

Scene: 10:50 p.m., two and a half months after Pearl Harbor. A mixed fleet of Dutch and American ships is trying to repel the Japanese invasion of Bali.

The Japanese now that knew the Allies were there and got the jump on the next ship in line, the Dutch destroyer *Piet Hein*. Two of their warships opened fire from point-blank range, 1700 yards. The destroyer snapped on its searchlight and returned fire. In the surreal whites and grays of the Japanese searchlight, *Piet Hein* could be seen launching five torpedoes to port; but a mile and a half behind, *Pope* was too far away to hear the launching charges go off.

25-millimeter anti-aircraft cannon shells raked *Piet Hein*, detonating on impact and sending sparkling shards of metal everywhere, leaving *Piet Hein* glittering from stem to stern. As fast as the eye could see, one stream of shells struck the destroyer obliquely and ricocheted over the deck and into the sea beyond without exploding. A couple duds rebounded back the way they had come.

To throw off the Japanese gunfire, *Piet Hein* steered to starboard and enshrouded herself in a smokescreen. The JA phone line buzzed. Jack picked up the handset. The *Pope's* bridge talker said, "All stations, Bridge: Enemy appears to be a cruiser, a destroyer, and a transport. Port Torpedo Control, prepare to fire. Target is transport. Mr. De Vries, Captain says be ready with star shell."

Five hundred yards ahead of *Pope*, *Ford* emitted three thumps like the beating of a base drum. Jack realized that they were the black powder torpedo launching charges heard from a distance. An acrid smell in his nostrils and the taste of oil on his tongue told him that they were sailing into the remnants of *Piet Hein's* smokescreen. *Pope* steered hard to port to clear the smoke and steady on the target.

Stepping over to the port side and peering around the corner of the after deckhouse, De Vries saw Chief Netterich swing his wooden mallet down on the firing pin of tube number 12. The detonation of the launching charge sent the torpedo shooting down the tube and into the sea. Netterich launched another. For a moment, Jack tracked the wake before it was left behind. He couldn't tell if it was aimed at the cruiser or the transport.

In the distance, *Piet Hein* tried to extricate herself from the trap she was in. She circled tightly to starboard, changing course from north to northeast to east.

Following *Ford*, *Pope* heeled over to starboard. The two destroyers were cutting across the corner to close up with *Piet Hein* in order to provide her with the mutual support that the Dutch battle plan lacked.

There was an explosion from the cruiser off to port, but not a loud one.

"We got her!" shouted Ewell Dibbs. "Our fish got her!"

For the first time, waterspouts erupted near *Ford*. She'd been spotted. Another waterspout shot up two hundred yards ahead of *Pope*, making it impossible to tell if the Japanese gunners had targeted *Pope* or *Ford*.

Most of the guns, though, remained aimed at *Piet Hein*. They had her range, and she was bracketed in a hailstorm of shells. Looking like colossal shocks of wheat, waterspouts surrounded her, blocking her from *Pope*'s view. As the spouts collapsed back into the sea, she took a hit amidships.

Piet Hein was a cornered rat. To throw off the enemy's aim, she began maneuvering radically, zigzagging left and right. This enabled *Ford*, steering straight ahead, to come within a thousand yards of her. At that moment, the Dutch destroyer took a hit in the stern, then another amidships. Her bow wave disappeared. She was slowing to a halt. The amidships hit must have taken out her boilers.

The two American destroyers were still in their rightward turn, cutting off the angle to *Piet Hein*, when the Dutch vessel disintegrated before their eyes. In fire and smoke, her topside fittings were tossed into the air above her. A 75-millimeter anti-aircraft gun vaulted eighty feet high and tumbled end over end into the sea. Her forward funnel was tossed to the top of the main mast, and the captain's barge beside it was blown into matchsticks. Three-quarters of a mile away, Jack felt a warm breath of wind on his face, and a moment later the violence of the sound wave made him flinch.

Oscar Botsky stared with his mouth open. "They must have hit her magazine."

