

When Masha Danilova, a junior sergeant and army radio officer, began her shift on the radar, a newfangled affair said to have been stolen by Soviet intelligence from West Germany or France, or wherever, all she foresaw was more boring hours in front of the screen.

To her surprise, it clearly showed an obscure collection of metallic objects moving along the surface of the ice at a good distance from shore. Considering that radar showed only metal, it could mean only one thing: people with a lot of metal, possibly weapons, were crossing the Strait.

No one had ever tried to cross the Strait from either side, and Masha, like all other personnel at border post number thirty-one, had long been convinced that illegal crossing of the frontier was a thing of the distant past. Anyway, what idiot would try to cross such a heavily guarded border? She picked up the telephone receiver.

“Hello. Get me colonel Lisyansky. It’s urgent.”

“Colonel Lisiansky speaking,” his baritone voice sounded in the earpiece.

“Comrade Colonel, Danilova speaking. Radar shows someone moving across the Strait in an easterly direction.”

“What? Who can it be? Are they armed?” the colonel asked.

“There’s lots of metal showing.”

“What’s their bearing?”

“About 65 degrees 1 minute and 25 seconds north by 169 degrees, 25 minutes and 19 seconds west.”

Lisiansky was chief of border control point number thirty-one, and immediately on hearing Danilova’s message, he summoned his adjutant.

“Call up all frontier post chiefs in the region,” he ordered, “and get them over here immediately.”

“Is this an emergency, comrade Colonel?” asked the adjutant standing in front of the colonel’s desk.

“You’re not supposed to question your superior,” snapped the colonel, then, after a pause and more calmly, “but I can tell you that it looks like that gang from Seimchan is trying to cross the Strait over the ice.”

“Those five? That’s impossible. They couldn’t have crossed the Uljuveyem Valley without being noticed.”

“No discussion. Carry out the order.”

“Yessir.”

Within half an hour the three captains in command of nearby border posts stood in front of Lisiansky, and he briefed them on the situation.

“So,” he summed up, “each of you get a Jeep load of men with at least one machine gun in each vehicle. Kharitonov, you take control. Leave a deputy in charge of your post.”

“Yes, comrade Colonel. I’ll need the bearings.”

“Here they are.” Lisiansky handed him a sheet of paper. “Now off you go and get cracking.”

“Yessir.”

Once the three captains had left his office, Lisiansky took up the phone again. “Masha, get me Sukhin on Ratmanov Island.” He waited for the barking voice at the other end. “Hello, Sukhin? Lisiansky here. Can you hear me? That Seimchan gang are crossing the Strait ... Yeah, no shit! They’ve been located by radar

... Bearings? About half an hour ago they were at 65/1/25 by 169/25/19. Have you got a Jeep? Fine, pack it with as many men as possible and get going. Cut them off from your side ... Fine, carry on."

Within twenty minutes, three Studebaker armored Jeeps moved out in line formation across the ice.

5

Trofimov, Bondarenko and Yatta took a short rest. They leaned against a hefty ice block and smoked.

"Have we passed Ratmanov Island yet?" Trofimov asked.

"Not yet," said Yatta, "in a couple of hours maybe. About a dozen kilometres."

"Still a long way off," Bondarenko shook his head.

"But if the weather was clear, and if there weren't all these hummocks, they could have spotted us already," Trofimov said.

"Then thank the Lord. Sometimes it looks like He cares after all for us wretched escapees." Bondarenko grinned. "Although not for those that do nothing to help themselves. Whatever the priests say about 'Blessed be the meek' it's quite obvious that God really favours the brave and the adventurous."

"Not always," Trofimov gave a shrug. "He didn't save those three that ended up tied to the larches."

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by the muffled rattle of engines.

"D'you hear that?" Trofimov turned to Bondarenko.

"Course I do. I ain't fuckin' deaf."

"Take off. Fast." Trofimov commanded.

They set off as fast as they could. The engine noise came closer and closer until it was no more than a couple of hundred metres behind them.

"Here, Captain, they're right behind us." Bondarenko exclaimed.

"Yeah," Trofimov listened hard, "and there's more than one vehicle—three for sure."

“How could they find us? It was snowing when we started off. I didn’t think our tracks would stay that long.”

“I’m afraid either someone saw our tracks soon after we left,” said Trofimov, “or they have radar.”

