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A NIGHT ON THE SEA

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Frank Koucky

Today is VE Day, a glorious day as the long War has ended in Europe. I am writing this in my rooms at The Harriet School in Edinburgh with a shining electric

lamp in the window and the curtains open for the first time as the endless blackout is finally done. Next year I enter the University to follow the law and tonight, instead of celebrating, I am remembering alone at my desk as the old coal-stained town is lit up bright below my uncovered windows and a warm fire burns in my grate.

Before I came to Edinburgh to attend school, I was a fisherman's son in Aberdeen, the cold stone harbor town called by some "the city that stands 'twixt the Don and the Dee", referring to our two rivers. I fished with my father for "silver darlings", the lovely small cold-water herring dried and salted or tinned and shipped around the world, fished cold nights and day aboard the "White Rose", our grandly named but somewhat down-at-the-heels little North Sea trawler. In 1940 I was twelve years old and those little fish were the life of a nation as a brutal U-boat blockade brought shipping to a halt, cutting off the food to a desperate nation as the Luftwaffe leveled our cities and prepared us for coming invasion.

Aberdeen's herring fed our troops around the world and made a fine breakfast for tens of thousands of civilians who had little else in the blacked-out world of rationing, blockades and the Blitz. We were, as my father often said, all that stood between our nation and starvation, so we went out day after day in all weather, summer and winter, to try our nets in conditions that no fisherman in peacetime would ever try, and those fishermen caught out in bad storms and high seas died as much heroes to their country as any soldier or airman. Despite the rationing we got fuel for the ancient petrol-fired engine that pushed us to the fishing grounds off the coast, as the authorities knew that the "silver darlings" had to be brought in no matter what the cost in Scottish fisherman's lives. Of more immediate danger to the Germans were our little wireless sets that let us help in the search for blockading U-boats, calling in death for the U-Boats we saw. Once spotted by Scots fishermen, a U-boat could

be hunted and destroyed from the air by RAF dive bombers or depth-bombed by a swift destroyer.

The Germans soon enough got wise to our value in feeding their enemies and spotting their boats for our destroyers, so Hitler's cruel U-boats began to sink many of our little fleet, our close friends and relatives. Never with torpedoes, mind you; those were saved for bigger vessels than ours. No, we were sunk by short range gunfire on the surface and no fishing boat could outrun a sleek U-Boat at our six knot top speed. They simply surfaced and put a single round through our hull from the deck gun or cut us up with steel-tipped machinegun bullets, then submerged, slinked away like the cowards they were to enter another unarmed kill in their log. Early on, U-boat captains gave civilian crews a fair chance to get away in rafts before firing on us, but the chivalry of those days was long gone as extra time on the surface meant one of our new destroyers or an RAF bomber might happen by or a location might be sent by wireless. Now it was just a high-explosive shell from half a mile away and for any survivors, a slow death in the icy waters. Still, we went out fishing just the same.

It was after they killed my uncle and his crew without warning that we Scots asked for deck guns of our own, and to my delight the ministry got our fleet fitted out. They were only little one-inch rifled cannons with a slow screw breech and a long thin barrel, left over from the last War to End All Wars, but to me they seemed the broadside of a dreadnaught as now we could shoot back. A small hole in the pressure hull of a U-boat meant certain death to them as they couldn't submerge, my father said, so the enemy submariners had to give us at least a bit more respect as they sank us. My mother's cousin, a first-rate gunner on the "Rodney", told us that one of our small armor-piercing rounds would "rattle around in the tower of a U-Boat like a pin-ball, dicing the officers to mincemeat", and, whether that was true or not, we were going to try rather than going down without a fight.

Though we had few shells, we tried the gun at old floating barrels for targets and concluded that we would have to be close, indeed, to hit anything from our rolling deck. I polished the brass shell casings to gleam like horse brass and wrapped them one by one in oilcloth before putting them in their tin box again.

