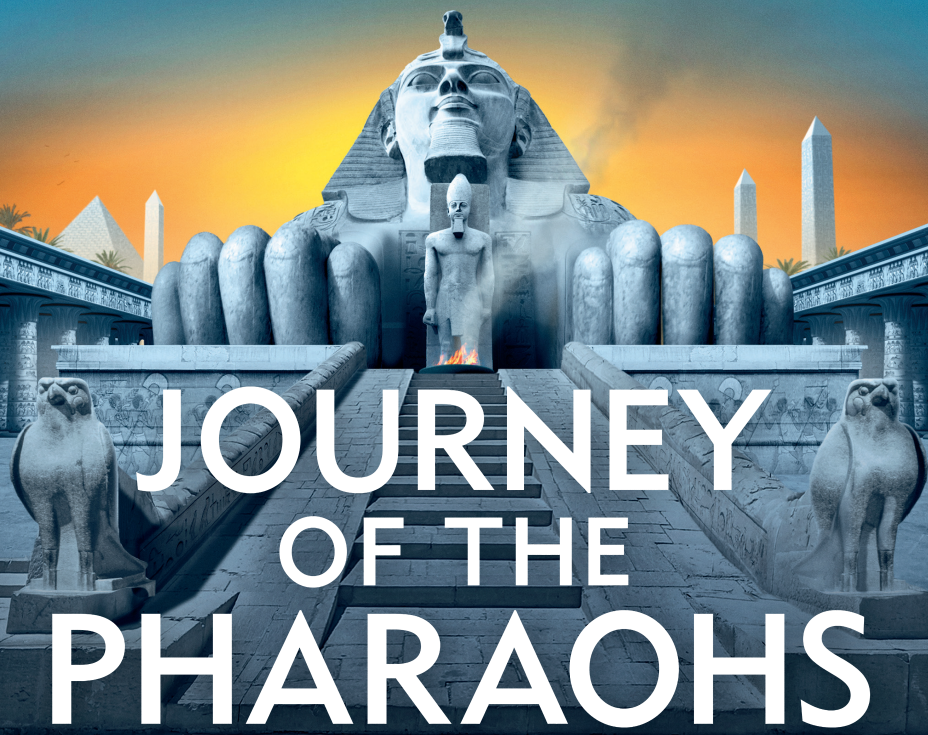


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Journey of the Pharaohs

Clive Cussler is the author and co-author of a great number of international bestsellers, including the famous Dirk Pitt® adventures, such as *Celtic Empire*; the NUMA® Files adventures, most recently *The Rising Sea*; the Oregon Files, such as *Shadow Tyrants*; the Isaac Bell historical thrillers, which began with *The Chase*; and the recent Fargo Adventures, which lastly included *The Oracle*. Cussler died in February 2020.

Graham Brown is the author of *Black Rain* and *Black Sun*, and the co-author with Cussler of *Devil's Gate*, *The Storm*, *Zero Hour*, *Ghost Ship*, *The Pharaoh's Secret*, *Nighthawk* and *The Rising Sea*. A pilot and an attorney, he lives in Arizona.

Find out more about the world of Clive Cussler
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Journey of the Pharaohs

CLIVE CUSSLER
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Cast of Characters

The Historic Past

EGYPT, 1074 B.C.

Khemet Former member of the Medjay, a group whose role was to guard the Valley of the Kings.

Qsn Orphaned child who gives information to Khemet, his name means *Sparrow* and the *Bringer of Sorrow*.

Herihor Military commander who rose to become Pharaoh of Upper Egypt and then vanished.

NEW YORK CITY, 1927

Jake Melbourne Pilot, barnstormer and World War I ace, competing for the Orteig Prize.

Carlo Granzini Head of the Granzini crime family.

Stefano Cordova Melbourne's friend and mechanic, Granzini's nephew.

The Present Day

NATIONAL UNDERWATER AND MARINE AGENCY (NUMA)

Kurt Austin Director of Special Projects, salvage expert and world-class diver.

Joe Zavala Kurt's closest friend, the mechanical genius responsible for constructing much of NUMA's exotic equipment.

Rudi Gunn Assistant Director of NUMA, a graduate of the Naval Academy.

Hiram Yaeger NUMA's Director of Technology, designed and built Max, NUMA's supercomputer.

Paul Trout Geologist with a Ph.D. in Ocean Sciences, married to Gamay.

Gamay Trout Marine biologist, married to Paul, most outspoken member of the group.

SCOTLAND

Vincennes Mysterious passenger on the fishing trawler.

Slocum Smugglers' contact, part of the Bloodstone Group.

UNITED KINGDOM SECURITY SERVICE, SECTION 5 (MI5)

Oliver Pembroke-Smythe Former member of the SAS, currently Director of Counter-Terrorism Operations for MI5.

Morgan Manning MI5 special operative, investigating the Bloodstone Group.

Henry Cross Professor of Antiquities at Cambridge University, assists MI5 in identifying smuggled artifacts.

THE BLOODSTONE GROUP

Solomon Barlow Former mercenary, now an arms dealer and head of the Bloodstone Group.

Kappa Weapons specialist and Barlow's second-in-command.

Robson Former street thug from a tough section of London, now one of Barlow's lieutenants.

Daly Associate of Robson's, blames Robson for his incarceration.

