

A REWIND OF MEMORIES

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Prologue

It was about 6 AM in the town of Hamburg. ~The city was ruined, bomb craters everywhere. And in the North Sea, about 250 miles west, the crew of a Lancaster bomber were sitting in a rubber dinghy, their plane now far below the sea. This is the tale of PR-Z, Lancaster No. X8972, and the crew that had cared for her before her final, fateful flight.

Chapter 1

Herbert Marcus Edwards yawned widely and settled himself lower into the sofa in the 207 squadron mess at RAF Honington. The time was just approaching half past 5, and the dinner gong was about to ring through the station like a tolling bell. Out on the tarmac, 12 Avro Lancaster B1's stood, their prop bosses seeming to wink at the crews through the evening sunlight. As the dinner bell rang, so did the minds of the crews and mechanics, their heads teeming with memories, thousands of memories. This was a special meal for the station, as one of the Lancasters was about to fly its hundredth mission. The Lanc in question was PR-Z, the aircraft of the Edwards crew. In the mess, the rumours as to the aircraft's 'charmed life' circulated like moths round a lamp.

"And really, it's all a question of luck" concluded the Station Commander George McArthur, laying down his fork on his plate with a bang. The time was nearly half past 8, the mission commencing time for the Hamburg raid scheduled that night. "Nonsense!" exclaimed a brawny farmer's son, glaring at the Edwards Brothers at the other end of the table. "There has to be a reason. There is no way that a certain plane could survive 100 missions without a speck of damage, while others just get shot down on their first sortie. The Germans must know who to target and who not to, that's all." A soft voice echoed down the table, quiet, but with an instant feeling of authority in it. This was the Recording Officer all over, and his latest speech was much the same. "Please will all officers involved in tonight's Hamburg Mission please report to their machines at once. Thank you." With that, he left the hall among derisive yells of "all right, posho!" This was the scene every night in the 206 squadron dining hall.

The cold, despite the heated flying suits of the crew, was intense. Even as the runway lights receded into the distance, mutters of discomfort were echoing in the R/T, and indeed, in everyone else's ears. Finally, Herbert Edwards could stand it no longer. "Alright! Shut up moaning and listen. We have a long journey ahead of us, and it is not going to be helped by the moanings of our crew. We are all cold, but we must learn to live with it." Mark Edwards, the Skipper's cousin, then spoke a few words on the insanity of the war, and was only stopped when his brother, (the rear gunner), yelled at him for his droning speech that would never make any difference to the war anyway. That put an end to the conversation, and the next 250 miles to the Dutch coast were passed in near total silence. On the dashboard a list was pinned:

Skipper = Herbert 'Bossyboots' Edwards
Flight Engineer = Mark 'Mr Fixit' Edwards
Bomb Aimer = John 'Steel pants' Edwards
Wireless Op = Frederik 'Sparky' Edwards
Navigator = Tony 'I just got lost' Edwards
Mid upper gunner = William 'Kamikaze' Edwards
Rear Gunner = Alfred 'Clever clogs' Edwards

This was the crew that were flying into Disaster that night.

* * *

Over Hamburg, things really got tense.

Flak could be seen from over 20 miles away, and as all the nearby night fighter squadrons had been scrambled to combat the attackers, the sky was a 'downright unhealthy' place to be at that time. RAF squadron 206 was the last flight to be over the city, so by the time PR-Z reached the scene, the whole Luftwaffe was sending bullets at everyone and everything, and aircraft were having trouble getting to the city centre, let alone managing to drop their bombs.

John Edwards smote the bomb release handle with a cry of relief, and the aircraft climbed swiftly away like a great dark bird in the direction of the distant coast. A thick mist was covering the ground, so as the area had been hairy to deal with from the start, the crews had decided to dump the bomb loads on the suburbs – and run. So that was what they did, and they had just left Germany when it all went wrong. Very wrong.

Eight marauding Ju88's materialised from the clouds like wraiths, their guns spurting molten fire and the propellers surrounded by a halo of spinning wood. The ensuing combat was short, and decisive. Two JU88's were shot down by the rear gunner; another two were damaged and forced to return home. But four remained, and even as the Lancaster darted into the clouds, two spotted it and moved in to attack.