"Or got her with a to'pedo," said Dibbs.

Piet Hein was dead in the water and ablaze from stem to stern, casting a shimmering red glow on the sea around her. *Ford* slowed radically to avoid bearing down on the cripple, and *Pope* had to back full to avoid colliding with *Ford*.

Tiny insect shapes swarmed over *Piet Hein*'s main deck, crawled down her sides, and leapt into the waves. She was beyond help. *Ford* and *Pope* were badly outgunned and needed to get out of there, or they'd meet the same fate.

Torpedoes 6 and 4 burst from Mount 2, just abaft the stern-most funnel, to buy time for *Pope* and *Ford* to escape by making the Japanese turn away. The torpedoes missed, but hitting wasn't the main goal.

Working up to top speed, *Ford* and *Pope* continued circling rightward and headed back south, the way they came. Their orders were to exit Badung Strait to the north, but they were cut off.

The two Japanese warships were two miles off the port quarter. For fifteen minutes the four vessels ran south-southeast on parallel headings.

It was nothing like Balikpapan. No stealthy ambush of anchored transports that didn't even know the Americans were there. No careful plotting of torpedo speeds and angles. Just bedlam. Jutland in a bottle. Armageddon at sea.

Waterspouts erupted all around the Americans in four-gun salvos, first from one of the Japanese warships, then the other, and collapsed downward, drenching everyone topside. Every thirty seconds, one of the two Japanese ships lit up the night with her guns, then went silent as the night closed in around her. And onboard *Pope*, you had four seconds to wonder whether you were about to die. Then four shells roiled the sea and sent

it skyward, the explosions hammered your ears, the splinters *zinged*, the stench of TNT assaulted your nose, and you'd been blessed with thirty more seconds of life.

With nothing to do, the 3-inch crew could only gaze horrified as the glowing red shells hurtled toward them, each one looking like a certain hit—only to fall ahead or behind, to the left or the right. Splinters flew through the air thick as mayflies, poking holes in the hull and upperworks. 25-millimeter ordinance flashed toward them in a series of orange streaks and then with the grace of God zipped on by.

Ford and *Pope* both made smoke, making the dark night even darker. With their foe hidden from them, the Japanese gunfire fell away. The Americans held their fire, so they wouldn't give themselves away. But launching torpedoes wouldn't reveal their location; Lieutenant Ziegler launched his last two. They missed.

Minutes passed. Except for the sounds of *Pope's* machinery straining at the bit to outrun her pursuers, it was quiet.

"Sir," said Botsky, "I think I saw something off the starboard bow." Oscar had the best eyes on the ship.

De Vries stepped over to that side but saw nothing. "You sure?"

"No, Sir."

Jack mulled it over. "If you did see something, how far away was it?"

Botsky furrowed his brow. "I don't know. Two thousand yards? Three?"

Jack was pretty sure he was making a mistake but made it anyway. "Bridge, 3-inch: One of my men thinks he spotted something two to three thousand yards off the starboard bow."

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

Swenson-Jensen's voice came over the line. "Bridge, Starboard Torpedo Control: My fish aren't doing any good over here. Permission to train on that location, just in case?"

More silence. Then, "Starboard Torpedo Control, Bridge: Permission granted."

Jack heard the hand cranks of Torpedo Mounts 1 and 3 turning the tubes leftward, more toward the bow. "Oscar, train the gun to where you think you saw something. Dibbs, load an armor-piercing round, but keep a star shell close at hand."

Botsky raised the peashooter's barrel a bit higher by turning the large hand crank on the left. With his right shoulder, he nudged the mount a trace more toward the bow. "Okay, Sir, I'm aimed where I think I saw—"

The ship was bathed in a brilliance whiter than white. In reflex, Jack turned his eyes away and shaded them with the palm of his hand. It took a second or two for him to realize that *Pope* was fixed in the beam of a searchlight.

For a moment, unbridled terror overwhelmed him. There was no cover, no hiding place. In the dazzling light, he was as radiant as a comet. He was naked on the stage at Carnegie Hall, centered in the limelight; and the audience, hidden behind the brilliance of a thousand supernovae, wanted to kill him.