Gus Associate of Robson's, Daly's half brother.

Fingers Member of Robson's old street gang.

Snipe Another member of Robson's street gang.

ADDITIONS TO THE BLOODSTONE GROUP

Xandra and Fydor Brother-and-sister pair of assassins, they operate jointly under the pseudonym the Toymaker.

Omar Kai Flamboyant mercenary who is hired by the Bloodstone Group after they reach the United States.

FRANCE

Francisco DeMars Grandson of the man who discovered the *Writings of Qsn*, lives in a château in France.

SPAIN

Father Torres Catholic priest, serving at San Sebastián de las Montañas in Villa Ducal de Lerma.

Sofia Young child who introduces Gamay and Paul to Father Torres.

THE UNITED STATES

James Sandecker Former Director of NUMA, now Vice President of the United States.

Miranda Abigail Curtis Senior archivist with the FBI.

Morris Lead agent in Sandecker's security detail.

THE NAVAJO NATION

Eddie Toh-Yah Old friend of Kurt Austin's, part of the Navajo tribal administration.

Eddie's grandfather Leader of the local Navajo Council, Keeper of the Flame.

Prologue

Valley of the Kings, Egypt

1074 B.C., during the time of the 18th Dynasty

Heat shimmered in waves across the Valley of the Kings as the merciless sun baked the desert sands into clay.

High above the valley, at the edge of a cliff, a bearded man named Khemet lay flat on his stomach, sweating beneath the noonday sun, looking for any sign of movement. Sweat trickled down the side of his face, a fly buzzed around his ear, but nothing moved down below.

The valley was still – as the resting place of the buried Pharaohs should be. The only movement was a dust devil that rose from the southern end and danced across the sand.

Khemet slid back from the rim. Several men in linen robes crouched there. A boy stood next to them. Khemet addressed the child. ‘What is it you’ve brought us here to see?’

Villagers in Thebes called the boy Qsn, which meant *Sparrow*. They used the term not because he was small for his age and tended to chirp as he spoke, but as an insult. To the people of Egypt, the sparrow was a nuisance, stealing food and spoiling fruit. The townspeople saw the orphaned boy in the same light.

Khemet knew differently. The child was a beggar, not a thief. In fact, he worked hard for the smallest of coins,

watching everything with sharp eyes, gathering information. His size and age meant he was often invisible even in plain sight.

The boy crawled to the edge of the cliff, looked down into the valley and then tugged Khemet's arm. He extended a tiny finger, pointing. 'Pharaoh's tomb has been opened. The stone has been thrown aside.'

Squinting to see in the bright sun, Khemet looked past the magnificent three-story temple of Hatshepsut, with its long central stairway and rows of towering columns, and ignored the piles of rubble sealing the entrance of some lesser-known ancestors, finally focusing on a gap in the rock where smooth limestone blocks denoted the entrance to the tomb of Horemheb, one of the more recently buried Pharaohs.

His eyes weren't as sharp as the child's, but after shielding them from the sun he began to see into the shadows. The whitewashed slab that had been used to seal the tomb lay on the ground, broken in two where it had fallen. The path in front of the tomb was heavily rutted from the wheels of carts and trampled with the hooves of oxen.

'The boy is right,' Khemet said. 'The tomb has been violated.'

'And just what does he want us to do about that?' one of the other men said.

The boy looked back, unafraid to address the adults. 'You are the Medjay,' he said in his high-pitched voice. 'You are the servants of Rameses XI of Memphis. You guard the resting place of the Sons of Amun.'

Khemet smiled. He had been a captain in the Medjay – a force of warriors appointed by the Pharaohs to guard the

tombs of their ancestors – but his position had been swept away in the political upheaval that was dividing Egypt.

‘Perhaps the Sparrow doesn’t hear everything,’ one of the men said. ‘We’re no longer needed by the Sons of Amun.’

‘But Rameses –’

‘Rameses rules in Memphis and Alexandria,’ Khemet explained more patiently, ‘but this is Upper Egypt and Herihor has taken the title of Great House for himself.’

The boy’s face showed contempt. ‘Herihor is not only the High Priest, he is –’

‘Here, he is a King,’ Khemet snapped. ‘There are those who would cut your tongue out for saying otherwise.’

The boy shrank back.

Khemet allowed the lesson to sink in before adding, ‘Fortunately, we’re not among them.’

The men behind them laughed. The child looked relieved.

‘Egypt is not what it was,’ one of his men said. ‘The weaker it gets, the more Pharaohs it needs. Soon there will be one in every region.’

This brought more laughter from Khemet, though the boy looked stricken. He was still young enough to believe in concepts like duty and honor and, above all, the glory of kings descended from the gods. Those beliefs were not unlearned without great pain.

Khemet turned his attention back to the open tomb. ‘We should investigate and see what they’ve taken.’

Leaving the cliffside, he led the group around and down a secret trail that took them to the valley below. These were hidden paths only the Medjay knew.

When they arrived, the light was brighter and more dazzling, as if they were walking the path to Heaven itself.

Unlike the tawny cliffs around them, the valley floor was covered with pulverized limestone and white dust, chips and shavings from the great blocks that had been cut and worked and manhandled into place almost continuously for the past thousand years.

The reflected light caused Khemet to pull a scarf across his eyes and he entered the tomb of Horemheb looking like a bandit.