The tracer shone red against the black of the night, as bullet holes appeared in the wings and fuselage around the cockpit. A single round gonged off the throttle handles, putting the aircraft into a dangerous stall. As the Pilot and Flight engineer fought to move the throttles into a position where control could be maintained successfully again, the second Ju88 fastened onto their tail and poured out a burst of tracer into the starboard inner engine. As the flames grew from under the engine cowling, the fighter dived into the clouds and vanished from view.

The Lancaster was clearly in a bad way. Elevator control had been lost, and the sea was only a few hundred feet below. As the morning light struck the cockpit from above, the engines sputtered, coughed and then died, leaving the Lanc falling towards the sea. As she struck and the crew swam for their lives, the sky was proved to be empty. They couldn't even contact base. They were alone.

Chapter 2

In the also quite smashed port of Haarlem, near Amsterdam, a small German E-Boat slipped noiselessly past the dark shape of a coastal defence gun battery, the glowing lights of the town hall and the dull mass of a U-Boat taking on fuel. The E-Boat had been scheduled to patrol the North Sea, but after a spate of bad navigation at full throttle it had made Haarlem by accident, but it was a good place to stay if you were German, so the vessel had decided to resupply and continue later on that day. The time was 5.00, and the port workers were already beginning to arrive. In the launch stood a young naval officer, Kapitan Hermann Siegfried Kerman, the latest recruit to the coastal patrol regiment. The sound of aircraft engines had been present for nearly an hour, but then the coastal flak battery sputtered, and he looked up in surprise – no air raid warning had been sounded, and the average Allied escape route was over Cuxhaven. Looking closer, though, he saw the scene above. An RAF Lancaster – or so he thought – was being chased over the coast by a pack of hunting Ju88 night fighters. Before his satisfied eyes, the machine was forced down, smoke trailing

from the engines, towards the sea. As the Lancaster disappeared behind the tall shape of one of the dockside cranes, Hermann gave the order to make full speed out to sea. The Lancaster couldn't be far away from a crash now, he thought, and anyway, his E-boat's guns could finish the job off well enough. Less than five minutes after leaving the port, however, 2 of the JU88's passed back overhead, their wings torn. Surprised, Hermann barked "Eile! Unsere Lands uns brauchen!" ("Make hast! Our countryman needs us!"). Even as his words were drowned by the accelerating E-boat's engines, the rest of the fighters – minus another two – passed by at nearly sea level, dipping their wings in salute to the commander's flag. With a chuckle, Hermann led the vessel onwards through the high seas, but then a dark shape appeared on the horizon. In fact, two of them. With a hiss, Hermann ordered more speed, and soon they were among the wrecks of the two downed Ju88's. The crew of one had been completely killed when the ammunition set light to the leaking fuel and blew the plane sky high, but the skipper of the other was found in his rubber dinghy, his tale ready to tell.

*"Die Besatzung des blutigen Lancaster erschossen uns in Stücke! Wir hatten keine Chance, aber unsere Freunde konnten sich die Bastarde zu nehmen. Ich habe sie gesehen, als ich kam. Meine Crew ... nun, wenn die andere Ebene explodiert – ich glaube, dass es ein Kraftstoffleck – sie wurden vom Schrapnell getroffen und sofort getötet. Ich entkam durch Vestecken unter dem Armaturenbrett und das Beste zu hoffen. Wenn wir stürzte, hatte ich die Kraft, das Beiboot impolemtieren und hoffenauf Rettung. Und noch etwas – meine beiden kleinen tauben ertrunken."**

With a sigh he collapsed back onto the chair in the bridge, and fell asleep almost instantly. As the medic tended his wounds, the Kapitan pondered on the young man's words. "The Lancaster is down" he mused to himself. Then a connection was made in his brain. Climbing the steps to the gun deck, he hissed to the gun team clustered round the 4 inch naval cannon, "Prepare for a fight. The scheiß Engländers are not yet found, and we may need to prepare for a fight."

Loosening his Luger in its holster, he made his way to the control cabin, and plotted the route for the chase. And less than 10 minutes later, his luck paid off.

