

RESCUE RUN

Capt. Jake Rogers' Daring Return to
Occupied Europe

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CHAPTER 1

The torpedo shot out of the darkness through a raging sea and slammed into the steel hull amidships with the ominous clank of a death knell.

At the awful sound and the steel hull's violent shudder, Capt. Jake Rogers bolted to the three small windows at the front of the wheelhouse of his newly minted American Liberty ship, the 7,100-ton SS Charles C. Walcutt, but couldn't see any flames or smoke. Swirling fog banks and torrential rain driven by gale-force winds shrouded the heaving North Atlantic, making it difficult to see any of the other 40-odd ships in the convoy.

"Helm, hard left!" Rogers yelled, his windburned face and hazel eyes impassive, his tall, gaunt frame rock steady, projecting a calmness for the benefit of his men that he did not feel.

"Hard left. Aye, Captain," said the young helmsman at the small wooden wheel in front of him.

Rogers slammed the General Alarm on the aft wall, setting off a loud bell, signaling the forty Merchant Marines and twenty-eight US Navy Armed Guards to man their stations. He lifted the sound-powered Hose-McCann telephone receiver on the wall, set it for Number One, the engine room, and cranked the handle. "Chief, what's the status?"

“No serious damage to the engine room, Captain. A few gauges broke, and asbestos flakes came down. We’re checking the hull. Bosun’s sending men to the holds.”

“So, did we hit something, or did something hit us?” Rogers asked. Out of the corner of his eye, through the front windows, he glimpsed another ship ahead. “Helm, hard right,” he shouted.

“Hard right. Aye, Captain,” the helmsman said, spinning the wheel just in time to avoid the approaching ship. Another deafening bang rattled the ship as it slammed down from the crest of a thirty-foot wave.

“Report to me as soon as you know anything,” Rogers said, slamming down the phone.

First Mate Ali Nidal rushed in from the starboard door, shaking the rain off his sou’wester hat and oilskin raincoat. “It does not appear to have been a torpedo, Captain,” Nidal said, his swarthy, pockmarked visage grim as usual.

“A dud?” Rogers asked. German torpedoes sometimes failed because they struck at the wrong angle.

Stroking his black goatee, Nidal shook his head. “I do not believe so. If it was, we should have been struck by other torpedoes by now. Must be something else,” said the Tunisian, one of the few men aboard with whom Rogers had sailed before and trusted completely. They had barely survived their

last voyage together on the ancient tramp steamer the Peggy C, one-third the size of their current ship.

Steel scraping across steel caused a dreadful shriek—something that meant serious trouble. “Take the watch. Keep the men at their stations until I find out what’s going on,” Rogers said, pointing at Nidal with a crooked right arm that he couldn’t straighten out all the way. Gunfire from a German Armed Raider had shattered it during a surprise attack on the Peggy C. “And continue evasive action.” He threw on his rain gear, including rubber boots and gloves, grabbed a large flashlight, and ducked out into the driving rain, slipping in his haste down the ladder almost to the main deck three stories below. He leaned over the starboard bulwark and searched the hull with short flashlight bursts. Trying to avoid detection by any nearby U-boat, he inched his way toward the stern. Relentless waves rammed him back against the main deckhouse.

To continue his inspection, Rogers had to tug his way along the bulwark, head down and leaning at almost a forty-five-degree angle against the wind. He anchored his feet from one metal stanchion on the side to another like rungs on a ladder.

“Come see this, Captain,” a voice called out behind him. The nearby sailor clicked a flashlight on and off his face in a short burst so Rogers could see he was the ship’s bosun.

Able Seaman Thomas Vimont, who oversaw the deck crew, was one of the older crew members, having “come up through the hawse pipes,” what sailors said of someone who had risen in the ranks without much formal education.

Vimont led Rogers forward toward the bow and pointed his flashlight down from where the superstructure met the hatch for Hold Number Three. In front of them was a horrifying sight: a long, jagged tear stretched up the hull where two prefabricated sections of the Liberty ship had been welded together. The tear seemed to grow with each bounce of the ship on the turbulent waters. The bosun clicked off the flashlight.

“Station two men here to monitor the damage!” Rogers shouted over the howling wind. “Have one of them run up to the wheelhouse every five minutes and report to me. Send two others down below to check inside Hold Number Three and report back to me in the wheelhouse on the phone. Is that clear?”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Vimont said.

“And tell Chief to organize a damage control team with the carpenter to see if we can do anything to patch it up from inside!” Rogers yelled.

The bosun motioned over an immense black sailor named Obasi, who always hovered about whenever the captain was on deck or in dangerous situations. Rogers smiled at his old friend before running to the officers’ mess. There, Cookie,

another old friend and cook from the Peggy C, and the stewards had laid out bandages, yellow sulfa powder, and other medical supplies on tables in preparation for treating the wounded. "All set, Cap'n," said the portly Brit. With molted jowls and thin white tufts of hair on his bald head, he was easy to spot.

Rogers saluted and struggled back up the ladder to the wheelhouse. "She's coming apart, Mr. Nidal," Rogers said, brushing back his wavy brown hair as rain streamed off him.

"How is that possible?" Nidal asked. "Were we hit?"

"I have no idea. Didn't look like damage from a torpedo. But sections are splitting apart. Bosun and the Chief are checking it out," Rogers said, scanning the ocean through the windows with large binoculars. Visibility was less than the length of a football field. "Helmsman, hard right. All ahead slow."

"Hard right. All ahead slow. Aye, aye, Captain."

"We will lose the convoy," Nidal said.

