

Excerpt

Prologue

USS Stonefish, July 1945

Stonefish was one day north of the Volcano Islands when Captain Hugh Carpen paged his new executive officer to the conning tower. Having only been aboard a week, Ensign William Myers was still adjusting to life aboard the sub, so it was ten minutes before he appeared, breathless and flustered, in the con. Carpen waved him over to the chart table.

“Sorry, Skipper, I got turned around. You wouldn’t think that—”

“Don’t worry about it. Takes some getting used to.”

“Yes, sir.”

“New orders, Billy.” Carpen tapped the chart. “That’s our first way point. I’ll give out the rest when we get there. Till then, it stays between you and me.”

Myers peered at the chart. “Jesus, Skipper, that’s—”

“Yep. Listen, rumors are going to start. I expect you to keep ‘em under control. I don’t like keeping the boys in the dark, but that’s the deal.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Two more things. Put the word out: We’re bypassing all targets this patrol. Log ‘em, run a firing plan, but steer clear of the. Second, our guest—”

“The fella in forward torp?”

“Right. He’ll be staying there for the duration. From now on, it’s off-limits to everyone. That means everyone, got it?”

Myers simply nodded. As XO, it was his job to make the skipper’s word law, but Myers felt far out of his depth. Less than a week aboard Stonefish and here he was, headed into God knew what. But then again, he consoled himself, this is what he signed up for, wasn’t it? “Yes, sir,” he said.

—

Two days later, Carpen gathered Stonefish’s officers in the wardroom. Taped to one of the tables was a square of butcher paper; beneath it Myers could see the outline of a chart. Though he knew what was hidden there, thinking of it filled his belly with butterflies.

Once the doors were locked, Carpen began. “Gentlemen, it’s time to let the cat out of the bag. While I can’t give you the why of our mission, I can give you the where.” Carpet ripped off the butcher paper. There were ten seconds of silence.

“Oh, holy Moses,” whispered the weapons officer.

“You got that right, brother,” said another.

Stonefish was fifteen miles off the coast of Shikoku, Japan.

“Four Marine Raiders died getting the details you see on this chart,” Carpen said. “Here’s the deal: In two hours we’ll penetrate their antisubmarine nets...right here. Once inside, we’ll navigate by chart and stopwatch through this minefield and, if all goes as planned, slip through undetected. If we manage that, we’ll be about four hundred yards offshore, so make sure to tell your people to keep their voices down.”

There was nervous laughter.

“From there, we’ll head northeast until we reach the mouth of the Inland Sea between Shikoku and Honshu. This is the Japs’ main sortie channel, so we can expect a lot of traffic.”

“How much?” asked Myers.

“Anywhere from four to eight tin cans patrolling the gap.”

“Oh, boy,” the chief engineer muttered.

“Supposing we get that far,” said the weapons officer, “then what?”

“Don’t worry about that,” replied Carpen. “Once we finish what we’ve come to do, we’ll turn south and cut between the opposite shoreline and the minefield. At Tanabe Point...here...we’ll make our exit, go deep, and head home.”

Carpen looked around. “Questions?”

“How long do we have?” asked the navigator.

“From net penetration to the channel, six hours.”

—

“Mine, port bow, closing,” called the navigator. “They’re thick out there, sir.”

“Time to turn?” asked Carpen.

Thirty seconds.”

The control room went silent as the time ticked away.

“Mark,” called the navigator.

“Helmsman, left fifteen degrees rudder, make your course zero-two-seven, speed six knots.”

“Zero-two-seven, speed six, aye sir.”

No one moved now, no one spoke. Myers stood beside the chart table, eyes on Carpen. The skipper looked completely at ease, and it made Myers all the more nervous. If either their navigation or a mine’s position were off by so much as a foot...they might hear the metallic scrape of the mine’s horn, and then...

The navigator called: “On track, sir. Mines on both beams, opening.”

"How long until we're clear?" asked Carpen.

"Fourteen minutes."