On the horizon, flopped low into the North Sea, was the dark hulk of a Danish fishing smack, with the sail taut and the motor running at full pelt. Its side lights were off, and it was only because of the rising sun that she was visible at all. Identification was easy through the telescope – she was the Mary Jane out of Esbjerg, homeward bound with her nets full and the hold bulging, with the pick of the seas on-board. Now, though, her sail flapped as she went about – a completely needless manoeuvre given the dead beam wind that she was receiving – and then began tacking up north towards the horizon. The Mary Jane didn't do that, Hermann knew. She (or rather, her captain) was a stickler for the rules, always making the best time with the best winds. It had to be something special for her to have moved ... And then Kapitan Hermann Siegfried Kerman knew what it was. With a press of the throttle, he moved away, the shape of the Mary getting closer every minute.

* * *

Aboard the Mary Jane, her lookout on the bow spotted something, bobbing in the waves about 8 miles away. With a yell, he applied his trained seaman's eye to the telescope, before doing a double take and sprinting for the stern. The seas were high, but the young man could cope well. With a bound, he made the deckhouse, and slammed open the door before being rocked in by a large wave and sent crashing to the floor. He barked out to the captain, his voice rough due to the sea wind, and snapped "Engländer off the port bow!" With a hiss of disbelief, the skipper moved out onto the fantail. Using the stern binoculars he trained his eyes onto the dark mass – before letting out a laugh.

“The RAF need to get their act together! Yet another Lanc down in the drink. She’s gone down, though, and the crew are in a dinghy. What’s left of them, at least, they seem to be one short ...”

“Can we help?” asked the young crewman, with a hopeful smile.

“May as well,” returned the skipper, forcing his way back into the bridge and fastening the door against the now calming sea winds. “Ready about! We’ll be there in no time!”

And on the calming surface of the North Sea, the crew of PR-Z settled lower into the leaky frame of the inflatable dinghy. Help would come. They were sure of it.

Inside the cabin of the E-boat, a curious smile came over the face of the young Kapitan. If there really was just a single crew to be saved, they would have been travelling slower, and certainly with the engine off to conserve fuel. This meant that ... they must have realised that they were being followed. With a smirk he pushed on, the blunt nose and holes of the torpedo tubes smashing through the swell. On the foredeck, a figure – one of the torpedo crews – loaded a Very signal pistol and launched it high into the sky. The ruddy light lit the waves like a fire on the decks. Sure enough, on the horizon was the dark mass of a U-Boat, approaching the still-invisible dinghy with great speed. There was the Mary Jane, and there was – he wiped his glassed and tried again – the mass of an approaching aircraft, of the RAF coastal command. With a snarl – the RAF were the ultimate enemies of the German Navy – he pressed the trigger on his torch. The sun was now up, but the cabin was dark still, owing to the fact that the blinds were down and all available power was being used to keep the boat moving. In a hiss of bubbles, the port torpedo was fired, leaving the tube like a snake from its burrow. The water boiled, but the dark mass missed its target, and sped away towards the east. With another snarl creasing the Kapitan’s features, he pressed on the throttles and sped onwards. Further towards his doom.

Chapter 3

On the rather battered nose of a Sunderland flying boat, a young rating snapped down the cover over one of the forward guns and smiled. The bow turret on ‘The Flying Porcupine’ had been playing up for days, and now the guns had been cleaned it should work better. Slipping back into the fuselage through the bow door and unclipping the safety line, he mounted the ladder to the cockpit, pushing his way through the assorted clothing and lifejackets to the captain’s seat.

“Sir? Sir? The nose turret is mended and ready to go, Sir!”

With a grunt of satisfaction, the engineer pushed the rev levers to fine pitch and full revs, and then checked the elevator trimmer switches.

“Let’s make for England!” he yelled, as he reached for the throttles – only to stop suddenly as the upper turret chattered, and the intercom spat a sentence down the wire. With a scream of fury, the Commander pushed the throttles full on, and then accelerated towards the sky. At the same time the ASDIC beeped, and the shape of a U-Boat appeared on the screen. The rear gunner was shooting and one of the crew – possibly the wireless operator or the navigator – was on the roof letting fly with the tommy gun that was stored under the pilot’s seat. Off the port side, the dark mass of the submarine was showing, the gun crew on the bow readying the 4-inch gun for shooting. The Sunderland lifted off, and then spun fast, headed for the U-boat. The Nav dropped in from the ceiling, and smiled at the pilot’s face. The machine was now flashing like fireworks, as the pilot brought the bow turret an dhis 6 .303 Brownings in the bow to bear. As the pressed the triggers, though, the bomg

aimer/side gunner pressed his face to the depth charge sight, and rested his hand on the release 'tit'. As the plane passed over and the rear gunner swung his turret to bear, the depth charges – all 12 of them – were released, making the machine buck like a shocked pony. All of them were on target, falling in a star around the U-boat, but the last to be released – the extreme outer on the port side – fell directly on the gun mounted on the foredeck.

