walking machine was not a battlesuit like the others but something obviously different. Though none of the RAF troops had any way of knowing that it was a loader machine rather than one meant for combat its weakness was obvious for all to see.

"Machine guns, target that rear machine." Hayes ordered and both of the MG-42s were turned towards the loader before the soldiers wielding them unleashed more fire.

The two streams of bullets hit the front of the loader. Had it been armoured like the two battlesuits it accompanied then they would likely have just bounced off without doing any damage. But the loader was made from a far lighter metal and the German made 7.92mm rounds had no difficulty in penetrating it. Once inside the machine they shattered both electronic and mechanical parts and cut through wires that kept the machine upright, bringing it crashing to the ground. But the machine gun fire from Hayes' command section did not end there and more rounds hit the alien engineer piloting the loader as he struggled to release his harness and abandon it.

The final two members of the section already targeted by the battlesuits fell to more machine gun fire from them. But now the two universal carriers were heading towards the battlesuits, the automatic weapons mounted in them firing. As before the overwhelming majority of the bullets were ineffectual but this time several of the rounds from the MG-34 struck the turret of the scorched battlesuit, first breaking through the outer focusing lens and then penetrating into the circuitry inside. This produced a flash as the damage short circuited power lines and electricity arced across them and burned out the weapon completely.

At the same time the aircraftman manning the Boys rifle fired on the other battlesuit. This time his aim was good and the bullet penetrated the coffin that held the pilot. It passed through the shoulder of the alien warrior and he screamed. At the same time his arm convulsed and pulled back on the control to the battlesuit's arm, swinging it around while keeping the machine gun firing and spraying the other battlesuit with bullets. The alien machine guns were no more powerful than the human ones currently firing at the battlesuits though and the already scorched machine remained standing while the other collapsed as its pilot succumbed to the gunshot wound to his shoulder.

Now only one battlesuit remained and the RAF troops facing it had seen the flash as its turret had been destroyed. Once again the PIAT team aboard one of the universal carriers hurried to prepare a bomb while the vehicle's driver swerved to try and prevent the remaining alien from accurately targeting the carrier.

"Ready!" the PIAT gunner yelled and the driver braked sharply, bringing the carrier to a rapid halt and allowing the PIAT gunner to take aim. Lining his weapon up on the final battlesuit the gunner launched the bomb, sending it racing towards the battlesuit. The bomb struck the battlesuit dead centre of its torso and detonated. The blast of molten metal easily penetrated the coffin that held the pilot before expanding to fill the interior, incinerating the alien warrior himself and the battlesuit fell backwards.

With both battlesuits and the loader lying motionless on the ground Hayes looked around, wondering whether there would be a further wave of aliens. So far the squadron had encountered only three battlesuits plus the much lighter loader, well below his estimate of the minimum number that he thought the aliens would still have available to them.

"With me." he told his section and he got up to move towards the downed walking machines. Skalaski was just starting to follow when Hayes held up his hand, "No." he said, "Wait here with the rest of the men. If this is a trap then Pilot Officer Barton has command."

"Of course squadron leader." Skalaski answered and Hayes continued to lead his men towards the alien machines, their way lit by the headlights. All of a sudden Hayes saw something move and he raised his Sten gun to take aim.

But before he could fire there was a burst of alien gunfire from beyond the the walking machines. This was not the sustained fire of the battlesuits' machine guns or the single discharge of a grenade launcher followed by the detonation of the round, instead it was the shorter burst that was characteristic of one of the aliens' machine pistols.

"I see him!" Mitchell yelled as he threw himself to the ground to stabilise the MG-42 he was wielding before he opened fire and from in the darkness just beyond the area illuminated by the flare there was an

inhuman shriek as the alien was hit. But there was another short burst of alien gunfire and Dunn collapsed beside Mitchell, almost landing on top of him.

There was several sudden sharp cracks of rifle fire as the runners who had joined Hayes' section from One Flight opened fire with their Lee-Enfields at where they perceived movement. Watching carefully, Hayes spotted a small figure dart towards the fallen loader and without pausing for thought he fired his Sten gun. The first couple of rounds just clipped the alien and it fell to the ground, screaming with pain as the rest of the burst passed over it.

Lying on the ground and clearly badly injured, the alien continued to scream as slowly Hayes and his section moved in closer.

"Doctor Weston!" Hayes called out, "I think we have a patient for you."

Weston and his two orderlies came rushing up to see what was happening and Weston gasped when he saw the alien lay beside the loader. Like the dead warrior he had examined earlier this engineer wore an all enclosing suit of rubbery grey material. But whereas the first alien had suffered a single gunshot wound to its chest this one had taken two hits to its abdomen.

"Slowly." Weston told his orderlies as he slung the Lee-Enfield he was carrying over his shoulder and began to move in closer to the alien, holding his hands out where they could be seen. Looking at the alien he smiled and spoke to it softly, "There's no need to be afraid." he said, "I'm here to-" but before he could finish the alien suddenly raised its pistol and fired.

The burst was not aimed at Weston but instead at one of his orderlies, both of whom still carried their Lee-Enfields in their hands and one of them fell. In reply the second orderly quickly raised his rifle and fired, worked the bolt as quickly as he could and fired a second shot straight after. Both hit the alien and its screaming was finally silenced as it died.

"Squadron Leader Hayes," Weston said, looking at the dead alien as he unslung his rifle ready to use it if any further aliens appeared, "I suggest that we refrain from trying to administer medical help to any further injured aliens we encounter."

## CHAPTER 13

The sounds of gunfire and explosions had been audible from the far side of the buildings where Milton and his two sections were advancing quietly. He considered hurrying his men back to link up with the rest of the squadron but then reconsidered this. With only a handful of men under his command and no anti-tank weapons there was little that his force could offer. On the other hand if there were further alien forces waiting on this side of the buildings then he could at least warn Hayes of their presence before they had the chance to ambush the squadron.

However, no such alien threat materialised and while the rest of the squadron was engaging the aliens in front of the buildings Milton and his sections were able to advance behind them without attracting any attention. Even the surveillance drone that continued to hover high above the airfield failed to see them thanks to the shadow of the buildings and by the time the firing on the other side died down Milton and his men had reached the large hangar that was their target.

"Over there." he said to his men, pointing out a doorway in the side of the building. This was the same door that Hayes had seen open when he had accompanied One Flight to scout the airfield but now it was once again closed. Milton and his men dashed towards the door and surrounded it, aiming their weapons at it, "Sergeant Teller, if you wouldn't mind." Milton said to his sergeant and Teller smiled.

"Of course sir." he replied and he advanced cautiously towards the door and tried the handle. When the handle failed to turn Teller's smile vanished and he looked around, "Locked sir." he said.

"Any chance we could break it down?" Milton asked.

Teller placed a hand flat against the door to see what it was made of and when he felt wood rather than metal beneath the dull grey paint his smile returned.

"I think so." he said, "But I wouldn't like to try it without something to distract anyone that may be on the other side while we try."

"Aircraftman Baker." Milton said, turning to one of his runners, "Go and tell Squadron Leader Hayes that we are positioned to try and enter the target building but that we'll need a distraction."

The runner set off, dashing down the gap between the hangar and the adjacent building as he headed back to where the rest of the squadron was located. He found them right in front of the hangar, slowly positioning themselves in a rough semi-circle around the main front doors.

"Squadron leader!" Baker called out and he came to a sudden halt, raising his hands into the air as weapons were aimed in his direction.

"Stand down." Hayes ordered. Then he added, "What is it aircraftman?"

"Sir, Pilot Officer Milton asked me to inform you that he has located a side entrance to the hangar. It's locked but if you can give him a distraction then it should be possible to break it down and effect an entry."

Hayes looked at the large folding doors that dominated the front face of the hangar.

"Somebody try these doors." he said, "Just find out whether they're locked or not. Don't try to open them though. I'm expecting the aliens to have something nasty waiting for us on the other side."

Barton and what remained of the support flight's command section were closest to the doors and they rushed forwards to where the handles were located. Carefully they pulled back on these to see how far the doors would move. But although the folding segments shifted slightly they remained jammed together.

"Locked sir." Barton called out.

"Then we need to find a way to unlock them pilot officer." Hayes replied.

"The PIAT ought to-" Barton began but Hayes shook his head.

"The contents of this hangar could be priceless." the squadron leader said, "Using a PIAT could risk destroying it when we only want to blow the bloody doors off."

"What about Mills bombs squadron leader?" Skalaski asked, "The doors ought to soak up most of the blast but they'll put a hole in it."

"Yes they will." Hayes agreed, "Okay let's have those two Bren gun carriers about twenty yards back and facing the hangar so we can get their lights shining in the right direction. Then we'll deploy in a line behind them and roll say half a dozen Mills bombs up to the door and see what that does." then he turned to the runner sent by Milton, "Go and tell Pilot Officer Milton that his distraction is on the way. I doubt he'll mistake it for anything else."

"Yes sir." Baker replied before heading back towards the side door.

In the meantime the two surviving universal carriers were manoeuvred into position facing the hangar and with their weapons loaded. At the same time the rest of the squadron set themselves up in a line lying prone and also aimed their weapons towards the door.

"Okay men," Hayes called out, "Every other man who still has one, arm a Mills bomb and on my command roll them at the door. That's roll, not hurl. The last thing we want is any of them bouncing right back at us."

All along the line men took Mills bombs from their webbing and pulled the pins. As Hayes had ordered every one of them kept a firm grip on the grenades though, waiting for him to give the order to use them. This came when he looked along the line and was satisfied that there was no-one still to arm one.

"Now," he called out and almost in unison the Mills bombs were tossed forwards so that they landed short of the doors and rolled the rest of the way to come to rest as close to them as possible. The four second fuses of the grenades allowed just enough time for the grenades to come to a halt before they went off almost in unison, producing a sudden flash and blast of heat along with clouds of heavy fragments that did not quite reach the RAF troops who had just used them.

