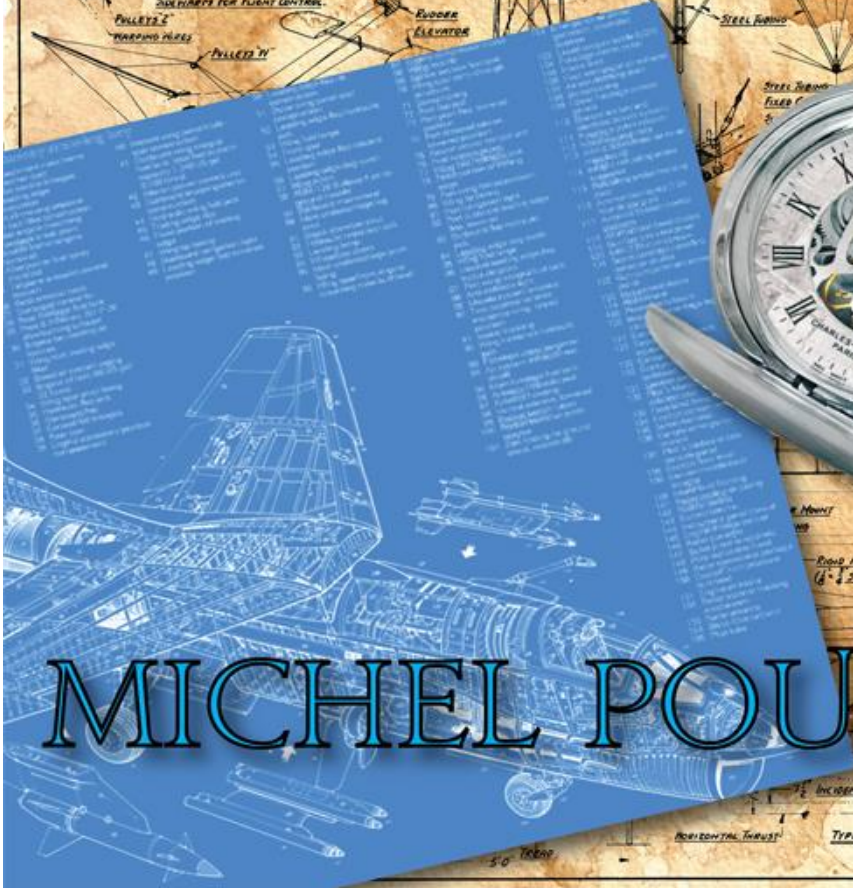
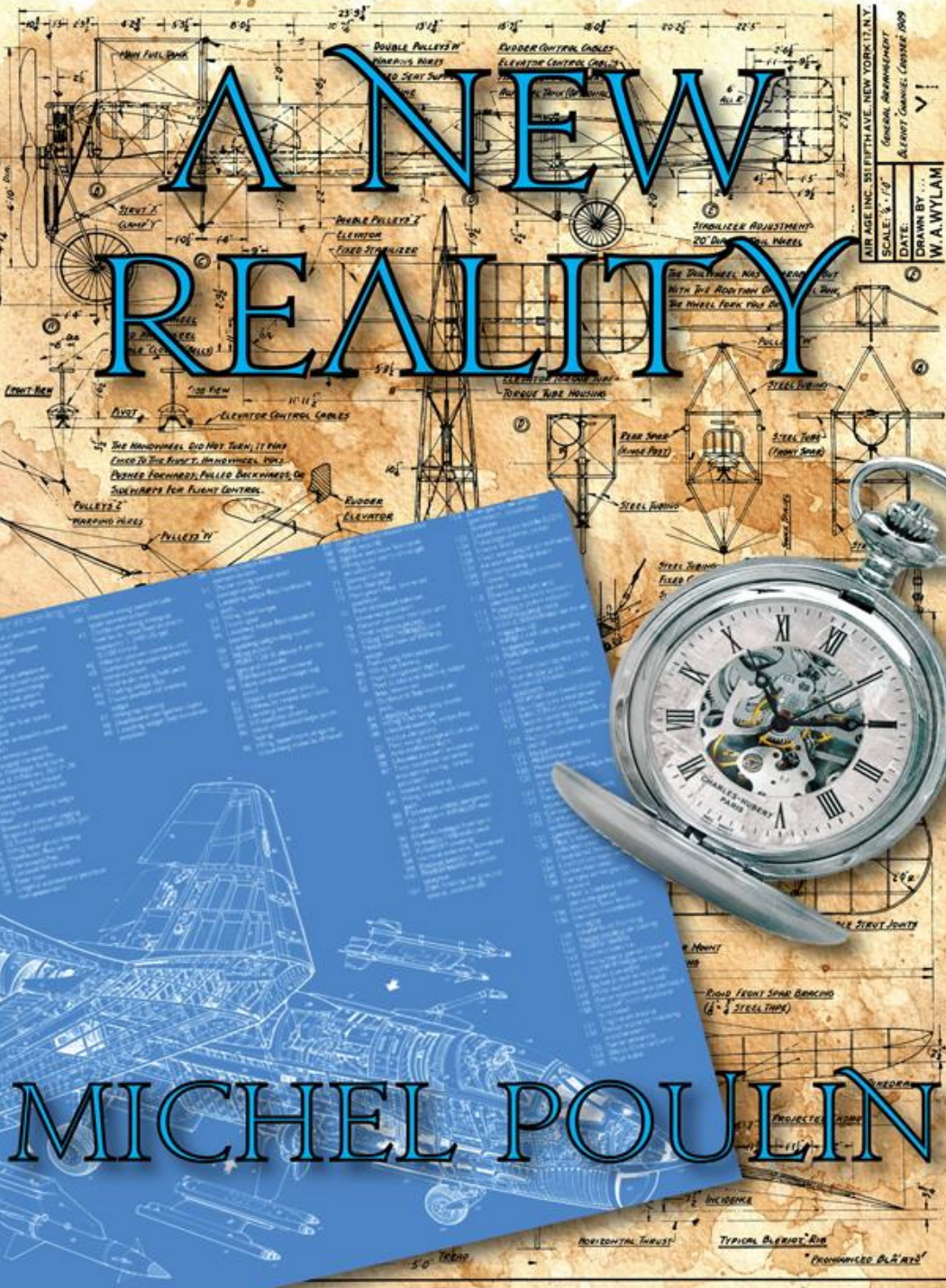


A NEW REALITY



MICHEL POULIN

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A NEW REALITY

An alternate history fiction novel

By

Michel Poulin

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Jason Terlecki

WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS SOME GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS AND PICTURES OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION: WHILE SOME PERSONS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL EXISTED, THEIR ACTIONS AND WORDS IN THIS NOVEL DO NOT REPRESENT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my novel A MINOR GLITCH and can be best described as being part of the 'Alternate History' genre as much as being a science-fiction novel. It continues the adventures of four women who were accidentally displaced in time and found themselves marooned in the early parts of the 20th Century, where they did their best to adapt and prosper.

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SPACE-TIME ODYSSEY

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Bastille Day military parade down the Champs Élysées in Paris.

CHAPTER 1 – LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ

18:03 (Paris Time)

Friday, July 11, 1930

Château du Haut-Buc (Castle of High-Buc)

Buc, southwest of Paris

France

“...This afternoon, the Senate finally passed and approved the new law and constitutional amendment on the equality of women. I, as President of the Republic, in turn signed that new law and constitutional amendment less than one hour ago. I, Pierre-Paul-Henri-Gaston Doumergue, am thus most happy to announce to the women of France that they are now fully equal to men in the eyes of the law and will be able to vote at every level of government. This means in practice that married women will be able to keep control of their possessions and financial assets, which can no longer be

taken away from them by their husbands or relatives, be they male or female. French women will be able to own and operate businesses and financial enterprises and sign legal contracts as freely as men do, while they will have equal rights regarding divorce and separation procedures. Finally, to balance those new rights with corresponding responsibilities, unmarried women aged eighteen and over will be obligated from now on to serve the nation for one year or more, depending on the occupation, by doing either national service work like humanitarian or medical work, or by serving in non-combat support positions in the Army, Air Force and Navy, for which positions they will be trained for by military instructors and specialists. Women of France, you can be proud of yourselves today, as you richly deserved your new rights.”

The eight women assembled in front of the large, flat screen color television sitting in one corner of the big lounge screamed as one with joy as President Doumergue concluded his televised appearance. Tasha Lenoir, the owner of the Château du Haut-Buc, first hugged her three longtime friends, Terry Clarkson, Pham Ti Hien and Johanna Kruger, before hugging in turn the four women employees of her household.

“Girls, I am so happy, for all of us! This is a moment that I had been hoping for years.”

“I actually had despaired of seeing this day ever come, madam.” replied Sylvie Brochu, the cook of the residence, while returning Tasha’s hug.

“Me too!” added Marthe Lecomte, the senior maid. “I do wish that it could have come much earlier: that would have prevented my no-good ex-husband from grabbing all my hard-earned savings when he left me.”

Tasha Lenoir, a tall and still beautiful Eurasian woman at the age of 52, smiled down with sympathy at Marthe.

“And I made sure that he later paid for his acts, Marthe. Here, you will always be respected and treated as an equal.”

Marthe nodded her head at that, knowing that Tasha meant what she had said. Tasha was a most caring employer, on top of being the richest woman in France and possibly in the World, being a savvy businesswoman and a scientific genius. In fact, all four permanent residents of the manor were rich, to varying degrees. Pham Ti Hien, the 43 year-old ex-executive secretary of Tasha Lenoir, owned and controlled the hugely popular and ever expanding ‘Radio France’ network, to which ‘Radio France Télévision’ had been added eleven years ago. Johanna Kruger, a blond, 57 year-old aerospace engineer, owned the ‘Automobiles Kruger’ company, which had gobbled up the

'Automobiles Renault' company some thirteen years ago, and was also co-owner and chief designer of the 'Aéronautique Blériot-Kruger' company. Finally, there was the incredibly tall and strong Terry Clarkson, a 49 year-old black woman who was still Tasha Lenoir's personal bodyguard, on top of being a top test pilot at Blériot-Kruger and the owner of 'Armements Clarkson', a producer of advanced weapons and military equipment which was the favorite supplier of the French Army.