With a huge detonation the hull was smashed, as the magazine exploded in flame. The Sunderland climbed away to just over 2000 feet, at which point the rear gunner stopped shooting. The U-Boat was sinking fast, with the hull lying in pieces across the ocean. With a large explosion of bubbles and dirty oil, the sub dived on its final journey. At the same time, the nav of the Sunderland started through his binoculars at the horizon.

“A small Danish fishing smack, a ... a German E-Boat, and a downed Lanc crew!”

“Sure that it's a Lanc crew?”

“Positive” came the reply. “What's more, they've seen us!”

“ACTION STATIONS!” bawled the skipper, as the huge machine dived downwards. Headed for the small vessel whose 4-inch gun was even now trained on the Sunderland. Headed for the E-Boat and the Lanc.

Aboard the now very exposed German E-Boat, Kapitän Hermann Siegfried Kerman stared in horror at the northern sky. The white mass of the Sunderland was shining against the sun, and the gunners seemed to be making ready. With a hiss of fury, the gun team next to the 4-inch began to load the cannon, but it would never be ready in time. Not a chance.

The great flying boat swept overhead, the guns in the hull spraying lead madly around the sea. As the mass passed away, though, the E-Boat gunners swung their cannon to bear, and fired instantly. The shell scraped the tail turret of the Sunderland and then detonated, pitting the rear fuselage and smashing the Perspex in the tail. The rear gunner fell from the turret with serious head wounds, and the pilot struggled to make the machine turn when it was revealed that both ailerons had been wrecked. But she still flew, and now she came down next to the leaky dinghy, her nose ignobly down in the sea. The crew was helped aboard, but the E-Boat was ready. A huge shell – probably from a horizontally-fired bazooka – came through the hull near the forward turret, killing the gunner and wounding the engineer of the Lancaster, who had been caught in the blast. With the machine shaking, the E-Boat turned, before firing 26-inch torpedoes one after the other. The first struck the running Mary Jane, sending her heeling over onto her port side and spinning downwards in a maelstrom of froth and wood. There were no survivors.

Inside the Sunderland, all was pandemonium. Two of the gunners were down, and the machine was very hard to handle. Combined with the fact that a torpedo had just torn off the keel under the tail – fortunately without detonating – she was almost unmanageable. As the battered fuselage lifted off from the frothing sea and headed straight for England, though, the two gunners of the Lancaster acted. Jumping up from the seats in the crew rest zone they ran for the ladders at either end of the fuselage, the mid-upper going for the ladders at either end of the fuselage, the mid-upper going for the front, while the rear gunner made for his 'paradise' at the stern. When the next flash came from the E-Boat's guns, therefore, they were ready.

Trails of tracer flew downwards from all three turrets, ripping the hull of the E-Boat into pieces. The pilot, realising the gunners' aim, turned and attacked, plating shattering under the leaden blows. On the bridge, Kapitän Hermann was hit between the eyes by shrapnel,

and he fell unconscious – but not for long. On the splintered deck, the gun team were decimated by the tracer, but the layer managed to get a shot off ... hitting a Ju87 that was heading for England to bomb Norfolk again, the shell ripping off the bomb. The large projectile fell solidly from the sky, impacting with the burning wreck of the Mary Jane, just under the water. As the burning wood hit the E-Boat and the shells began to fuse from the heat, Kapitän Hermann Siegfried Kerman pulled out a revolver and fired, hitting the one man aboard the Stuka that could have caused him any damage – the pilot. As the flames spread, the Stuka dived steeply towards the sea under the command of the gunner, putting itself between the tracer-spitting guns of the Sunderland and the damaged E-Boat. Glad of the respite from damage, the E-Boat gunners pulled another shell into the breech, but the Sunderland's gunners were having none of it. Their combined fire tore the Stuka apart, sending it down to a fiery doom on the waves below – right on top of the splintered E-Boat.