The sound of the explosions echoed down the gap between the hangar and the adjacent building, reaching Milton's group almost immediately and the two aircraftmen standing by the door holding their Lee-Enfields by the barrels needed no further instruction to swing them at the lock, bringing the butts down on it like hammers and the explosion was joined by a splintering sound as the wooden door cracked.

"Go!" Sergeant Teller yelled as he delivered the kick that flung the door open and rushed through with his Sten gun at the ready.

In front of the hangar the rest of the squadron looked up as soon as they heard the sound of the explosion, ready to open fire on whatever defences the aliens had prepared for them. But what they saw was not what they had expected at all.

Apart from the men of Milton's group who could be seen in the headlight beams of the universal carriers towards the rear of the hangar, it was completely empty.

The humans had breached the hangar.

The alien commander had fewer than twenty of his crew left to resist the humans and he was the closest thing to a true warrior left among them, all of the rest were engineers, flight crew or scientists. But with the humans finding their way to the aliens now appearing a certainty the commander knew that the only option left open to him was to issue weapons to every last one of his crew and so he gathered them together in the armoury.

There were enough sidearms for every member of the crew as well as a small number of rifles intended for use by the warriors in situations where their battlesuits could not be used. For example when fighting in any space too confined for the battlesuits to even enter. The commander issued the six rifles to members of his flight crew, judging them to be more expendable than the engineers but more competent in their use than any of the scientists. With his crew fully armed the commander then set about deploying them to counter the humans.

"It can't be empty," Hayes said in astonishment as he walked through the hole in the ruined main doors, but it was clear that the hangar held nothing.

"Could we have killed them all?" Weston suggested as he followed Hayes.

"What? A few walking machines and a handful of alien creatures? I doubt it. Why have a hangar this big for just that?" Hayes said.

"Perhaps the Germans took whatever else they had back to Germany itself," Weston said and Hayes sighed.

"To have missed it, possibly by just a day or so," he said. Then he looked around at his men, "Okay I want this place torn apart," he said sternly, "I refuse to believe that there is nothing else here to tell us what happened to whatever the Germans built a hangar of this size for."

"Excuse me squadron leader," Skalaski said as he rushed up to Hayes.

"Yes Pilot Officer Skalaski?" Hayes responded.

"I was wondering if you knew of any differences in the way that the Germans build their hangars from the way the RAF does," the Polish pilot said.

"As far as I know they build them exactly the same as we do," Hayes answered, "Why?"

"Well I was wondering why the floor is made of wood rather than concrete," and Hayes looked down and saw that the floor was indeed made of wood, with planks placed side by side to cover the entire surface.

Crouching down, Hayes knocked on the floor.

"Seems solid enough." he said but then he frowned, "Of course if this is thick enough to take the weight of those walking machines or even a transport plane being housed in here then they'd have to be pretty damned thick anyway."

"But the question is why use wood?" Skalaski said, "What advantage would it offer?"

"None that I can think of." Hayes replied. Poured concrete is much easier to level out. No matter how hard you tried with a floor like this you're going to end up with tiny gaps here and there as the floorboards warp from damp or get damaged."

"So gaps aren't a problem then." Skalaski said, "Doesn't sound like much of a hangar to me. Ground crew would be forever losing screws in them."

"Or maybe the gaps are important." Hayes said suddenly, smiling, "Quick, look for any unusual patterns in where the floorboards join to one another." and he and Skalaski along with the men of Hayes' command section began to spread out, carefully searching the floor under their feet for anything unusual. It was Aircraftman Hooper, one of the runners from One Flight that finally found what they were looking out just a few feet inside the main doorway and he called out to Hayes.

"Over here sir!" he shouted, waving the squadron leader over to him.

"What have you found aircraftman?" Hayes asked as he dashed across the hangar to join Hooper.

"Right here sir." Hooper replied and he pointed down at a line formed where several floorboards were connected end to end, "My old man's a carpenter sir and you don't join floorboards like that. You stagger the joins."

"Yes you do." Hayes agreed, "Good work aircraftman. I think I know what the Germans were hiding." then he looked up and called out to two more men from his section, "Jones! McReady! Get over here." he yelled and when they arrived he pointed out the line in the floor, "I want to see just how far this goes."

The four men split into two pairs and slowly walked away from one another until they finally came to the end of the line where it ran into a floorboard. Hooper and Jones then stayed in place to mark this location while Hayes and McReady walked along the floorboards, heading deeper into the hangar until they came across another line like the one just inside the doorway. Hayes looked around and as he had expected he found that the positions now occupied by the four men formed a rectangle that covered most of the hangar floor, leaving a section about ten yards deep at the back of the room.

"There's a door hidden in the floor." Hayes announced before he looked towards a group of men from Two Flight, "You there! See if you can find any more sections of floor like this. You're looking for continuous end to end joins between floorboards. Everyone else see if you can find anything that looks like it may be a lever that opens this up. Whatever we're looking for is right beneath our feet."

## CHAPTER 14

While Hayes was directing the search of the hangar itself Pilot Officer Barton and the remaining men of the support flight had made their way into the collection of rooms adjoining it. As far as they could tell these were nothing but places for ground crew to store their equipment along with one room that had, either officially or not, been furnished with some chairs and a small table to provide a space where they could relax while a deck of cards left laid out on the table suggested that the room had been abandoned by its occupants in a hurry. Barton was about to give up on the search of this section of the building and return to the main hangar when he heard one of his men call out.

"There's a door back here!" the voice yelled and Barton rushed to see what had been found.

The voice led Barton into a room that looked like a simple office where logs of work carried out on aircraft would be filled in and stored. But unlike any of the other rooms in the hangar building that Barton had seen so far there were numerous bullet holes in the walls from small arms fire. Given the number and the spread of these Barton guessed that someone had fired a sub-machine gun in here, though the lack of brass bullet casings on the floor meant that there was no way to tell for sure without digging bullets out of the walls to match the calibre with any particular weapon.

But it was not the damage to the walls that had prompted the cry that had brought Barton running.

Instead on the far side of the room there were two of his men standing on what looked to be a large pool of dried blood below a large propaganda poster of Hitler on the wall and it appeared that this pool extended beneath the wall. The two aircraftmen were scraping at the wall itself with the tips of their simple spike bayonets, removing the plaster to expose what lay beneath and it was clear that the poster covered more than just a blank section of wall. Just a few inches either side of the poster the plaster came away to reveal the wood and brick structure of a solid wall but only just beside it the plaster instead covered a dull metal surface.

"What have you found Higgins?" Barton asked.

"There's a door back here sir." Higgins answered, "We found it when we realised that the blood on the floor had tracks in it and they went under here."

Barton looked at the dried blood again and he saw the signs of it having been walked over while still wet, spreading the blood out but leaving smearing marks behind and some of these ran right up to the wall just as Higgins had said. Barton then looked around just as Sergeant Hurt appeared behind him.

"Sergeant, go and tell the squadron leader we've found something he needs to see." he ordered.

"Yes sir." Hurt said before he dashed away.

The search for further hidden doors in the floor of the hangar revealed one more. This was inevitably significantly smaller than the first but it was still large enough to fit either a vehicle such as a universal carrier or two of the alien battlesuits. However, despite a thorough search of every conceivable hiding place there was no sign of any form of control to open the doors from inside the hangar.

"Now this is damned strange." Hayes said, "Who makes doors that can't be opened?"

"Squadron leader!" Hurt then called out as he appeared towards the rear of the hangar, "Pilot Officer Barton wants you to come and see something. Bell and Higgins have found a secret door."

"Who hasn't?" Skalaski commented.

"Show me." Hayes said and he darted across the hangar to where Hurt led him back to the office and the hidden door it contained, "Pilot Officer Barton," Hayes said when they reached the room, "what have you found?"

"Well it was Bell and Higgins really sir." Barton replied, "But it looks like the Germans tried to conceal a door behind that wall. Though there doesn't appear to be a handle to go with it."

Hayes sighed.

"Same in the hangar itself." he said, "We've found two large doors hidden in the floor but there's no way of getting them open. I'm starting to think that we may have to blow them open as well." then he frowned.

"Problem sir?" Barton asked when he noticed this.

"The chairs." Hayes replied, looking at the upturned and broken furniture in the room.

"What about them sir?"

"They've all been tipped over or broken."

"Yes sir." Barton said, "But I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"So why hasn't the table been overturned as well? There are no scuff marks on the floor to suggest it's

ever been moved since it was first brought in here.”

“Oh it's stuck down sir.” Bell said, pausing in his removing of the plaster from the wall.

“Is it really?” Hayes said and he walked around the table to the spot where someone would sit if they were to have a view of both the door the RAF troops had come through and the hidden one as well. Then he felt under the table and a smile spread across his face, “Stand back from that door.” he said, “And have your weapons ready.” and then when the others had done as he said Hayes pressed the button he had found concealed beneath the table.

As soon as he did this there was a soft 'Click' and then a grinding sound as the hidden door retreated back into the wall and slid aside to expose a dark passageway beyond. In response the RAF troops all pointed their weapons into the darkness.

Slowly, Barton and Hurt advanced to the doorway and peered into the darkness.

“Got a flash light there sergeant?” Barton asked.

“I have a lighter.” Hurt replied and he produced a cigarette lighter and held it into the passageway before igniting it. The small flame did little to expose much detail in the passageway but it did reveal one key detail.

“Stairs.” Barton said, “Leading down.” and Hayes smiled again.

“I think we've just found our way down.” he said, “Go and get everyone else.”

There was insufficient room in the office for all of the surviving members of the squadron along with the attached personnel so instead just the officers stood in front of the hidden doorway while a pair of aircraftmen stood either side of it pointing Bren guns into the passageway.

“So we're just going to rush down there are we?” Weston asked.

“No, not just yet doctor.” Hayes replied, “While I'm hoping this will take us to them, we can't be sure that the aliens know about this particular door. It could even lead to a part of this facility they remain unaware of and if that is the case there could be German troops hiding down there still. I want to give them the chance to surrender first.” then he looked at Skalaski, “How is your German pilot officer?” he asked the Polish pilot.