"Jeanne, this calls for Champagne!" said Tasha to one of the maids. "Bring eight cups and two of the bottles that were chilling in the refrigerator for Bastille Day." The maid walked out at once, heading towards the kitchen and leaving the seven other women to listen to the commentaries from the Radio France TV news announcer about President Doumergue's declaration. Those comments made evident the fact that the resistance to that new law had been both long and intense, something the women knew too well indeed. They had hoped for such a law for a long time but had until now to angrily listen to the collection of misogynistic and hypocritical arguments dished out by the opponents to the women's right to vote. Most prominent in those opponents were the members of the French Senate, who had blocked for years all the attempts by either the President of the Republic or the Prime Minister, also known as the 'President of the Council of Ministers', to have such a law pass. However, Tasha Lenoir, who held discreet but considerable political power thanks to her fortune and to her friendly links with high officials, including the President, had worked hard to discredit those opponents to women's rights and to counter their arguments. Now, those efforts were finally paying off, opening new horizons for Tasha, her three friends and partners and for all the women of France.

Jeanne soon came back to the lounge with a service trolley on which sat eight crystal flutes and an ice bucket with two Champagne bottles in it. Tasha personally filled and distributed the cups, then raised her flute high while speaking up.

"TO EQUALITY!"

"TO EQUALITY!" repeated out loud the other women before each taking a sip of Champagne. Sitting back like the others on a sofa, Tasha sighed audibly, her glass still in her hand.

"I wish that Henri would still be here to see this moment."

Mournful expressions appeared on the faces of Hien, Terry and Johanna at those words: Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, a rich oil industrialist who had helped all four of them after

they had arrived accidentally from the future in 1912, had died over ten years ago and was missed by many, as his generosity as a philanthropist and his support for the development of aviation and automobile had been widely recognized. The group of women stayed mostly silent for minutes while sipping their Champagne and listening to the commentaries on the television. The four female employees were finally dismissed for the weekend by Tasha, leaving her alone in the lounge with her three friends from the year 2624. When she spoke again, it was while keeping the volume of her voice low, so that the departing employees could not hear her.

“Hien, what are the chances that our actions in this century, by changing history, could prevent Louis’s death in 1936?”

Hien, who had like her three friends a micro-computer and radio implanted at the base of her brain, reviewed mentally the historical files contained in her computer databanks before answering Tasha while shaking her head sadly.

“I am sorry, Tasha, but Louis is due to die from a heart attack, something our actions can hardly prevent. At best, the actual circumstances and date of his eventual death may change a bit, but Louis has only a few years left to live right now, whether we like it or not.”

“And what then?” asked Johanna Kruger. “I may be the co-owner of the Aéronautique Blériot-Kruger, but who will succeed him? Our company is now hugely important to both the economy and power of France and none of his children are truly ready or even willing to take his place.”

“We will continue Louis’ work while channeling Louis’ part of the profits to his family.” declared Tasha in a quiet voice. “Our biggest problem is actually about ourselves: what will happen to all that we have accomplished when we will eventually die? The anti-aging genetic treatment that we got as a standard medical procedure in the 27th Century may make us live longer than the typical people from this century, but we will still die eventually, either from old age, accident, disease or assassination. What then? Our combined industrial and economic empires are now central to France’s future and to a better World overall. Even though we could now marry without fear of losing our fortunes to greedy husbands, I am loathe to have children only to push them into having to assume our succession. If I ever have children, I would want them to be free to choose the kind of life and occupation they would like best. To force-feed a child into becoming an industrial baron is not my idea of being a good parent.”

“Neither is it for me, Tasha.” replied Johanna Kruger. “Losing my husband and son from the 27th Century when that matter transporter accident projected us in the past was very painful to me at first, but I would never have a child just to fulfill some long term plan for him or her to succeed me. Adopting children and then forming them to succeed us equally strikes me as pure cynical manipulation and I won’t do that. I think that our best option is still to carefully select our most meritorious and talented employees we have in our respective industries and name them as chief designers and managers in our last wills, while naming people we know to be caring and generous persons as beneficiaries of our wills and actual owners of our companies, in order to ensure that our industrial empires profit all of France, rather than only just a few very rich people. I already have a very talented and imaginative engineer name Marcel Bloch in mind, who could succeed me as chief designer at Blériot-Kruger. As for a future owner of Blériot-Kruger, I can’t think of anyone better than Éliane Archdeacon: she loves aviation, like her father, is generous and kind and lives rather simply, despite her father’s fortune. She also happens to be married to an aristocrat who is a painter and a true artist at heart.”

“I agree with you, Johanna.” said Terry Clarkson, Tasha’s personal bodyguard and owner and chief executive of the ‘Armements Clarkson’ industrial group. “Choosing successors based on their talents and ideals sounds like the best solution for us.” All four women nodded their heads at that and fell silent while sipping on their flutes, absorbed in their individual thoughts. In truth, as the mere existence of the large flat screen color television set in the lounge proved, their eighteen years in France had already transformed the country in an immeasurable way, putting it largely ahead of other countries both technologically and, more importantly for Tasha and her three friends, sociologically.

09:18 (New York Time)

Sunday, July 13, 1930

Queens International Airport

District of Queens, New York City

New York State, U.S.A.

U.S. Secretary of Commerce Robert P. Lamont was happy to get up from his rather uncomfortable seat in the narrow cabin of his Boeing 224 passenger plane, which

had just landed in New York, coming from Washington. Recuperating his leather briefcase and hat from the overhead luggage rack, he then walked towards the forward exit of the plane, mixing with the nineteen other passengers, which included his two aides and one female secretary. The Boeing 224 was by American standards a good plane, with two radial piston engines, an all-metal construction and a true cantilever mono wing, and was the mainstay of many American domestic airlines. However, by the standards of Air France it was a hopeless dinosaur. Lamont had more than once wished that American airline companies could buy some of the advanced aircraft designs used by Air France, but that had hit a wall raised by the owner of Air France, Tasha Lenoir, who refused to sell Blériot-Kruger aircraft to American customers as long as segregationist laws, regulations and policies would be forced upon Air France installations in the United States. New York City, along with Los Angeles and Honolulu, had been and still were the three sole American cities which had accepted to forgo segregationist policies at their local airports. That had in turn brought a huge economic stimulus to those three cities, which were now important international hubs in the worldwide Air France network of airports, routes and radio navigation beacon stations. If you wanted to go from the United States to Europe and back these days, you basically had two options: to either be ready to spend over a week at sea and travel aboard a passenger liner ship, or to take one of the jet-powered airliners operated by Air France, which made the New York – Paris trip in less than seven hours, and this at less cost than the cheapest maritime fare available. Understandably, most people opted for Air France, making its New York – Paris route a heavily frequented and also very profitable one. It also made the maritime companies scream like skinned cats as they were gradually pushed towards bankruptcy.

Leaving the Air America's Boeing 224 by its forward left door, Lamont waited for his three assistants to come out as well before walking to the nearest ground level access door to the air terminal building. The building, a big, round affair, had eight arrival/departure aircraft gates, each of which had both a ground level access door and what was called 'jetways', elevated corridors that could move around on wheels and extend themselves to connect with the access doors of aircraft which would otherwise require the use of mobile staircases. Lamont knew about them from the past newspaper articles written about Air France, its planes and its installations, but the airports in the U.S.A. that didn't belong to Air France still didn't have such 'jetways'. Once inside the

terminal, Lamont was confronted with more visual evidence that this was no standard American installation. The architecture was decidedly 'avant-garde', with lots of stained glass and stainless steel used, while electronic display boards and large color television screens dispersed around the terminal showed various messages and flights information to the public using the building. Lamont's secretary, Louise Perkins, sighed with content on feeling the fresh breeze from the building's air conditioning system.

"Aaaah, that feels good! I wish that our offices in Washington could also be air-conditioned."

"Don't count too much on that, Louise." replied with a smile Adam Salinger, Lamont's translator for this trip. "They are talking of further cutting our department's budget, thanks to the recession."

"Uh, I would use the word 'depression' instead of 'recession', Adam." said John Cartwright, who was Lamont's personal aide and who tended to tell things as they were. "But I must say that this place does honor its reputation, from what I can see of it."

"Well, you guys can debate semantics later." cut in the Secretary of Commerce. "Let's recuperate our luggage, so that we can go to the Air France counter and board our plane to Paris."

For that, the group had to wait for the ground personnel of Air America to finish transferring the luggage inside the Boeing 224 to the terminal building, putting the various bags and suitcases on an oval conveyor belt system near the gate's door. Using two of the luggage carts available around the terminal, Lamont and his aides loaded their suitcases on them, then rolled them towards the Air France service counters. One large publicity poster made Lamont stop for a moment on the way, time to examine it with curiosity.

"The Ireland weekend express? What is that?"

Reading the poster, which showed the picture of a happy Irish family coming out of an Air France plane, Lamont understood quickly what it was all about.

"Special weekend return trips to Dublin at half fares for Irish-American families? That is mighty generous on the part of Air France...and not very good business practice: those special fares must eat a lot in their profit margins."

"Maybe, sir, but it certainly must create a lot of goodwill and good publicity for Air France." said Adam Salinger. "There is a big Irish immigrant community in New York and such cheap flights, providing a chance to go visit relatives in Ireland, must be

extremely popular. That would also jive with the reputation of the owner and creator of Air France as a social activist.”

“Aah, yes: the powerful and mysterious Miss Tasha Lenoir. I can’t count how many times someone mentioned her while discussing trade with France with me. If I believed them, this Tasha Lenoir pretty well owns much of France.”

“Well, sir, they do say that she is the richest woman in the World right now.” added Louise Perkins, making Lamont nod his head.

“She does have that reputation, Louise. She is also said to be a formidable businesswoman, on top of being a scientific genius. I would be truly curious to meet her one day. But enough of this! Let’s go to the Air France counter!”

The line of passengers waiting to get booked aboard the next flight to Paris was quite long, snaking around moveable poles linked by red tape. Lamont was tempted for a moment to use his social status and jump the line but decided that it would have been squarely impolite and patiently waited his turn. John Cartwright, on his part, eyed with some misgivings the few dark-skinned people mixed in with white people in the lineup.

“Hum, no segregated line for negroes: I wouldn’t try that in Alabama or Georgia.”

“And that is why they don’t have Air France service there and still have to use piston-powered planes.” replied Salinger, his tone a bit caustic. While on the whole a fairly decent man, Cartwright had a racist streak that tended to sour his personality. At that point, Lamont put up one hand, cutting off a reply from Cartwright.

“Enough on that subject! John, I will remind you that the racial atmosphere in France is quite different from that here in the United States.”