The last thing that Kapitän Hermann Siegfried Kerman ever saw was the spinning arc of the Stuka propeller, as it shredded his skull, and sent the pieces of his brain whirling across the sea forever.

Chapter 4

Inside the shattered fuselage of the Sunderland, a small groan echoed from the cockpit floor. As the haze of gun smoke slowly cleared, the stunned flight engineer turned to the Sunderland's pilot and gasped. The man's face was a mess, at least 12 bullet wounds through his chest and head, blood oozing across the controls.

He was dead.

Inside the crew rest area, the pilot of the downed Lanc pulled himself wearily up the ladder into the cockpit, and then took the controls as the two gunners pushed the body into the nose. Two crews were now aboard, but the casualties were as follows:

- The Lancaster Pilot and Engineer had both been hit by shell fragments, but were still in control
- The two gunners from the Lanc were fine, just a bit shaken
- The bomb aimer was dead, hit by small pieces of metal when the torpedo took off the Sunderland's tail
- The rest of the crew were still alive, but shaken.

Of the Sunderland's crew:

- The pilot had been hit by a spray of bullets from the diving Stuka, and killed instantly.
- Both the forward and tail gunners had been hit by shrapnel, forcing them to hand over to the Lanc crew
- Both the engineer and the radio operator were still at their posts, completely unharmed.
- The rest of the crew were dead.

The shattered machine was going down fast, and the controls were hard to hold. With flames now pouring from the two port engines, the crews curled up, and waited to die.

Inside the cockpit, Herbert Marcus Edwards eased back on the throttles with a groan. One of the petrol tanks had been ruptured in the conflict with the Stuka, and all of the previous 'juice' had flowed out into the sea. Thankfully, all of the depth charges had been jettisoned, so it was only the weight of the two crews that he had to contend with. With the wind screaming in through the shattered walls of the machine, he now not only had to deal with

the damaged plane, while at the same time working out how to fly it, as he had never flown such a large machine before. It was a helpless situation. With a look at the clock – it read just past 8.30 AM – he settled down into the seat and turned the nose wearily towards England. It would be a long trip back.

* * *

On the tarmac of RAF Honington, the last machine of 'B' flight came down over the runway and put down in a perfect landing. From the hard standing of XP-Y, George MacArthur pulled a pair of field glasses from his jacket and surveyed the sky gloomily. There was no sign of PR-Z, or her crew. A radio transmission had come through just before dawn from her wireless operator, but that was broken up and hard to read. Less than a minute later, the headsets of the base controllers had hissed, and then died. He waited for a few more minutes as the Lancaster behind him taxied in, but it was no use. The Edwards crew were gone. It had been their 56th trip, on their third voluntary tour of ops. Their loss would be a blow to the squadron.

A small Avro was now falling from the sky, An Anson of the Chadderton works, out on test. It was evidently trying to land, and the Major stared in disbelief. No test flights were scheduled in this area for at least an hour, and the time was passing very slowly by. But it was definitely landing, and from a seaward direction. But the wheels were up still, which meant that she was either going to crash ... or she had a message that she needed to deliver. Sure enough, the silver machine raced over the dispersals, sending a small parachute falling aft from the door, directly above the office on the tarmac. It read:

Downed Lanc's crew's dinghy found on North Sea near Haarlem. Crew not seen, but Sunderland flying boat away to the North. Possible rescue attempt? Also lots of oil on surface. Barnet.

The delight that this put the Major into was indescribably.