Once inside, he removed the scarf and stood in the entry corridor. The cool air caressed his body while his eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness. As his pupils dilated, the splendor of the artisans' work appeared before him. Ceiling and walls, whitewashed and covered in hieroglyphics. Statues, carvings and other works of art. All lit up by the light coming in from the entrance of the tomb and from the torches mounted on the walls, which gave off an even purer light as they burned a smokeless blend of castor oil and natron.

Khemet took one of the torches and moved forward. His men followed close behind, the boy at his side.

Passing a second doorway, they entered the burial chamber reserved for lesser wives and servants.

Khemet stopped and pushed the boy back into a cleft in the wall. 'Quiet, now,' he said. 'We're not alone.' Reaching under his garment and pulling out a short sword, he waved the men to move up beside him. 'Be ready.'

Without a sound, Khemet stepped through the next doorway. He passed two statues of Anubis, the flickering torch in Khemet's hand casting shadows across the unmoving beasts on the far wall.

'Worthless guards,' one of the men whispered of the

Anubis pair, 'sitting idly by as robbers plunder the belongings meant to equip Pharaoh in the Afterlife.'

The sound of a tool hitting stone could be heard up ahead. Moving into Pharaoh's burial chamber, Khemet found the source of the noise, a priest and a stonecutter carving a message into the far wall. Between them lay the stone sarcophagus of Horemheb. Its heavy lid had been thrown down and discarded. The golden coffin, death mask and mummified Pharaoh were gone.

The priest and the stonecutter noticed the flickering torch light. 'It's high time you've returned,' the priest said without looking back. 'We have more items that need to be moved.'

'You mean stolen,' Khemet said.

Only now did the priest turn. 'Who are you?' the priest demanded.

'I am Khemet, Captain of the Guard. And you are a thief.'

The priest did not back down. 'I am the hand of the Great House. Servant of Pharaoh Herihor. I do the Pharaoh's work. You men are trespassers and deserters.'

And I will be a hero when I serve your head to Ramesses, Khemet thought.

He stepped forward with his sword raised. 'What have you done with the Pharaoh? Where are his gifts?'

'They have been relocated,' the priest said, 'to keep them safe from scavengers like you.'

The priest's voice had turned snide and awfully bold for a scrawny man facing a soldier with his sword drawn. At the sound of movement, Khemet knew why.

An arrow flew down the corridor, piercing one of his

companions from behind. The man fell with a grunt and nothing more.

A spear followed, catching another of the men as he turned.

Khemet pressed himself against the wall as a second arrow flew past. This one sailed into the burial chamber and hit the stonecutter in the stomach. He tumbled off the ledge and hit the floor, writhing in pain.

With the reflexes of a veteran warrior, Khemet dropped low and charged the archer in the hallway, upending him before he could nock another arrow. Thrusting his sword, Khemet pierced the man, yanking the blade back violently and pulling it free.

Seeing the last of his men speared, Khemet threw his sword, impaling the attacker. The man dropped to his knees and then fell sideways. Only the priest and Khemet remained, but the priest had used the fighting in the outer chamber to his advantage.

With Khemet engaged, the priest had drawn a cobra-headed dagger from beneath his gaudy robes. He rushed forward, plunging it into Khemet's side.

Khemet twisted and slashed with a dagger of his own as he fell back. A hand closer and it would have been a fatal strike, but the priest had pulled out of range.

Falling to the ground, Khemet reached for the knife he'd been stabbed with. He could not remove it. The blade was deep, the wound burned strangely.

Fueled by anger, he stood, raising his weapon. The priest backed off farther but, curiously, did not flee.

'Face me,' Khemet said, 'and I will send you to the Afterlife you claim to adore.'

He stepped forward trying to close the gap, but his feet were unsteady. He swayed to one side, placing a hand on the wall. Steadied, Khemet remained upright, but his head swam.

This was strange, he thought. He'd been wounded in battle a dozen times, and once he'd almost bled to death, but never had he felt like this. He reached for the dagger, pulled it from his side and noticed an empty niche cut into the center of the blade.

‘The poison was meant for the stonemason,’ the priest said. ‘To keep him quiet when his work was done. It will serve its purpose just as well in your blood.’

Khemet threw the cobra-headed knife down. Steeling his resolve, he stepped forward again, but by now his eyes were playing tricks on him. The shadows around the tomb came alive. The Anubises and the crocodile moving and speaking.

The chamber began to spin. Khemet's own dagger fell to the ground, clanging against the stone floor as it hit. Fighting to remain upright and summoning the last remaining stores of his strength, Khemet pushed forward, lunging for the priest with his bare hands, grasping at the man's robe but catching nothing but air.

Khemet landed facedown on the stone and rolled over on his side. He heard music. Voices. But saw only the face of the treacherous priest. The man leaned over him, mouthed a curse, then straightened, raising a stone over his head, preparing to smash Khemet's skull.

Before he could strike, the priest's face tensed in agony as the tip of a blade burst out through his belly. The stone fell backward and the priest toppled over dead. And looked quite surprised to be so.

The boy appeared from behind the body.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, rushing to Khemet. ‘I shouldn’t have told you. I am Qsn – the Bringer of Sorrow.’