"No choice," Rogers said. "We have to slow down and get out of the way." U-boats were always lurking about, waiting for a lame duck like his ship to fall behind and become easy prey. It was a terrible dilemma. But Rogers couldn't risk endangering the other ships in the east-bound convoy. HX-229 ships were trying to maintain a rectangular formation with five

columns 1,000 yards apart and 600 yards from the stern of one ship to the bow of the trailing vessel.

It didn't take Rogers long to do the math. The convoy was moving at seven knots, the slowest ship's speed in rough seas. If his ship slowed down to even three knots to do repairs, it would take less than five minutes for the trailing ship to ram his ship. With the Charles C. Walcutt blacked-out except for a low-voltage, shielded blue light on its stern—a light that couldn't be seen in such low visibility in time to prevent a disaster—she would be all but invisible. And that assumed the ships could maintain any semblance of a convoy formation in the violent seas. That near-impossibility made the situation even more dangerous and unpredictable.

They were on their own. No rescue ships were assigned to this convoy. And it was too dark to get protection from covering aircraft, even if the convoy wasn't in the dreaded "Black Pit." The 300-mile-wide gap from east to west in the middle of the North Atlantic was out of range for almost all land-based planes from either America or England. It was a hell of a way for Rogers to celebrate his fortieth birthday, an hour away on St. Patrick's Day, 1943.

A burst of light flooded the wheelhouse before the sound caught up, rattling the windows and sending shock waves through the ship. Tentacles of yellow and orange flames ripped through the sky. A second blast followed within

seconds. Given the proximity, Rogers guessed it was the Norwegian motor ship Elin K, carrying a load of manganese, an essential ingredient for stainless steel used to make helmets and other military equipment.

“Those were definitely torpedoes,” Rogers said. But he could do nothing about it as his ship fell farther behind its assigned position in the convoy. He could only hope any survivors would be picked up by one of the four destroyers in their escort or by the lone corvette, a lightly armed warship smaller than a destroyer that could match the speed and range of U-boats.

At the whining squeal of the sound-powered phone, Rogers hustled to the back of the wheelhouse to answer it. “Chief here, Captain. We’ve got a real problem. Hold Number Three is flooded, and we can’t get to the crack for repairs. We’ll have to try to weld it from the outside.”

“Using a blow torch would attract every U-boat for miles, even if we could get someone safely over the side in this weather,” Rogers said. “Can you pump out the hold enough to lower a welder inside?”

“Possibly. But we’d have to come to almost a full stop.” A full stop would kill any hope of catching up with the convoy, even at his ship’s top speed of 11.5 knots, which wasn’t possible anyway. She was loaded down with 8,000 tons of

steel, cotton, and food and had a deck crammed with aircraft, tractors, and trucks.

The proud stevedores in New York had bragged that the Charles C. Walcutt was “full and down,” meaning they had accomplished the rare feat of filling all her cargo space so that she was loaded down to her white-painted Plimsoll lines, marking how low the hull was in the water. That wasn’t true. The Plimsoll line was below the waterline, and his ship was clearly overloaded. It didn’t matter for Rogers’ ship. It was wartime, and being beyond capacity was a necessity, even if it meant his ship was slower and more unwieldy than usual.

“Helm, all ahead slow,” Rogers said.

“All ahead slow. Aye, Captain,” the helmsman said, pulling the handle to his right back and forth on the brass engine order telegraph, which was connected to the engine room’s telegraph by a chain. He halted the arrow on “ahead slow,” which the engine room acknowledged by repeating the steps with a loud clanging of the telegraph’s bell.

“Chief,” Rogers said into the telephone, “you’ve got less than five hours until sunrise to make repairs. After that, we’ve got to make a run for Liverpool as best we can.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“And send someone to find Bosun and tell him to deploy the torpedo nets.” The nets were interlocking steel rings attached to cargo booms lowered to ninety degrees port and

starboard. They only protected about three-quarters of the hulls, but that was better than nothing.

Rogers returned to the windows and searched the turbulent sea with his binoculars. In the distance, a cargo ship passed through the fog to his port, its blue taillight fading like a dying ember. The passing of what sailors called the “coffin corner”—the last ship on the starboard column of a convoy—meant they were now utterly alone and at the mercy of luck and the weather.

Urgent ship alarms wailed in the distance. Rapid explosions shot flames and billowing smoke sky high, illuminating dreaded silhouettes: conical towers atop low-slung hulls of U-boats. The German subs blasted away with their 8.8cm deck guns and launched torpedoes as they wove in and out of the columns like steel sharks in a savage frenzy among lumbering whales. More torpedoes found their mark, turning the whole area into a horrible scene of shooting flames and burning metal.

Rogers pivoted to US Navy Ensign Johnny Mitchell standing at his battle station in the wheelhouse. “We have reduced speed,” Rogers said. “So, I’d advise you to hold your fire unless you’re 100 percent certain you see a target.”

“That is my decision, sir,” Mitchell said. Rogers had no authority over the Armed Guards, and relations were not always the best between the naval personnel and the unionized

Merchant Marines, who were employed by private companies and paid higher salaries, including combat bonuses, than the Navy. The Armed Guards, most of whom had never been to sea before, were bitter about being the “Navy’s stepchildren” and often derided by sailors as “fish food” on suicide missions.

“Of course, Ensign,” said Rogers, who always went out of his way to be deferential to the sensitive young officer. “But if you open fire while we can’t maneuver, you’ll be sending a signal flare to all the U-boats to come pick off an easy trophy. Better to let them keep moving away with the convoy.”

There was a long pause. “OK, Captain. I understand. We’ll keep our powder dry as long as we can.”