“If so, we aren’t half in trouble. If only God would send us a blizzard right now.”

Yatta looked up to the sky. “No, it doesn’t look at all like heavy snowing.”

The column of armored Jeeps slowly wended its way through the gaps between the ice hummocks, following the tracks of the sled party, which were now perfectly visible. In the front Jeep captain Kharitonov sat at the driver’s side.

“We can see their tracks, comrade Captain,” the driver observed.

“Good,” Kharitonov smiled. “Can we go a bit faster?”

The driver shook his head. “No, comrade Captain. You can see, we can hardly get between these ice hills as it is. If we go any faster, we’ll slam into one of them.”

“So I see.” Kharitonov picked up the radio intercom. “Calling Commodore, calling Commodore. Number six calling ... We’ve picked up the tracks. The only problem is we can’t move fast enough. The gaps are too narrow ... Yes, yes ...”

The Jeeps were close behind them. They passed a long stretch free of ice ridges, and then turned in behind another row of hummocks with their pursuers closing in.

“Hell,” Trofimov turned to his comrades. “We’ve no choice. Get the grenades.”

Yatta went to the sled with the weapons and handed them each a dozen or so grenades.

“Spread out in a line facing the enemy and lob one grenade after another onto the ice in front of them, but don’t pull the pins. Wait till you’ve got just four left, then pull the pins and throw them. D’you understand the trick?”

“Got you, Captain. Then all the grenades go off together with the last ones, and there’ll be a humongous crack in the ice. That’s

real smart. It wasn't for nothing they promoted you captain."
"You guys, stand there and there. I'll get behind this hummock."
He pointed to the closest of them. "Can you lob your grenades above these bumps?"

"Yeah, sure," Bondarenko and Yatta both nodded and confirmed.

"You know, I think we should keep back a few grenades," Yatta objected. You never know. We might need 'em later."

"All right, do that," Trofimov agreed. "Get ready!"

The roar of engines was just beyond the ice ridge where they had taken up position.

"Now!" Trofimov ordered.

The grenades flew over the ice hummocks. One, two, three ... Instinctively both Trofimov and Bondarenko several times almost pulled the linchpins and stopped themselves only at the last moment.

Kharitonov's Jeep had reached the small gap in front of the ice ridge separating them from their quarry. They had to slow to walking pace, since the gap between the hummocks was almost too narrow for any vehicle to pass.

"Look out, comrade Captain," the driver called out. "Something's landed in front of us from over the ridge."

Kharitonov strained his eyes.

"Looks like grenades. How come there's no blast? Don't their grenades work? Maybe it's just some crap and they want us to think they're grenades?"

That instant a powerful blast shook the surface of the ice, a crack opened up, and fountains of water spurted up from the crevasse.

"Stop! Stop! Fucking hell!" Kharitonov yelled.

Too late. The driver stood on his brakes, but the ice was awash with water. The Jeep slithered to the crack and plunged into it. Within seconds the heavy vehicle sank beneath the surface with its driver and passengers. The driver of the next Jeep stopped just in time, and the third Jeep also ground to a halt. Soldiers and officers jumped from the two vehicles.

"Shit," bawled Junior Lieutenant Tarasov who was in

command of the second Jeep. "The bastards broke the ice."

"As we see," Lieutenant Shchukin said grimly. "I never imagined they had so much explosive. And poor old Kharitonov's done for."

"Maybe we can get round the crack," Tarasov suggested.

"How can we do that with all these ice hills?" Shchukin retorted. "And how're you gonna get a Jeep through a narrow space like that?" He pointed out the narrow clefts between the ice hills on either side.

"I guess we could look for a wider opening," Tarasov said.

"Ridiculous. While we manoeuvre around this crack, they'll have time to reach no man's land, and we've no right to chase 'em beyond that point. I'd rather just report the accident and have done with it." Shchukin boarded his Jeep again and switched on the intercom.

"Calling Commodore. Calling Commodore. Number six calling. The bandits have blown a hole in the ice ... How? With grenades. They've apparently got lots of them ... Yeah, and the current's opened one hell of a long crack. We've no chance of getting round it at the speed we can go over these ice ridges ... Right. Return? Yessir."

Shchukin got out of the Jeep and shouted a command: "Everyone back into the Jeeps. Orders from the chief. Move slowly back and get away from the crack."