The human instinct is to cower; to blindly, irrationally, scurry out of the light like cockroaches darting under the kitchen stove. Priborkin jumped behind a canvas windbreak that wouldn't stop birdshot. Dibbs scampered on hands and knees behind the depth charges—probably the worst place on the ship to be if a shell landed nearby. Anything to get out of the glare.

Before his mind even registered the thought, Jack jumped to the pistol grip and pulled the trigger, and the gun went off with a preposterously loud discharge.

BOOM!

Taken by surprise, Botsky yelled, "Shit!" and jerked backward. But he remained at his post.

Jack tracked the shell, which passed ahead of and above the searchlight. In the instant after firing, he realized that he had been trying to determine the angle and distance to the enemy by firing what amounted to a one-round ranging ladder.

"Right seventy-five, down twenty-five," Jack yelled.

"Sir, tell the bridge," said Botsky.

Jack blinked, then grabbed the phone. "All stations, target is 2300 yards out, zero-four-five Relative."

With no gun crew, De Vries yanked on the breach handle himself, opening the breach and ejecting the shell casing backward. As he stooped to lift one of the sixteen-pound armor piercing rounds, somewhere deep in his mind he realized that the shell casing struck him on the left arm as it was ejected. But there was no time to feel pain. No time to be afraid, even.

"Loaded," he shouted. "Fire when ready."

Only then did he realize that the searchlight beam had passed on to fix on *Ford*. But *Pope* was still visible in the cocoon of light reflected off *Ford*.

"Firing," said Botsky.

BOOM!

The 3-inch shell struck the thin steel of the superstructure and pierced it, and Jack could see the metal bend inward and for a moment glow deep red, just before the shell burst somewhere within.

"Hit," said Botsky without emotion. His years of training had him on autopilot.

"Sir, Bridge says cease fire!" yelled Priborkin. "Captain thinks it's the *De Ruyter*!" Jack hadn't heard the phone buzz. Only Josef would have had the gall to answer it.

A full broadside from the mystery ship put the lie to that idea. Its whole port side erupted in flame. The vessel was immense, probably a heavy cruiser. But even at point-blank range, it was two and a half seconds before the full six-gun broadside passed over Jack's head, and four more before he heard the guns' roar. The salvo was way long. The Japanese must have thought tiny *Pope* was farther away than it was.

Making smoke, *Pope* sheered violently to port.

"I got it, Sir," said Dibbs, nudging Jack aside and ejecting the shell casing. Priborkin handed Dibbs the next shell, and he rammed it home and closed the breach.

"Loaded."

"Firing."

BOOM!

"Hit."

Jack heard the muffled bang of five torpedoes being fired from Swenson-Jensen's starboard mounts, and a moment later the 4-inchers opened up. The vibration from the broadside went down the deck and up Jack's legs like a small electric current.

He glanced at the enemy ship but saw only a dark red orb hovering in the air before him, offset slightly toward his right ear. Before its existence registered, it was gone with the hiss of a steam iron, leaving Jack with warmth on the right side of his face and a smokey musk smell in his nostrils.

The air turned brown and acrid, and Jack realized that they'd entered *Ford's* smokescreen. But the enemy cruiser was still visible. From the forward deckhouse, 50-caliber machine guns rattled out *ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka*. They were targeting the enemy cruiser's searchlight.

"Loaded."

"Go for the searchlight, Oscar," Jack yelled.

Ford's main armament joined in, and in a staccato cadence, three waterspouts erupted around the heavy cruiser. *Ford's* 50-calibers targeted the searchlight too, and streams of tracers from *Pope* and *Ford* converged and crisscrossed.

"Firing."

BOOM!

The shell struck the base of the searchlight tower, which waggled for a moment.

"Hit."

Sparks from ricocheting 50-caliber bullets played all around the searchlight. The tower that it was mounted on seemed to tip toward the sea like a toppling pine, and the light faded out.