

Someone had thoughtfully put a gas cape over the blood-soaked seat. Sutherland had proudly showed him that his .55 calibre round had gone through the German lieutenant, the back of the cab, into the cargo space, shattered a man's leg, before exiting through the steel deck tray, taking the spare wheel with it. "With the right angle, I could've taken out the truck behind as well, Skipper, with just one round!" he had exclaimed.

Rankin undid the clips holding the windscreen and let it down: looking through the bullet hole was unnerving. They drew up at the crossroads and jumped out.

"Hurry up, boys. If someone comes along and catches us out here we'll be up shit creek without a paddle." Rankin felt naked and exposed. A dozen men and two small trucks, in the middle of the plain. Who might be watching them? From where?

The material taken from the school and most of the cases of mines were stacked on the ground. The men fanned out around the crossroads in pairs with spades and mines. Rankin and Renfrew hauled out the large pieces of board, stakes, paint and brushes, hammer and nails. Rankin started nailing the boards to the stakes.

"How do you spell this, Skipper?" asked Renfrew.

"A-c-h-t-u-n-g M-i-n-e-n," answered Rankin. "How good are you at painting a skull and crossbones, like a pirate flag?"

"Circle, two eyes, hole for a nose, line for a mouth, and a big 'X' underneath," Renfrew said, applying his brush.

"Art classes weren't your forte at school, were they?"

"I only stayed at school until I was fourteen. They must've done pirates after I left." He stood back and surveyed his handiwork.

"Very good, Colin. I'm sure they won't notice that's spelt with a 'k'. Perhaps you'd be better digging and Teach could do the drawing." Renfrew swapped places with Gibson, who added in Greek '*kindynos*' under the crossbones.

"'Danger', Skipper. It might keep the locals away."

They were well through the job of arming and laying the mines around the crossroads. Rankin had erected a couple of the boards with the hand-painted signs. So far, so good, he thought, surveying Gibson's handiwork with the paint brush. Naïve style, but the message was clear.

"Skipper, I can hear an engine," called Corkhill.

Rankin stood bolt upright. Shit! Corkhill was out in a field with his spade, head cocked to the west. "Sounds like the little plane."

Rankin listened. Nothing. "You sure?"

"Yes. It's coming this way."

Fuck! "Right, you blokes, finish digging them in, then into the trucks – on the double! For Christ's sake, don't stand on one!"

Renfrew cackled. "Exult in doing the Lord's work, boys, and ye shall become like a blinding star in the firmament!"

Rankin heard the Storch over the groans of derision of the rest of them. *Shit, shit, shit!* "Get in the trucks, now!"

The Storch appeared above the road to the west, low down, flying straight toward them. Spades scattered as they all scrambled into the trucks.

Rankin vaulted over the tail board of the nearest truck. Three German jackets hung from the canopy frame. Rankin grabbed one and threw it to Corkhill. "Corky, you're fair. Stand by the truck, get ready to wave at them. Act natural."

Corkhill's protest died in his throat as the Storch flew low overhead, banked to the left, and flew around them. Rankin hurled a jacket at Duggan. "Put this on, Duggy. Hop out and look friendly. Outside, Corkhill was waving to the aeroplane.

The pilot and observer waved back. The back of the other truck gave out a hiss, it spluttered and crackled, and a voice sounded. A radio!

“Jesus Christ,” cried Rankin, “I never thought of that!” The buggers were in radio contact! Of course they were... Panic rising, he had to think of something. “Pretend you haven’t heard a thing.” Rankin put the last jacket on, picked up a forage cap off a wooden case, and waved it out of the back of the truck as the pilot flew low overhead.

The pilot banked low and flew wide out past the outermost mine placard, then turned back towards the trucks, throttling back. The trailing edge flaps lowered; the aircraft wavered above the road.

“Fuck!”

The leading-edge slats popped out: Rankin’s fears were confirmed, the Storch’s wheels brushed the road and ran along the ground, kicking up a little trail of dust.

“Corky,” he shouted over the noise of its engine, “wander towards them. Act friendly, alright?”

Corkhill looked terrified but turned towards the plane.

The box! He looked at the Storch through the pull-down flap in the canvas cover. The aeroplane halted, the propeller slowed, stuttered, and stopped. The pilot’s side-door dropped and flapped against the side of the plane; a booted leg swung out of the cockpit.

He couldn’t use his Tommy gun: he would probably hit Corkhill, who was now between the truck and the plane. The box! He hastily pulled the top off the box, and, with shaking hands, snapped the telescopic sights onto the Mauser rifle. Corky didn’t have a word of German. Shit! Why in God’s name hadn’t he done this before when he examined the bloody rifles?

There was no quick-loading clip: he had time to load only two rounds. They had to count! His hands were shaking. Christ! He raised the rifle to the flap.

Breathe, Rankin, breathe. You’ve been here before, when your whole future rested on a single shot. He breathed heavily: the day he had had to convince Mister Wilson he could shoot was vivid in his memory; it’s just another one of Wilson’s beer bottles. The sight settings were different to the British – unfamiliar. It doesn’t matter, Neil. Breathe! Range one hundred and fifty metres. There’s no wind.

The pilot was out of his cockpit, talking at Corkhill, still thirty yards away. Corkhill had his cap in his hand, nodding like an imbecile. A dumb imbecile. Rankin breathed, dragging the air into his lungs. He forced himself to stop shaking. A rifle he had never fired with sights he had never looked through, let alone tested. The optics gave him a detailed close-up of the pilot's face: a good-looking young man, grey eyes, pronounced nose, firm set to his mouth, brown hair. Bleary eyed: a short night? They must be putting in the hours, searching for us.

The man's expression went from faint amusement, through annoyance, towards anger. Recognition would be next. Corkhill's dumbness was on the verge of discovery.

Rankin's larger field of vision through his left eye showed him the observer was out of the plane, walking around the tail to the pilot's side.

Now, Neil, or the game's up.

Rankin squeezed the trigger. The rifle felt and sounded very much like a .303 when it fired. The report echoed around the low hills. He quickly moved the sight to the observer, whose face was frozen in horror. A pistol in his hand was pointing at Corkhill.

The second shot crashed into the still morning air: the observer was dead before the sound reached him.