Khemet tried to focus on the child. As he did, a swirl of light and shadow grew behind Qsn, spreading like wings. In his delirium, Khemet saw the boy as a living bird, but not one so small and weak. ‘You are the falcon,’ Khemet told him. ‘You are Horus, the last protector of the Pharaohs . . .’

He reached out and laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder. And then the world turned to blinding gold. And all he saw and knew vanished.

Qsn stood silent as Khemet’s hand fell to the ground. The tomb was cold and silent and filled with death, but not the glory of the Pharaohs. He could think of nothing to do, no place to go, but he knew he would be killed if he stayed there.

Getting up, he rushed to the entrance and back out into the blazing sun. The ruts and hooves in the hard-packed ground led off to the south. A trail of thieves. He followed it almost without thinking.

By sunset, he’d caught up to a slow-moving caravan as its row of heavily laden carts neared the banks of the Nile. There, beyond a bend in the river, lay a natural harbor and more ships than Qsn had ever seen. Large ships, with long oars and masts built for heavy sails.

Some were tied up at the limestone dock, others waited their turn anchored in the quiet water, while still others were out in the channel, allowing the current to move them slowly downstream.

As the boy watched, treasures that belonged to the dead were loaded on ship after ship. Goats and other animals were brought aboard as well. Foodstocks and amphoras of wine and sacks of dates and other fruits. In the midst of the commotion, the boy slipped aboard one of the ships, hid among the animals and soon fell asleep.

He woke to find himself part of a fleet under full sail heading south. They passed Memphis, the city of Ramesses, in the dark of night. They sailed into the flooded Delta the next day. And then out into the sea.

By the time the boy was discovered and captured, the fleet had sailed from the mouth of the Nile and out beyond the edge of the known world.

I

Roosevelt Field, New York

May 12, 1927

On a pleasant afternoon that marked the middle of May, a small crowd gathered at an airfield on Long Island. A roped-off area was set aside for reporters, while farther back spectators from the general public jostled for position. Nearby, on a small platform, a brass band played.

A photographer snapped a picture of the crowd and the band. 'You have to give Jake Melbourne credit,' the photographer said. 'He really knows how to put on a show.'

Jake Melbourne was a World War I ace, a celebrity daredevil aviator and, as the photographer had noted, all-around showman. While other pilots wore brown leather jackets and drab wool pants for warmth, Jake wore a bright red leather jacket, adorned with epaulets. He wrapped his neck in a golden scarf and shod his feet in ostrich-skin boots. Over the years, he'd become famous, winning various flying contests and plenty of notoriety. Now he was going after the biggest ribbon in aviation, the Orteig Prize, twenty-five thousand dollars to the first pilot to fly nonstop from New York to Paris. Or vice versa. It meant hopping the Atlantic Ocean in one leap and many people thought it couldn't be done.

‘What good is it if he gets himself killed?’ one reporter asked.

‘It makes for a good headline,’ a second reporter answered.

‘Winning the prize would be a better one,’ another reporter said. ‘If anybody can do it, this guy can.’

‘You think Melbourne’s going to make it?’ the photographer asked. ‘You really think he’s going to be the one? What about this Lindbergh guy?’

‘Who?’ the reporter said.

‘The guy with the silver plane. He’s parked over at Curtiss Field next door. Flew in last week from San Diego. Set a cross-country record on the way.’

‘Oh, you mean Slim,’ the reporter said with disdain. ‘Not a chance. His plane’s only got one engine. Melbourne’s got two and can carry more fuel.’

‘If you ask me, it can’t be done,’ another reporter leaned in to say. ‘Four men have already been killed. Three other planes have crashed. And the French team in the *White Bird* are still missing. It’s been a week. Wherever they are, they’re not still flying.’

The *White Bird* was the English translation of *L’Oiseau Blanc*, the name Charles Nungesser and François Coli had given their airplane. They’d left Paris on May 8th in spectacular style but hadn’t been heard from since crossing the coast of Normandy. Searches for the plane and its crew were being carried out on both sides of the Atlantic even as Melbourne and other contestants prepared for their attempts.

‘You wonder where Melbourne gets his money from?’ the skeptical reporter continued. ‘Byrd has the Wanamakers, Fonck had Sikorsky.’

‘I heard Melbourne is funding the flight himself,’ the photographer said.

‘And I heard he’s flat broke and desperate for the prize money,’ the reporter replied. ‘Likes to gamble, you know.’

The photographer considered that. ‘Well, it doesn’t get much higher stakes than risking your life. Makes you wonder why anyone would even try it.’

In a planning room, near the back of a hangar, Jake Melbourne and his financial backers were having a similar conversation.

Melbourne stood tall with his boots on, hair slicked back and his red jacket hanging open. His meticulously trimmed mustache gave him a passing resemblance to Errol Flynn. He’d slept in very late in order to be rested for the long solo flight, but he looked tired and angry. ‘I’m not going,’ he insisted. ‘Not with that thing on board.’

He was pointing to a compact steamer trunk, which, though it was small in size, was extremely heavy.

The men across from him seemed unimpressed by the outburst. There were three of them, very different from one another but with a family resemblance.

The older man in the center was thin and balding, with glasses and wearing a double-breasted mackinaw overcoat. Beside him was a bruiser who looked like he’d come straight from the bare-knuckles boxing ring or jail. His nose was flat, one eye recently blackened, his ears chewed up like he’d taken a hundred punches to the head.