It was December of 1940 and the news was all bad. London was burning and the Blitz ground on by night, the Germans seemed to be advancing everywhere and we were all alone, this being well before America entered the war. France had fallen and Holland and Africa and all the rest were under Hitler's heel. Still we fished and watched for U-boats, and the short dark days turned quickly into cold winter nights on the rough water off Scotland. Tonight we took the "White Rose" well north of our usual water, far north toward the Shetland Islands, and a ground swell from a storm off Iceland made things very wet out there as we rolled in the troughs of the huge winter seas. There were just the two of us and I steered while my father hauled the well-worn nets with icy hands, his net handling made easier by a good bronze winch that ran off the engine. Cold as it was, it was still a good night's work, and we'd be home soon, safe and warm with a fine catch at Aberdeen Cay.

On the western horizon I saw a blast of white light, a small flare of red and then yellow flames, all visible only from the top of the waves before we fell off again. I called out and my father said to mind the nets and haul in quickly. When I finished, he said it was "a great ship on fire, torpedoed". Without hesitation we turned across the mountains of cold waves to see if we could save the crew. They had to be ours, as no German surface ships could operate here without being detected. As we drew nearer I could see it was a large freighter, crippled and down in the bows, sinking very slowly and on fire forward. Away to the north were more flames and my father said it was the convoy, moving away. We tried our little radio to call for

help, not that any was near, and we pushed closer to the burning freighter left behind to die.

A convoy under attack has to stay in formation and close to its escort destroyer; any wounded vessel is left behind alone by grim necessity, as the waiting U-boat wolf pack would sink any rescuer as well. Only by staying close to the destroyers could a ship survive. My father, a bosun in the last war who had twice been torpedoed, knew the danger from his own sinkings and still without hesitation had come to try to pick up survivors, the old brave law of the sea.

Suddenly we saw against the fire the unmistakable black outline of a U-Boat's conning tower, rising up to finish off the lost and abandoned freighter, the captain trying to collect another score toward his Iron Cross by confirming a kill with a shot in the hot boilers. I watched in horror as I saw for the first time, like a cobra rising before me, a real German U-boat and I felt the icy chill of seeing men who wanted to kill me. They didn't see us as they were busy taking trophy pictures of their burning victim before they fired their final shots. Three men tended the deck gun in breaking seas as we came out of the dark behind them.

I saw my father's face. He was smiling like a child at his birthday party as he steered for the U-Boat, the way I saw him smile when he beat a cruel Gordon sergeant who kicked my mother's dog one day, laughing in the sheer joy of battle as he gave and took the hard straight blows that finally laid the big soldier out cold in the middle of the sidewalk with no front teeth and a broken nose. He handed me the wheel from his scarred strong hands. "Straight and true" he said, "Run right up on them, two shots, turn and run." I saw the flames reflect in his eyes like the fires of hell and I knew he was going to try to sink a U-Boat himself to revenge his brother's death and to stop them from firing on the sinking freighter again. I was only twelve, but I held the wheel like a grown man, so

scared I was almost sick and shaking with the cold and fear, but straight and true I steered.

Down and out on the forward deck he ran, cutting the tight oil-cloth wrap off our little gun with his folding knife, and then down below again, emerging with our tin box of polished armor-piercing shells. I held dead steady for the U-boat and knew his plan in an instant, one shell into the tower to "dice them up like mincemeat" and one down low right through the pressure hull, then a quick escape into the rough dark night. I held the helm straight on as he loaded the gun by the light of the fire on the water, coming on out of the dark in a total surprise.

We were seventy yards away when their useless lookout finally spotted the "White Rose". My father looked straight down that long thin barrel like he was testing a billiards cue, sighting point blank at their bridge as Jerry officers dived for cover. At fifty yards he fired, the muzzle flash nearly blinding me in a hot ball of white fire, so close I heard the hard clink of a direct hit on the tower, and he unscrewed that long slow breech with a speed I still marvel at, ejected the smoking brass casing and loaded again. Smooth as glass he cranked down the elevation screw on that little gun and waited for the roll of a wave to fire again, putting the second round right through the U-Boat's black hull at less than ten yards with the "White Rose" actually grinding against their side like a bad approach to the dock as I spun away for open water. I saw the hit, down low and certain, right through a plate well below their teak decks as the flash lit the U-Boat brighter than day.

It was then that all hell broke loose, as apparently the desired pinball effect had not been achieved on the bridge. Far from doing great destruction, my father's single "coup de grace" at close range had gone right through the tower, hitting no one and only cause momentary panic. Now the Germans had mounted a machine gun from somewhere up high and

were blazing away with rifles, pistols and anything else that they could muster. Since their deck gun was pointed toward the burning ship, they could not hit us with that, but tracer bullets chopped into our stern and huge waves broke green over our bow as we ran into the steep breaking seas.

