

***Blood Wings* by Phil Ward**
Book Three in the Raiding Forces Series

PROLOGUE

There is no official record of there ever having been a Force N operating in the central part of Abyssinia in 1940-41. A request for information on the subject was met with the response “Special Operations Executive’s records were destroyed in a fire at the end of World War II.”

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Wire Noose

Maj. John Randal, DSO, MC, stared through the dark gloomy night as the inkblot coastline of enemy-occupied France swam into focus after a high-speed run from his headquarters located at Seaborn House in the southern portion of England. Anticipation spiked among the small group of Raiding Forces officers on the bridge of Motor Gunboat 345 as they inched their way in toward a purple-shaded signal lamp beckoning from the rocky shore. Tonight they were working for the fledgling Escape and Evasion organization, MI-9, making the first-ever attempt to bring out an evading British officer on the run from the Nazis.

The powerful engines of MGB 345 warbled as the heavily-armed craft stealthily worked in toward the faded violet light. Six pairs of night glasses strained to pierce the night fog. This was a hasty operation, launched in response to an urgent request from MI-9 to evacuate a high-value escaper about whom little was known. The only information Raiding Forces’ mission planners had to go on was the coordinates of the pickup point, the type of signal to be expected upon arrival and the fact that they were bringing out a senior British officer tonight.

Purple meant the landing point was clear. Any other color was a wave off, indicating the mission was compromised. At this point, the pick-up was a go.

“Stand-by landing party,” Major Randal ordered, never lowering the powerful Zeiss field glasses he had captured from a German Panzer leader at Calais, what now seemed like a lifetime ago but in reality was less than a year.

There was a rattle of equipment as six Commandos made last-minute checks and prepared to go ashore in the MGB’s Goatly dory. Two Lifeboat Servicemen were primed to launch the dinghy upon command. Members of the famous National Lifeboat Institute, they were a couple of the top rough-water small-boat handlers in the world. The Raiding Forces troops in the landing party were the most experienced small-scale amphibious operators in the British Armed Forces. Tonight may have been MI-9’s maiden mission as an Escape & Evasion organization but the personnel carrying it out for them were the best in the business led by the most capable small-unit special operations officer Combined Operations possessed.

Nevertheless, they were winging it. No one really knew what to expect. You never do on first operations.

Major Randal looked at the luminous green Coke bottle-shaped hands on his Rolex and noted that it was 2330 hours. The watch was a gift from his fiancée, Capt. the Lady Jane Seaborn, OBE, Royal Marines; a fabulously wealthy widow of a Royal Navy officer killed early in the war when the destroyer he commanded was sunk by Stuka dive bombers off Norway. Captain Lady Jane was generally described by any man who ever laid eyes on her – and by most women – as ‘drop-dead gorgeous.’

The watch was an exact copy of the official hardhat diver’s model the Royal Navy had specially purchased from the Rolex Company. Originally it had been intended as a surprise birthday present for Captain Lady Jane’s husband, but he had sailed on his last voyage before she had been able to present it. Major Randal thought about her every time he glanced at the watch, which, in his line of work was a lot. A reliable source had privately confided that was the reason Lady Jane had given it to him.

“Bring her around, Randy, and be ready for us to get the hell out of Dodge the minute we come back on board,” Major Randal ordered MGB 345’s young commander, Lt. Randy ‘Hornblower’ Seaborn, DSC, RN, as he made a last-minute check of his equipment.

Tonight Major Randal was going ashore armed to the teeth with his Browning A-5 auto-loading 12-gauge shotgun with the short barrel and extension magazine holding eight rounds; a Colt .38 Super at his waist; a High Standard Military Model D .22 with the silencer mounted in a chest holster; a Fairbairn fighting knife laced to that; and four Mills No.36 grenades tucked into the bellows pockets of his sand-green Denison parachute smock. What the Commandos called ‘dressed for success.’ The mission was not intended to be a fighting patrol but he planned to be prepared for any contingency.

‘Expect the unexpected’ had been one of Raiding Forces’ ‘Rules for Raiding’ before they had learned from hard experience the rule was worthless since the unexpected was always worst-case scenario and never anything anyone had ever even remotely anticipated.

The new rule to replace it was ‘When the unexpected happens, press on.’