Inside the cabin of the Sunderland, repairs were being carried out. The sea below was now completely devoid of oil or wreckage, despite the fact that they were flying up the length of the hidden current, which would have carried the dinghy back to the coast had the Germans not intervened. Both the Navigators and wireless operators were working together, trying to get a position. The Sunderland engineer was working tirelessly on the wounded, trying to make them comfortable and happy, even though he could do no more for their wounds than apply bandages and administer aspirins. In the cockpit, the Lanc crew were in control. In the conflict the compass had been shattered, so they had no idea which direction they were flying in, apart from the angle of the sun. The navigational maps in the nav's compartment were also useless, as they showed the operational area that she had been operating in previously, which was over the Southern Indian Ocean, near Indonesia and Thailand. It was probable that they would not make it home that day, as there was a strong head wind and the fuel supplies were running low. The light was finally beginning to fade when the engineer let the machine run gently onto the surface of the Atlantic, just a few miles away from the Channel Islands. The plan, he explained to the crew (the pilot was in the sick-bay being treated for stress) was simple. They could drop the dinghy with the body of the Sunderland gunner and pilot inside onto the sea but tied onto the tail by a long rope. While it floated on the sea, the Germans would be occupied with capturing its occupants, which would give the Sunderland a chance to taxi in and rob the fuel stores. It was all very organised, especially when the gunner offered to put up covering fire should the Jerries decide to put up a fight. The dead crew were tied into the dinghy and set adrift, and the huge machine was slowly punted in through the mouth of the bay. The E-Boats were out at sea, and the port was empty. There *had* been a guard on the shore, but the Sunderland nav

picked him off with a long range silenced pistol shot from the roof, and he was now lying collapsed on the dock, with his legs dangling into the sea.

The incident that followed was entirely the fault of the Luftwaffe.

Chapter 5

At about 27,000 feet, a pilot of the 7th Jagstaffel pulled the joystick over and sent his ME109 spinning downwards towards the small isle of Guernsey. In the harbour stood the Sunderland, and a man was dead on the quayside. It was vengeance that was needed, especially as the impudent crew were now hauling a petrol bowser to the shore and ifilling up. Fire was spitting from the guns, and the attacking military were being driven back. Now it was his turn to run interference.

As the tracer spat upwards from the guns of the Sunderland, the young pilot pulled the bomb release handle twice. Two 50lb bombs fell, their dark shapes racing towards the docks. The explosions occurred less than three seconds later, as the bombs powered into the dockside hotels, The Elephant and The Nazi Scum, as it was locally known owing to the large population of German soldiers that frequented the site. Then the flames swept upwards, and a small silver shape fell downwards. The guns shot down lead, and a small spark lit the petrol tank of the Messerschmitt and blew it to bits. Now the machine – which could now be identified as a P51-D Mustang – fell, and opened up, scything the shoreline with its devastating 5 inch cannon. As the bullets fell, the petrol tanker was disconnected, and a small dribble of petrol rolled out of the pipe mouth. As it did so, a bullet ripped into the tarmac and detonated – less than 5 cm from the small pool of fuel.

The explosion was huge.

As the fames climbed the pipe towards the bowser, everything went wrong. The crew were sprinting for the Sunderland, and the sea was now beginning to rock under the force of the repeated explosions. As the huge white mass pulled away from the docks and raced for the open sea – the dinghy containing the dead pilot and crew now safely recovered – a small dark shape came into the bay. Another E-Boat. This one had been working in partnership with the now destroyed ME109, and it had been called in to help destroy the English machine, which was even now taxi-ing for take-off. Then the shooting began.

The gunners of the Sunderland/Lancaster pulled their triggers, and sent the lead ripping through the sky towards the little boat. As the bullets smashed forwards, the flames began to engulf the Sunderland as, dripping fire, she began to climb.

Less than ten minutes later, the plane was on the water again. There was no damage, but the skies were now rather unhealthy to be in, owing to the fact that there were no less than 15 ME109s and 12 110s, as the E-Boat had called them in for help. The machine was skimming the surface, sometimes flying, sometimes racing through the spray. Her pilot, Herbert Marcus Edwards, knew this. And there was no chance that he would be defeated. Not now.

* * *

The year was 1936, and Herbert Marcus Edwards was seated in the cabin of a zeppelin, watching the world go by. Beside him was his family, his wife Louisa, and his two children, Henry and James. They were all headed for the city of New York on a family holiday, and even now the children were clamouring to be allowed to go to bed, despite the fact that it was only a few hours until arrival time – the arrival having been put back an hour owing to the bad weather. The airship in question was the Lufthansa/Zeppelin Company LZ129, the

infamous Hindenburg, which was the largest craft in the air at the time, although larger ships were planned for the summer of 1937. She was renowned for her comfort and plush cabins, and there was no doubt that she was the best in the world by far. Yet some doubts remained in Herbert's mind. She was, after all, inflated with hydrogen, one of the most flammable gases in the world, and they were flying into a storm ... Added to the fact that the zeppelin would be trying a new type of landing that day, she really didn't feel too safe at all. He tried to push away the underlying fears in his mind, and tried to focus on the game of cards that he was playing with his wife. It would be fine, he told himself. It had to be.