“Good enough squadron leader.” he replied, “If you would like to go ahead I will translate for you.”

“Thank you.” Hayes said and then looking into the passageway he called out, “Royal Air Force! If there is someone there they should come out with their hands up.” and then Skalaski followed this with a call of his own, translating the call into German and then the RAF troops waited to see whether anyone would respond. But when there was only silence in return Hayes turned to Milton, “Okay pilot officer,” he said, “I want one section of your men to investigate ahead of the rest of us.”

“Corporal Robertson.” Milton said, “Take your section down and report.”

“Yes sir.” Robertson replied and his section made their way through the office and into the passageway. Though it risked giving away their advance they turned on flash lights to illuminate their way through the darkness as they descended the stairs.

The beams of the flash lights revealed a second office at the base of the stairs and like the one above it showed the signs of violence having taken place here with bullet holes in the walls and furniture smashed.

“Corporal.” Hayes called out from the top of the stairs, “What do you see?”

“It's a mess down here sir.” Robertson responded, “But I think that whatever-” and then he was cut off by the sound of gunfire.

The muzzle flashes from the rifles wielded by the two aliens standing just outside the office at the bottom of the stairs lit up the office as the deadly projectile tore through half of Robertson's section, including the corporal himself. In response the survivors dropped to their knees or prone and returned fire, the sound of their Lee-Enfields echoing back up the stairs and making Hayes flinch.

“Get out of there!” he shouted down the stairs, realising that the section had walked into an ambush.

The aircraftmen began to fall back, heading for the stairs and another of them was cut down as he turned to run. They continued to fire as they retreated though, working the actions of their rifles as rapidly as they could. Even though Lee-Enfields were bolt action weapons that required manually re-cocking their action was smoother than other comparable weapons and benefited from a greater magazine capacity. Combined this allowed the RAF troops to produce a respectable volume of fire that forced the two concealed aliens to pause in their fire long enough for three of the survivors to get back up the stairs.

“Davis! Get a move on.” the Bren group's lance corporal yelled back down the stairs when he was half way up, “I'll cover you.” and he fired his rifle again towards the aliens. But the moment that Davis ceased fire to stand up one of the aliens leant around the door frame and fired another short burst that struck the

soldier in his legs and he fell to the floor, dropping his rifle. Then the alien rifle fire was directed up the stairs, striking the lance corporal in his chest.

Now lying at the bottom of the stairs, Davis looked towards the source of the alien gun fire and in the dim light provided by the now dropped flash lights he saw the two aliens emerge from their hiding place and slowly make their way towards him. The aliens kept their rifles aimed directly at Davis but he was partially concealed by the ruined furniture and they did not see as he reached into his webbing. Then as they stood over him he grinned and started to laugh as he held up the Mills bomb that he had already pulled the pin from.

"Grenade!" he shouted and at the top of the stairs Hayes and the other members of the squadron stood by the door threw themselves aside moments before the explosive went off, killing Davis along with the two aliens.

Picking himself up off the floor, Hayes looked into the passageway and listened for any indication that anyone had survived the explosion. But no sound at all came from out of the darkness.

"Sir we should move quickly." Milton said, "Before the enemy can react."

"Go." Hayes told him.

"Two Flight, with me." Milton said as he also waved what was left of his flight, now amounting to just twenty-one out of the original forty men, forward. Sergeant Teller and the corporal in command of Two Section led the way down the stairs. Both men were armed with Sten guns so it was only logical for them to take the lead with their rapid firing weapons while behind them came Milton himself with the Sten gun he had also acquired and Two Section's Bren gunner. This put a significant portion of the advancing group's firepower at the front ready to respond if there was another ambush waiting for them at the bottom. But the Mills bomb triggered by Davis had done its job and all that remained of the two aliens was a pair of ruined corpses that had been ripped apart by the detonation.

"Clear!" Milton called out for the benefit of those who were still upstairs and then he waved towards the doorway, "Cover that door." he ordered and Two Section's Bren group moved forwards, picking their way through the wreckage that was all that remained of the room's furniture to take up a position by the door.

"Sir," the lance corporal commanding the Bren group hissed as he shone his flash light out into the corridor beyond the doorway, "I think there's a light switch out there."

"Try it Booker." Milton ordered and the lance corporal darted through the door and jabbed at the light switch. As soon as he pressed the switch the lights mounted along the ceiling of the corridor flickered into life, revealing the corridor in its entirety and its appearance made Booker think of a hospital building with its plain white walls and tiled floor. Doors to other rooms stretched down only one side of the corridor but with them all being closed and the markings on them being limited to nondescript numbers Booker could not tell what was in any of them. Turning his head, Booker could see that the corridor also led off to the side and that once more the doorways were all along one side. This put the door to the office leading back up to ground level as the only one on this side of the corridor while all the others were on the opposite wall.

"See anything interesting?" Hayes asked as he came down the stairs with the rest of the squadron.

"Just doors sir." Booker replied as the squadron leader walked right up to him and looked out into the corridor himself.

"Well we need to search every last one." Hayes announced, "Pilot Officer Milton you will take your flight straight ahead and I'll take the rest of the men to the right."

"Yes sir." Milton replied as Hayes stepped out into the corridor and turned to the right.

Despite them all apparently being unlocked, every door that the RAF troops came to was kicked open rather than pushed. This was intended simply to give anyone inside as little warning to their entry as possible. Hayes then left two or three men in each room to conduct a search while he led the rest of the force on to the next doorway. Each of the rooms in the corridor appeared similar, being furnished as offices but with no obvious clue as to what their purpose was. Some of them contained paperwork that had been left out in the open when the offices had been abandoned and Skalaski used his knowledge of German to give a brief translation, but all he could tell was that they were mundane documents that could be generated by the operating of almost any military installation. Or at least that was the case until they came to the largest room they had yet found.

Rather than being set up as an office this had the appearance of a meeting chamber, with a large table dominating the room. The chair at the far end of the table was located under a pair of crossed flags mounted on the wall, one a Nazi swastika and the other a Luftwaffe banner and disturbingly it was upturned and the wall directly behind it was marked by bullet holes and splashes of dried blood. Spread across the table were more documents and it was plain to see that these were more than just mundane

equipment requisition or payroll forms. They were a detailed study of the aliens.

"Looks like I'm not the first to have carried out an autopsy on these things." Weston said as he flicked through a file that contained photographs of an alien corpse stripped of its all covering grey suit and sections of its exoskeleton sawn through.

"Skalaski, what do you make of any of this?" Hayes asked, holding up a loose sheet of paper for the Polish officer to take a look at.

"It looks like the Germans were conducting a study of the aliens' blood sir." he replied, "I think they were studying what diseases they carried for some reason."

"Worried about contagion?" Hayes suggested.

"I hope so." Weston responded.

"Why do you say that doctor?" Barton asked.

"Well if the aliens did carry some virus or bacteria that could affect life on earth then its likely that we'd have no natural immunity against it. All the Germans would need to do is find a vaccine for their own people and they'd have a potentially devastating germ warfare agent." Weston explained.

In the mean time Lieutenant Grey, who had remained by the door while his men kept watch out in the corridor noticed the windows that dominated one wall of the room. These were covered by blinds that had been closed and he wandered over to them and gently moved them aside just enough to be able to see what was on the other side.

"Good God!" he exclaimed and he reached for the cord to open the blinds properly, "You need to see this." and he opened the blinds. Moving towards the window the other officers saw that it looked out into a massive open space that looked to extend up to the hangar in one direction and much deeper down in the other. But it was not the size of this central shaft that had startled Grey, instead it was what lay at the very bottom.

It was the craft that had been shot down three and a half years earlier.

"Well," Hayes said as they all looked down through the windows, "I'm guessing that is how the aliens came to be here on earth."

The saucer shaped vessel was obviously badly damaged, with a large section missing from one side and a hole punched through close to where its streamlined shape bulged out in the centre.

"That must be what the door in the hangar was for." Skalaski said, "That thing is sat on a raised platform, see? I bet that raises up so that it can be brought to the surface."

"But why put it so far under ground?" Weston asked, "Right outside this window would be enough to keep it hidden."

"I'm guessing that the Germans didn't want to risk losing their prize to an Allied bombing raid. That far down it's probably beyond the reach of anything other than our really large bombs, the grand slam for example and we wouldn't use something that big on a target like the airfield above us." Barton suggested.

"Whatever the reason we need to get down there." Hayes said, "Recovering that vehicle has to be our absolute priority now. Forget rifling through filing cabinets, I want the men to work on finding us a way down there."

## CHAPTER 15

Given the lack of communication from the two flight crew that the alien commander had ordered to act as sentries on the top level he could only assume that they had been overpowered and now the human forces had penetrated the facility itself and would be making their way down to the saucer. Had the facility been built by his own people then it would have featured an internal security system that would have provided the commander with detailed information on the strength and deployment of the intruding force but that level of technology was beyond the humans that had built it and so the commander instead had to rely on a mix of guesswork and his own instincts.

Four of the crew were at work on the facility's workshop level but they were armed only with machine pistols and if the most recent intelligence on the strength of the human force was anything to go by would not be able to hold them back. Therefore the alien commander decided that he would have to send out the four remaining members of his flight crew that he had issued rifles to and give them orders to attack the humans. They would be outnumbered but at least it appeared that the human force was mainly armed with relatively slow firing weapons that were not designed for room to room fighting and he hoped that would be enough to give his men the advantage. The containment level where he and his crew had been held since they had been brought to this place seemed like the most logical place to stage this ambush. There were numerous heavily armoured doors on this level and although they had failed to keep the alien crew in they were now the best chance to keep the humans out.

The stairs leading to the next level down were located on the far side of the hangar and the surviving British troops proceeded down them cautiously just in case there was another ambush waiting for them at the bottom. But the aliens had left this staircase unguarded and the squadron emerged onto another floor that was reminiscent of a hospital building. But the rooms here were far different from those on the previous level and rather than blank walls separating them from the corridor that led around the shaft large windows dominate them, allowing the troops to see into them without needing to open the doors while the wall around the large central shaft was windowless.