The third member of the trio was younger still, of more average height and build, and he considered himself Jake’s friend. But that didn’t count for much at the moment.

It was the older, bespectacled man who responded. ‘Listen to me, Jake. We’re all here to help each other. Remember when the Irishmen wanted to break your hands for stiffing them on the three grand you owed? We paid them off for you. Not only did we do that, we bought out your other markers and helped you buy this plane. Now we need something from you.’

‘I was going to pay off those markers after I won the prize,’ Jake said, ‘that was the deal. You get half, plus we sell the plane. The rest I keep.’

‘That *was* the deal,’ the older man said. ‘We got a different one in mind now. In this deal, you get to keep the whole prize. You just have to deliver that trunk to a friend of ours on the Continent. He’ll meet you in Paris after you land.’

Melbourne shook his head. ‘If I put that thing on my plane, I’ll have to off-load fifty gallons of fuel. One bad stretch of weather and I’ll never make Paris. A little bit of a headwind and I might not even make the coast.’

‘You said going east instead of west puts the wind at your back,’ the older man insisted.

‘I still need fuel.’

‘Maybe we could take out some other equipment,’ the youngest member of the trio said. ‘I’ve heard Lindbergh isn’t using radio. I heard he doesn’t want a parachute. Says the equipment is too heavy and unreliable.’ The young man turned to Jake. ‘You taught me how to dead reckon,’ he said. ‘You can use a compass and your watch.’

‘Lindbergh’s crazy,’ Melbourne replied. ‘Once he takes off, he’s gonna vanish just like the French. I need that equipment. And I need every gallon of fuel. Why don’t you

put the trunk on a steamship? Then I'll meet your friend in Paris and tell him what ship it's on.'

The bruiser shook his head. 'Hoover's boys are closing in fast and the docks are crawling with flatfoots looking for us. Besides, who can we trust?'

'Hoover?' Melbourne blurted out. 'You're telling me the Bureau of Investigation is looking for this thing?'

The older man nodded. 'We've had a misunderstanding with them,' he admitted. 'Why do you think we funded you in secret?'

Melbourne rubbed at his temple and ran a hand through his thick blond hair. Stepping forward, he grabbed the trunk, straining to lift it up, and then put it back down again. 'Way too heavy,' he said. Out of instinct, curiosity or just plain stupidity, he opened it to see what was inside. 'What in the world?'

A boot slammed the top down so suddenly that Melbourne almost lost his fingers.

'I wish you hadn't done that, Jakey.' It was the older man talking. His foot on the trunk, a revolver in his hand.

'You can't be serious,' Melbourne said.

'Now what?' the bruiser said. 'Those stones can tie us into everything. The guys we killed at the train station were carrying them. We get caught, it's the chair.'

'I didn't see anything,' Melbourne stammered. 'Just a bunch of—'

Without finishing his statement, Melbourne threw a punch, knocking the revolver out of the old man's hand. As the weapon hit the hangar floor, Jake turned and sprinted for the door, but the bruiser tackled him around the waist, landing on him like a sack of cement.

Melbourne squirmed to get free and managed to slam an ostrich-skin boot into the man's already flattened nose. Blood spurted and the man grabbed his face, letting Melbourne go.

Jumping up, Melbourne froze in his tracks. The youngest man in the group had blocked his way and he now held a pistol as well.

'You have to fly it,' the young man said. 'Otherwise, we all go down. And that means you too.'

Melbourne was past caring. He pulled open the top drawer on his desk, reaching for a derringer that lay there.

'Don't!' the younger man shouted.

It was too late for reason. Melbourne grabbed the pistol and spun. The fight ended with a pair of gunshots ringing out.

To the crowd outside, the shots were barely noticeable. Muffled by the walls of the hangar and masked by the playing of the brass band, no one could be sure if they came from bottles of champagne being opened, rimshots from the drummer or the backfiring of a nearby car or plane.

Any thoughts about the sounds were forgotten when the doors of the hangar opened and the crew pushed Melbourne's plane out into the sunlight.

The aircraft was beautiful. Painted bright red, with Melbourne's name on the tail and his personal emblem – a polished brass ram's head – on the side.

The plane was also a technological wonder, for its time. One of a kind, with an all-metal fuselage and a mid-mounted wing – design cues that foretold the future

direction of aviation. It had twin engines, with in-line twelve-cylinder power plants that were water-cooled and had a capacity of 450 horses each. Its streamlined appearance and extra power gave it a top speed nearly twice what the average plane could fly. Its only weakness was that those engines consumed a lot of fuel. Melbourne's plan was to shut one engine down when he reached maximum cruising altitude, spend an hour slowly losing altitude, then fire the sleeping engine up and climb back into the sky. It was risky since twin-engine planes didn't fly particularly well on one engine, controlling them was difficult and restarting engines in flight had a spotty record of success. But Melbourne claimed to have practiced it and thought he could pull it off.

It was precisely this level of daredevil confidence that made the crowd love him. And when he came striding out behind the plane, in his red jacket, leather helmet, goggles and golden scarf, the crowd roared with delight. He bowed and waved and then climbed onto the wing of the plane.

From a spot behind the rope, the photographer raised his Ansco Memo box camera to take a picture. But just as he centered it on Jake, the reporter beside him pushed the camera down, the shutter snapped, and the photographer knew the photo would be blurred.