At about 6.30 p.m. local time, the Hindenburg glided effortlessly over Lakehurst Naval Air Station in the light rain. The ground crew were waiting, and the huge machine was stopped, blending into the clouds; a creature of the heavens.

The first inkling that anything was wrong aboard the *Hindenburg* was the actions of the ground crew. From the windows, Herbert and his family watched the ground crew stiffen in shock, their faces lit up suddenly, and then move backwards, a few speaking into radios or phones, trying to save the day. Then there came a roaring of air, and the stern began to sag. This wasn't anything out of the ordinary, surely, thought Herbert. The crew at the stern must have just started pulling the ship in, that's all. But as the slope became more pronounced, the passengers raced to the bow end of the cabin and looked aft. What they saw was a terrifying sight to behold.

The ship was on fire.

Herbert pulled the catch off the window with a scream. The flames were licking through the rear bulkhead, and the smoke was making the companionways dark and dangerous. The ship was rising, her tail smashed into the floor, the windows smashed under the pressure. There would soon be nothing left, nothing but her crushed skeleton on the tarmac. He threw his children out of the window, only concerned for the safety of his toddlers, both of whom were unconscious, sleeping through the fire. His wife jumped too, catching the kids as Herbert passed them down, but the ship was groaning, and the metal girders were spinning down ... Herbert closed his eyes and waited for the smash.

And it came.

When Herbert Marcus Edwards opened his eyes next, his family had been crushed under one of the after engine cars. His wife was struggling, but she was going grey and her eyes were glazing over. "Protect yourself" she whispered. "Protect yourself, and get the hell out of here. GO!"

Herbert pulled himself away from the flames. He ran, fire spitting down his back. As he emerged from the wreck, he looked back. The area he had emerged from was almost unrecognisable. His family were dead.

He walked away to the port nearby, and took a plane to New York, where he sailed back to England and joined the RAF. He had wanted revenge on the Germans for killing his family. He wanted vengeance. So when the war started, he had been pleased. Revenge was sweet.

Chapter 6

Herbert Edwards wiped tears from his eyes as he pulled the throttles back to conserve fuel. He had been dreaming, he thought, but he knew really that he was emotionally drained, depressed and stressed. The horizon showed England, but he only put the stick over towards Honington through instinct alone. He was no longer fit to fly. No longer fit to live.

About ten minutes later, the light reflecting off the hull shone down onto the halls of RAF Honington. The Sunderland was smashed, its engines sputtering, but she was still airborne, and still headed for home. As the crew all piled into the cockpit and nose to see the ground approach, the lone Anson slowly rolled past, its gunner waving merrily. As it moved off into the distance, Herbert's eyes followed it, the tears falling once again. It landed, and the crew piled out, headed for the Ops room nearby. But Herbert was only concerned with getting the machine down. There was no water anywhere; the machine would have to make a grass landing. With its shattered hull and damaged engines, it was entirely probable that she wouldn't make it, and it was for that reason that Herbert Edwards gave the order to bale out onto the landing field. It was childishly easy, and so, as the last man pulled the ripcord and glided down, Herbert banked the Sunderland around once again.

The sun was glinting off the shattered cockpit windows as the huge craft made its final fly-by. The engines were in definite trouble, and the tail looked as though it would fall off at any moment. But she still flew, and it was with this in mind that Herbert brought the Sunderland down towards the grass strip alongside the runway; the aim being to avoid as much damage as possible. The floats were the only part of the machine that was relatively undamaged, and so Herbert relied on them for stability as he came in.

The hull touched the ground in a perfect landing only 30 seconds later. As the port side float touched down, Herbert breathed a sigh of relief – but not for long. The trailing edge of the float hit the FIDO (Fog Information and Defence) pipes and rolled the machine, bringing it down on the tarmac in a welter of mud, clods, metal and canvas. The fire crews doused the wreck with foam, while Herbert was dragged out by his cousin and brother, and laid on the grass. Stars were beginning to show before his eyes, and the voices of his crew were being overwritten by a chant, seeming to come from far away, sung by those he loved most ...

Herbert Marcus Edwards smiled and closed his eyes.