I saw my father laughing with delight, trying to get the deck gun around for another shot as the icy waves broke up to his waist. Everything was moving in slow motion for me now as the battle pumped through my blood and I saw every tiny detail, the Germans yelling and shooting, the waves, the flames, each individual hit on our deck and cabin as hardened bullets whipped right through the "White Rose". I turned my head for a second to see what the Germans were doing and then I turned back, my father was gone.

I couldn't stop to look for him as the Germans were shooting while they brought their boat about to fire the big forward gun and I had no lights. I couldn't see him in the dark waves, so I just held ahead full and began to scream at the top of my voice at the loss of my father and the nearness of death, a boy suddenly alone on the dark sea.

I heard a calm voice over the din of my own howling, the engine and the gunfire, and turned slightly to see a man beside me with his hand beside the wheel. He was only a foot or two away, neither old nor young, dressed in a worn blue wool uniform with a dark blue officer's cap and a kind weathered face, smoking a straight briar pipe. "Turn hard to starboard" he said again, so I did, and huge spout of water exploded where we had just been as a German shell hit beside our boat, throwing harmless cold spray over me. "Steady, mate" he said, "I'll take the wheel". I turned over the helm without question. Boys in those days knew how to respect authority, so I obeyed. I saw his calm grey eyes sweep the burning sea and I was suddenly not afraid anymore. A small puff of smoke

from his pipe drifted downwind as he smiled at me in the flickering light.

"Go get your father out of the fish hold" he said as an order and I knew with elation that my father was not dead and over the side at all, but had stepped straight down into the open hold in the confusion. I went down into the dark hold, still in that strange slow-motion daze, as bullets walked across the cabinhouse and splinters whirled above me. I found my father unconscious on top of the fish and tried to lift him up, succeeding by rolling him over onto the deck with the aid of the net winch and a line. I realized then that the stranger was steering a perfect zigzag course, as another German shell hit beside us and he turned again, counting a rhythm to himself as he waited for the next shot to fall and the next. All this could have taken only a matter of a few minutes as the time was measured by German firing and reloading, and the German gun crew was fast, but it seemed long weary hours to me.

I saw now that Father had more of a plan than I thought as the Germans could not chase us and fire at the same time because the icy waves swept right over their deck gun crew at speed. They elected to stay in one place and fire from a badly rolling boat, while we ran away in the dark at our steady six knots, straight into the breaking head seas that hid us from their fire. I had seen deep water down below and it came to me as a great shock that we were sinking.

I saw the man at the helm again, his blue cap thrown back a little as he spun the spokes of the old brass wheel hard to port. "We're sinking" I called. "Of course we are" he said, taking his pipe out of his mouth as if sinking was an everyday experience to him. "Don't worry about the U-boat. "Icarus" is coming up soon."

I wondered blankly for an instant what he meant and turned as a huge white ball of fire on the horizon

sent screaming heavy shells right over our heads, bracketing the U-boat with naval gunfire. A new fleet destroyer firing both her forward turrets charged past us at over thirty knots, four inch guns firing together light lightning, the most beautiful sight I have ever seen in my life. "His Majesty's Ship Icarus" shouted the man beside me. I could see the White Ensign streaming behind, gun crews in helmets and her brilliant white searchlights swept the dark water. I cheered and waved like a schoolboy whose team has just won the Cup as she roared by at full speed throwing spray thirty feet in the air. The U-Boat dived as another pair of shells hit the water where she had just been as the destroyer came on to toss depth bombs high off her stern, the shallow explosions lighting the water and blasting up pillars of spray.

"Take us along the freighter's port side. She's only carrying pig iron so she won't explode. Don't mind the burning bunker oil" said the man at the helm, giving me back the wheel, and I looked at him again. He must have come aboard from a lifeboat when we approached the U-Boat, I thought, to know the cargo, and I steered for the freighter just as he said. Up close the freighter looked as big as a Grampian mountain wall, painted in an odd dark pattern to try to confuse the Germans. The fire aboard was roaring now, and I saw the frantic crew waving for rescue from the after deck as the bows went under, sinking with their lifeboats burned. "Take her alongside" he said "and yell to Jimmy to bring the big fire pump from locker twelve and lots of hose". As I came up I shouted as loud as I could, "Jimmy, get the big fire pump, locker twelve" and a tall, oil-covered Yankee first mate ducked below, then lowered a huge, heavy bundle down the rope cargo net over the side, followed by rolls of heavy three inch hose.