The rest of the men in the landing party were all armed with Thompson .45-caliber sub-machine guns as well as the personal sidearm of their choice, Fairbairn daggers, and an assortment of hand grenades. Lt. ‘Pyro’ Percy Stirling, MC, 17/21 Lancers, the ‘Death or Glory Boys,’ was equipped with a small amount of explosives.

The young cavalry officer had recently been undergoing an intensive course of demolitions training provided by the Territorial Regiment stationed near Seaborn House, the Kent Fortress Royal Engineers. Lieutenant Stirling had achieved ‘living legend’ status in Raiding Forces, having blown up a lighthouse on OPERATION TOMCAT by ordering one hundred pounds of guncotton explosives to be placed under the two-story storage tank of acetylene fuel that powered the light. The resulting explosion had struck terror into the hearts of a lot of brave men (most of them his own) and earned him the lasting nickname ‘Pyro.’

Sgt. Mike ‘March or Die’ Mikkalis, a baby-blue-eyed professional who looked exactly like the dreamy soldier of fortune in a white kepi staring off in space on French Foreign Legion recruiting posters had been tapped to be the interpreter tonight. He actually had completed a tour in the legendary 13th Demi-Brigade of the Legion. Tough as nails, he spoke French like a native.

The remaining four men of the landing party consisted of two cavalymen from the swanky Blues Regiment of the Household Guards, one rifleman from the Kings Royal Rifle Corp and one rifleman from the Rifle Brigade. RM Butch Hoolihan rounded out the team. All personnel were graduates of the British Parachute School and the Commando School at Achnacarry, Scotland and were veterans of a number of small-scale Commando raids, including the first-ever British parachute raid on a German installation on the continent and the cutting-out of three enemy ships from the Port of San Pedro – OPERATION LOUNGE LIZARD.

Major Randal was an American volunteer serving in British Forces. Originally he had been commissioned into The Rangers, a Territorial Regiment recently activated as the 9th Battalion 'The Rangers', King's Royal Rifle Corps. He had served four years previously as a junior officer in the 26th United States Cavalry Regiment (Philippine Scouts). Two years of that tour of duty was spent on intensive operations against the elusive and deadly Huk guerrillas.

Tonight was his first back-on-duty after recovering from a serious wound he received on an off-the-books pin-prick raid unofficially known in Combined Operations circles as the 'Gunfight at the Blue Duck.'

"You men all know your jobs," Major Randal said as he prepared to lead the way down into the gently-rocking dinghy being held against the side of the MGB 345 by Lifeboat Servicemen Tom Tyler and Jimmie Dodd. "Let's go do it."

The purple lantern was their objective. The mission was a quick in and out. The idea was for them to slip ashore, retrieve the high-value evader waiting at the water's edge, return to the MGB and be away and gone before anyone was the wiser. All good plans are simple. And this one was as simple as it gets.

Maj. Norman Crockatt, the officer commanding MI-9, was onboard tonight as an observer for this very first evader retrieval operation. He was along to evaluate Raiding Forces' performance with an eye to entering into a long-term commitment with them for joint operations in the future. Thus far he had been keenly impressed with the high degree of professionalism and teamwork exhibited by Major Randal's men.

Everything had gone like clockwork.

The Lifeboat Servicemen rowed the dinghy with powerful strokes. As the small cockleshell of a craft approached land it became clear that they were coming in to a rugged rocky shore. White foam lapped around a large stone that appeared right in front of them as they made landfall. These were the kind of landing conditions that would defeat most small-boat handlers but in which the Lifeboat Servicemen excelled.

Lieutenant Stirling leapt from the bow of the dinghy carrying the landing line and landed silently on the big rock. The rubber soles of his canvas-topped raiding boots gave him a secure grip on the slippery surface and were completely silent. He helped hold the boat in place as the Lifeboat Servicemen paddled furiously to bring the stern of the dinghy against the rock and tossed the young officer another line to secure the fragile craft from the pounding of the tide.

Sergeant Mikkalis followed him on to the rock. Next out was Major Randal, Royal Marine Hoolihan and the four remaining Commandos. The Raiders fanned out and immediately set up a ragged security perimeter. Terrain dictated that they were halfway up a rocky cliff in a ragged, diamond-shaped formation.