“Thanks. And you should know that we have developed a serious crack in the starboard hull amidships. If it gets worse, I’ll recommend you pull your men on the bow back to the stern.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Using his helmet phone, Mitchell told the chief gunner’s mate in the stern gun tub, who commanded the ship’s primary weapon—a 4-inch 50-caliber gun that required at least seven men to operate—to hold his fire. He repeated the commands to crews manning the 3-inch 50-caliber gun in the bow, the 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft machine guns on the four corners of the main deckhouse, and the two 20mm Oerlikon guns atop the poop deck at the stern.

They all huddled in the driving rain in their semi-circular gun tubs made of “plastic armor,” a made-up name to confuse the Germans. It was actually a thin steel plate covered with a layer of stones mixed with asphalt that would deflect bullets and not shatter as concrete barriers would.

Although there were many weapons on the Charles C. Walcutt, they were primarily defensive. In the event of an enemy attack, the recommended course of action was to flee and use the stern gun for cover. That was another source of bitterness among the Armed Guards. They had joined the Navy to attack the enemy, not run away, a frustration reflected in a derisive sign at one training center: “Ready—Aim—Abandon Ship!”

A speeding British corvette hurtled past Rogers’ ship, churning up a foamy wake as it chased the U-boats into the flaming convoy, its spotlight swirling around. As it roared away, the corvette launched a flurry of barrel-shaped depth charges over both sides of the ship. They exploded with bone-jarring thumps in rapid succession, triggering geysers of water and sound waves that rocked the Charles C. Walcutt.

Long-tailed snowflake flares, tracer bullets, and bursts of star shells lit up the sky over another exploding cargo ship. Rogers never understood the use of flares because, in his opinion, they simply made the Allied ships easier targets. He couldn’t be sure what ship had been attacked because Liberty

ships painted over their names after launching so the Germans couldn't track them. But based on its position in the convoy, it appeared to be the SS James Oglethorpe. It, too, was on its maiden Atlantic crossing, aflame and listing to its starboard.

Desperate sailors scrambled over the decks, some fighting to lower two lifeboats. One boat flipped over when someone prematurely cut the fall—the rope and blocks used to lower the boats from davits—and dumped more than a dozen men into the icy sea. Death for them was mere minutes away.

Rogers let out a silent curse as he lowered his binoculars, unable to watch any longer. He had repeatedly drilled everyone on his ship to lower the lifeboats slowly and safely. Now, there was nothing he could do to help as the wounded ship circled out of control to port.

One of the rain-drenched sailors who had been monitoring the crack in the hull darted in the starboard door. “Come quick, Captain! You gotta see this!”

Rogers followed the sailor down the ladders to another sailor, holding a large flashlight. He handed it to the captain with a shaking hand. When Rogers pointed the flashlight down onto the hull, a chill shot up and down his spine. The crack was still growing.

CHAPTER 2

Rogers raced back into the wheelhouse, headed straight for the telephone, and cranked it. As he waited for the chief to respond, he shouted to Mitchell, “Ensign, get your gunners to the stern! Now. And tell them to wait for further instructions. I repeat, await further instructions.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“Mr. Nidal, get the men to their boat stations.” In frustration, Rogers hung up the phone and rushed back to the starboard door, stopping and calling out. “And get the lifeboats overboard and rigged for quick launching. Drop over the Jacob ladders and the scrambling nets. But nobody moves to abandon ship. We do not want to create a panic.”

Rogers was gone before Nidal could verbally acknowledge the command. At the bottom of the ladder on the main deck, he bumped into Obasi. “Where’s the Chief?” Rogers said.

The Nigerian sailor motioned the captain forward to the cracked-open hatch of Hold Number Three, one of five cargo holds in the ship. Inside, the chief and a welder, wearing metal face shields, hung halfway down the flooded compartment on bosun chairs of wooden planks between two ropes. They struggled to weld a metal sheet over the gushing crack in the hull.

When he succeeded in reducing the flow of seawater to a trickle, the welder killed his blowtorch and signaled for Obasi and other sailors standing above to haul him and the chief up. As soon as his feet hit the deck, the chief flipped up the face cover and sucked in the frigid air. “That’ll only last for a short while, I’m afraid, Captain,” he said. “The damage is right at the engine room bulkhead.”

“And the engines?”

“Fine for now. But I’m not sure what’s going to give first, the bulkhead or the hull. I’ve never seen or heard of anything like this. Not on a Liberty ship. Not on any ship, for that matter.”

“All right,” Rogers said. “Let’s get back underway and hope the patch holds.” Distant flashes filled the sky ahead, followed by the rumblings of explosions and the rat-tat-tat of gunfire. Smoke redolent of cordite rolled by. Rogers got the attention of Obasi and the bosun. “Set up tag teams to keep watch inside the hatch and tell them to do their best to shade their flashlights.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” the bosun said, waving over sailors from their boat stations and giving them their assignments.

Ensign Mitchell skidded down from the wheelhouse ladder and tapped Rogers on the shoulder. “What about my men?”

“Bow’s still not safe. But they can return to their gun positions aft and atop the wheelhouse. We’re far enough away from the fighting that you might consider securing from General Quarters to a modified Battle Stations Condition One. Let them get some food and rest where they are.”

“I appreciate your concern for my men, Captain,” Mitchell said, apparently doing his best to follow naval training and not irritate the much older ship master. “But I think it best to continue with General Quarters. Including in the bow.”

Rogers paused for a moment, considering how to respond. “I’ll have Cookie send some stewards with food and hot coffee for your men.”

“Thank you, Captain. Very kind of you,” Mitchell said, appearing taken aback by Rogers’ generosity.

“Listen, son. I know being in command’s hard,” Rogers said, putting his hand on Mitchell’s shoulder. “You’re doing what you believe is right. I respect that. Just always take care of your men.” With that, Rogers headed back to the wheelhouse. “All ahead half,” he said to the helmsman, who acknowledged the order and rang the engine order telegraph.