"What is this place?" Barton asked as he looked through one of the windows at the work benches and scientific equipment contained in the room on the other side.

"Looks like some sort of laboratory complex." Hayes replied.

"I agree sir." Doctor Weston added and he darted further down the corridor to a window that looked in on a room that resembled the surgery in the town hospital where he had examined the alien corpse. "See? This is the room in the photographs of the Germans' examination of the alien corpse. This facility isn't just for storing what they captured, it's for studying it as well. Look, this door looks like it's air tight. I expect the Germans were worried about what their experiments may unleash."

"And you examined one of their bodies with nothing more than rubber gloves and a surgical mask." Skalaski commented.

"Well we can find out what the Germans managed to uncover later on doctor." Hayes said, "But right now we need to find the stairs."

"My guess is that they're on the far side of the shaft." Grey commented, "I wouldn't be surprised if they alternated from one side to another."

"Then we'll split up again." Hayes said, "Half of us in each direction and we ought to meet up by the stairs on the far side. Milton, take your flight to the left and everyone else can follow me again."

"Yes sir." Milton replied and he led his men down the corridor to the left of the stairs. As they advanced they looked through the windows of the various laboratories just long enough to ensure that there were no aliens lurking in any of them. But as they continued on their way they suddenly came to a room that had no such windows.

"Could these be the stairs sir?" Teller suggested.

"If they are then that army lieutenant's theory on the design of this place are well out." Milton replied, "But I suppose we ought to check it out just in case. Squadron Leader Hayes won't be too impressed if we end up walking right past the stairs."

The men of Two Flight positioned themselves either side of the door and raised their weapons. Then Teller crept forwards and took hold of the large handle set into the door. This took much more pressure to turn than an ordinary door handle and when it finally moved there was a dull 'Clunk' from beyond the door as whatever was holding it shut moved out of place and allowed Teller to push it open, though this was far slower than he would have liked owing to the weight of the door itself. There was no alien gunfire from

within the room beyond but moments after the door was opened the RAF troops in the corridor outside recoiled and coughed at the stench that emerged. Teller let go of the door, leaving it ajar as he covered his nose and mouth with his hands.

"What in God's name is that?" Milton exclaimed.

"Smells rotten." Teller replied.

"Respirators." Milton ordered, "Maybe they'll help keep the smell out while we investigate."

"We're going in there?" one of the members of the flight asked and Teller turned and glared at him.

"Yes we bloody well are if that's what the officer says Taggart!" he snapped and then he smirked and added, "And just for that you get to go first."

A short time later Taggart advanced through the door, peering through the narrow opening first. But it was only when he was fully inside the room that he saw what was causing the smell and he lifted his hand up to rip off his respirator right before he vomited on the floor.

"Let me out!" he gasped, pushing his way back out into the corridor.

"What's in there aircraftman?" Milton asked as Taggart continued to wretch and the other troops stood back just in case he was sick again.

"The Germans sir." Taggart answered, "The Germans are all in there."

As Lieutenant Grey had suggested Hayes' group found the stairs leading down to the next level opposite where the ones leading up were located. But despite there being no indications of any alien presence on this level Two Flight had failed to appear.

"Perhaps the direction Two Flight went in doesn't loop round to here after all sir." Barton suggested. But before Hayes could reply Aircraftman Baker from Milton's section came running around the corner ahead of them.

"Squadron leader!" he called out as he came to a stop, sliding a short distance along the smooth floor, "Pilot Officer Milton wants you come and see what we've found." then he looked at Weston, "And perhaps the doctor should come along as well."

"Barton stay here with the rest of the men." Hayes ordered, "If this is going to take long I'll send a runner." Hayes and Weston then followed the runner back to where Milton and his men were still gathered outside the door that had once again been pushed closed.

"What have you found pilot officer?" Hayes asked.

"And what's that smell?" Weston added, "Smells like a rotting corpse."

"There's a reason for that doctor." Milton replied and he looked at the soldiers closest to the door handle, "Aircraftmen, open the door for the doctor and the squadron leader."

The men by the door took deep breaths while the others from Two Flight stepped back to allow Hayes and Weston through. Then as the door was pulled wide open the pair of officers recoiled at the smell.

"Good heavens!" Hayes exclaimed, covering his nose and mouth. Weston on the other hand rapidly recovered his composure, being more used to the smell of decaying bodies.

Exactly how many bodies had been dumped in the room was impossible to tell but it was clear that the pile was several bodies deep. Many of the corpses wore military uniforms, particularly those of the SS but there were also some in civilian dress present and given that some of these wore white coats it could only be assumed that they were the research staff. Most of the corpses appeared to have been shot, but there were some that had visible blast injuries from grenades or some that had been burned by the energy weapons carried by the alien battlesuits.

"Why leave them here like this?" Hayes said as he stared at the bodies.

"I think they got the idea from the Germans." Weston replied as he advanced into the room, "I think this is the facility's morgue. Look." and he pointed to a wall that was lined with what looked like cupboard doors in rows. Picking his way through the German bodies Weston approached the closest and reached out to open it, "The Germans must have been storing the bodies of the aliens they examined in here." he said as he pulled open the door and slid out the body it contained, "But then again." he added as he found himself looking at a body that was undoubtedly human.

This corpse was not of a German soldier however, instead the almost skeletal figure wore simple black and white striped clothing marked by a yellow star stitched to the chest.

"What the hell is this?" Hayes said, scowling as Weston inspected the body.

"He was shot." Weston said, "Single bullet wound to the chest and from the burns around the wound I'd say it was from close range." then he turned to the next drawer along and opened that to reveal a similar body with an almost identical gunshot wound, "Squadron leader I think it likely that every one of these drawers contains a body like these. The Germans probably used slave labour to build this place and when they were done they simply disposed of them, keeping the bodies for their research."

"Doctor," Hayes said sternly, "when we are done with these aliens I want an exact count. Someone other than those lying here knew about this and I want to make sure that they pay for this. Do you understand?" "Yes sir." Weston replied as he closed the two drawers again.

"Should I leave someone to guard this room sir?" Milton asked but Hayes shook his head.

"No pilot officer I don't think that will be necessary. I don't think anyone's coming to steal these bodies and we may need every man to help deal with the aliens. Now let's get a move on. I left Barton with the others by the stairs."

Once more the RAF squadron descended the stairs cautiously, ready to face an ambush as soon as they reached the bottom but as with the previous level there were no immediate signs of alien activity and the troops began to spread out as they left the stairwell.

The appearance of this level was radically different from those above and rather than the clean white walls this level was decorated in a dull grey. But the differences went further than just the colour of the walls. Instead of a corridor that circled the central shaft with rooms located around the outer edge the parts of this level visible from the doorway to the stairwell were all one chamber with lightweight dividing walls partitioning it into sections, each of which held various tools for use in working with electronic or mechanical devices while various sketches, handwritten notes and photographs of alien devices were pinned to the walls. Also noticeable amongst all this were numerous cables running across the floor, linking numerous different partitioned sections together as they joined to run off away from the stairs.

"Power lines." Grey said as he knelt down by one of these cables and looked at where it was plugged into the wall, "Someone wants a lot of power for something without having to rewire the whole level."

"What could need that much power lieutenant?" Hayes asked quietly as he looked along the cables as far as he could before they turned a corner and disappeared from view. It was obvious that this was not some application that the Germans had intended this level be used for or they would have provided greater power without the need to run cables as haphazardly as this and that left only the aliens themselves as the culprits.

"We could be dealing with technology not of this world squadron leader." Grey responded, "There's no way to tell for sure." then he paused before he added, "Though I'd expect one of those ray guns of theirs to need a lot of power."

"Then unplug it." Hayes said, "I don't want to run into another of their death rays down here. Then we'll follow these cables and see where they lead us."

Removing the power cables from the wall sockets as they advanced, the RAF troops followed the cables that ran along the floor. This led past more individual sections where various machine tools could be seen but it was noticeable that in some of them the more advanced tools had been partially dismantled and components removed.

"Wait!" Grey said suddenly, holding up his hand and the soldiers came to a complete stop.

"What's wrong lieutenant?" Hayes asked quietly, concerned that they were about to walk into an ambush.

"Don't you hear that?" Grey asked in return and all of the RAF troops stood silently as they listened.

"That humming?" Skalaski said and Grey nodded.

"I think maybe I ought to go on ahead with my section and check that it's safe to continue sir." Grey said to Hayes.

"Very well. But don't take any unnecessary risks. We can always try going around the other way if this one is booby trapped." he said.

"Don't worry about me sir. I do this for a living." Grey replied as he began to advance.

"You may want to think about finding a different job then lieutenant." Hayes said with a smile.

Returning the smile, Grey carried on moving forwards. The path towards the source of the humming sound followed that of the power cables running along the floor and as he reached the corner and slowly peered around it he saw that these led into one of the work areas and that there were more of them coming from the opposite direction. Whatever was being done here obviously required a great deal of power to operate and Grey wanted to know what it was.

"Stay behind me and be ready with those Brens." he whispered to his men before he darted forwards, halting just before he reached the work area that all of the cables led into and was the source of the strange humming noise and once his men had caught up with him he listened for any signs of movement from the other side of the partition. But with nothing other than the hum to be heard he leapt around the partition and aimed his weapon into the neighbouring work area.

"What the hell is this?" he then exclaimed.

In front of him Grey saw a strange collection of electronic components, most of which appeared to be of human origin but with numerous pieces that were quite clearly of alien manufacture. The device that the

aliens had been working on was a cone about seven feet in height and there was a cluster of metal rods extending vertically upwards from it around its mid section and from the very top.

"Lieutenant Grey!" Hayes' voice called out, "What have you found?"

"I have absolutely no idea sir." Grey replied, "But I don't think it's dangerous. It'd have done something by now if it was."