“Understood, sir!” said the chastised aide, who then clamed up. Twelve minutes later, Lamont’s turn came at the service counter. The Air France stewardess who greeted him with a big smile was young, very pretty and most appetizing, making Lamont wish that he was some thirty years younger. Her English proved to be fluent, with only a trace of French accent in it.

“May I have your passport, sir? Did you have a reservation made in advance in your name, sir?”

“Me and my three assistants behind me had first class seats reserved for this morning’s flight to Paris, with return tickets for next Friday. Here are my passport and those of my assistants.”

“Thank you, sir!”

The young woman opened first Lamont's passport and looked at the picture and name inside, then looked at a sort of glass screen in front of her while typing quickly on a keyboard somewhat similar to that of a typewriter. She then did the same with the passports of his assistants before looking back up at Lamont and smile to him.

"Your reservations are confirmed and you are now booked aboard our Flight AF002, Mister Secretary. I just need now to weigh your suitcases and tag them and you will then be able to pay for your fare before going to your gate's waiting lounge."

"Uh, may I ask what you just used to type our names and check our reservations, miss? And how do you know that I am a federal cabinet member?"

The young French woman had a cute smile, her eyes glinting, as she answered him.

"What I used is called a computer, sir. It was developed by the 'Électroniques Lenoir' company and is a proprietary system used only by the various branches of the 'Lenoir Industries Consortium', which includes Air France, and by the French government and military. That computer system allows us to book or check for a reservation, verify seat availability and allot specific seats for each passengers. As for your title, sir, our personnel keeps abreast of lists of important officials with V.I.P. status."

What the stewardess didn't say, in order not to alarm Lamont, was that the Air France computer reservation system did a lot more than that and had actually flagged Lamont as a high-level government official once his name had been entered in the system. She also didn't tell him that she had scanned his passport, thus recording his picture in the system. Her explanation however seemed to satisfy Lamont, who was still quite overwhelmed by that demonstration of superior technology. He thus promised himself to tell someone about this 'computer system' once back in Washington and took back his passport, along with his ticket and embarkation card. He then paid for his fare and that of his assistants, using cash, before passing one by one their suitcases to the stewardess, so that she could weigh and tag them. At the end of the process, the stewardess gave a last warm smile to Lamont while pointing at a nearby hallway.

"Your bags are now going to be loaded aboard your flight, Mister Secretary. If you may now proceed to the departure area, where you will be able to wait for your flight's departure, which is due in eighty minutes. There, you will be within the airport's duty free zone, where you will find various boutiques that sell numerous luxury items free of import taxes."

"Thank you very much, miss." said Lamont before leading his three assistants towards the departure area. He couldn't help however say something to them in a low voice while walking.

"Wow! This Air France bunch is starting to seriously impress me. That computer system of theirs looks incredible. I will have to mention it to the President and to the rest of the cabinet on our return."

Only seconds after saying that, they crossed path with a group of Air France pilots and stewardesses dragging behind them wheeled suitcases. Louise Perkins couldn't help open her mouth and eyes wide at the sight of those suitcases, held by their owners via telescopic handles integrated into the hard-cased suitcases.

"Oh my God! Look at those suitcases! I should get some like these."

One of the French stewardesses heard her and turned her head to speak to Louise in a good English.

"If you wish to buy similar suitcases, miss, you can find them in most boutiques in Paris and also in one of the duty free boutiques of this airport."

"Damn, I must get myself a couple of those: I am getting tired of stretching out my arms with heavy suitcases that I have to lift and carry."

"They sure look practical." said Lamont, thoughtful, while watching the Air France crew walk away. "Maybe we could reserve half a day for shopping, once in Paris."

"Thank you, sir." said Louise gleefully, promising herself to use that coming half-day to the fullest.

To their surprise, they had to empty their pockets of all metallic objects and pass through a metal detector frame in order to enter the departure area, which was situated on the upper floor, while a large, multi-lingual sign at the entrance said 'No firearms, knives or other weapons allowed'. However, Lamont accepted that without fuss.

"Well, that policy makes sense. I certainly wouldn't want to have an armed madman aboard our plane."

"Me neither, Mister Secretary." added Louise. Once inside the departure area, they saw that a number of waiting lounges lined the outer side of their level, while numerous boutiques, shops and service counters lined the inner side. Since they still had over one hour to wait before boarding their flight, Lamont led his assistants in a tour of the boutiques, curious to see what they sold and at what prices. What they saw was a

wide variety of luxury items like perfumes, jewelry, watches and articles of clothing, but there was no alcohol on sale, as the Prohibition Act of 1920 made illegal the importation, sale or exportation of alcohol products in the United States. The boutiques themselves, sporting an abundance of mirrors, brass fittings, glass and stainless steel, were nearly as much of an eye-catcher as the products they sold, making a stunned Louise exclaim in wonderment at one point.

“My God! It is as if we stepped into a different world.”

“Well, a different world just came to us.” said Adam Salinger, his head turned towards one of the outer panoramic windows. “Look at the plane that just lined up at our gate.”

All four Americans then stared at the big, sleek jet aircraft that had come forward to their flight’s assigned gate. Painted mostly sky blue, it wore on its sides a wide tricolor, red-white-and blue band running from nose to tail, with the words ‘AIR FRANCE’ painted in bold red letters within the white band. All ideas of shopping temporarily forgotten, the Americans, like the other non-French passengers due to embark on Flight AF002, walked quickly to the panoramic windows to admire the aircraft.

“Look at the size of that beast!” exclaimed John Cartwright. “It is easily three times the length of the Boeing 224 we came in from Washington.”

Lamont looked at his boarding pass and read the aircraft type they were to fly in.

“This is a Blériot-Kruger ATLANTIQUE Model 200, according to our boarding passes. It is certainly an impressive beast. Hopefully, its performances and comfort will be on par with its looks.”

“Well, it appears to be an amphibian aircraft as well, sir.” remarked Adam Salinger. “Look at the shape of the bottom half of its fuselage.”

“Oh? Damn, you’re right, Adam! But why make such a big aircraft an amphibian one?”

“Probably because true airports with long, paved runways are still uncommon around the World, sir. Also, the French have many overseas territories, especially around the Pacific, where paved runways must be rare but where most places are near the sea. Such an amphibian airliner could thus in theory land about anywhere in the World, something that would be a definite advantage in commercial terms.”

“It is certainly a beautiful aircraft, with those smooth, curved lines.” Said Louise, making Lamont nod his head.

“That it is!”

His eyes then caught on a Ford three-engine plane rolling past behind the Blériot-Kruger ATLANTIQUE. Lamont couldn't help cringe at the sharp contrast between the American-made aircraft and the French one.

"Damn! And we are claiming to be the most advanced nation on Earth."

Some forty minutes later, an Air France employee standing behind a service counter near the gate's access announced via a loud speaker system that the passengers for Flight AF002 could start boarding, with the first class passengers to proceed inside first, along with pregnant women and handicapped persons. Walking down the 'jetway', Lamont was greeted just inside the aircraft by two smiling and very pretty Air France stewardesses who were pointing each passenger towards his or her seat. The stewardess who greeted Lamont took a brief look at his boarding pass before pointing at a nearby spiral staircase behind her, all the while smiling to him.

"The first class cabin is on the lower deck, sir. This staircase will lead you to it."

"Thank you, miss!"

Going down the carpeted stairs, Lamont ended inside a compartment that was approximately six meters long and five meters wide, which contained a total of sixteen wide, well padded seats. Another stewardess looked at his boarding pass and showed him a set of four seats arranged in pairs facing each other, beside two large windows on the left side of the aircraft.

"You have Seat 01-A, sir, the one nearest the first window."

"Thank you, miss." replied the politician before going to his seat and putting his hat and briefcase in the overhead luggage bin. Sitting down in the brown leather padded seat assigned to him, he found it to be very comfortable, making him sigh in contentment.

"Aaah, that seat is as comfortable as my favorite sofa at home. This flight is decidedly starting on a good foot."

"I wonder how the seats in the other classes look like." Said Salinger as he sat down in his own seat, prompting a reply from Cartwright.

"Probably a lot cheaper and narrower than our seats."

"Actually, Adam, I would like you later on to go look at the accommodations in the rest of this aircraft." said Lamont. "I would like to have an assessment of this plane ride, for the benefit of the employees of the department that may need to travel on Air France in the future."

“Understood, Mister Secretary.”

Some seven minutes later, as the last first class passenger had just taken his seat, a young Asian stewardess with a singing voice stood in front of the forward bulkhead of the compartment and addressed the passengers.

“Good morning and welcome on Air France Flight 002, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Liyang and I will be your stewardess for this trip. I will now review with you the flight safety directives for this plane, then will explain the various services and devices meant for your use. First, I will point now to the two emergency exits available for the first class section...”

The stewardess went on for a couple of minutes, demonstrating among other things how to put on and use the inflatable flotation vests stored under each seat. Then, she started talking about the services and devices available to the passengers. Lamont was surprised by the extensive list of things available, but was particularly overwhelmed by one item.

“They have color television sets on this plane?”

As if in response to his exclamation, the stewardess pressed a button on the wall electronic panel next to her, making flat television panels pivot down from the overhead luggage bins above each passenger seat. Lamont found himself looking from a distance of forty centimeters in front of him at a flat plasma screen about thirty centimeters in both width and height. That screen then came alive with vivid colors, showing the Air France logo on a light blue background as the stewardess went on.

“The television screens now in front of you is controlled by a command panel hidden in the left armrest of your seat. Just raise the forward cover of your armrest to access it. You will also find in that armrest recess a pair of small earphones that will allow you to hear the audio output from whatever you will select to view or listen to. With your command panel, you can either select to view a film from our pre-recorded list, listen to some pieces of music from our audio menu, or access the broadcasts from Radio France and its various channels, one of which is Radio France International, which broadcasts in English and can be heard around the World. Your command panel will allow you to review the lists of available channels, films and music. I will now retract your viewing screens inside their housings, so that we could prepare for takeoff. Once at our cruising altitude of 10,000 meters, or 33,000 feet, I will serve drinks, followed by a

hot lunch. Now, please make sure that your seat belts are on and keep your seats up for takeoff.”

As the flat television screens disappeared in the overhead bins, Lamont exchanged stunned looks with his two aides and one secretary.

“Such incredible technology, aboard a passenger aircraft? Who would have thought this possible? I wonder if it is only first class passengers who enjoy such expensive things.”