When the engine kicked in, the ship rumbled. As he scanned the darkness outside with his binoculars, Rogers worried about a surprise attack and wondered what the hell had damaged the brand new “ugly duckling” he commanded.

Three years before, Liberty ships didn't even exist. Newspapers called the boxy ship—the length of a forty-story building and six stories wide—an “ugly duckling” because it had been designed to eliminate as many time-intensive, manufactured curves as possible; President Franklin D. Roosevelt dubbed it a “Liberty ship.” Like so many other things in the war, they were invented out of necessity and produced on a scale and speed never seen before.

Each ship was a Herculean task involving 250,000 parts, forty-three miles of welding, five miles of wiring, and seven miles of piping. But the new method of building the ships in sections all over the country and welding them together in one port created unforeseen problems. Welding the hulls was faster and required less steel and used fewer workers than traditional riveting. As Rogers was learning, the welds sometimes cracked in cold water or rough seas.

Rogers got a few hours of sleep in “full rig,” not even taking off his boots, before returning to the wheelhouse at dawn. The rain had stopped, but intermittent fog still limited visibility, and the swells had dissipated to a more manageable ten to twenty feet.

“Nothing to report, Captain,” Nidal said. “We are proceeding at 3 knots but not making much headway. Chief says the patch appears to be holding well enough.”

“Good. Go get some rest and—”

“Torpedo trail sighted three points to port!” yelled Mitchell as he ran back out to the flying bridge in front of the wheelhouse.

“Hard right, Helmsman. Full speed ahead,” Rogers commanded, sounding the alarm throughout the ship for General Quarters.

As soon as the helmsman acknowledged the order and rang the engine room, Nidal said to Rogers, “Captain, are you sure that is wise? Even in these seas, the hull might not be able to take it.”

“No choice. The greater danger is staying a sitting duck. Have Sparks send an S-O-S,” Rogers said, referring to the radio operator. “And S-S-S, so the Brits know we’re being attacked by a submarine, for whatever good that’ll do us.”

Grabbing his helmet and life jacket, Rogers raced outside to join Mitchell at the far end of the flying bridge. The ship rocked to starboard when the rudder shifted and to port as the engines revved up to full speed.

Together, the two men searched the turbulent waters with their binoculars for the tell-tale phosphorescent trail of a torpedo, a cigar-shaped canister the length of a truck that carried 617 pounds of explosives at 30 knots.

“There!” Mitchell said, pointing to port. The torpedo raced toward the fo’c’sle outside the torpedo net, where the bow gun crew gawked, helpless. Rogers followed the trail backward

until he spotted a U-boat bouncing in and out of sight on the waves a mile or two away. The Germans often fired torpedoes in groups of two or three and would close fast on a target to finish the job using the 8.8cm gun on their forward decks.

Rogers could see no other trails, but that was little comfort; some torpedoes with magnetic triggers traveled deep below the surface to explode under ships and couldn't always be spotted in time for evasive action.

He searched the clearing skies in a futile hope some plane could miraculously penetrate the Black Pit and save his ship. As he lowered his binoculars, the torpedo passed a few yards ahead of the prow. The gunners jumped and cheered. Mitchell exhaled sharply in relief until Rogers pointed out the U-boat closing in for the kill. A U-boat could travel at 17 knots, which meant Rogers had little hope of outrunning it.

"Ah, hell," Mitchell said, raising his binoculars and fighting to appear calm. "Any chance you could ask the helmsman to keep us stern on so my crew can get a clean shot?"

Rogers said he would do so and returned to the wheelhouse. "Helm, set a course for 150 degrees and zigzag at thirty-second intervals. Give me flank speed." As the helmsman repeated the instructions and rang the engine order telegraph, a whistle sounded over his head from the brass

speaking tube. Rogers popped out the rubber stopper. "Captain here."

"Captain, flank speed on these waves could put too much stress on the crack."

"We just dodged one torpedo, Chief, and the U-boat is on our tail."

"Flank speed it is, Captain. And the torpedo nets?"

Rogers thought the matter over. "They only cut our speed by a knot or so. Better to have the protection."

The entire ship shook and banged as cresting waves lifted the racing propellor out of the water and smashed the hull into a trough. Rogers jogged outside to the far port wing of the flying bridge to see what was happening. Mitchell, using his telephone headset, directed the gun crew on the stern's 4-inch 50-caliber gun.

One gunner's mate lugged a thirty-three-pound shell from the ready magazine and shoved it into the breach. Other sweaty Armed Guards and Merchant Marines relayed shells up into the gun tub from the magazines below deck. Another gunner called out the distance, "3,500 yards," well within the gun's 9,000-yard range, but the fast-approaching U-boat was still a difficult target. Mitchell ordered the gun elevated to aim at its conning tower.

"Fire!"

The gun cracked with a violent recoil. The Armed Guards didn't wait to see the results before cleaning the barrel and reloading. In theory, they could fire eight or nine shots a minute. They would be lucky to get off a couple a minute in wartime, under fire, on a rolling sea and a weaving ship. The first shot landed short of the U-boat. The Germans returned fire with their deck gun, using similar-sized shells as the Americans' but with a longer range.

Shells exploded all around the Charles C. Walcutt. Water domes shot up, rattling the lifeboats dangling over the bulwarks like trinkets on a baby's mobile. Mitchell's crew matched the U-boat shot for shot, but it was clear the Germans were gaining ground and would soon give up the useless deck gun and return to using torpedoes.