Grey moved closer to the device, studying it more closely while Hayes and his men advanced to join the bomb disposal section. Examining it carefully Grey was able to identify various components that had been used in its construction and he understood why so many electronic devices at the airfield had been vandalised, it was because the aliens needed the components to build this. Whatever it was.

"Incredible." Hayes said as he stood at the entrance to the work area, "What is this thing?"

"I'm not sure sir." Grey replied, "But there seem to be a lot of radio components used in it. Look, all along here are the tuning components from four of five German wireless sets."

"But is it the alien equivalent to a wireless set or maybe an alternate version of those rockets they used to kill the Dutch?"

"My guess would be the former sir." Grey replied, "See these rods? I think that they form some sort of antenna and they're the wrong length for generating a signal at a similar frequency to the one inside the rocket I studied."

"And how safe is it to shut this thing down?" Hayes asked.

"Oh I think it's perfectly safe sir. Though if you're wanting to keep the thing for study later you should be aware that there is the potential for damage if we don't so it correctly."

"Well that's just a risk we'll have to take. If the aliens left this running even after they abandoned it then I don't want it left switched on at all." Hayes said.

"Of course sir." Grey replied and he reached down to where a single insulated cable almost an inch thick linked the base of the device to the myriad of cables running towards it and pulled as hard as he could.

The device was not built to withstand any sort of attack and when Grey pulled on the cable it tore free immediately and the humming sound ceased in moments, "Device deactivated sir." Grey added.

"Good. We'll leave it here for whoever gets sent in to clean this place up." Hayes replied before he turned around and started to walk away.

Despite the lack of a security system worth the name, the alien commander now knew exactly where the humans were located. Despite it not yet being complete, the transmitter that his scientists and engineers had been working on had been generating a signal field that was detectable from the flight deck of his vessel and that field had just been shut down. This placed the human troops just two levels above the actual hangar with only the containment level between them and this was where his crew would ambush them.

Barton and the surviving members of the support flight led the way down the next staircase and as they descended them they noticed that the walls here were marked by bullet holes and stained with dried blood. Reaching the bottom of the stairs Barton looked out into the corridor beyond the doorway and saw that there was a desk positioned directly opposite the door so that someone sat behind it would have a full view of whoever was coming down the stairs towards them. Unsurprisingly however, there was no one sat at this desk and Barton lent around the door frame to check the corridor.

In each direction he saw that the corridor was blocked by sets of vertical metal bars that looked like the doors to a prison cell. However, there was no sign of any movement and this section of the level appeared just as deserted as most of the rest had been.

"Looks clear." he said, "Sergeant Hurt, secure the corridor."

"Yes sir." Hurt replied, stepping out of the stairwell with the rest of the flight following him.

Barton remained by the door to the stairwell while his men headed towards the metal bars, waiting for the rest of the squadron to catch up. But just as Hurt and two aircraftmen were closing with the nearer of the sets of bars an alien leant around a doorway in the corridor beyond it and opened fire. The burst of gunfire cut down all three men before any of them could manage to return fire and Barton dropped to his knee as he took aim and fired his Sten gun.

However, just as the rest of his men were also turning around to face this threat to more aliens suddenly appeared in the other direction, one armed with a rifle and the other with a machine pistol and both opened fire at the same time. This sudden attack caught the RAF troops by surprise and two more of them died, shot in the back while they tried to react to the first alien. Now only Higgins and Bell remained in the corridor and they dived to the floor to present the smallest possible targets while Barton used the doorway for cover and reloaded his Sten gun.

"How many do you see?" he called out.

"One this way sir." Bell replied.

"And at least two over here." Higgins added.

Then came the sound of running as the rest of the squadron, spurred on by the sound of gunfire, came rushing down the stairs.

"We've got at least three aliens in cover." Barton told Hayes, "And two of my men are stuck out there."

Hayes nodded and looked at Grey.

"Give them some cover." he ordered him and in turn Grey looked towards the two members of his section carrying Bren guns.

"Jackson, Poole, you heard the squadron leader. Give those men some covering fire."

"Yes sir." Poole replied and the two men made their way down to the doorway and leant around it, each man looking in opposite directions. Then came the roar of the Bren guns as both opened fire simultaneously, spraying bullets down the corridor in both directions. This now forced the aliens back into cover and Bell and Higgins began to crawl towards the doorway to the stairwell. The pistol armed alien risked exposing himself just long enough to fire another burst from his weapon and seeing this Poole swung his Bren gun around and fired a burst of his own that sent the alien spinning around as the bullets struck his chest. However, this was not in time to prevent the alien firing his pistol at Higgins, the handful of shots striking him down before he could reach the safety of the stairwell.

Poole then ceased fire just as Bell got within arm's reach and he stepped back to allow the aircraftman to dash through the doorway.

"It's no good sir." Bell said, looking at both Barton and Hayes, "They've got us covered from both directions."

"Then we'll have to use grenades to dig them out." Hayes said but Barton shook his head.

"There are metal bars blocking our way in both directions sir." he explained, "If we throw a grenade it's likely to just bounce off one and come right back at us."

"Then we'll have to move in teams, two in each direction." Hayes said, "One moves and the other provides covering fire."

The usual split sir?" Milton asked and Hayes nodded.

"Indeed pilot officer." he replied, "You take your men left and I'll lead the others right. Lieutenant Grey, your section along with Pilot Officer Skalaski, Doctor Weston and his orderly and Aircraftman Bell will be the first group while I'll lead the second. My group will go first."

"Understood sir." Grey replied.

"Very well. On my command. Go!" Hayes yelled and he leapt through the doorway, rolling across the corridor and firing his Sten gun down the corridor. At the same time Milton and his command section burst out as well, firing in the other direction as their respective groups emerged. Both groups positioned themselves on the far side of the corridor and continued firing as the rest of the force emerged and moved along the other wall while the fire from the first two groups kept the aliens pinned down. The running groups halted when they were past the firing ones and their roles swapped, allowing Hayes and Milton to advance with their groups while covered. It was then that another alien decided to risk a shot. But he revealed himself too soon and a bullet from a Lee-Enfield passed right through him, spraying the wall behind him with both his blood and fragments of his exoskeleton.

Milton's section reached the bars in the other direction and he peered between them. In the corridor beyond he saw that the doors of the rooms along the outer wall were also fitted with barred doors and that they stood open. Then he saw movement from inside one of the cells and fired towards it. The alien inside held his rifle around the door frame and fired it randomly into the corridor, succeeding in hitting one of Milton's men.

"Reckon you can get a grenade in there sergeant?" he asked and Teller nodded.

"I think so." he replied and he took a Mills bomb from his webbing and pulled out the pin. Then holding his arm through the bars he threw it towards the doorway of the cell where the alien was hiding. The explosive flew straight through the doorway into the cell, but the alien was positioned just inside and it came rushing out before the grenade could detonate. Even though the alien had its rifle pointed towards the human troops Milton's men were faster and one fired a single shot from his Lee-Enfield that took off the side of the alien's head.

In both directions the RAF troops now paused as they waited to see whether any further aliens would appear. For now though they seemed to be safe and their attention turned to the metal bars blocking their path. These bars were in fact doors that looked as if they slid back into the wall to open. But the problem facing Hayes and his men was that they were locked and there was no sign of the keys anywhere.

"I don't suppose anyone knows how to pick a lock do they?" Hayes asked out loud but there was only silence in return, "Then I suppose that leaves us with only one option." he added, "Lieutenant Grey I want your advice on the best way to shoot out these locks before more aliens can arrive."

Shooting even an external padlock was more than a matter of just pointing a gun at it and pulling the trigger. The Boys anti tank rifle would have easily smashed its way through the locks, but given its weight and bulk it had been left fixed to the universal carrier outside which left the squadron with only an assortment of weapons in .303 rifle calibre or assorted .38 and 9mm pistol rounds. The captured German machine guns also having been abandoned but due to there being little ammunition remaining for them rather than any lack of practicality. A bullet from any of these available weapons could easily fragment when it struck the hardened metal of a lock or ricochet off in a random direction. Even if the round did penetrate the lock then that in itself would split into fragments that could easily injure anyone standing too close.

"Well pressing a rifle right up against the key hole ought to guarantee a hit." Grey replied, "Though there's still the fragmentation to worry about."

"What about wrapping a tunic around the muzzle?" Weston suggested.

"It might work. Though I expect it will still take two or three shots to destroy the mechanism." Grey said.

"We'll give it a try." Hayes said, "From here on we stay together and move in alternating groups and stay alert."

"Lawson, Wisher." Grey said, "Deal with that lock. Everyone else cover them."

Grey's men positioned themselves by one of the barred doors, Lawson and Wisher by the lock while the others aimed their weapons through it. Wisher removed his tunic and waited while Lawson pressed the muzzle of his Lee-Enfield against the key hole before he wrapped his tunic tightly around it and held it pressed against the lock. Then Lawson fired.

Even with the muzzle wrapped in the tunic the shot still echoed loudly, the sound passing through the lock itself. Wisher flinched at the sound and he felt his tunic shake. Meanwhile a cloud of metal fragments flew out of the other side of the lock.

"Give it another." Grey said and Lawson chambered and fired a second shot that resulted in yet more fragments flying out of the other side of the lock, "Okay stand back." Grey said and as Lawson and Wisher stepped back he grabbed the bars in front of him and slid them sideways, smiling as the door rolled back into the wall on the other side, "The way is open squadron leader." he announced. Then Wisher held up his tunic, the back of it now blackened and torn where it had absorbed the fragments of bullets and the lock that had come back towards him and Lawson.

"What should I do with this sir?" he asked.

"Hang on to it." Grey told him, "We may need it again."

The squadron's advance now continued and Milton's section rounded a corner they encountered another of the barred doors. Through this the full length of the corridor was visible and there were two more doors blocking the squadron's path. But worryingly there was also a barricade made from stacked furniture beyond the last of them.

"Everyone stay back." Milton said as he backed up and peered around the corner.

"What's wrong?" Hayes asked.