'What gives?' he said sharply.

'Never take a photo of a pilot before his flight,' the reporter told him. 'It's bad luck.'

The photographer sighed. 'Can I get the plane?'

'Wait until it's moving.'

As the photographer waited, the band struck up a rendition of 'Grand Old Flag' by George M. Cohan. The

crowd sang along as Melbourne climbed into the cockpit. Within minutes, both engines had been fired up and the *Golden Ram* was heading toward the far end of the runway. There were no preflight checks, no delays, nothing that would cause the plane to spend more time on the ground burning fuel. It taxied out onto the runway, turned into the wind and began its takeoff roll.

The photographer took a photo and then lowered his camera.

With its twin engines thundering, the craft accelerated, but slowly. Halfway down the field, its tail wheel came up. Then, with only a quarter of the runway to go, it finally lifted off the ground, clawing its way into the air, fighting for every foot.

Everybody in the crowd held their breaths. Many of them had seen René Fonck's overloaded plane crash and burst into flames at the same spot the previous year. If they could, they would will the *Golden Ram* into the sky.

With the end of the runway nearing, the landing gear was jettisoned from the aircraft, the idea being that two hundred pounds of metal wasn't worth lugging all the way to Paris when one could land on the skid underneath the plane's belly.

Relieved of the landing gear, the plane climbed more easily, clearing telephone wires strung along the road at the end of the runway. Only now did the photographer snap his final shot. It caught the red plane turning east, heading for the coast, the sun glinting off its polished ram's head emblem. The Atlantic Ocean beckoned and, on the other side, Paris, fame and fortune.

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The photographer developed his photographs the next morning. His pictures of the *Golden Ram* in flight would be used repeatedly over the next month, first in articles describing the great hope on the day of the flight, then during the unsuccessful search for the plane, which would go on for weeks after the *Golden Ram* vanished.

Despite the possibility of selling it for a large sum of money, the photographer would never publish the slightly blurred picture of Melbourne climbing onto the wing.

‘Bad luck,’ the reporter had called it. And for the rest of his life the photographer would believe it had been just that.

The North Atlantic, off the coast of Scotland
The present day

Gale-force winds howled across a hundred-foot trawler, whistling through the masts and booms that rose above the deck. Rain and spray blew in equal measure, lashing the windows of the bridge with blinding sheets, while the seas beyond the ship became a field of endless white-capped swells rolling beneath the heavy gray sky.

A powerful Atlantic storm that had briefly been a hurricane had wandered north toward Newfoundland and then back across the pond toward Ireland. It was only the second such tempest to reach the British Isles in as many decades and it had come on faster than any of the predictions said it would.

Inside the trawler, three men occupied the bridge, one of them clinging to the ship's wheel, the other two holding tight to anything that helped them remain upright.

'Keep us square on,' the captain shouted to the helmsman.

'I'm trying,' he replied. 'But the winds are shifting, Cap'n. We'll be getting blown over before long.'

Both men spoke with a deep Scottish burr, a lifetime of northern heritage clear in their words. And despite their efforts, the trawler was struggling.

As it crested a long swell and dropped down the back side of the wave at an angle, the ship leaned hard to starboard and threatened to capsize. The helmsman had no choice but to turn downward and go with the wave.

Even then, it seemed like the ship might roll until the bow dug in to the bottom of the trough, the hull groaned loudly and the trawler's nose pitched up, shedding the seawater that had nearly swamped it.

Timing his steps to coincide with a brief moment of stability, the captain moved to the navigation computer. Holding on to the sides of the console for balance, he looked at the screen. The sweep of the radar beam showed an even heavier wall of rain to the north, but nothing beyond that. To the east, it picked up a small number of contacts and the rocky coast of the Isle of Skye.

As they neared the crest of the next swell, spindrift blew back at them, raking the windows and sounding like hail. 'It's no good,' the captain said. 'We'll never make it around the point. We need to find somewhere to shelter from the storm.'

The third man on the bridge, whose name was Vincennes, took exception. Small in stature, thin-bodied, with a round, soft face, he looked anything but the demanding sort. Yet there was no mistaking the intensity in his unblinking eyes. 'No diversions,' he insisted, stepping closer to the captain and tapping a finger on the screen. 'We go to Dunvegan.'

Vincennes was neither an officer nor member of the crew, but he'd paid for the voyage and he intended to arrive at his chosen destination.

'Listen to me,' the captain said. 'The storm has passed

far enough over that the wind is coming from the northeast. Right now, the Isle of Skye is between us and the worst of it. But the moment we pass Neist Point Lighthouse the waves will double in size and the wind will start ripping things off the boat. Things we need, like antennas, radar masts and life rafts. One bad wave and we'll lose a hatch or a window and then we'll start taking on water. Do you understand?'

Vincennes stared.

In case he hadn't gotten the point, the captain put it together for him. 'We'll not be making Dunvegan tonight. The only thing for us to decide is if we spend the night sheltered in a bay or drowning out here.'

The helmsman offered a solution. 'If we put in to Loch Harport, we'll be safe from the storm. The loch is protected on three sides. And, from there, it's no more than twenty kilometers by road to Dunvegan.'