"Launch three smoke floats!" Mitchell yelled. His crew fired off the 165-pound canisters full of a toxic mixture of hexachloroethane, zinc oxide, and aluminum that could produce thick clouds of smoke lasting twenty minutes or so. Mitchell phoned the bridge, where Mr. Nidal stood watch. "I'll try to give us some cover from the torpedoes, Mr. Nidal. But I don't think it will fool them for long."

"Do what you think best, Ensign Mitchell," Nidal replied. He stepped outside onto the flying bridge to consult with Rogers. "We might want to prepare to abandon ship once they run out of smoke floats, Captain."

“They’ve only fired three. They have seven more. So, let’s wait and see.”

“It is hopeless, Captain. No one will come to our rescue.”

“Such a pessimist, Mr. Nidal,” Rogers said with a thin smile. It wasn’t the first time they had found themselves in an impossible position.

Their last ship, the tramp steamer Peggy C, had outrun a pursuing U-boat for thousands of miles in a desperate rescue of Miriam Maduro and her Jewish relatives. It ended up at the bottom of the Mediterranean but took the chasing U-boat with it. Leaving Miriam, the love of his life, safe in Palestine so he could return to America was the hardest thing Rogers had ever done. Nidal had initially called that escape attempt “hopeless.” Rogers was betting he would be wrong again.

For several tense hours, neither ship could make much headway or aim with any accuracy in the rough seas. From time to time, the Armed Guards launched a smoke float, obscuring their position and giving Rogers time to maneuver away from any torpedo’s path. By 4:30 p.m., the sun had almost set, and Mitchell was down to his last smoke float.

Once night came, all hope would be lost. The moon would be close to full, making the Charles C. Walcutt as brightly outlined as a slow-moving duck cutout at a shooting gallery.

Rogers stood on the port wing of the flying bridge, kneading his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. He estimated the U-boat had made up half the distance between them. Now he had a decision to make: abandon ship or risk being blown to smithereens with all hands on board.

He hated to quit. He couldn't help but recall a quote from one of his favorite characters in one of the books he so loved. "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." Sherlock Holmes' advice had always served him well.

Outrunning the U-boat was impossible. Outgunning it was impossible. Letting all these men die for a futile effort was impossible. The remaining answer was an orderly abandonment of the ship. Mitchell and the Armed Guards would resist because they were under orders never to let a Liberty ship fall into the enemy's hands. Rogers would try to give them enough time to set detonation charges and safely join him in the last lifeboat.

As he headed into the wheelhouse to announce his decision, a noise made him twist around and cock his head to listen, searching the sky for what sounded like the faintest whine of engines. Impossible? Wishful thinking? Tapping on the door's window, he motioned Nidal outside to the windy flying bridge. "Do you hear something?"

Nidal shook his head and headed back inside. Then a blinding circle of light flooded the bridge, freezing both men in their tracks. It moved aft over the stern and out to sea, heading straight for the U-boat. The two men exchanged looks and followed the dancing light with their binoculars.

High above, Rogers found the light's source: an airplane with a glass cone on its long nose, four engines on longer-than-normal wings, and a flat tail with what appeared to be upright cafeteria trays at the tips. A giant spotlight hanging on its front held the U-boat captive as the plane descended and dropped depth charges. "I don't believe it," Rogers said. "A Liberator. Must be one of the long-range ones."

"Are they not all bombing Germany?"

"I guess not."

The U-boat raced forward to submerge in a crash dive, but not fast enough. On its second pass, the bomber hit home, buckling the U-boat in an arc of flames and smoke. Cheers erupted all around the Charles C. Walcutt. Rogers winked at Nidal, "Never bet against my luck. Now, let's get out of here and find the convoy."

Mitchell skipped up the ladder and slapped Rogers and Nidal on their backs, making even the taciturn Nidal crack a smile. They laughed, inhaling deeply, invigorated at being alive and still aboard their ship.

The celebration came to an abrupt halt when the bridge rumbled as if the ship had driven over an old country road lined with lots and lots of potholes, each bigger and deeper than the one before. To keep from falling, the three men grabbed tight to the rails.

A massive pop rang out as loud as an explosion, followed by an ear-splitting screech of tearing metal. Rogers covered his ears as the ship's bow lurched up, knocking him and the other two men off their feet. Struggling to pull himself up on the rail, Rogers had to blink repeatedly and shake his head, not believing his eyes:

The entire front half of the ship, from the tip of the prow to the wheelhouse amidships, had broken loose and was floating away, the ocean's ferocious waves clawing it down to a watery grave.

The Charles C. Walcutt had split in half.

CHAPTER 3

The aft end of the ship slowly settled down, but forward, planes, tractors, and trucks slid off the deck into the sea. Frantic Armed Guards scurried from the gun tubs and hurled themselves into the frigid waters rushing over the bow, their helmeted heads bobbing as they floated away into the darkness with the safety lights pinned on their life jackets blinking red.

“My men!” Mitchell shouted at Rogers.

“We’ll swing around and grab them as soon as we get the lifeboats launched,” Rogers said, amazed his portion of the ship was still afloat. He hurried into the wheelhouse, pulled the whistle chord for three long blasts to signal “abandon ship,” and called out to the helmsman, “Ring Finished with Engines.”

The terrified young sailor didn’t move, holding on tight to the wheel. “I said, ‘Ring Finished with Engines.’” When the helmsman didn’t move fast enough, Rogers rang the engine order telegraph himself and pried the sailor’s shaking hands off the wheel. “Head to your boat station,” he said without anger or disapproval. The boy was upset enough.

The sailor gazed at his captain with terror in his eyes and mumbled something before taking off through the starboard door.