"This has trap written all over it sir." Milton replied, "There's a barrier at the end of the corridor and I bet that as soon as we show ourselves to deal with the lock they'll appear from behind and attack."

"What sort of barrier?" Hayes said.

"Just furniture it looks like."

"So not bullet proof then? Hayes asked and Milton smiled.

"No sir." he answered.

"Bren guns." Hayes ordered and the three remaining Bren gunners made their way to the corner and prepared themselves, "Now!" Hayes ordered and the three men leapt out from behind the corner and opened fire, directing the sustained bursts into the barrier at the far end of the corridor. A few of the rounds inevitably hit the metal bars between the soldiers and the barrier but the majority did not and these ripped through the lightweight wood and metal of the barricade. Even over the sound of the gunfire there was a clearly audible shriek as an alien hiding behind it was struck and killed. In response a second appeared over the barricade, aware that its hiding place had failed to act as the protection it was supposed to and returned fire. The three men with Bren guns ceased fire as they ducked and this allowed the alien to aim his rifle more accurately, hitting one of Grey's section before the others fired again. They used shorter bursts this time however, a visible target removing the need for their earlier random suppressive fire and the alien gunfire stopped as there was another shrieking sound.

Grey and the rest of his section then rushed forwards, Lawson and Wisher once again positioning themselves by the lock for Lawson to disable it with his rifle. But on this occasion just as Lawson fired the first shot another pair of aliens, attracted by the gunfire, appeared at the very end of the corridor and began firing. The first burst of pistol fire struck Wisher as he held his tunic around Lawson's rifle and he fell sideways even as Wisher was starting to look up at the source of the attack.

Grey leapt forwards to grab hold of the tunic and squeeze it around the muzzle of Lawson's rifle.

"Do it!" he snapped and Lawson began firing into the lock while RAF troops opened fire on the aliens.

One of the aliens darted out from around the corner they were using for cover, hoping to get to the rifle now lying on the floor behind the barricade. But it was too slow and several rifle rounds struck it when it was only about half way to its target.

"Lock's free!" Grey yelled as he pulled open the door and the human soldiers began to advance once more, still moving in their groups that provided continuous covering fire.

But a third alien arrived, the last of the rifle armed flight crew and rather than leaning around the corner to expose himself to fire the alien just held its rifle around the corner and waved it around, firing randomly down the corridor.

With so many humans present this was good enough for rounds to strike another pair of men from Two Flight before the weapon's magazine was emptied and the alien pulled it back around the corner to reload.

"Covering fire at that corner!" Hayes yelled as the squadron was forced to come to a halt at the next door, the last one between them and the barricaded corner and while Grey and Lawson worked to destroy the lock the rest of the squadron fired down the corridor, the weight of fire dissuading the aliens from attempting return fire just yet. Then Grey suddenly pulled open the door, "To that barricade!" Hayes ordered, "And take cover."

The squadron advanced, still firing until they reached the barricade that the aliens had set up across the corridor where they used it for cover themselves.

"Does anyone still have a Mills bomb handy?" Hayes asked.

"Here sir." Preston replied.

"Then try and get it around that corner." Hayes told him, "Everyone else get ready."

"Grenade!" Preston yelled as he hurled the Mills bomb over the barricade before ducking back down for cover and clamping his hands over his ears.

Even behind the barricade and braced for the blast, the detonation of the grenade still disorientated the RAF troops. Fortunately however, the barricade did stop the few fragments that reached as far as them and as they recovered their senses the squadron realised that they were not being fired on.

"Quickly!" Hayes yelled as he leapt over the barricade and rushed forwards, his Sten gun held ready for use. Before he even reached the corner he saw the body of one of the aliens lay just around it, the rifle it had been armed with now lying smashed beside the body of its owner. Rounding the corner, Hayes saw the other alien doing its best to withdraw, trailing blood from a wound to its side. Without pausing Hayes aimed his Sten gun and fired but the alien threw itself forwards and the burst passed harmlessly over its head. In addition this took the alien past another sliding door and before Hayes could correct his aim it reached out and slammed the door shut. Then a single rifle shot rang out from behind Hayes and the alien fell as Doctor Weston finished it off.

"Thank you doctor." Hayes said, "Though we still have one last door to deal with it would seem."

"Just the one?" Weston asked.

"I think so doctor." Hayes replied, "Because unless I'm very much mistaken that door just beyond it leads to the stairwell we are looking for."

Three more rifle rounds took care of the lock and then the squadron rushed towards the door pointed out by Hayes. This was unlocked and when it was ripped open it was indeed revealed to be the access to the stairwell.

"Quickly." Hayes said quietly, "The aliens probably know we're coming after all that commotion." and then he started to run down the stairs ahead of his men.

Reaching the bottom he found that this level was not laid out in the same hollow rectangular as those above. Inside from the exit from the stairwell he found himself looking out over a large storage area filled with crates, some of which had been broken open and in the very centre Hayes found himself looking at the alien spacecraft itself.

## CHAPTER 16

The saucer sat on half a dozen steel supports that were obviously not a part of its own structure and any landing gear of its own that it may have possessed was not visible. It did not appear that the craft was supposed to land flat on the ground however, as a pair of ramps, one narrow for passengers and one wider that looked as if it was meant for use by the battlesuits and loader that the squadron had faced. From this angle the damage to the side of the saucer exposed some of the interior and it was clear to see that the main hull contained two levels in addition to any that may lie within the wider central section. There was more damage to the lower hull of the saucer that Hayes assumed to have been caused by its being forced down and in addition to this it appeared that the Germans had either started to dismantle it further or alternatively had been in the process of trying to put the saucer back together. In either case there was alien machinery beneath the saucer where the hull had been removed that remained connected to the craft by clusters of thick cables.

"Squadron Leader," Weston said as he exited the stairwell with his orderly, "it appears your concerns were correct."

"It does?" Hayes responded and he looked over his shoulder to see the doctor pointing to a large wooden rack elsewhere in the chamber. Lined up on this were around a dozen of the rockets used to wipe out the inhabitants of the nearby town.

"Enough for London, Paris, Antwerp, Brussels, Amsterdam, Portsmouth, Calais." Weston said, "Plus some German cities as well I suppose. I doubt these things are any more enamoured with the Nazis than we are."

"Spread out." Hayes ordered, "We need to take that craft and there are plenty of places in here for more aliens to be hiding."

As it happened Hayes need not have been concerned about aliens lying in wait to ambush them amongst the items removed from the saucer and now stored outside it. Including the alien commander himself, only eight of the crew of the space craft remained and all of them were located inside it. Now that the human troops had entered the hangar itself though the saucer's own surveillance system enabled the alien commander to track them. Had this been a force that had happened to stumble across his vessel while it was landed of its own accord he would have simply lifted off. But ever since the attack by the German night fighter the saucer had been incapable of flight and the only weapon systems still functioning were adequate for attacking targets at a distance but unsuitable to use inside the hangar. The surveillance system indicated that the humans had an advantage in numbers of around five to one now. But they still had to make it into the saucer and this gave the aliens a fighting chance. Looking at the last two flight officers the commander issued an order and they reached for their consoles.

"It's closing up!" Barton yelled as he saw the two ramps retracting back into the hull of the saucer.

"Move!" Hayes yelled and he swapped his cautious advance for a sudden charge. Unless the aliens were prepared to abandon their own, the fact that they were retracting the ramps leading into their vessel suggested that there were none left outside. But even with the ramps retracted the saucer was not entirely sealed up, the large tear in the side offered an alternate means of access if the RAF troops could just make their way up to it. Given the sheer quantity of material left lying around by the Germans, making a set of steps looked like an easy proposition. But the aliens were not intending to just sit back and wait for them to get inside the saucer and there were bursts of gunfire from the damaged section as the crew acted to defend it.

Hayes heard the cries of men hit by the machine pistol fire and he threw himself behind a large crate for cover while he evaluated the situation.

"How many hit?" he called out as his men returned fire.

"Five I think." Milton replied.

"Can we use smoke to give us some cover?" Weston suggested.

"I wouldn't recommend it doctor." Hayes replied, "We don't know what effect the phosphorous would have on any of this alien technology or whether it will disperse enough to prevent us from choking on it. Have the Bren guns deploy to give covering fire.

Using both crates and machinery for cover, the soldiers with Bren guns set up their weapons and fired towards the hole in the saucer's hull. There was no indication that they actually hit any of the crew but the alien gunfire came to a halt long enough to satisfy Hayes.

"Now!" he shouted as he leapt out from behind the crate and ran forwards, firing his Sten gun towards the hole in the hull as well for good measure. He ran as far as a hand cart that was piled high with metal cylinders before coming to a halt and kneeling behind it while he reloaded his weapon. Despite having done his best keep stocked with ammunition the rapid firing Sten gun had allowed him to expend a large amount in a relatively short space of time and now he had only a few magazines left. While he did this Milton and other several men from Two Flight ran past him, obviously intending to reach the hole in the saucer's hull. But just as they ran into the shadow of the alien craft an object with an all too familiar shape to Allied troops was hurled from within and landed right in front of them.

"Grenade!" Milton yelled as the stick grenade landed on the floor right in front of him. But the warning came too late and when the grenade went off Milton and his section were caught out in the open and well within its effective blast radius.

"Are there Germans in there helping them?" Barton exclaimed as he stared at the bodies of Milton and his men.

"I doubt it Pilot Officer." Hayes responded, "More likely the aliens have studied the Germans' weapons just as we tried to study theirs."

"Well we are going to need a way past them." Skalaski commented before firing two rapidly aimed shots at where he thought he saw movement inside the saucer.

"Lieutenant Grey! Pilot Officer Skalaski!" Hayes shouted, "To me." and Grey sprinted forwards, leaving his remaining men. Skalaski on the other hand paused to fire again then reloaded his revolver before finally running out into the open and firing on the move until he reached Hayes' position. Sliding to halt he sat with his back to the cart and began to reload again.

"The aliens are obviously prepared from an assault directly towards the breach in their hull." Hayes explained, "But maybe they won't be as ready for one coming from an alternative direction."

