

They crept forward, looking into each house with lights shining, but saw no one. Hugging the shadows, they came to a position Rankin had found which allowed observation of the river, the bridge, and some houses. He rubbed his gloved hands together and blew on them. They stood by a tree trunk, shadowed, immobile and silent. Nothing moved. Their eyes covered the ground in front and where they had come from with barely a twitch. Rankin marvelled at how quickly McKinlay had assimilated his stalking instructions. Standing in the deep shadows, with anything that might glint muffled with hessian, they would be all but invisible even to someone close by.

Someone coughed. McKinlay jumped a foot in the air.

“Christ,” whispered Rankin. “Where did that come from?”

There was a sound like someone picking up a rock. A dog barked.

“Where the hell is he, Bobby? Have you got your safety off?” Rankin asked, tapping McKinlay’s Tommy gun.

He could hear McKinlay shaking with fright, and sensed rather than saw him nod his head, desperately searching.

Up the street a stone skittered. A goat trotted down the street, bell tinkling.

“Jesus bloody Christ,” whispered Rankin. “You have no idea how close you came to having your guts shredded by fifty rounds of .45 calibre, you stupid animal.”

“Shit, Skipper, I think I’ve pissed my pants,” said McKinlay.

After another ten minutes, they crept along the riverbank to a large, fragrant lilac bush. From beneath its spreading branches they could observe the bridge, a stretch of river, and through the riverside trees, they had glimpses of cultivated fields, enclosures and several houses straddling the road.

Rankin took the entrenching tool and carefully scraped away at his position. When he had deepened the shallow depression, McKinlay finished his own. Sunlit excursions into Lokova and the countryside beyond the river had given him a clear picture of what lay to their front, and enabled him to make sure their own positions were invisible.

They settled in to wait. A bell clanked and a dog barked, a cold drip ran down his neck, and he cautiously raised the collar of his overcoat. An owl hooted. Overhead, they heard the drone of aircraft flying south.

“We’re not the only ones out tonight, Skipper,” McKinlay whispered.

“No, so it seems. A bit like a South Otago night, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’ve brought the cows in on plenty of nights just like it. Great weather for ducks.”

“You shot ducks at home, didn’t you?” Rankin asked.

“Yes. I got the job of fixing up the maimai every year. Best in the district, she was.”

Vehicles coughed into life up the road, towards the sanatorium. A couple of minutes later five carriers came clattering past and turned over the bridge, showing only hooded rear lights. Rankin hardly dared breathe as the caterpillar tracks rumbled past their lilac bush, a few feet from their faces. He carefully searched the countryside on the other side of the river, sector by sector, as the carriers’ noise faded into the dark, heading towards the main highway.

From the far distance came a deep rumble.

“What d’you reckon that noise is, Skipper? Too low for thunder. Doesn’t sound like planes.”

“That, my boy, is the sound of the rest of the Division withdrawing through the Olympus Pass, leaving the Aliakmon Line and heading south,” said Rankin.

“Oh. They only just got there.”

“Yes, and I bet they’re mighty pissed off about it,” said Rankin. “They spent weeks building the line we’re on, then they get sent off to the north to build another one, and before it’s finished or they’ve fired a shot, they’re back on the trucks heading south.”

“Funny way to fight a war,” said McKinlay, after some time. “The noise of the trucks carries, even in the damp air.”

“There,” Rankin whispered, “beside the big house out there. There is definitely someone moving about.”

“It could be the farmer.”

“Yes, it could be. But we’ve been here twice now when the carriers have gone out and there’s been someone moving about both times.”

“We could always go for a look, Skipper. Catch the buggers at it if they’re up to no good.”

“Yes. Or mark it on the map for the artillery to register when they get here.”

“What will it be like, Skipper?” asked McKinlay, after a long silence. “When it starts?”

“I don’t know, Bobby. The blokes in the last lot say the first thing to get you is the noise – you can’t hear yourself think. None of us really knows.”

“Are you scared?”

Rankin was staring at the house in front of him. “Yes, when I think about it. I’m sure everyone is, Bobby. You wouldn’t be normal otherwise. My biggest fear is making a stuff-up that gets someone killed.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Letting down the blokes or being in a funk and too shit-scared to move. That’s what scares me most.”

“It’s the same for all of us, Bobby.”

A muffled boom sounded in the distance.

“What was that?” McKinlay jerked in fright.

It was followed by another, and another, until it sounded like thunder rolling in the distant hills.

“That,” said Rankin, “is the beginning of our war.”