Rogers snatched the weighted box containing the codebook and the ship’s confidential papers and followed him

out and down the ladder to his boat station. There were two twenty-six-foot-long metal lifeboats on either side of the deckhouse. The Maritime Commission designed the eight-foot-wide vessels to hold twenty men each, although they could, in a pinch, accommodate up to thirty-one. Crew members had raised the cargo booms with the torpedo nets and were already lowering the lifeboats as sailors and Armed Guards crawled over the bulwarks and down scramble nets and Jacob's ladders.

As soon as the keels splashed into the water, boat crews released the falls and struggled to hold the boats steady for the men to jump aboard. Some missed and had to be fished out of the water while the boat crews used eight-foot-long wooden boathooks to keep the lifeboats from being smashed against the ship's tilting hull.

Despite Rogers' best efforts at training, everything was chaotic. Panicked men shouted, running around, scrambling in vain for their proper boat station. Others flung themselves into the freezing water. Still others jerked out the pins to release two ten-foot-square balsawood life rafts over the side and tried to leap on them. Most missed and had to pull themselves to the rafts with the "painter," a long, thick tow rope connected to the raft.

After tossing the weighted box over the bulwark, Rogers stumbled around the deckhouse to the port side to ensure the two boats there had gotten away. Instead, he found

men fighting and shoving Nidal and the second mate, desperate to crowd aboard the half-lowered boats. Shaking with anger, Rogers grabbed and shoved sailors, yelling at them to calm down, but most couldn't hear him, and those who could paid no attention to him.

One of the boats flipped over, dumping a half-dozen men into the heaving sea. Nidal was able to right it and lower it with him in it. After watching the other boat safely descend into the water, Rogers returned to his station.

Seeing no more men on the decks, he scampered down the side of the hull and hopped into his crowded boat, almost falling. "Free the falls!" he shouted, indicating the men should unhook the ropes that lowered the boat from the davits. "Now, ship the oars and push her away!" Rogers shouted at the four-man lifeboat crew.

They didn't have to be asked twice to insert the oars into the oarlocks and pull, but the towering waves slammed them back no matter how hard they rowed.

"Pull, damn it, pull!" Rogers screamed, holding tight to the tiller.

The men redoubled their efforts, straining every muscle they had, but couldn't escape the steel sword of Damocles looming over them. The curling waves continued to threaten to overturn them.

In frustration, Rogers tried to lend a hand. But something was out of place. The metal cradles used to lower the lifeboats were still attached to the bottom of the boat. “Release the damn cradles!” Rogers shouted. As soon as that was done, the lifeboat sprang away from the ship.

Steering the lifeboat in a wide arc toward the bow, Rogers hoped to pluck some of the Armed Guards out of the water before they froze to death, despite their thick life jackets. They were stuffed with kapok, a fiber from kapok tree pods that weighed one-eighth as much as cotton and could support thirty times its weight in water.

Their emergency whistles shrilled all around, but no blinking lights were visible except the ones casting eerie red shadows on the faces of the fourteen frightened men in Rogers’ own boat. As they rode up a mountainous wave, flashlights from the other three lifeboats illuminated the waters around the almost immersed bow and the thrashing Armed Guards being reeled into safety. That was a relief until . . .

“Captain, we’re leaking everywhere!” someone shouted over the wind, swirling with the beginnings of a snow squall.

“Start bailing with the bucket. Use your boots, your hands—anything you can find!” Rogers shouted, handing off the tiller to another sailor so he could work his way forward to deal with the leaks. Frigid water gushed in from several gashes, probably caused by the earlier explosion of U-boat shells, and

had filled the boat up to the thwarts. “Cookie, use whatever you can find to plug the holes.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” said the Brit. Because he knew everything about ships, Cookie didn’t panic.

“Bloody hell. Too many holes!” Cookie shouted after repeated attempts to stuff the gashes with blankets and spare life jackets.

“Keep bailing. We gotta make it to the other lifeboats,” Rogers said, fighting to keep the small craft on course to the flashing lights ahead.

The four sailors strained at their oars, their hands almost frozen to the wood, their faces determined but making little headway over the furious waves.

Rogers fired a flare from a snub-nosed Very pistol in hopes the others would spot the distress signal and row in their direction. The flare’s bright glare illuminated the boats, but only one was nearby, piloted by the second mate. The other two had been driven apart by the storm and were fading behind sheets of snow.

Rogers’ lifeboat inched nearer the other lifeboat, only to be tossed farther away by foaming waves and wind. Before long, the two vessels steered close enough for the sailors to throw ropes to each other and pull their boats together with a grinding crunch. Cookie and Rogers helped the sailors and Armed Guards across and hurriedly handed over all the

emergency supplies they could gather before joining the others in the second mate's now seriously overcrowded lifeboat.

The extra weight lowered its freeboard, similar to the Plimsoll line designating overloading, to within inches of the water's surface. The drenched men squeezed into any space left in the boat, but some were forced to stand while straining to keep their balance. As the rowers pulled away from the Charles C. Walcott, the bow pointed to the sky and slid under the waves in a gurgling of bubbles; the stern section remained eerily afloat, a chicken with its head cut off and refusing to fall.

The second mate kept the lifeboat headed into the ever-growing swells to prevent it from being swamped or flipped. Through the jam-packed men, Rogers made his way with difficulty to the bow, and streamed a sea anchor, a cone-shaped canvas bag attached to a thick rope tossed in front of a lifeboat to keep it heading into the waves. With Obasi's help, Rogers dumped a bucket of bunker oil over the bow with the wind to their backs—what sailors call windward—to break the heavy seas.

There was no sense using a compass or trying to set a course. All they could do was ride out the storm and wait for daylight. As the lifeboat ascended the crest of one whitecap, Rogers spotted blinking red lights around a lifeboat but lost sight of them until the next crest. The lights appeared to be around the boat, not in it. He focused the flashlight on a

wallowing hull, where men were clinging to steel grab rails attached to the lifeboat's underside.