“I can ask the stewardess about that, Mister Secretary.” volunteered Adam Salinger, who then made a sign to the stewardess. Liyang smiled on hearing his question and replied in her singing voice.

“All the passengers aboard this plane have such individual viewing screens, sir.”

“And...how long have you had such television sets aboard Air France planes, miss?”

“Nine years, sir.”

That answer made both Lamont and Salinger open their mouths in shock.

“Nine years? But, there are still no regular television broadcasting stations in the whole of the United States. Do the French people have regular access to television broadcasts, miss?”

“They have...since 1920. Presently in France, you can tune between three national channels and over a dozen regional ones. Once we are close to the French coast, you will be able to tune in to Radio France Télévision, sir.”

“Uh, one last question, miss: what other country in Europe does have such television public networks, if any?”

“The British have had their own national television network, operated by the BBC, for about four years now, while Belgium and Switzerland have had their own national networks for a bit over three years now. Radio France also broadcasts both radio and television programs via underwater cables to the various French overseas territories, where local stations also provide services in the local languages. Is there any other questions that you would like me to answer, sir?”

“No! Thank you, miss. You were most kind.”

Lamont closed his eyes for a moment in order to calm the storm in his brain.

“France has had working public television stations for ten years already, while we still have nothing? How could this be possible?”

"My question would rather be 'how come we didn't know that before?' added Louise Perkins, making Adam Salinger nod his head slowly.

"A most pertinent question, Louise. Is it possible that those news could have been censored in the United States? After all, the Navy Department still claims control of all radio transmitter stations in the country, while relations with France have been rather spotty in the last fifteen years or so. Remember how badly President Wilson reacted to French criticism about American policies concerning racial segregation?"

"Yeah, I remember that alright." said John Cartwright, making a sour expression. "Those Frenchmen tried to give us moral lessons and President Wilson was right to tell them to get screwed. Our presidents since then have been right to keep that policy of arms-length approach with France. In fact, I am surprised that Air France is still allowed to own and operate an airport on American soil, an airport where American laws are flouted openly."

"Maybe it is still open because it is the only air link existing between Europe and the U.S.A., John." replied at once Adam Salinger, a first generation immigrant whose family had come from the Alsace region of France some forty years ago. "Unless of course you would prefer for us to spend over a week on a ship in order to cross the Atlantic."

"Please calm down, gentlemen." intervened Lamont in a low but firm tone. "We are on this trip to try to get the cooperation of France in dealing with the economic depression devastating our country and many others, so let's avoid anti-French rhetoric, at least in public."

"Uh, understood, Mister Secretary." said Cartwright before clammng up.

Some three minutes later, the noise of whining turbines announced the lighting up of the four big engines of the ATLANTIQUE, with a female voice then sounding out of a loudspeaker after another minute, as the plane started to be pushed back away from the gate.

"May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain, Commandant Élisabeth Deroche, speaking. We should be taking off for Paris in approximately six minutes and our flight will take approximately six hours and twenty minutes. Make sure that your seat belts are buckled and tight and keep your seats in the 'up' position for the time being. Thank you for flying with Air France."

“A woman pilot?” exclaimed Louise Perkins, a delighted smile on her face. “That’s great!”

“We shouldn’t be surprised by this.” said Adam Salinger, also smiling. “After all, Air France was created and owned by a woman.”

“That Tasha Lenoir certainly put her imprint on history in a big way.” added Lamont, thoughtful. In that, Lamont didn’t realize how true his statement was.

Compared to what they had experienced in the Air America Boeing 224, the takeoff in the Blériot-Kruger ATLANTIQUE could easily be described as ‘high performance’, with the big airliner taking off cleanly and climbing speedily. As their plane started turning around to adopt its heading towards Paris, Lamont saw something on the ground, along the shores of the East River and near Bowery Bay, that intrigued him.

“Hey, I see bulldozers and excavators demolishing the old Gala Amusement Park.”

After taking a quick look through a window, John Cartwright nodded his head once and spoke up.

“I heard about the park’s demise, Mister Secretary. Basically, the Prohibition Act killed it by closing the bars and beer joints that made the park popular. It had been losing money for years, so I suppose that the owners decided to close it and sell the land. I suspect that the new owners will build low income apartment buildings on its grounds.”

“Too bad! I once had fun there with my family a decade ago.” said Lamont, who then all but forgot about the old park.

22:53 (Paris Time)

Le Bourget Airport, northeast suburbs of Paris France

While the flight itself had proved very comfortable and agreeable, with excellent meals and free drinks, Lamont still felt somewhat hammered by the change in time zones and was happy to be greeted inside the arrival terminal building of Le Bourget Airport by an American embassy employee. The employee, a thin man dressed in a good quality dark blue suit, bowed briefly his head to him as he presented himself.

“Mister Secretary Lamont, I am Roger Metcalfe, Assistant Commercial Attaché at the U.S. embassy. I was sent to greet you and bring you and your assistants to your hotel in Paris.”

“Aaah, excellent! I must say that this abrupt change in time zones is killing me. To which hotel are we going?”

“The ‘Le Meurice’, in the First Arrondissement, right in the heart of Paris, sir. It is a five stars establishment and is about the best hotel in Paris, on top of being very well situated. Uh, I suppose that you already know that tomorrow is Bastille Day, the national holiday of France, and that all government offices will be closed, sir.”

“I do! I insisted on arriving in advance in order to be able to rest after my flight and be in top shape to meet with Ministers Briand and Flandin. Are stores also closed tomorrow?”

“Most of them will be, but stores, shops and restaurants geared towards tourists will be opened for business, so if you intended to use that day to do some shopping, you will still be able to do so. I however counsel that you wait for the afternoon to do that: a huge military parade will go down the Champs Élysées in the morning, all the way to the Place de la Concorde, in front of your hotel. It is a grand spectacle and is well worth watching.”

“Really? Then, I will be delighted to watch it with my staff, sir.”

09:08 (Paris Time)

Monday, July 14, 1930

Suite 326, Hotel Le Meurice

Rue de Rivoli, First Arrondissement

Paris

Having been more affected than he had expected by the change in time zones between the USA and France, Robert Lamont ended up sleeping longer than he had planned and was actually awakened by the noise of an approaching military band, complete with trumpets and drums. Groggily getting out of bed, he put on his robe and slippers before going to a window of his suite’s bedroom. What he saw coming down the wide avenue of the Champs Élysées finished waking him up: thousands of soldiers in parade uniforms were marching down the avenue in solid, colorful blocks, heading

towards the nearby Place de la Concorde, with its Egyptian obelisk, while following the beat from a military band.

“Wow! This is certainly quite a show.”

Walking out of his bedroom and entering the large and luxurious common lounge of his suite, he found his two aides and his secretary there, watching the parade from the windows of the lounge while wearing robes and slippers, like Lamont. Louise Perkins turned her head towards her boss and smile, excitement showing on her face.

“Mister Metcalfe didn’t lie yesterday about this military parade, sir: it is indeed a grand spectacle. I wish that we would hold such annual military parades in Washington for the Fourth of July.”

“Well, don’t keep your hopes up on that, Louise: with the present state of the American economy and government budget, I am not sure that we could even afford to pay for a parade like this one.”

Lamont then joined his secretary at her window and watched with her as the successive marching units passed in front of the V.I.P. stands set up in Place de la Concorde, where President Doumergue was standing and saluting the passing units.

“The French sure know how to project martial grandeur. Their military tradition is indeed a long and proud one.”

The approaching whistling noise of jet aircraft then made him look up, in time to see ten jet fighters flying in ‘V’ formation over the avenue, coming from the ‘Arc de Triomphe’. The jet aircraft had triggered colored smoke generators and were painting a long red, white and blue band of smoke behind them.

“Look at those aircraft! They are fantastic!” exclaimed Louise, all excited by the visual show. However, the five large jet aircraft that followed two minutes later left her and the three other Americans with mouths open ajar.

“My God! What are these?”

“My bet would be bombers, judging from their size and aggressive lines.” said Lamont while looking up through the window. “But their shape is really bizarre: they have two pairs of wings with their tips linked, with one pair of wing swept back and the other swept forward, forming a sort of lozenge.”

The four Americans kept watching the parade, both on the ground and in the air, as dozens of separate units marched down the avenue. The last marching unit was that of the French Foreign Legion, marching at their traditional slow pace. What followed

them however was what impressed Lamont the most on the ground: dozens of armored vehicles, rolling in boxes of impeccably lined columns and rows, followed the troops on foot, driving down the avenue at walking speed. The first box of vehicles was in fact made of close to eighty tracked armored vehicles equipped with large turrets and sporting the barrels of long guns of large caliber.

"Is that what they call 'tanks', Mister Secretary?" asked Louise, her eyes fixed on the big, intimidating steel beasts.

"I believe that they are, Louise, although I never saw a tank before."

"Do we have tanks in the U.S. Army, sir?" said John Cartwright, making Lamont shake his head slowly.

"I don't think so, John. Even if we wanted some such tanks in our army, we probably couldn't afford them right now. Hopefully, the French will help us go over this damn economic and financial depression by making a deal with us on trade tariffs. I am not sure that passing the Smoot-Hawley Tariffs Act was a wise thing, though. We will see about that tomorrow, I suppose."

On that, Lamont was quickly disappointed the next day, when he met French Commerce Minister Flandin and Foreign Affairs Minister Briand in a meeting that turned sour nearly at once, with the French threatening to impose counter-tariffs in response to the Smoot-Hawley Act. Two more days of talk proved basically fruitless, with Robert Lamont and his assistants flying back to the United States the next Friday with essentially empty hands.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt signing an act.

CHAPTER 2 – SEPARATE DEAL

14:36 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, July 29, 1930

Tasha Lenoir's electronic research laboratory

Aéro-Parc Blériot, Buc

Southwest suburbs of Paris

France

Thomas Fletcher had expected to be guided to a managerial office or, at the least, to some kind of administrative suite. Instead, he found himself entering what looked furiously like some kind of scientific laboratory. After asking to see Miss Tasha Lenoir, Tom had been led to a small group of buildings situated near the prototype shop

of the Blériot-Kruger aircraft company, in Buc. The first room he was led into was full of tables and work stations supporting a bewildering assortment of electronic equipment of all kinds, along with some fantastic-looking instruments about which he couldn't even start to guess what they were for. His guide, a young female employee, had then told him to wait there before she entered an adjacent room. Tom was still looking around at the strange instruments when the young employee came back, another woman in tow. That woman was clearly much older, appearing to be in her forties, but what struck Tom was her dress: a white coverall with hood, a pair of swiveling magnifying lens mounted on a sort of headband, and surgical gloves. She also had an air filtering mask, which she had pulled down below her chin, revealing the face of a beautiful mature Eurasian woman. The newcomer went to Tom and shook hands with him while smiling to him.