A tiny cadaverous Frenchman clad in a thread-worn black suit topped by a nasty-looking beret was holding the purple-shaded lamp. The man was excitedly gesturing to Sergeant Mikkalis and speaking in a high-pitched rapid-fire voice.

When Major Randal came up, Sergeant Mikkalis announced, "Sir, we have a situation," sounding like he enjoyed delivering bad news, as usual.

"Let's hear it."

"Fritz says the police nabbed our man on the way to the rendezvous tonight. The bloody idiot was apparently in the village up the road having dinner with a woman in a public eatery and got caught during a routine inspection. Fritz arrived in time to see the policemen leading our evader and his dinner companion away in handcuffs."

Major Randal knew from his map reconnaissance prior to the mission there was a tiny village two miles west of the rendezvous point called Le Muy. The place consisted of no more than a dozen buildings, making it not much more than a wide spot in the road. No German forces were permanently stationed there according to the intelligence provided by Major Crockatt, MI-9.

"Military?"

"Metropolitan Police – they patrol the rural areas. Vichy, which means they cooperate with the Gestapo. Mean bastards every bit as bad as the SS, sir."

"How many?"

After a lengthy back and forth with the shabby little man in the worn black suit, Sergeant Mikkalis translated, "A mobile squad, Fritz is not sure exactly how many there were. He thinks he saw approximately half a dozen but did not hang around long enough to get an exact headcount, sir."

"How many police cars did Fritz say were in the village?"

"Three, sir."

"What do you think, Sergeant Mikkalis?"

"We ought to go home and let the Germans keep the bloody fool, Major," the ex-Legionnaire said in a flat tone. "The man failed to follow instructions to lay low. He deserves what he gets. Whoever the evader is, he's a dangerous fool."

"I meant how many policemen do you estimate are in Le Muy?"

"That is what I was afraid you meant, sir," the tough sergeant grinned, which came across more like a homicidal snarl. "Probably no more than six or eight. Metropolitan Police seldom expect to find much in remote areas like this."

"Where's the evader now?"

"Locked up in the local post office, sir," Sergeant Mikkalis said, "in the only public building in town, dead center in the middle of the village according to Fritz." He had not needed to go through the Frenchman for the answer, having already asked the question anticipating Major Randal the way really good sergeants do.

"Will he take us there?"

"Not a chance, sir."

"Have Lieutenant Stirling report to me."

"Yes, sir," the NCO responded in a resigned tone. Sergeant Mikkalis knew his commanding officer and he knew what was coming next.

Major Randal turned to the Lifeboat Serviceman standing alongside, “Tom, you hear everything we just said?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, report back on board the 345 and brief Lieutenant Seaborn and Major Crockatt on the situation. Tell them we’ll be going into Le Muy to retrieve our evader,” Major Randal ordered. “Inform the Lieutenant he is to wait until 0300 and if we are not back by then, head home immediately. Is that clear?”

“Wait ‘till 0300 hours, sir,” the Lifeboat Serviceman repeated, clearly not liking the sound of the message he was to deliver, “then shove off.”

“Roger that, move out.”

“Godspeed, Major.”

Lieutenant Stirling walked up with Sergeant Mikkalis as Lifeboat Serviceman Tyler headed back to the dinghy.

“You understand what’s happening here, Percy?”

“Sergeant Mikkalis filled me in, sir.”

“Good. Have your garrote with you?”

“Always, sir.”

Major Randal took the weapon, fashioned a wire loop, then whipped it over Fritz’s head and pulled the noose tight before the startled Frenchman knew what was happening, causing him to emit a noise that sounded like something you might expect to hear from a startled duck. Then he took the ends of the garrote and wrapped them around the barrel of Lieutenant Stirling’s Thompson submachine gun behind the Cutts compensator, twisted them down tight and tied them off so the muzzle was wired in place about three inches from the back of Fritz’s neck.

“If the man so much as wiggles,” Major Randal ordered through clenched teeth, “blow his head clean off.”

“Yeeeeehaaaaa!” Lieutenant Stirling responded in a stage whisper. “Death or Glory, Fritzie!”

“Sergeant Mikkalis, tell him what I just said,” Major Randal instructed. “Make sure you include Lieutenant Stirling’s comment.”

“With pleasure, sir!”

After listening to a short, unhappy exchange in French, Major Randal commanded, “OK Fritz, lead the way.”