One of the men appeared to have a goatee. A wide-eyed Rogers fought his way through the mass of men to the stern, waving his arm toward the upturned boat and shouting at the second mate, "Port! Steer to port!"

"I'm trying, Captain. But she's not responding. And if I make too sharp a turn, we'll be swamped," the Second Mate said.

"I don't care. We have to save them!" He shoved aside one of the exhausted rowers and began pulling himself. "Pull, men! Pull!"

The second mate fought the tiller, and the sailors made a mighty effort, but to no avail; the sea wouldn't loosen its grip. A powerful comber swept over the lifeboat, tossing it back and almost flipping it.

Rogers stopped rowing and instructed another sailor to take his place. "You're not trying hard enough!" he yelled. "Pull, pull! And you," he said, pointing at the second mate, "you're a worthless son of—"

"Captain!" Cookie yelled, grabbing Rogers by the shoulders and shaking him. "They're doing the best they can."

"But Nidal." Rogers waved his hands. "He's there. I saw him. We have to save him."

Cookie clutched Rogers' arms and tried to calm him down, speaking in low tones so no one else could hear. "If you keep making them try, our boat will be swamped, and we will all die." Rogers stopped squirming and focused his watery eyes on Cookie. "These men are counting on you to do—what do you always say?—the right thing. Now sit down and help row."

With the realization sinking in that there was no way to save his friend and the rest of the crew, Rogers grabbed one of the oars and pulled mechanically, staring straight ahead, the glow of red flashes from his safety light casting shadows on the sullen men. "Kill the damn emergency lights. You want a U-boat to machine gun us?!" Rogers shouted, unplugging his own light with an angry jerk and returning to his mindless rowing.

By daybreak, the other lifeboats had disappeared, and the ghostly hulk of the Charles C. Walcutt's stern, hovering behind them on the horizon, was somehow still afloat. The sea had calmed enough for Rogers to steer the lifeboat east toward Ireland.

With the sun hidden behind black and gray clouds, the sextant was of no use to Rogers, who focused all his attention on a compass and his charts—fortunately, part of the emergency kit on all lifeboats. He tried not to let the men see how distraught he was.

Cookie distributed the rations of one spoonful of pemmican—a mixture of tallow, dried meat, and berries in

round tin cans—one Horlick's malted milk tablet, one piece of chocolate, and half a dipper of water.

Around midday, the second mate stepped the mast and raised the small red sail used by most Liberty ships' lifeboats. Rogers maneuvered the tiller while Obasi knelt in front of him, holding the compass. "Cookie, try to inventory the food and water."

"Aye, aye, Captain." The chore was easier said than done. Cookie had to twist and wiggle through the overcrowded lifeboat carrying thirty-nine shivering men, well over its capacity. Men grumbled as Cookie made them move out of his way so he could inspect the lockers under the thwarts.

Rogers estimated they were around 500 nautical miles from land. Still, it was hard to project how many days the journey would take because of the wind-driven waves breaking over the gunwales from all sides, drenching the men, and knocking the lifeboat around like a cork. The wind had freshened, the seas were getting higher, and conditions were ripe for a worse storm to blow up without warning.

To be safe, Rogers rationed the provisions based on twenty days at sea, a bare subsistence amount of food and water. The sailors took turns bailing and rowing, standing and sitting, and passing around a bucket to use as a toilet. Every one of them kept a weathered eye on the horizon in the slim

hope of spotting a ship, but shifting fog banks and sheets of rain squalls cut visibility to almost nil.

As the day grew darker, Cookie handed out reduced rations, drawing loud murmurs of discontent from men facing another wretched and terrifying night adrift at sea. Rogers leaned against the stern planking, staring blankly ahead, paying no attention to the sailor at the tiller and brooding about his lost friend Nidal.

For two awful, blustery days of bitter cold, pounding rain, and swirling snow, they tacked over monstrous White Horses—what sailors called cresting waves—and rotated men on the four oars. With no sun or stars, Rogers couldn't know how far they had traveled or how far they had to go.

Out of desperation, the sailors crafted a small fire from pieces of a spare oar they stacked into a bucket. Matches were kept in a Mason jar, so there was no trouble finding dry ones to light the fire. The men took turns huddling under a tarp to keep out the waves and warming themselves, a temporary but welcome respite from the bone-chilling cold.

Several men became too sick to move. Obasi and the others covered them with blankets and rubbed their hands and feet. On the third night, fewer men were fit to row, and there

was no need for the toilet bucket. The sailors were dehydrated and starving.

The monotony of leaden skies, shifting fog banks, and the rhythmic grating of the oarlocks cast most of the men into a kind of trance, mumbling their daydreams of home and warm food. Some had to be restrained from drinking seawater while others babbled to themselves.

“What’s that?!” someone shouted.

Rogers snapped out of his reverie and searched the darkened sea.

“Off the starboard bow! See it?” another voice called out.

Rogers couldn’t see anything because the lifeboat was in a deep trough, but when it crested on a wave, a distant outline of what might be a ship appeared in the mist. As the lifeboat plunged into a deep trough and then rode another crest, the men screamed and jumped up, waving shirts, blankets, and oars. Rogers focused his binoculars on the silhouette. It must be a ship. He pulled out his Very pistol and fired a distress flare.

All the men plugged in the emergency lights on the collars of their life jackets, hoping the flashing red lights would draw the ship’s attention.