"Hello! I am Tasha Lenoir. I was told that you were looking for me?"

"Uh, yes, Miss Lenoir. My name is Thomas Fletcher and I came to Paris to bring you an invitation from the governor of the state of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt."

Tasha raised at once an eyebrow on hearing that name. When she and her three old friends had accidentally been projected back in time all the way to the year 1912, which for persons of the 27th Century was an obscure and long-forgotten time period, they had with them only the most basic of historical data about the 20th Century. However, as basic as it had been, that database did include a substantial entry on Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was supposedly to prove to be a key player in this century and who would become President of the United States in a bit over two years. Tasha's interest was thus raised at once.

"Oh? And what kind of invitation would Governor Roosevelt have for me, Mister Fletcher?"

"Basically, he and state governors from the New England region would be most interested to discuss with you a possible expansion of your air transportation network in the United States, to cover the whole New England area and the state of New York, on top of New York City. Governor Roosevelt noticed that you have started to build a new airport on the site of the old Gala Amusement Park, in the Queens District. Were you looking to expand your United States air coverage, Miss Lenoir?"

"Actually, no! Yes, I have bought the land on which the Gala Amusement Park was, but that is in order to give some extra breathing space to my existing Queens International Airport, whose runways are starting to become short and which is getting

progressively squeezed by new constructions around it. As for expanding my network in the United States, that won't happen until your damn segregation laws and Jim Crow regulations are repealed. I will simply not operate in a place that will force me to discriminate against people of color."

"Governor Roosevelt and his colleagues from the New England states do know about your objections against racial segregation, miss, and are ready to shield your future installations and personnel from them, the same way your present airport in Queens is exempt from following segregationist regulations."

Tasha nodded slowly her head at that, partially reassured.

"And did Governor Roosevelt tell you why he wants me to expand my aviation network in his state and around the New England area? The United States is presently living through a severe economic depression and I have already noted a significant drop in Air France flight bookings by American users. What does he want to achieve? Boost the local economy with foreign investments? Introduce new technologies that would create jobs? I am sure that he has not sent you here just to help me improve American ridership on Air France."

"I honestly couldn't speculate about the Governor's motives, Miss Lenoir. However, what I know is that Governor Roosevelt, along with the governors of the various states of New England, are ready to defy the federal government and the racist attitudes of many in the country in order to facilitate the expansion of your Air France network within the United States."

Tasha thought for a couple of seconds before replying to that last remark.

"Very well, Mister Fletcher: you convinced me. We will leave together for New York tomorrow. You will get to ride in my personal plane."

09:24 (New York Time)

Wednesday, July 30, 1930

PÉGASE supersonic executive jet 'Lenoir 001'

On approach to the Queens International Airport

New York City, U.S.A.

"We are now on final approach to Queens International Airport. Please buckle up your seat belts and put your seats in the 'up' position."

The overhead speaker's announcement from the pilot made Thomas Fletcher reflexively look out through his window, where he effectively saw the East River and the suburbs of the District of Queens below. He then looked at his watch in disbelief: the flight from Paris to New York had taken only a bit over two and a half hours! The stunned look he gave to Tasha, who was sitting across their small table, facing him, made the Eurasian woman smile.

"I told you that my plane was a fast one, Mister Fletcher."

"But, your ATLANTIC jetliner takes about seven hours to make the New York to Paris trip. How fast is this jet, really?"

"How fast? Let's say that we just made the trip at a cruising speed of Mach 2.35, or 1,562 miles per hour, and that my plane can go even faster...much faster. I am very proud of the Blériot-Kruger PÉGASE, and not only because it is fast."

"Uh, what would be your other reasons to be proud of it, if it is not only its speed, Miss Lenoir?" asked Tom Fletcher, still shaken and impressed by the performance of the plane he was in. Tasha's expression sobered up then.

"Because of the social and humanitarian impacts it is bringing to France and its people, mister. Air France presently uses a number of PÉGASE supersonic transports reconfigured for mass transit, with 54 regular-sized seats in its cabin, to provide a fast means of transportation to the average French citizen needing to go from France to one of its more distant overseas territories, like Tahiti and New Caledonia. A trip to Tahiti that would normally take over twenty hours in the air, plus two refueling stops on the way, only takes less than nine hours and one refueling stop with a PÉGASE, thus making such long trips much more tolerable. With its very long range, which gives it a truly global reach, the PÉGASE is helping to cement together France and its overseas territories, facilitating their administration from Paris, speeding the movements of civil servants, diplomats and dignitaries, and making mail distribution that much faster. Before, those overseas territories justifiably felt to be often forgotten by France. Not anymore! Another important role my PÉGASE plays is medical air evacuation. A patient in critical need of advanced or specialized medical treatment in France can now be transported quickly by one of the PÉGASE jets configured for medical evacuation that are used by France's Red Cross Society. I donated the use of three such planes, along with their flight crews and ground support crews, to the French Red Cross, and I am immensely proud about the good they are doing."

"You donated three planes like this one? But, each such plane must cost close to a million dollars, no?"

"And? Mister Fletcher, please understand this. I may have been very successful in business and do have a sizeable fortune in my name, but I am not doing all this in order to live in utter luxury. You saw my manor in Buc. While vast and well furnished, it is by no means extravagant in terms of decoration or furniture. The majority of the profits I make from my various business and scientific ventures are either reinvested into my enterprises' infrastructures and tooling or spent to improve the work conditions and social benefits of my employees. All my employees benefit from a forty hour, five-day work week, paid annual vacations, free health care, maternity leave and retirement pension, to name only a few such benefits. As for Air France, I keep my air fares just high enough to turn a minimal profit and not register losses. Why? Because I want French citizens and other people to be able to travel around at an affordable price. For me, Air France is another way to glue together France and to make it a better country. It also gives me a way to improve the lot of the local citizens in our overseas territories, like Indochina, the Guadeloupe and French Polynesia, by offering them opportunities for good jobs and good education and by extending to them the same work conditions and benefits I offer to my employees in France. If you will go visit the Air France terminal in Hanoi, in Indochina, you will find that much of the employees there are locals, which I have helped educate and train for over fifteen years now. The same applies to my employees in Dakar, Senegal, and in Honolulu and Tahiti. By the way, my terminal in Honolulu is providing jobs to members of the local Japanese ethnic community, who are regularly discriminated against by your government and refused all but the most menial jobs by American employers. You must have noticed when you took your plane to Paris in New York that there were no separate bathrooms for negroes at Queens International. Well, if I ever build more installations around the United States, I intend them to be all desegregated and I will not tolerate any pressure to do otherwise."

Tom was left silent for a few seconds, taken a bit aback by her forcefulness, which was no fake indignation in his opinion.

"Miss Lenoir, may I ask what caused you to dislike so much racial segregation? Don't get me wrong: I am no racist myself, but most people in the United States accept such policies."

"Which clearly marks the United States apart from France, or other countries. To accept the fact that black men and women can still be lynched by mobs, with no

consequences for the perpetrators, is a sign of a deep social disease among the American society. You saw my friend Terry, who is presently piloting this plane and is both my personal bodyguard and a best friend of mine? Well, she has a university diploma, is a top notch pilot and a top rate soldier. Yet, because she is dark-skinned, any of your Caucasian American citizens with barely any education and no technical skills will deem her to be inferior to them, just because of her race. That, for me, is the epitome of stupidity and ignorance.”

Tom decided then not to reply to that, seeing how passionate Tasha Lenoir was about that subject. He could understand her feelings, but he knew that those feelings could and would make her clash with many American citizens who were going to take exception to her preaching.

The landing was quite smooth, denoting the high skills of the pilot. However, the noise level in the cabin went up sharply when the two powerful turbofan engines were put in reverse thrust mode, making Tom’s torso and head project forward, so strong was the deceleration. Turning off the runway they had used, the plane then rolled along a taxiway leading to the main tarmac area, which surrounded the airport’s air terminal, to finally come to a stop under one of the eight passenger gates. That gate, like the others, was covered by a high overhead porch supported by pillars at its corners and had both an extendable elevated jetway and ground access doors for passengers and luggage. Having a low airstairs door, the PÉGASE didn’t use the elevated jetway to connect with the terminal. Instead, Terry Carlson opened and lowered the left side airstairs door of the plane, then helped Tasha take out their luggage from the luggage hold in the aft section of the cabin. Leaving the plane in the care of the copilot and radio-navigator, Tasha left the plane with Terry and Thomas Fletcher and walked to the ground level access door of their gate. Passengers in the process of boarding a Curtiss triple piston engine transport parked at the adjacent gate to their left couldn’t help gawk at the PÉGASE. In truth, it made a for a violent contrast compared to the American-made transport plane, something enhanced by the striking gold and red paint scheme of the supersonic executive jet, with the giant red and black letters ‘L i’ of the logo of the Lenoir Industries painted on the double vertical rudders of the PÉGASE. Once inside, they had to go as a routine procedure through the U.S. immigration and customs booths, where Tasha presented her French passport to the graying immigration officer.

"Hi, Fred! I'm coming for business and should be returning to France in a couple of days."

"It is always a pleasure to see you in New York, Miss Lenoir." replied the immigration agent with a smile before stamping her passport and giving it back to her. He similarly stamped quickly the passports of both Terry Clarkson and Thomas Fletcher, allowing the trio to move on and bypass the customs services' luggage search counters. As they were walking out of the Arrivals Hall, Tom couldn't help make a remark to Tasha.

"You seem to have a good rapport with the U.S. Immigration Services agents posted here, Miss Lenoir."

"I indeed do, Mister Fletcher. For one, I am always polite and friendly with them, as long as it is mutual. Second, they know that this airport is by far the best assignment they could get, with ultra-modern facilities and excellent employees facilities. They have their own lounge and office area here, courtesy from me, and they know that this is a privately-owned airport and not a government-administered one."

"And what if the federal government expropriated this airport, for whatever reason?"