By the time he'd finished making the suggestion, the boat had pitched forward once again, dropping into another trough between the waves. Everyone braced themselves for its bottom and the inevitable upward thrust that accompanied it.

This time the bow pierced the oncoming wave, submerging beneath it for just a moment. The crest of the wave flew back toward the bridge at a frightening speed. It slammed into the structure like a hammer, cracking one of the storm-proof windowpanes and staggering the boat.

The impact startled Vincennes. He flinched and ducked and then stood up slowly, looking surprised to be dry. 'All right,' he said, nodding to the captain. 'Take shelter in the loch. But no radio calls. No one must know we're there.'

The captain nodded to the helmsman, who'd already begun the turn.

Buffeted by the wind, the trawler swung ponderously to the northeast. It brought them on a course more directly into the waves. The awful twisting and rolling they'd been enduring for half the day was reduced.

Another hour brought them in sight of the loch's outer bay. The entrance was wide, but dotted with small rocky islands and submerged shoals.

'Watch the current,' the captain urged. He could feel it pulling at the boat, slewing it around and drawing them off their intended course.

Waves were another issue. Out in the channel they were fairly regular and predictable, but as the boat neared the coast the wave pattern became more chaotic as the incoming swells bent around the rocky points and rebounded off the walls of the bluffs. One moment they would be getting pushed from behind, the next a wave would slam off the bow.

It didn't take long for them to find trouble. 'We're out of the channel,' the captain shouted while comparing their position to what was on the navigation terminal. 'Hard to starboard.'

'We're full over,' the helmsman said.

Turning more, they were now fighting the wind as well. The combination was too much. The trawler was pushed farther out of the channel and dragged across a shoal.

The terrible sound of wrenching metal reverberated through the hull.

The helmsman tried to lessen the damage. He reduced the throttle at the first sound of impact, turned the rudder

and waited for the leading edge of the next swell to roll in before returning to full power.

The arriving wave lifted them free, but the trawler was slow to pick up speed and they'd only just begun to make way when the bottom dropped out.

The second impact was more jarring than the first. The captain and Vincennes were thrown to the deck. The helmsman remained upright but slammed into the control panel. He cut the throttle once more as a bilge alarm went off.

'What's that?' Vincennes asked.

'Water coming in,' the captain replied. 'We've been holed.'

'We're sinking?'

The captain ignored the question. 'Full power,' he ordered. 'Go with the current until we're over the rocks, then make for the nearest shore. Our only hope is to run up on the beach.'

The helmsman did as ordered, but the trawler was like a child's toy in the storm. Even with the throttle wide open, they were going nowhere. 'Prop's not biting, Cap'n. Might've chewed itself up on the rocks.'

'In which case, we're doomed,' the captain replied.

Another wave hit from the side, swinging them around and shoving them even farther onto the shoal. They came to a jarring stop, caught hard on the rocks. The impact again threw the captain and Vincennes to the deck.

'Now what?' Vincennes demanded, attempting to stand.

The captain was up before him, looking out through the windows into a swath of sea lit up by the trawler's lights, where he saw the jagged tips of the rocky trap they were

being held in. He knew the future. The waves would punish them as the rocks slowly tore his ship apart. ‘Now we die.’

The trawler’s approach had been noticed by the patrons of the McCloud Tavern, which sat up on a bluff sixty feet above a beach consisting entirely of smooth stones. They’d watched in fascination as the vessel approached the mouth of the loch with every light on board blazing.

A running argument divided the room, with one camp marveling at the bravery of the crew and the other marveling at the sheer stupidity of being out on the water in the first place.

‘This gale has been comin’ for three days,’ one man said.

‘Aye,’ a woman replied. ‘But it’s come on fast. And it’s a wee bit worse than the dobbers on the TV said it would be.’

‘Ack,’ the man said, raising a mug. ‘You know you can’t trust that lot. Even if you could, a man would have to be right doaty to be out in this weather to begin with.’

The arguments went back and forth as quickly as the hot toddies and pints of ale. Hoping they made it, the bartender reserved a special bottle of scotch should they arrive in good health. But all the fun went out of the game when it became clear the trawler was in real trouble.

‘They’ve run aground,’ one of the older men said as the ship’s progress stopped. ‘I’ve nearly been caught on those rocks myself. Sharp as dragon’s teeth, they are.’

‘There’s been no calls,’ the bartender pointed out.

Like many small towns on the ocean, half the population here were fishermen. Marine radios were not in short supply. And during a storm everyone listened to the emergency channel.

The bartender picked up the phone to contact the Coast Guard.

‘They’ll never get a helicopter up here in time,’ the old man said. ‘And a rescue boat won’t do. Not in this weather.’

Despite the man’s statement, the bartender stepped away to make the call. As he left the window, another man stepped forward, stopping at a spot between the other onlookers.

They looked at him sideways. He was tall, with a lanky build and silver hair. His face molded firmly but weathered by the elements. He wasn’t a local, but he looked like a man of the sea.

The stranger took a brief look at the trawler through a pair of compact binoculars. ‘How far out are those rocks?’

‘Just under a mile from here,’ the old man said.

The stranger raised the binoculars again, training them on a different location off to the side where a rugged spit of land stuck out into the bay. ‘And from the nearest point on that ridge of land?’

‘A quarter mile,’ the old man guessed. ‘Maybe a bit more. Why?’