On the next crest, they were disappointed. The ship—if it had been a ship—had vanished into the mist and fog. As the

cheering and waving sputtered out, the glum sailors looked to their captain for guidance. Rogers lit the boat's lantern and waved it while keeping the binoculars pressed to his eyes. He held his breath as the lifeboat soared to the top of the next wave.

There it was: a merchant ship, all lit up, heading their way from out of a fog bank. Cheers erupted among the huddled sailors; they staggered to their feet and waved.

"Sit down, men!" Rogers shouted. "Strike sail and row with all your might for the lee side." The ship should shield them enough from the wind so everyone could climb aboard without the steel hull smashing their tiny lifeboat to pieces. Rogers plucked the tiller from the second mate and directed their bobbing and weaving craft as close as he dared to the ship's hull. There, spotlights shined on "EIRE" amidships in giant letters and the green, white, and orange flag of Ireland at the bow and stern.

White letters on the bow said, Irish Palm. The Irish crew unfurled a Jacob's ladder and tossed long ropes to the sailors below, who lashed them to their swaying and pitching lifeboat. One by one, the trembling survivors leaped for the ladder and scurried up to safety.

After the last sailor was aboard, Rogers waited for the crest of a wave and vaulted to the ladder's wooden planks. The frozen hand on his crooked right arm couldn't get a good

enough grip, and his feet slipped off the rungs, leaving him dangling by one hand in the bitter wind and waves, banging hard against the steel hull like a bell clapper. His left hand slipped.

In desperation, he slapped his right hand on the ladder, hoping against hope it would awaken his frozen hand enough to close his fingers on the rope. It didn't work. Down below, his own black pit loomed.

Pain shot through his neck as his collar jerked against his Adam's apple, abruptly stopping his fall and giving him enough time to lodge his boots on the rungs. Obasi, holding on tight, helped him claw his way up and over the bulwark.

"Thank you, Obasi," he said, hugging the massive African.

"This time, we truly are even."

Obasi smiled and shook his head. "You never stay out of trouble."

Someone wrapped Rogers in a blanket and handed him a cup of steaming hot coffee. "Here you go, Captain."

Rogers downed the coffee with shaky hands before raising his head to thank the sailor. "Vimont?" he whispered in a hoarse, dry voice. "You're alive. Thank God. Who else made it?"

"My lifeboat only had fifteen mates and guards, sir. They included the chief and Chippy," the bosun said, referring to the ship's chief engineer and carpenter.

“What about Nidal’s lifeboat?”

“We lost sight of it after it capsized. Sorry, Captain. But we couldn’t fight our way through the storm to help them,” Vimont said, his voice drifting off.

“Ensign Mitchell?”

“Must’ve been in Mr. Nidal’s boat,” Vimont said as he helped the shivering captain make his way to the warmth of the crew’s mess. “He’s not here. By my count, that leaves fourteen men unaccounted for. God rest their souls.”

“We don’t know for sure that they’re dead, Bosun,” Rogers said. As they stepped inside the mess, Rogers shook hands with all his remaining crew and with the Armed Guards, addressing them by name and smiling and joking. He stripped off his wet clothes, dried himself with a towel near the stove in the galley, and donned a borrowed work shirt and dungarees.

With the blanket wrapped tight around his shoulders, Rogers headed up the ladders to the wheelhouse, where he found the white-capped captain sitting in a tall chair behind the helmsman at the wheel. “Captain,” Rogers said, extending his hand. “I want to thank you for saving me and my men.”

“Padraig O’Sullivan, Captain,” he said, stepping over to shake hands.

“Rogers. Jake Rogers.”

“You’re a very lucky man, Capt. Rogers. We were about to abandon the search, but your bosun wouldn’t have it,” he said with a toothy smile.

“Thanks. But there’s one more lifeboat missing.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t linger,” O’Sullivan said, shaking his head. “There was a massive U-boat attack against your convoy and a larger convoy not far ahead of it. Lots of ships were hit and sunk.”

“We weren’t hit. At least, I don’t believe so. The old girl split apart on us in rough seas.”

“Jaysus.” O’Sullivan handed Rogers a cup of hot coffee and returned to his chair with a cup for himself. “Anyway, as I was saying, can’t take the chance of a ship—from either side, mind you—shooting first and asking questions later.”

“But nobody fires on Irish ships. You’re neutral.”

“Aye. ’Tis true what they say—Hitler’s afraid Ireland will let British ships use our port. And Churchill’s afraid of the IRA using Germany to gain independence. So, both sides are supposed to leave us be. But the attacks still happen. Did to my company’s Irish Pine last November. U-boat must have sunk it because all thirty-three souls have never been seen again.” He paused to cross himself and mouth a silent prayer. “It’s a sad fact of ‘The Long Watch,’ unfortunately.”

“Long watch?” Rogers said as he took a seat on a stool at the chart table.

“That’s what we Mercantile Marines call the state of things during ‘the Emergency.’ Danger’s always about, and we never know for sure who’s friend or foe.” He took a sip of coffee. “Even though we’re well-lit and clearly marked as neutral, we must be ever vigilant, especially in low visibility conditions like this.”

“But my men,” Roger said, jumping up to pace. “Surely you can search a little longer. Please.”

“Sorry, Captain. I truly am. And I’ll pray for your crew to Saint Brénaind,” O’Sullivan said, referring to the sixth-century Irish priest considered one of seven patron saints of sailors. “But there be too many U-boats swarming about, smelling blood in the water. We can’t take the chance.”

Rogers tried again to argue with O’Sullivan about searching for the last lifeboat, but the captain wouldn’t change his mind. They were in a war, and Rogers knew in his heart that commanders had to make hard decisions. He thanked O’Sullivan, made his way back down to the crew’s mess to be with his men, and tried not to blame himself for the ones he had lost at sea.