The crew of the freighter jumped across the deadly gap above the oily water one by one as the freighter and the fishing boat slammed together hard with the waves. There were six of them and one wounded man they

lowered down tied to a makeshift stretcher and I somehow held the "White Rose" alongside long enough for them all to get aboard without being crushed. "Thank God!" said the tall one called Jimmy, and without another word he assembled the big pump and set two men pumping to empty out the hold while others hammered wooden plugs in the holes below or bailed for dear life with anything they could find.

I steered clear of the sinking ship as she went down slowly behind us and carefully avoided the burning oil, but the "White Rose" was black with it and the night's catch of herring had to be thrown to our town's cats as it reeked of bunker oil even after several rinsings from the bullet holes below our waterline. The splashing cold water soon revived my father. He pointed off our bow and there it was, the U-boat, surfacing to die, blowing tanks, rolling high with water streaming off her decks. Then I saw the destroyer coming on at full speed, throwing a huge bow wave with a dozen searchlights lighting the sea and a siren whooping like nothing I had ever heard before. They rammed that U-boat full amidships, drove their keel over the Jerries like a steam locomotive, and cut them clean in two. Father said the U-boat couldn't dive to get away with a hull pierced by our deck gun's round and for years afterwards he would described the German captain's fury at the crazed Scot who blasted a big hole right through his pressure hull from ten yards away, the whole North Sea flooding in with a fifty foot head of pressure.

The Admiralty sent out a story to the morning papers about the success of their new destroyers against the U-boats that didn't mention us at all, driving Father wild for a week, but then we were presented engraved Certificates for Lifesaving signed by some English lord made out to the both of us, with fine cased medals to match. Those hang over the fireplace now and Mother shows them to everyone even if they have seen them ten times before. Jimmy came ashore and stayed with us for a fortnight while he

waited for a new ship and wired home to his parents that he was alive, and every one of the freighter crew still sends us a letter at Christmas. Jimmy painted a little black U-boat on the cabinhouse of the "White Rose", saying that if the Sea Lords wouldn't give Father credit for the sinking he would give it to him myself and his rich father in Chicago arranged to pay for The Harriet School in Edinburgh for me so I could stay alive longer than at sea. I've done my forms as well as I could and tried to make my father proud, but I know he will be a bit sad that I will be a barrister with an Edinburgh firm in a few years instead of the next captain of the "White Rose".

As for the kind man in the faded blue uniform, when the excitement was over and the cold ride home was underway, I went down to find him, expecting him to be in our little cabin warming up with some whiskey or tea. I wanted to thank him now that I had stopped shaking and could talk normally again. He was just plain not there or anywhere else aboard, and Jimmy and the rescued crew said they never saw him at all. My father said the same, claiming that no one could have come aboard at full speed and that I was alone at the helm the whole time, shouting to myself like a wild looney as I steered.

If that is true, and it must be, then I made up that brave captain in my stress and fear, creating an able shipmate to help me right out of my own mind when the bullets were all around me, much like a lonely child will create an imaginary playmate. At least that is what Doctor Armstrong said back in Aberdeen when my mother insisted I tell him the whole story.

The only thing wrong with that explanation is that, according to Jimmy, the skipper of his freighter met the exact description of the man who helped me, right down to his briar pipe, but his captain died instantly in the explosion of the torpedo. Jimmy said it had to have been him that saved us all, else how could he have known to order the big pump down or what

the iron cargo was, or how to steer a proper zigzag and dodge the German gun or that HMS "Icarus" was coming up to fight. Jimmy said that sometimes people meet ghosts and don't even know it at the time, at least back in Illinois, and maybe even out on the cold sea off the Shetland Islands. My mother, who never believed in ghosts, says it probably was a sort of sea-going angel, and our vicar says much the same, at least when the bishop isn't around. I leave it to you what I saw out there on that cold December night as I simply don't know.

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