—

"Mine passing the port beam, skipper. Last one coming up on starboard bow."

"Aye," said Carpen.

"Bottom rising, Skipper. Fifty feet in the past minute. Depth two-fifty."

"Navigator?"

"Ten seconds to turn...three...two...one...mark!"

"Helm, come left to zero-nine-zero. Planesman, make your depth one hundred. Prepare of PD."

Stonefish began her ascent to periscope depth. The bottom sloped up to meet her until only fifty feet lay between the sea floor and the keel.

"Depth one-fifty."

"Up twenty-five," ordered Carpen.

"Depth one-ten."

"Up another twenty."

"Up twenty, aye sir."

"Coming clear," called the navigator. "Last mine opening the port quarter."

"Bottom leveling at ninety feet," called Sonar.

"Engines all stop," Carpen ordered. "Diving Officer, give me zero bubble."

"Zero bubble, aye." At the control board, the diving officer turned a series of levers controlling the hydraulic manifolds, which in turn displaced Stonefish's ballast. "Zero bubble, Skipper. Floating like a balloon."

Stonefish was now hovering some thirty feet from the sand.

"Sonar, Conn," called Carpen. "We're at PD, Chief. Got anything?"

"Negative contact, sir."

"Conn, aye. Up scope." The periscope ascended from the well, and Carpen caught the handgrips. "Hold. Billy?"

Myers stepped to the opposite eyepiece and pressed his forehead to the plastic. The lense was still submerged. After a few seconds he could distinguish moonlight filtering through the black water. No shadows, no lights...

Carpen called, "Up twelve inches...slow."

The quartermaster complied. The hydraulics hissed. The tube ascended. The moonlight grew stronger.

"Almost there," said Carpen. "up six. Up two...easy...There."

Myers' first view of the world in three days was breathtaking. Half awash, the periscope displayed a clear, star-sprinkled sky. A thick mist clung to the surface, and through it Myers could see the winking of navigation buoys.

Carpen said, "Okay, here we go, Billy. Look sharp."

Myers focused on the bearing viewer. Arms dangling over the grips, Carpen began duckwalking the scope. The sea skimmed past the lens until the shoreline appeared. The trees and fishing huts stood out clearly under the moon. Myers's heart pounded. Damn, we're close...

"Mark on Mugi Point coming up...Mark."

"Bearing zero-zero-five," recited Myers.

The navigator plotted it. "Got it. Match, Skipper. We're on course."

As Carpen swung the scope past due west, Myers caught a glimpse of something in the mist, a shadow. "Hold," he called. "Back, Skipper."

"Yeah, I see it."

Sitting low in the water and shrouded in fog, the silhouette was almost invisible but unmistakable nonetheless: sleek hull, single slanted stack, deck guns...It looked just like the flash cards from sub school, Myers thought. A Naichi-class destroyer. Bad boy.

Carpen snapped up the grips and stepped back; the periscope slid down. "Sonar, Conn. You get anything on the SJ?"

"Land to the north, faint contact bearing zero-nine-five."

"Mark her target one, Naichi-class destroyer." Carpen pointed at Myers. "Good eye, Billy. Where there's one, there's more."

—

Four miles from the mouth of the Inland Sea, Sonar called out.

"Conn, Sonar, multiple surface contacts. Screw count makes it four—no, five—bad guys. Target one bears zero-nine-zero, range two miles—"

"The Naichi," Carpen muttered to Myers. "Where's he going, Chief?"

"Listening...Doppler's down. He's heading away. Shaft rotation for six knots."

"Back into the channel," Carpen whispered. "And the others, Chief?"

"Same bearing, range four miles. They're really pounding the hell out of the main channel, Skipper."

Far off, Myers could hear the wailing gong of the enemy sonar.

"Twenty seconds to new course," reported the navigator. "New course zero-eight-four."

Carpen turned to Myers: "Recommendation, Billy?"