"First, they would have to reimburse me for all the infrastructures and for the terrain I paid for if they wanted to do that. With the present economic depression, Washington simply doesn't have the millions needed to buy this airport. Second, they would then end up with an 'international airport' with no international flights, as I would then immediately terminate all Air France flights to New York and would transfer them to other airports I own in Canada and in the French possessions in the Caribbean. I will do the same if Washington tries the same game in Honolulu and Los Angeles. Then, Washington will be free to explain to thousands of irate American businessmen why they now have to endure a week-long trip by ship to get to Europe and back. Basically, expropriating or seizing my airports on United States territory would be about the dumbest move Washington could do."

"Uh, there is no lack of stupidity in Washington, if I may say so, Miss Lenoir."

"Unfortunately, you are too right about that, which is why I keep fresh cards close at hand."

"So, how do we go to Albany now?"

"We use the same thing that other passengers stopping here do: we take a Queens Air Taxi ride."

"Oh, I see!" said simply Tom, understanding at once. 'Queens Air Taxi' was a company affiliated with the airport and the Lenoir Industries that offered short haul, point to point air rides to passengers via the use of COLIBRI light vertical takeoff and landing craft. There were always at least two or three such machines on standby, parked near the taxi zone of the airport and awaiting customers. Those machines were very popular with passengers wanting a quick trip back directly home or to a hotel, even when their destination was in downtown Manhattan. The normal taxi drivers had made a lot of fuss at first about losing costumers to the air taxi service but, with a COLIBRI ride costing more than a normal taxi ride, they had ended losing only a small proportion of their customers. Extra airport amenities made available to the taxi drivers, like a heated and air-conditioned hut with large transparent windows and washrooms built at curb-side, had also helped silence any protests. Now, both air and ground taxis coexisted in peace, with ground taxis happily taking the slack when bad weather grounded the small craft.

The trio, towing behind them their wheeled suitcases, did find two COLIBRIs waiting in the taxi zone and boarded one, with Tasha handing a twenty dollar bill to the young pilot.

"We need to go to Albany. Is your tank full?"

"It is, miss! I can make a return trip to Albany without problems."

"Excellent! Head for Albany: Mister Fletcher here will guide you to our final destination once over the town."

"Understood, miss! Please sit down and buckle your belts: we will take off in a minute, time to make a quick check of my map and instruments."

As promised, they soon were in the air, with the COLIBRI, a small machine consisting of a transparent cabin attached under a five meter-diameter ducted rotor and powered by a small gas turbine, rising gingerly in the clear July sky of New York and then heading North. Tasha and Terry were mostly silent during the ninety or so minutes the 240 kilometer trip took, while Tom, who was still not very accustomed to flying, avidly admired the view around from the air. When they arrived in sight of Albany, Tom got up and went forward to point to the pilot where to go. Six more minutes and the small 5-seat craft smoothly landed at the vertical on the lawn of a three-storey Italianate style mansion in downtown Albany. The COLIBRI's landing immediately attracted a few neighbors and passersby in gawking from a distance at the machine, while a black man

soon came out of the house and started walking towards the craft as its rotors slowed to idle. Tom then pointed out the approaching man to Tasha.

“This is Joseph, the Governor’s head steward. Let’s take out our suitcases: I will help you.”

“No need, mister: I can take care of my things.”

“As you wish, Miss Lenoir.” replied Tom before turning around to speak to the black steward. “Joseph, go tell the Governor that Miss Tasha Lenoir and one of her friends has arrived.”

“Yes, Mister Fletcher!”

With only one or two suitcases per person to carry to the mansion, the trio was inside in a minute, with the COLIBRI then powering up and taking off to return to New York. The head steward then bowed to Tasha in the rear vestibule area.

“The Governor will receive you now, miss. I will take care of your suitcases and will have them carried up to two guestrooms while you speak with him. If you may follow me.”

“Thank you, Joseph.”

She, Terry and Tom followed the steward to a comfortably furnished but traditional-looking lounge, where a man in his late forties sitting in a wheelchair greeted them with a smile.

“Aaah, the famous Miss Lenoir! Welcome to Albany! I am Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Governor of the State of New York.”

“Pleased to meet you, Governor.” replied Tasha while shaking hands with Roosevelt. “May I present my friend and associate, Terry Clarkson, chief test pilot at Blériot-Kruger and owner of the ‘Armaments Clarkson’ company.”

Roosevelt looked up with surprise at the tall and fit black woman wearing a dark blue female business suit of futuristic cut, while Joseph, standing to one side, couldn’t help show near shock on his face. Terry then shook FDR’s hand with a strength that surprised the governor, who then asked a question.

“You own an arms manufacturing company in France, miss?”

“It actually is more like a research and development shop for advanced weaponry, Governor. The mass production of weapons selected by the French government is normally done in a state arsenal, unless the weapon system in question is deemed to be too highly classified a design to mass produce in an open shop.”

"And, to which countries apart from France is your company selling weapons to, Miss Clarkson? Do you sell weapons to the United States?"

"No! My company sells its designs only to the French government, to equip its armed forces and its police forces."

"Your annual production must then be somewhat limited, no? You could probably easily sell more weapons by extending your list of customers."

"True, but that is a conscious choice I made years ago to help make France stronger with my weapons...and only France. Tasha also follows the same business philosophy."

"I see! You will have to tell me more about that later on, but first please have a seat, both of you."

Roosevelt also signaled Tom to stay and sit with them, then waited for them to be seated before continuing.

"You will excuse my wife Eleanor for not being present to greet you now: she is presently at a meeting of one of the local charitable organizations she is sponsoring. I must say that you arrived in the United States much sooner than I had expected. You must be quite tired after flying all night."

That brought a malicious smile on Tasha's face.

"Actually, Mister Governor, we left France this morning and our trip from Paris to New York took less than three hours. There is of course the time zone factor that was in play here, with the time going back by six hours between Paris and New York."

"Less than three hours?" said Roosevelt, stunned, who then looked at Tom, who spoke up before his boss could ask.

"We came on Miss Lenoir's private executive jet aircraft, which can fly at speeds above 1,500 miles per hour. That plane is a pure technological marvel, Mister Governor."

That left Roosevelt speechless for a moment but, to his credit, he rebounded quickly from his surprise.

"Decidedly, your reputation as a top scientist is well deserved, Miss Lenoir."

"Actually, I didn't design that plane, Governor: another close friend of mine, Johanna Kruger, is chief designer at Blériot-Kruger and designed my PÉGASE. She is a top aerospace engineer, while I hold a doctorate in physics, plus master's degrees in chemistry and electronics. As for my friend Terry, she has a diploma in weapons systems engineering."

This time, Roosevelt's silence was markedly longer as he digested those facts, which went against all known conventions and preconceptions of the time, especially those concerning the role of women in society.

"This is getting more and more interesting by the minute, I must say. However, I should finally tell you why I wanted to meet you, Miss Lenoir. As you must know, the times are difficult ones at present in the United States, due to the effects of that disastrous financial crash last year. Many banks and businesses went bankrupt and unemployment is shooting up, while investments are drying up. My state has been hit hard by that economic downturn, like all the other states in this country, and I am working hard to combat it and stimulate the economy while helping those most affected, namely lowly workers and farmers. Unfortunately, President Hoover has, in my opinion, only worsened the situation with his misguided economic policies."

"I know! His recent Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act was about the most stupid move he could have done. By slapping protectionist tariffs over more than 20,000 items of imported goods, he only attracted retaliatory tariffs from other countries and further restricted the outside markets for American goods, be they agricultural products or manufactured items."

"Exactly! Unfortunately, he is refusing to listen to reason, despite many attempts by me and by other state governors to make him reconsider his economic policies. He also refuses to abolish this stupid Prohibition Act, which cuts even further the amount of jobs and business opportunities. Instead, we now have more people than ever drinking, but in illegal joints mostly importing their alcohol from Canada or Mexico, while organized crime has used Prohibition to greatly boost its business and profits. Overall, not a very rosy picture, I must say. However, I am hoping to use your assistance in order to help my state's economy and that of the various New England states, whose governors have the same mind frame as me."

"And I suppose that the help you are hoping from me is fresh investment money to stimulate your state's economy and job market."

"Correct, but I am also aiming at another target at the same time: to improve the state's aviation infrastructure and expand its air travel network, something you are justly deemed to be an expert in. An expanded aviation network will hopefully attract and stimulate more business and possibly extra tourism from overseas, something that could only benefit the local economy. If that expanded network could also be extended to the

states of the New England region, then I think that it would attract even more business and tourism.”

“France has indeed prospered thanks to my Air France network, which has greatly facilitated its links with its colonies and overseas territories, Governor, and I would tend to agree that an aviation network here would benefit the local economy. I however have two questions for you before we could discuss in detail what you would wish from me. First, I believe that most aviation facilities in your state and around New England either belong to the U.S. Army Air Corps, or are co-located with military installations, right?”

“Uh, I believe so, miss. Why do you ask?”

“Because of the second question I have for you, Governor: do you, as Governor of New York, have the power to stop the federal government and its military units from possibly interfering with the operations of future airports run by me and Air France within your state?”

While keeping an impassive expression, Roosevelt was thrown off by that question and had to think quickly about it before he answered as diplomatically as he could.

“Well, technically, the federal government has the last word on the use of American territory by a foreign entity. However, if those new airports are officially owned by American interests, then expropriating them or even interfering with their operations would be much harder for Washington, as they would be considered as American private property, with all the legal protections that this ensues under American laws and jurisdiction. Do you really expect that the federal government could interfere with those future airports?”

“Yes, in view of the conditions I would impose before I would accept to invest in your state, Governor. As with all Air France installations, both in France and overseas, and in all the facilities belonging to the Lenoir Industries Consortium, those airports and aviation facilities will have to be fully desegregated, during both their construction and their operations. This means zero racial or sexual discrimination in employment, pay rates, benefits and rights, on top of having no segregated facilities to separate people of color from Caucasian people. Since segregation laws are the purview of state jurisdiction rather than federal jurisdiction, I would expect you, as Governor of New York, to protect the integrated status of future facilities in your state and I will expect the same from the governors of the various New England states who will accept my help.”

“What if there are protests about such integration by American citizens from my state? I do have to listen to my citizens and am accountable to them, after all. In fact, I expect such protests to come up.”

Tasha’s expression closed up then and she stared hard at Roosevelt, while keeping the tone of her voice polite.

“Then, I will expect you, as an accomplished politician, to explain to them the benefits of those integrated facilities, along with the consequences of enforcing segregation laws in them. That is the price I am asking in order to help you, Governor. However, if you do accept my conditions, I would be ready to invest a minimum of eighty million dollars in such a joint venture, plus more money if New England governors also agree to my terms and jump into the program.”