"You mean those ramps?" Grey asked and Hayes nodded.

"The aliens close them so they may not be as heavily defended internally. If at all." he responded.

"Most of my men are providing covering fire." Grey pointed out.

"Yes I realise that." Hayes said, "But hopefully just the two of you will be able to find a lock or something similar that you can manipulate."

"We'll give it our best shot squadron leader." Skalaski said and then he and Grey sprinted away. Rather than moving directly towards the alien craft they instead circled around it until they came to the spot where the larger of the two ramps had now retracted back into the hull leaving only a barely noticeable seam.

Skalaski looked directly up at the hull, following the edge of the ramp while Grey instead focused a small opening close by where something had been removed but left connected to the saucer. It consisted of a short cylinder with a cable protruding from one end that ran back into the saucer's hull while the other featured a small opening about the width of two of Grey's fingers. What its function was Grey could not tell, but it seemed possible that it was related to the ramp opening somehow.

"What are you?" he muttered to himself as he felt within the cylinder for any signs of a concealed switch. In the mean time Skalaski began to creep further under the alien craft, heading back towards the hole in the hull that the aliens were firing out of. With the Bren guns aimed towards the hole the aliens could only make brief attacks before having to take cover again but it was enough for a few of their bursts to find a target and from beneath the saucer Skalaski could make out a few more bodies in British uniforms than there had been when Hayes had given Grey and Skalaski their orders.

Then it occurred to Skalaski that the aliens firing from inside the saucer were probably unaware of his presence beneath it. Looking around he saw another of the carts the Germans had used to move equipment around on and this one had a wooden crate loaded onto it. The crate was open to reveal another piece of technology from the saucer but the lid was leant up against it and Skalaski placed this on top of the crate to form a flat surface to stand on before he began to slowly push the cart towards the hole in the hull.

With the cart in position Skalaski paused to see if another grenade would come dropping out of the saucer. Then he spotted the Sten gun lying beside the body of Sergeant Teller and he bent down to pick it up and checked it. As far as he could tell the weapon was still operational and with it slung over his shoulder Skalaski climbed onto the cart and then up onto the top of the crate. He kept low here, the underside of the saucer only just above his head. Then he reached up and took hold of a piece of metal that stuck out of the damaged section of the alien craft and used it to pull himself up into the ruined structure beneath the lower of the two visible floors, bracing himself against various protruding components. From here he could hear the sound of the alien machine pistols being fired from just above him and as he unslung the Sten gun he peered up into the interior and he caught sight of two of the

aliens in their all covering grey suits. Before either of them could notice him Skalaski pointed the Sten gun towards them and pulled the trigger, holding it down as he sprayed both aliens with bullets until the magazine was emptied and by this time they were both dead.

"Hold your fire!" he shouted as he let the now empty Sten fall to the floor below and drew his revolver. Then as soon as the firing from the British troops ceased Skalaski hauled himself up into the saucer and looked around.

From here it was clear to see that the craft had been built with the alien's smaller stature in mind. The ceilings were proportionately lower than they would have been for a human made vehicle such as an aircraft or submarine. However, though the difference meant that the RAF troops would likely have to stoop to pass through doorways they would not be reduced to having to crawl through the innards of the alien vessel.

"The way is clear squadron leader." Skalaski called out, "Throw me up a rope and I'll tie it off for you to climb."

The humans were inside his vessel. By moving beneath it where the external optical sensors had been destroyed by the crash landing more than two years earlier at least one of them had been able to kill the two engineers that the commander had ordered to hold them back and even now more of them were advancing to gain entry into the saucer.

Keeping control of the flight deck was essential and so the commander decided that he and the two remaining flight crew would remain here and use the saucer's internal security sensors to guide the three remaining crew, one engineer and two of the scientists that had been intended to study rather than battle the local life forms.

Hayes climbed the rope ahead of the rest of his section and looked along the narrow passageway he was stood in.

"There's not much room in here." he commented.

"Enough to move around in." Skalaski replied.

"Maybe so, but handling a number four will be difficult in here." Hayes said and he looked back down to the floor where his men waited, "I want every man with a Sten or revolver up here." he called out,

"Everyone else secure the area and wait." then he paused before adding "Lieutenant Grey?"

"Yes squadron leader?" Grey replied as he appeared beneath Hayes.

"I want you to stay out there as well. See if you can get that larger ramp open. That probably leads to a section of the ship large enough to make a Lee-Enfield more useful. If you manage to get it open then I want you to lead another section of men inside."

"Yes sir. I don't think that device I was studying is what we're looking for but there has to be something." Grey told him before he turned around and head back underneath the saucer again.

## CHAPTER 17

Hayes' order regarding who was to enter the saucer meant that a five man team was all that could be mustered, made up of Hayes himself, Pilot Officers Barton and Skalaski, Doctor Weston and Sergeant Martin from Grey's bomb disposal section. Unsure of either the layout of the saucer's interior or the strength of the aliens this team stayed together as they crept along the cramped passageway that the breach in the hull had allowed them access to.

The passageway curved around at a constant rate and Hayes guessed that it ran all the way around the saucer in a circle. Every so often they would come to a oval shaped doorway that lacked a door to bar their way and while two of them would wait in the corridor the other three would go inside to determine whether there was anything of interest inside. For the most part the answer to this question seemed to be 'no', the rooms were lined with shelves and cupboards that appeared to have already been emptied by either the Germans or the aliens themselves.

This changed when the team followed the corridor to its very end however and for the first time found their way blocked by a door. This doorway was larger than the others they had walked past and the door itself was segmented, with numerous curved seams running from all around the circumference and meeting in the centre.

"That looks like a control panel of some sort." Hayes said softly as the group advanced cautiously and he pointed to what looked like a green gemstone set into the wall beside the doorway.

"But how does it function?" Weston asked in response.

"Perhaps all we need to do is walk up and touch it." Barton suggested and he proceeded to do just that, keeping his Sten gun pointed at the doorway while he approached the green gemstone and reached out for it. As it happened he did not even have to touch it, as soon as his hand came close the colour changed from green to red and the segments of the door split apart and rotated so that an opening appeared first at the very centre of the door and expanded until all of the segments had retreated into the wall, "See?" he said, looking back over his shoulder, "Nothing to-" and then he was cut off as a burst of alien gunfire struck him.

"I see them!" Martin yelled and he fired a burst from his Sten gun through the doorway at a pair of aliens he caught sight of amongst the machinery in the room beyond but they both retreated from view before either were hit. Advancing to the doorway Hayes also fired into the room beyond, using short burst to dissuade the aliens from shooting back as he entered the chamber and took cover himself. The chamber Hayes found himself in was much taller than the passageway or any of the rooms that his search team had yet encountered and it struck him that it was tall enough to occupy both levels in the main section of the saucer. Another obvious feature was the atmosphere itself. Unlike the passageway and smaller rooms that had been at a similar temperature to the hangar the saucer was housed in, this chamber was significantly warmer. Then Martin came through the doorway after him, holding his fire while he searched for a target and taking cover beside the squadron leader.

"Did you see where they went sergeant?" Hayes asked him.

"Over by that raised platform I think." he replied and he pointed to a section of the room where there was an upper platform at the rear of which was another doorway that clearly led to the saucer's upper level. Sure enough an alien appeared from behind a short column at the edge of the platform and fired down at the two soldiers. But there was another rattle of gunfire from the doorway as Skalaski, now holding Barton's Sten gun opened fire and the alien was struck. Letting out a high-pitched shriek the alien staggered backwards and stepped off the edge of the platform where a gap in the safety rail was positioned for one of the ladders leading up to it from the lower level. There was another burst of gunfire from the alien's machine pistol as its grip tightened on the trigger as it fell but this was not aimed towards any of the humans and the entire burst went into the ceiling. As the alien came crashing down it landed on top of a control console, smashing its interface and a fraction of a second later the entire saucer seemed to shake.

The flight deck was suddenly filled with alarms and displays sudden switched to show a schematic of the saucer with points all around its outer edge flashing red as an uncontrolled power surge was sent through the ion thrusters meant for manoeuvring the ship in space. The thrust produced by these was nowhere near enough for the saucer to achieve flight but it was enough for it to shift on the steel supports the Germans had mounted it on and outside in the hangar the human soldiers all looked towards the saucer as they not only heard it grinding against its supports but also felt a sudden intense wave of heat from the

thrusters.

"Get back!" Grey yelled as he saw the alien vessel shift just enough that the supports began to lean and as the saucer came to a halt once more they were no longer able to support its weight and they collapsed under its weight, bringing the whole thing crashing down to the floor.

Fortunately the saucer came to a stop when the wider section at its centre struck the ground and the few troops not able to get out from underneath it were prevented from being crushed by the good fortune of having been nearer to the edge where the saucer's structure was still held up off the hangar floor.

"What the hell was that?" Grey exclaimed as he looked at the saucer.

Inside the saucer both the remaining alien crew and the human boarding party were left just as shocked and disorientated at the sudden unexpected and uncontrolled movement and they struggled to regain their senses.

It was Doctor Weston who was first to recover enough to take in what was happening and looking through the doorway he saw another alien crawling towards where its pistol had been dropped when the saucer moved and it was thrown against a nearby wall. Acting quickly, Weston aimed his revolver and fired two shots in rapid succession. The first struck the alien's leg and as it fell the second hit its body, killing it instantly. Then he rushed to Hayes' side.

"Squadron leader." he said, shaking him.

"What happened?" Hayes responded, blinking and then reaching out for his Sten gun.

"I don't know. But hopefully it won't happen again." Weston replied. Then he added, "I got another of them over there by the wall."

"Well done doctor." Hayes said, getting slowly to his feet. Then he heard a strange groaning sound coming from behind some machinery and both Hayes and Weston pointed their weapons towards the source. By this time both Martin and Skalaski were recovered enough to get back to their feet as well and the four men crept towards the source of the groaning, all of them holding their weapons ready.