God almighty, he's asking me? Myers could feel sweat rolling down his back. He forced calm into his voice. "Heck, we've got the Naichi heading into the channel. Might as well hitch a ride." Carpen nodded. If they got into the destroyer's baffles, not only would its sonar be useless, but its screw cavitation would cover their own. "Good call."

"Mark, skipper."

"Helm, come right to new course zero-eight-four," Carpen ordered. "All ahead one-third for twelve knots."

—

Invisible in the destroyer's wake, Stonefish was two miles from the channel and three miles from their destination when the depth charge attack started.

"Conn, Sonar! Depth charge in the water, close aboard!"

"All hands brace for shock!"

Stonefish was rocked to port. Men were thrown from their stations into bulkheads, then back again as the second, then a third depth charge exploded. Carpen and Myers gripped the overhead pipes, their legs swinging free. The tower went black. The red battle lamps flickered. Gauge faces shattered and steam pipes burst, hissing wildly in the darkness.

"Planesman, forty degrees down! Helm, come right twenty degrees!"

Depth charges exploding around her, Stonefish spiraled downward. Then, as quickly as it had started, the attack stopped.

"Bottom coming up, Skipper."

"Level her off."

"They're turning around for another run," Myers said.

"Good for them," Carpen said. "We won't be here. Sonar, Conn, where is he?"

"Zero-eight-nine, range eleven hundred. Bearing shift...he's turning."

"Speed?"

"Sixteen knots."

"Helm, steer course zero-eight-nine, all ahead flank."

Myers did the mental calculation and said, "Skipper, what—"

"At flank speed we make fifteen knots. Add that to the Naichi's sixteen, and we're closing her at thirty-one. They're fast, but their turn radius ain't for shit. We'll be under and behind her in three minutes."

"Will that work?"

"We'll know soon enough. The question is, has he called for help?"

—

Carpen's gambit worked. For whatever reason, the four warships in the channel did not come to the aid of the Naichi. Their luck was short-lived, however. Five minutes after sliding behind the destroyer, a screech echoed through the boat.

"What the..." Carpen muttered. "All stop, zero bubble."

"All stop, zero bubble."

The whine ceased.

"What is it?" asked Myers.

"Conn, Engine Room."

"Go ahead," replied Carpen.

"That last depth charge must've got us in the ass, Skipper. Shaft's bent. The seal's okay, so we ain't gonna drown, and we can limp home, but anything over three knots, and she'll start screaming again."

Carpen and Myers studied the chart. Their destination, marked as a red triangle, was three miles away, deep inside the Inland Sea.

"What d'you think, Billy?"

"The current in the channel is four knots at least," Myers said. "With the time we've got left, we'd have to do at least eight knots to get there. And with the shaft the way it is..."

"We'd be ringing the dinner bell," Carpen finished. "They'd sink us before we got within a mile of it." He paused, thought for a moment. "What's that saying about discretion being the better part of valor, Billy?"

Myers felt a flood of relief. "So how do we get out?"

"As planned. It just might take us a little longer to get there."

"And the mission?"

"My boat, my call. If they don't like it, they can fire me. Conn, Sonar, report."

"Four surface contacts dead on the bow, bearing zero-eight-five. Bearing shift is changing...turning...They're headed deeper into the channel, Skipper."

"And the Naichi?"

"He's astern of us and moving away."

"Conn, aye." Carpen said, then to Myers: "Time to make like a ghost. Helm: Come right to new course zero-nine-one, speed two knots."

"Zero-nine-one, two knots, aye, sir."

Carpen tilted his cap back on his head and grinned. "So what d'you think of the tour so far, Billy?"

Myers shrugged. "Interesting?"

“Nice way of putting it.” Carpen clapped him on the shoulder. “you did good. Before you know it, we’ll be back in the Volcanos drinking beer.”

“Sounds good to me.”

As Stonefish turned east and began limping through the water, neither Myers nor Carpen realized the terrible mistake they’d just made or the price it would exact over half a century later.