While not showing it, Roosevelt was stunned by the dollar figure quoted by Tasha: in 1930, eighty million dollars represented a sizeable fortune, even for a state-level government. That sum in fact represented more than half of the annual revenues of the State of New York...prior to the 1929 Wall Street financial crash.

“Er, may I ask how rich you are exactly, Miss Lenoir?”

When Tasha answered him, Roosevelt could not see any trace of vanity or arrogance in her tone or expression, just plain statement of fact.

“I am a multi-billionaire in U.S. dollars term, Governor. However, much of my fortune is presently linked to the various factories and facilities I own. The eighty million dollars I mentioned constitutes a sizeable part of my ready reserves of cash and I do happen to have a number of other priority projects in the making around French territories, so don’t think that I will invest that kind of sum just on a whim.”

“My dear Miss Lenoir, anyone who would invest eighty million dollars just to show off would truly frighten me. Coming from you, such an investment would attract only admiration and gratitude on my part.”

“Governor, you do have a way with words. So, can I count on your support to protect the integrated status of any installation or facility that I will help build in your state?”

“You certainly can, Miss Lenoir.” replied Roosevelt, giving the only sensible answer to such a fabulous offer. “As for discussing the details of such a project, I would prefer to wait until my fellow state governors from New England be here before talking further about it. In the meantime, I would be most happy to be your host, to you and to Miss Clarkson.”

“Thank you, Governor. Your offer is accepted with great pleasure. However, I am going to send Terry back to New York this afternoon, so that she could borrow an appropriate craft that could go pick up quickly your fellow governors at their homes tomorrow morning.”

Those words made Roosevelt smile in anticipation.

“You mean, a craft like the one you came in? That would be great!”

“Oh, I had something a bit bigger in mind, Governor.” replied Tasha, a malicious smile on her face.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was left stunned when, in late afternoon, Terry Clarkson landed on the rear lawn of the mansion at the commands of a SUPER COLIBRI ‘C’ VTOL civilian transport aircraft. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, who had returned home earlier this afternoon, stared with awe at the big, eighteen meter-long machine, with its two huge, pivoting and ducted main rotors and its smaller but also pivoting ducted tail rotor.

“My God! This plane is positively fantastic!” exclaimed Eleanor, a dignified woman in her forties. “How fast can it go, Miss Lenoir?”

“It can attain speeds of 412 miles per hour, Misses Roosevelt. It also has a maximum range of 2,680 miles with 24 passengers and a ton and a half of cargo, enough to do an unrefueled trip from New York to Los Angeles in about six hours. In fact, such an aircraft type will constitute the backbone of any air transport network operating from New York State and New England. It can land or take off from anywhere at the vertical and will thus minimize the cost of future air installations. However, long runways will still be built in order to accommodate conventional aircraft. What I propose to do now, Governor, is to make a few phone calls to your fellow governors, to invite them to Albany and tell them to be ready to be picked up by aircraft early tomorrow morning.”

“That sounds like a marvelous plan, Miss Lenoir.” Said F.D.R., a big smile on his face.

“Oooh, could I ask you for me to travel in your plane tomorrow, Miss Lenoir?” asked Eleanor, as excited as a little kid. “I always was interested by planes.”

“Of course, Miss Roosevelt. Your husband may come as well if he is interested : that plane has a rear cargo ramp suitable for wheelchair-bound passengers.”

Those last words made the governor smile even more: due to his lack of mobility, he had not had the chance until now to fly aboard an aircraft, as the American planes of the time still mostly used rudimentary short ladders to load and unload their passengers. He then saw Terry Clarkson, who had just shut down her engines, come out of the SUPER COLIBRI 'C', still wearing her modern pilot helmet, complete with golden reflective visor. That simple sight was actually the one that finished convincing him that he was not dealing with simple, average persons.

11:35 (New York Time)

Friday, August 01, 1930

Airfield operations building, Jeffery Field

East Boston, Massachusetts

Amelia was discussing the subject of flying with a group of pilots from the Massachusetts Air Guard stationed at Jeffery Field when one pilot had a bewildered look through a window of the operations building and shouted excitedly, as the noise of propellers grew.

"HEY, COME LOOK AT THAT MACHINE APPROACHING!"

Like the pilots from the 101st Observation Squadron, Amelia ran to the nearest window and peered through it. What she saw stunned her.

"An Air France aircraft, here? But, they operate only from New York and Los Angeles when in the continental United States. What is it doing here, in Boston?"

"I believe that it is a Blériot-Kruger SUPER COLIBRI, a transport aircraft that can land vertically." said the senior pilot present, who was better at aircraft recognition than the others. "What a machine!"

On her part, Amelia showed a lot less excitement at the sight of the SUPER COLIBRI, for many reasons. First was the fact that the meteoritic rise of the Blériot-Kruger company in the aviation world since 1912 had basically caused the long term demise of much of the American aeronautical industry during the last fifteen years or so. For about a decade now, Blériot-Kruger aircraft had been dominating air transport around the World, thanks to their highly advanced designs and superior performances. Adding insult to injury, Blériot-Kruger had also refused to sell its aircraft to American air transport companies, while keeping its aircraft designs secret, supposedly to protest racial discrimination in the United States. Amelia didn't consider herself racist, but she

suspected that the real reason for Blériot-Kruger's behavior and that of Air France was to basically achieve World monopoly on air transportation. American aircraft designers and manufacturers had tried their best to replicate the advanced features of the Blériot-Kruger planes but had failed miserably, lacking too many critical pieces of technological knowledge. In fact, there had been dozens of crashes, many fatal ones, of failed prototype designs in the United States in the last fifteen years and, by now, American designers had mostly given up and had reverted to the techniques they knew well, something that produced decidedly inferior planes compared to French aircraft. Personally, that state of affair had strangled most of the dreams Amelia once had about flying, as Blériot-Kruger aircraft kept breaking various records and routinely did things that were previously deemed a challenge. Amelia had once dreamed of becoming famous as an aviatrix by performing things like a transatlantic air crossing, or a cross-continental flight from one coast of the United States to the other. However, Air France, with its advanced Blériot-Kruger aircraft, had already done all that, years before any American pilot could even attempt such things. As of this year, no American-designed and produced aircraft had yet been able to cross the Atlantic, something that Air France had been doing routinely since 1913. With her dreams smashed and with American air transport companies obliged to use what was considered now to be rather primitive designs, Amelia was down to making a meager living as a pilot for National Airways, a small company that conducted regular passenger flights linking Bangor, in Maine, with Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.. Her aircraft, a monoplane, three-engine Stinson SM-6000, could carry ten passengers at a top speed of 146 miles per hour over a range of 390 miles, a far cry from the Air France machines like the one now in the process of landing at the vertical near the operations building.

Amelia watched with the others the landing of the SUPER COLIBRI next to Amelia's Stinson SM-6000 and six Curtiss FALCON O-11 observation biplanes of the Massachusetts Air Guard, then went out of the operations building with the pilots after the big ducted rotors of the aircraft had slowed down to idle. As the group approached the big machine, they saw a cargo ramp lower at the rear and a tall woman wearing a dark suit with trousers emerged from the aircraft, closely followed by a few men. Amelia stopped dead on the spot on recognizing the woman: she had seen in the past numerous newspaper articles with the woman's picture in them.

"Lenoir, here?"

One of the pilots also exclaimed himself then while fixing the man walking out behind the woman.

“Shit! It’s the Governor! Straighten yourselves up, guys!”

The pilots quickly buttoned up whatever buttons of their uniforms that were not done and lined up side by side, getting ready to greet the Governor of Massachusetts, who was their boss. Frank G. Allen smiled on seeing them and walked straight to them, followed by the woman and two men.

“Aaah, here are seven good men from my Air Guard.”

The men of the Air Guard saluted Allen before he shook their hands one by one.

“Good day, men! Don’t mind my surprise visit: I am not here for some snap inspection. Miss Lenoir, founder and owner of Air France, is here with me to assess the extent of future expansion and renovation work to be done to various airfields around the state.”

Allen then went to Amelia to also shake her hand.

“Good day to you as well, miss. I suppose that you are the pilot of that National Airways plane, if I can judge by your outfit?”

The thin, 33 year-old woman with curly blond hair nodded her head while shaking Allen’s hand.

“That’s correct, Mister Governor: Amelia Earhart, at your service. I am still waiting to see if some customers will show up to go to Bangor, but today seems to be a lean one for the air transport business.”

“Well, that could change in the near future, with the boost to it offered by Miss Lenoir.”

“Uh, what kind of boost, Mister Governor?” asked Amelia, at once suspicious. Allen replied by twisting his head to look at Tasha Lenoir, standing next to him.

“Why don’t you expose your plan to Miss Earhart and to my guardsmen, Miss Lenoir? You still know the details far better than me.”

“With pleasure, Governor.” said Tasha before looking collectively at Earhart and the male pilots. “Basically, at the request of the governors of New York State and of the New England states, who invited me to come to the United States, I have decided to end my moratorium on the providing of air services in the United States, but for their states only. My sole condition to accept to extend my Air France network was for their states to agree not to enforce segregation on my future installations and to practice non-

discrimination rules for the hiring and employment of personnel used in both the construction and operation of all future air facilities and operations in their states.”

Tasha then looked straight at Amelia, who had stiffened on hearing her.

“Do not worry, Miss Earhart: this will not mean that your airline will be pushed out of business by me, on the contrary. While I will nominally finance the construction and renovation work at various airfields deemed essential for a working local and interstate air transport network, the various municipal and state governments involved with me will keep ownership over these installations. As for the various airlines operating around New England and New York, they will be offered my financial and material help, as long as they agree to treat with equal respect all its passengers and employees, whatever their race, sex or religion may be. This means that these airlines will then be able to buy Blériot-Kruger aircraft. That will also mean that they will have to send their aircrews and ground support crews, including you, on extensive retraining courses. Piloting a Blériot-Kruger aircraft is only for pilots with hundreds of hours of experience and some solid technical training in modern aeronautical technology.”

“Does that mean that I could end up flying a jet aircraft, Miss Lenoir?” said Amelia, her animosity evaporating quickly.