"Together?" Martin asked as they neared the unidentified equipment and Hayes nodded. Then all four men suddenly rushed forwards and aimed their weapons over to the other side.

There they saw another of the alien crew. But when the saucer had shifted this one had obviously landed on a tool of some kind that had not been properly secured and now it protruded from the alien's chest, blood pouring out around the sides. Looking up, the alien saw the four humans and it started to raise the machine pistol it still held and all four men fired at the same time.

Hayes reloaded again, inserting his final magazine of 9mm ammunition into the Sten gun as he looked around.

"Well if I was designing this thing I'd put the cockpit at the top." he said, looking up at the doorway on the platform above.

This doorway was blocked by a smaller version of the door that the team had entered the room through and there was an identical control set into the wall beside it. This time however, as Weston waved his hand over the gemstone the others covered the doorway itself just in case there was another alien ambush waiting on the opposite side. However, as the door slid open it revealed nothing but a corridor that led directly ahead, towards the centre of the saucer it seemed and there was a pulsing sound from within it.

"Does that sound like an engine of some kind to you?" Hayes asked, looking at Skalaski.

"I fly Spitfires squadron leader." he replied, "If it doesn't have a Merlin or Griffon engine then I don't know about anything it."

"Well let's go and find out shall we?" Hayes said and he advanced through the door.

The air in the passageway was just as warm as in the large chamber the team left behind it but there was no equipment of any kind to indicate where this excess heat may be coming from. Instead the passageway extended for about ten yards ahead of them before ending in another closed door.

"Shall I do the honours again?" Weston asked and Hayes nodded.

"If you'd be so kind doctor." he replied as he pointed his Sten gun at the door.

Weston waved his hand over the gemstone and once again the door spun open and Hayes smiled as he saw what lay beyond. The chamber on the other side of the doorway was the smallest that his team had come across so far and including the doorway he was looking through it had four exits spaced evenly around it. The walls between these were covered in some sort of readouts that meant nothing to any of the humans, the text being indecipherable. But it was what was in the very centre of the chamber that made Hayes smile.

It was a ladder.

The ladder descended through a hole in the floor but it also extended straight up as well and as Hayes stepped through the doorway it was in this direction that he aimed his Sten gun. Spotting movement above he fired a short burst and there was a shriek as he hit another one of the aliens.

"Cover me." he said as he held his Sten gun in just one hand and began to climb. Aware of just how vulnerable he would be when he emerged onto the level above, Hayes paused and wrapped the arm that held his Sten gun around the ladder to support him while he undid the chinstrap of his steel helmet with the other. Then he took off the helmet and placed it over the muzzle of his weapon before slowly raising it up above him.

As the helmet reached the top of the ladder there was a sudden cry in the alien language that was accompanied by a rapid burst from a machine pistol. Hayes quickly pulled his Sten gun back, swinging it so that the helmet fell from the muzzle and fell down the ladder shaft with a loud clattering sound. Hoping that the aliens would think it was he who had just fallen after being shot in the head Hayes suddenly pushed himself up the ladder and out onto the flight deck itself.

Hayes barely had any time at all to take in the layout of the flight deck but he could see that there were a collection control consoles all around him that were arranged in a circular pattern with the access to the ladder shaft at the centre and facing away from it. Rather than remain where he was, Hayes kept on moving and there was another burst of machine pistol fire that struck the deck right where he had been as the aliens tried to defend the flight deck.

"Get up here!" Hayes yelled, "I'll cover you." and he fired another short burst from his Sten gun that forced the alien who had targeted him to retreat.

Skalaski was the next to appear, dragging himself out of the ladder shaft and rolling across the floor until he came to a halt beside a chair designed for one of the alien crew.

"Where are they?" he called out as he searched for a target.

"Over there." Hayes replied and he pointed towards the source of the alien gunfire that had targeted him. Skalaski now fired as well, the bullets from his Sten gun smashing a display screen as Martin and Weston followed him onto the flight deck as well.

"Keep him pinned down." Hayes said and the three other men all fired towards the hidden alien while he moved to the outside of the ring of control stations and began to work his way around to its hiding place. Then when he saw the figure huddled behind one of the control stations he took careful aim with his Sten gun and fired. The weapon rattled and shook as Hayes kept on firing until the magazine was empty, by which time the control console the alien was using for cover was smashed and the alien itself lay dead with more than a dozen bullet wounds to its chest.

The four humans waited to see if any further aliens were about to leap out at them. But the flight deck was now silent.

"Is that it?" Weston asked, "Have we taken the ship?"

"I would not be so certain just yet doctor." Skalaski replied, "We do not know if there are any more aliens left on the lower levels."

"Well there sure don't seem to be any more up here." Weston said and he stood up. But just as he did there was a shriek and he turned to see another alien charging towards him from behind another control console. Like the others this one wore a rubbery suit that covered its entire body but whereas the others had been a dull grey this one was white, suggesting that this particular individual held some position worthy of being differentiated from the others.

The alien commander held a machine pistol in one hand that he fired as he ran, the burst striking Martin as he turned to fire. Then the alien slammed into Weston, knocking him backwards and as Skalaski rushed to help him the alien commander swung what he held in his other hand like a club and struck the pilot and stunned him.

Knowing that his Sten gun was now empty and useless, Hayes instead reached for the revolver still holstered at his waist. Seeing this, the alien commander pointed his machine pistol towards Hayes and fired again. But Hayes reacted quick enough to dive behind a console that absorbed the gunfire and when he leapt out from the other side he came out firing. Pointing his revolver at the alien commander he pulled the trigger repeatedly. The first shot struck the alien in the arm that held his pistol and the weapon flew from his grip. The next two missed completely before Hayes brought his revolver back on target and put a round into the alien's neck.

The alien let out a garbled shriek, distorted by the blood now flooding into his throat. Hayes saw the alien commander fall and ceased fire but his enemy was not quite dead yet and as a final act of defiance he pulled the pin from the base of the stick grenade that he held and released it.

Hayes gasped as he saw the grenade fall to the floor and roll across it, all thoughts of finishing off the alien gone from his mind. But his initial fear turned to relief as the grenade rolled all the way to the ladder shaft and dropped over the edge before detonating as it fell.

There was a sudden flash of light and a blast of flame erupted from the shaft and on the remaining flight deck displays readouts all became red.

"Skalaski! Weston!" Hayes yelled as the two men started to get back to their feet, "I think we need to get out of here."

"Slight problem with that." Weston said, looking at the ladder shaft and seeing the orange glow of the flames below them, "Our escape route seem to be blocked."

"Look around." Hayes said, "Maybe the designers were smart enough to design an emergency exit into this thing." and the three men began to search for another way out.

"What about that?" Skalaski asked, pointing up at the ceiling where there was a green gemstone set into it.

"It does look like the controls to their doors doesn't it?" Hayes replied and he rushed towards it, waving his hand at it. Sure enough one of the ceiling panels suddenly retracted with a hiss and light from the hangar shone into the flight deck, "Okay out!" Hayes yelled.

First he and Skalaski helped Weston to climb out onto the upper hull of the saucer and then he reached back down to assist the other two in following him. After this they slid down the sloping hull of the saucer before leaping from the edge.

"Squadron leader! What's happening?" Grey exclaimed as the three RAF officers suddenly dropped into view.

"The ship is on fire lieutenant." Hayes replied, "I think perhaps we should be getting out of here."

"Where to?" Grey asked.

"Back to town for starters. Then we'll see about getting the evidence of what happened here to headquarters."

The survivors of 2728 squadron rushed back up the multiple flights of stairs until they reached the surface. There they crowded onto the two universal carriers that waited where they had been left when the squadron had gone inside the hangar. The two vehicles then sped towards the airfield gate where the squadron's trucks were parked and men jumped down from the overcrowded carriers and boarded one of the trucks instead before all three vehicles set off for the town. As they drove the sky behind them was suddenly lit up by a brilliant white flash and the ground shook as a sound like thunder filled the air. Looking back towards the airfield, Hayes saw a massive mushroom shaped cloud now extending up into the air and he knew that all hope of recovering any part of the flying saucer was now lost.

## EPILOGUE

A collection of men in the uniforms of senior army, RAF and Royal Navy uniforms sat around the large oak desk and studied the photographs in front of them.

"Unbelievable." one of the RAF officers said, looking at a picture of an alien without his rubber mask on. Then he looked towards a man in the uniform of an army general, "But you say that your men have the actual body secured?"

"They do." the general replied in a Canadian accent, "Along with some sort of walking machine that your men were able to take relatively intact."

"And who else knows about this?" another RAF officer asked.

"As few people as possible." a third replied, "Just the people in this room and those who have actually witnessed any of what happened."

"We need to keep this quiet." the first RAF officer added.

"People will ask why your squadron suffered so many casualties." the Canadian general pointed out.

"Then let the squadron itself vanish from all records." another general suggested.

"He has a point." one of the RAF officers said, "Two Seven Two Eight Squadron was reorganised from its previous light anti-aircraft role in June and deployed straight to the European front. It would be easy to suggest that it was disbanded instead."

"Then that is what we shall do." the highest ranking of the RAF officers present announced, "As far as history will be concerned Two Seven Two Eight Squadron ceased to exist before any of these events took place." then he looked towards the window where a large man in a suit with thinning hair stood smoking a cigar as he looked out at the view of London, "Does this all meet with your approval sir?" he asked.

"It does Air Marshal." the man replied as he turned to face the assembled military officers, "But I would like to hear from the navy as well." and all eyes turned towards the two admirals present. One of them held one of the photographs of an alien wearing its rubbery suit while the other studied a book.

"They appear the same." the one with the book said, holding it up so that the others could see the hand drawn sketches it contained, sketches that were quite clearly of one of the aliens, "I suggest that although we are keeping all of this classified we should ensure that we will be prepared should anything like this happen again. We may not be so lucky a third time." and then he closed the book. Stuck to its cover was a small label that was written by hand as well. It read 'HMS Hydra. Ship's Log. September 1846'