

Forty two.

The vessel lay one mile offshore in absolute darkness and almost absolute silence. Below decks two of the three petrol engines had been closed down completely. The third centrally-mounted engine had been eased back to minimum tickover speed. From the open bridge above the wheelhouse nothing could be heard, except for the low hum of machinery somewhere below. The sea was still wonderfully smooth.

They had left the Donegal coast at seven the previous evening. With a deck-cargo of fifty-gallon drums of petrol the little ship could not do any more than thirty knots flat out. At ten, they found a quiet and temporary anchorage off the singing sands on the western side of the island of Eigg and transferred the deck cargo to the tanks. Now the little ship could fly at close on sixty knots and be back in Loch Swilly within two hours of leaving the Scottish coast. But only under cover of darkness, of course.

It would begin to get light at seven in the morning. They would therefore have to leave at five at the latest. And there was still no sign of any life ashore on Shona. Soon it would be time to decide whether there was indeed anyone waiting ashore - or whether it was in any case now safe to take the vessel in among the rocks and shallows on a falling tide. Soon it would be time to decide: one way or the other.

After they had refuelled, they shut down both of the wing engines and on the centre engine alone ran across from Eigg to a point one mile west of the channel north of Shona. When they arrived it was still pitch dark, for the moon would not rise until later. The little vessel lay in absolute stillness while the commander and

his first officer took it in turns to watch the land through the tripod-mounted bridge-binoculars.

But there was nothing at all to see, save for the occasional curl of foam on the shore rocks and the vague suggestion of a snowy hump to mark the approximate location of the island of Shona and the hills to the north of it.

‘Why don’t they signal?’, a voice asked quietly.

‘Perhaps they are not there. Perhaps they have nothing to signal with. And they won’t be able to see us, at least until the moon is up’.

The second voice suggested that they flash ashore with their signal lamp, but the commander of the little vessel refused permission. Absolutely the last thing he was prepared to do was to give away the position of his boat, loaded as it was with munitions and petrol.

The two men leaned over the edge of the bridge, and peered into the night. The lighthouses on the southern tips of Eigg and Skye, and the light on the Bo Faskadale buoy, were quite clear. The second officer took a compass cross-bearing and went below to the wheelhouse to plot the position on the chart. Then he returned to the bridge.

‘Do we actually know that someone is going to be there anyway?’, he asked urgently.

‘We don’t’, the other said. ‘But if there is, this is their last chance of a pick-up. After tonight they are on their own. They won’t last long like that. We have to try’.

‘We might not get back out’, the first voice cautioned. ‘The tide is well back. There are drying rocks on either side of the fairway. We have a course but the tide can set us athwart it. There

are sunken rocks in the channel. There is a very tight port-starboard dog-leg through the narrows. And there is a sandbar in the narrows too. But we have to go through once we are in the channel, there's no room to turn otherwise. If we touch we stay there until after daybreak, till their aircraft see us in the morning'.

'We're going in', the commander said, 'get the dinghy ready for a trip ashore'.

He eased a polished brass handle forward and the engine rumbled below. For a moment there was a kick of wash at the stern, and then the boat began to move dead slow ahead, and turn to the helm. On the foredeck, a pair of sailors was preparing a dinghy for launching. A third man had been called to the bridge with orders to watch the shore through the binoculars and report at once should he see any sign of life whatsoever.

The first officer said, 'What if the enemy is waiting for us?'

The commander said, 'Then they will blow us out of the water. Give me a course and distance'.

The first officer studied the chart with a shaded torch. He said, 'One thirty compass, half a mile. Drying rocks port and starboard any time now'.

Almost at once, the slow wash of tide could be seen across the rocks that the tide had uncovered on either hand of their track. The commander killed power to the engine, and the vessel glided through between the rocks. Then he asked his engine room for dead slow ahead again. The night darkened: now they were inside the southern arm of the channel. Rocks could be seen a matter of yards away, on the starboard side. Again they killed the power and glided down the southern shore, very close to the rocks. Suddenly, two above-water rocks were dead ahead.

The commander whirled the wheel and the long snout of the patrol boat began to move to port, ever so slowly. A moment's burst of power on the engine helped the stem swing some more. Then they resumed their course, as before, and glided into pitch darkness.

'Hard a port now', the navigating officer said. 'And we'll need power to get through. Feel the tide'.

'I can see a house on the brow of the hill', the seaman on the bridge-binoculars said. 'I can see people, three people. They're waving'.

'Hard a starboard', the navigator said, 'hard as you can. There can't be more than foot of water under us now. And we're through. One thirty compass'.

The vessel slid through between two rock faces, very close indeed. Then the channel opened into a pool of almost complete darkness. Somewhere, the moon was beginning to rise, for the loom of its light could just be sensed. From the bridge, the rock face to port seemed very, very near. The vessel held close to this face and then turned hard to the right, until she was facing back to the narrows through which she had just come.

'There are people on the beach', the seaman on the bridge binoculars said. 'Maybe six, I can't be sure'.

'Dinghy away', the commander said, 'as fast as you can'.

Minutes past, and the dinghy disappeared under the dark slab of mountain. Then it was back, with three woman to load aboard.

'Three more to come', an American voice said.

Then the second trip. The moon was rising clear above the hills now, and the dinghy could be seen coming from the beach. When it came alongside two figures leapt aboard, and quickly dragged a third after them.

'Fast as you can lads', someone said, 'get that dinghy aboard now'.

Already the vessel was going ahead. All three engines were running now. She gave a spurt of power and nosed into the narrow gap between the island and the mainland. Then she swung hard to the left. And moments later, hard to the right. The peak of a drying rock passed very close to port.

On the open bridge someone said, 'Steady on three ten. We're getting depth now. We're clear'.

For perhaps two minutes, the vessel moved slowly out among the forests of drying rocks and reefs on every hand. To the south the comet was still blazing an impudent trail across the sky, and the moon was up over the hills. From the shores of Shona the boat could clearly be seen moving out from the channel.

Then she was clear of the rocks. There was a roar of power; a spurt of white water was flung from the stern; and quite soon she had gone from sight in the night.