The stranger lowered the binoculars. He turned to the old man, looking at him with a pair of eyes that were deep blue in the gray light. ‘Because you’re right. In this weather, a boat just won’t do.’

With that, the stranger turned and walked back through the pub. He met up with his friend near the bar and together they walked out through the front door.

The woman exchanged glances with the old man. ‘Who’s that, then?’

The man shrugged. ‘Foreigners.’

Aboard the trawler, things had gone from dangerous to desperate. The boat had settled onto the rocks with a ten-degree list, water pouring in down below and the storm showed no sign of relenting.

The helmsman, feeling the sting of guilt and believing he'd failed the ship, turned to the captain. 'I'm sorry, I should have swung wider.'

'Nothing much you could do,' the captain said. He got on the intercom, calling the chief engineer. 'How bad off are we?'

'Three feet of water in the bilge. She's flooding fast. We need to abandon ship while we're still upright.'

Vincennes heard this and shook his head vigorously. 'No,' he snapped, 'we can't leave the boat. We have to get off these rocks.'

'The rocks are all that's keeping us afloat,' the captain shot back. He pressed the INTERCOM button again. 'Get the lads topside. We'll go out in the rafts.'

With the order to evacuate given, Vincennes became livid. He pointed an accusing finger at the captain. 'If this is some kind of a trick —'

Whatever else he might have said went unheard as a larger wave crashed against the ship, slamming the trawler broadside and rolling it farther over to starboard.

‘You want to stay on board, you’re welcome to it,’ the captain shouted. ‘My men and I are leaving.’

Vincennes stared irately as men began coming up the stairs from down below. Unable to sway the captain, he waited for the last sailor to pass and then lurched in the other direction, making his way to the back of the wheelhouse and charging down the stairwell.

The helmsman made a move to follow, but the captain held him back. ‘He’s my problem, lad. Get out on deck. Keep the men together. Launch the rafts as the waves crest, not before or after, or you won’t stand a chance. Understood?’

The helmsman nodded, pulled on his life jacket and pushed out through the starboard door. As soon as he was in the open, the wind attempted to knock him down. He grabbed the railing and fought to stay upright on the tilted deck.

Things couldn’t have been much worse. They were over nearly twenty degrees now and leaning into the rocks. The port side of the ship was raised and acting like a bulwark against the onslaught of the storm, shielding the deck from being swept by every wave. But any boat that went into the water on that side would be slammed against the trawler’s hull long before it could move away.

The starboard side of the deck looked more promising. The trawler was leaning that way and the edge of the deck was already awash. That should have made for an easier way off, but just beyond the rail lay a field of jagged rock spires.

The rocks vanished every time a wave crested through,

only to reappear as it passed, emerging from the trough left behind like teeth in the jaw of some hungry beast. Still, he decided, a small chance was better than no chance at all.

He made his way down a ladder and then along the deck toward the midship's muster station. By the time he arrived, several of the men had begun inflating one of the boats.

The compressed-gas charges filled the raft quickly, but the wind and the rocking deck made it difficult to control.

'Secure the lines,' the helmsman shouted.

Even as he shouted, the trawler shuddered with the impact of another wave. A blast of spray flew over them as green water a foot deep slid down from the elevated port side of the ship. It swept two men off their feet and took the raft into the sea.

Attached to the trawler by a sixty-foot lanyard, the raft was not yet lost.

The helmsman rushed forward. 'Grab the line,' he shouted, wrapping his hands tightly around the nylon cable. After two of the crewmen joined him, they pulled with all their strength, but they'd only managed to drag the raft a short distance before the next wave came surging through.

It swept over the ship and all around it, flooding in from both the bow and the stern. It caught the raft squarely, wrenching the line from men's stinging hands and flipping the raft as it carried it into the teeth of the rocks beyond.

One side of the inflatable boat was torn open upon impact. The orange craft lost its shape and was soon awash with seawater. The next wave finished it off, dragging it

backward and wrapping its deflated fabric around one of the stone outcroppings.

The crewmen had seen the destruction up close. They all knew what it meant.

‘We’re trapped,’ one of the men shouted. ‘Even if we get another raft ready, we’ll never survive that.’

‘This gale has a center to it, an eye,’ another of the men said. ‘If we wait it out, we might have a chance.’

‘The eye of the storm is hours away,’ a third crewman replied. ‘The ship will be scrap by then.’

‘Quiet,’ the helmsman shouted. He thought he’d heard the sound of an engine on the wind. He turned his eyes skyward, hoping to spot a Royal Navy helicopter. All he saw were churning gray clouds.

‘There,’ one of the crewmen shouted. He was pointing toward the channel.

The helmsman turned, squinting against the wind and rain, and finally spotted a torpedo-shaped craft racing through the twilight. Whatever it was it pursued a curving path, disappearing behind the back of a large swell and then reappearing as the wave moved on.

‘Are you lads seeing this?’

Murmurs of acknowledgment came his way.

‘Whoever it is, he’s got to be a bloody loon.’

The bloody loon was a man on a high-speed watercraft similar in design to a Jet Ski but longer and wider, with an extended section aft of the seats, a bulbous nose and a noticeably broader stance.

The craft moved with great speed and agility and its pilot showed no fear, racing up one wave, coming down its back side and then heading directly toward the stricken trawler.