“Not at first, Miss Earhart. The economics of operating a short haul network at regional level favors turboprop aircraft like the SUPER COLIBRI I came in with the Governor, due to their better fuel efficiency compared to jet aircraft. I am also not sure that the present economic climate would support the kind of expenses involved in operating jet aircraft, or that there would be enough customers to justify their use. However, as things will improve, longer range routes could be opened, at which time the use of jetliners may become justified. However, Air France is always ready to hire good pilots for its worldwide network, if you ever become interested.”

Next, Tasha looked and smiled at Allen.

“What do you say if I offer to your pilots and to Miss Earhart to tour my SUPER COLIBRI while we look at the facilities and grounds of this airfield, Governor? My pilot can guide them on that tour.”

“That sounds like a nice idea, Miss Lenoir.”

Tasha then surprised everybody by taking out of a pocket of her suit a tiny, handheld radio, then speaking in its microphone.

"Terry, this is Tasha. Could you come out and guide a group of local pilots on a tour of your aircraft? You may even offer them a short ride: me and the Governor will need a good twenty minutes here on the ground."

"Understood!"

"You can make radios this small, Miss Lenoir?" asked Allen, his eyes still on the pocket radio.

"Yes, Governor, and much more. Miss Earhart, you may go in my aircraft now with these gentlemen from the Air Guard."

"Thank you!" replied Amelia before starting to walk eagerly towards the SUPER COLIBRI, closely followed by the seven guardsmen. As she was about to get to the lowered rear cargo ramp, the pilot of the aircraft appeared on the ramp, making Amelia slow down and hesitate: the pilot was a black woman, and a very tall one. She wore a sort of aviator's coverall, a pair of black boots and a fantastic helmet that made Amelia instantly jealous.

"Come in, guys: I will show you my SUPER COLIBRI and will give you a short ride as well."

Those last words made Amelia forget her hesitation and she gingerly stepped on the cargo ramp, where she shook hands with the black woman.

"Hello, miss! I am Amelia Earhart and I work as a pilot for National Airways."

"And I am Terry Clarkson, a close associate of Miss Lenoir and also chief test pilot at Blériot-Kruger."

Seeing that the Air Guard pilots also hesitated on seeing that she was black, Terry countered with an inviting smile.

"So, you want to visit my aircraft or not, guys?"

"Uh, sure!" replied the senior pilot, a captain, before climbing the ramp and stopping inside the cabin, where Terry started to describe the aircraft to the group.

"Welcome into this Blériot-Kruger SUPER COLIBRI C, lady and gentlemen. The SUPER COLIBRI is actually built in three different models: the 'A' model is a military assault transport aircraft; the 'B' model is a military maritime patrol and search and rescue aircraft and the 'C' model is the unarmed civilian transport variant."

"So, those two military variants are armed, right?" deduced the Air Guard captain, making Terry nod her head.

"Certainly! The 'A' variant, on top of being able to carry 24 fully equipped troops, has a chin-mounted turret armed with a 7mm Gatling machine gun, plus has two fixed

25mm automatic cannons, six weapons pylons and four launch rails, for a total maximum carrying capacity of 10,000 kilos or 22,000 pounds if you prefer, of bombs, rockets and missiles. Of course, the more weapons you will carry, the less range you will have. As for the 'B' variant, it is a heavily modified model geared towards long patrols over the ocean. It does not normally carry troops and doesn't have a rear cargo ramp. Instead, its cabin houses numerous electronic systems and work stations where technicians operate a number of radars, radio direction-finding sets, a dunking sonar and a magnetic anomaly detector designed to detect submarines under water. The 'B' model has the same armament capability as the 'A' model. All models of the SUPER COLIBRI have a top speed of 412 miles per hour and an operational ceiling of 26,000 feet for the 'A' and 'B' models, with the 'C' model having a ceiling of 31,000 feet, due to the fact that it is lighter than the military models and doesn't have the folding rotors mechanisms used for shipborne storage of the 'A' and 'B' models. The ranges vary for each model, but this civilian variant can carry 24 passengers with their luggage over a distance of more than 2,680 miles, enough to get to Los Angeles from here without refueling. Being able to land or take off vertically, the SUPER COLIBRI can basically operate from any flat surface large enough to accommodate it, which makes it extremely flexible in its use. In France, the regional air networks of Air France use extensively the SUPER COLIBRI for inter-city liaisons, and also to link together the various islands of French Polynesia and New Caledonia, in the Pacific. Here, in New England, it will be perfect to serve on the regional routes in the Northeast region of the United States. Miss Earhart, you may be interested to know that Miss Lenoir plans to offer SUPER COLIBRIs to reequip and revitalize the airlines operating through New York State, Massachusetts and the other states of New England. The only condition attached to that will be that those airlines will not practice or enforce segregation against their black customers and personnel."

"Uh, any chance that we may get some military SUPER COLIBRIs, miss?" asked a guardsman. Terry had a malicious smile at that question.

"That is a subject still being discussed between Miss Lenoir and Governor Allen. Now, if you will follow me, I will show you the cockpit of this aircraft."

With the band of American pilots eagerly following her, Terry walked along the 2.4 meter-wide cabin, with its 24 folding seats along the sides, and passed by the small, enclosed toilet stall next to the forward right side door, before sitting in the pilot's seat. She then pointed a large flat screen on the instrument panel in front of her.

"This is the display screen for the nose-mounted meteorological and collision avoidance radar, which is a must for flying at night and in bad weather. This aircraft also has a radar altimeter, a gyro-stabilized attitude display ball and thermal cameras that allow its pilots to see in total darkness."

"Thermal cameras? What's that?" asked Amelia Earhart.

"Thermal cameras detect the heat signature of objects and persons. Let me show you."

Terry then switched on the battery of five thermal cameras equipping her SUPER COLIBRI, making greenish images appear on the heads-up display and viewing screens of the cockpit and attracting exclamations from the American pilots around her. Amelia Earhart looked at her as if she was a witch.

"This is like magic! How could you have such advanced technology?"

"You can thank Miss Lenoir for that: she invented all the instruments and electronic systems you will find in this aircraft. Now, if you could go take place in the seats in the cabin and buckle up your seat belts, I will now offer you a short ride over Boston. Miss Earhart, please stay and take the copilot's seat."

Amelia eagerly accepted that offer and quickly took place in the seat to the right of Terry's seat. The latter then cautioned her as she was going to take hold of the control stick in front of her.

"I will ask you not to touch the controls during the take off phase of our flight, Miss Earhart. The transition from vertical to horizontal flight is a bit tricky and requires an experienced hand. However, once in conventional flight mode, you will be able to handle a bit the plane before leaving your place to one Air Guard pilot."

"Understood, miss!" replied Amelia, now excited like she had rarely been lately. She watched carefully every move by Terry as the black woman powered up her engines to full power and made the big aircraft take off gingerly and climb, then made her ducted rotors pivot gradually as the plane took up speed and altitude. Once they were up at 4,000 feet and a speed of 200 miles per hour, Terry smiled to Amelia.

"We are safely in conventional flight mode. You may now take the controls, Miss Earhart. Use them the same way you do on your trimotor aircraft but no acrobatics, please."

"I promise to be reasonable, miss." replied Amelia as she grabbed the control yoke in front of her.

Some 25 minutes later, the SUPER COLIBRI landed back in front of the operations building of Jeffery Field, where Governor Allen, his two aides and Tasha Lenoir were having cups of coffee inside while discussing. Allen smiled on seeing how joyful his Air Guard pilots were when they walked out of the aircraft.

“Well, I suppose that I will get plenty of pleas from my Air Guard pilots to get new planes after this. Any chances that I could buy a few Blériot-Kruger military planes at a reasonable price, Miss Lenoir?”

“I will see what I can arrange with the French Air Ministry, Governor.” said Tasha, an imperceptible smile at the corner of her mouth.



American National Guardsmen at the scene of a riot.

CHAPTER 3 – BACKLASH

07:50 (New York Time)

Sunday, August 17, 1930

Burlington, Vermont

Having just bought the local morning newspaper from a street vendor boy and having returned to his second floor apartment, where he lived with his wife and three young children, Thomas Gardner started going through it without much conviction, looking for any employment add that could give him some new hope in these grim times. As a black man, he had been one of the first employees to have been let go by the construction firm where he had worked for seven years, victim of the quickly sinking economy following that 1929 Wall Street crash. However, his white colleagues had also quickly felt the pinch afterwards and the firm was now all but idle, with building projects drying out or being cancelled for lack of financing. Now, after four months of unemployment, Thomas was getting close to desperation as he was coming to the end of his meager savings. Soon, he would have no money left to buy food for his family or

pay his apartment's rent and would have to depend on charity to survive. Turning quickly the pages of the newspaper to the employment adds section, his eyes stuck at once on an add title typed in big, bold letters.

"Workers needed for large construction project at the Burlington Municipal Airport..."

Feeling hope coming back to him, Thomas avidly read the add, which said that the project could employ up to 300 construction and general workers. All those interested were asked to show up at the Burlington town hall on Monday morning to register for a job position. Closing his eyes for a moment, Thomas made a silent prayer, wishing that he could obtain a job at that town hall meeting tomorrow. Black people were few in Burlington, counting only a few hundred amidst a town's population of about 25,000 people. His own parents had fled the oppression and segregation of the South at the turn of the century, establishing themselves in Vermont with the hope of a better life. While racism and segregation were still evident at times and in places, Burlington residents had actually proved to be a lot more tolerant and open-minded than those of Mississippi and life had proved to be decent for the Gardner during the first decades of this century, with then young Thomas even being able to play with young white boys in his neighborhood. Many of those white boys were in fact from families of recently immigrated Irish or French Canadian people. Then, at age 24, Thomas had met and married Josephine, the daughter of one of their black neighbors, and they had three children together. Now, at 32, with his family on the edge of financial demise, this add had come as a last hope for Thomas.

07:23 (New York Time)

Monday, August 18, 1930

Burlington town hall

Thomas had come early to the town hall square, in the hope of being among the first to register for the work project, but many other unemployed men seemed to have had the same idea, so he found himself in line with some 140 people ahead of him, waiting for the doors of the town hall to open at eight. More men quickly added themselves to the line in the following minutes under the watchful eyes of four municipal policemen apparently there to keep order. Three minutes after Thomas' arrival, a big

white man came in and jumped the line ahead of a black man, pushing him out of the way.

“Go away, nigger! Leave the jobs to white men!”

Normally, local policemen would have turned a blind eye to that. However, to Thomas’ surprise and that of the other black men in the lineup, one of the city policemen immediately reacted and, walking quickly to the newcomer, tapped his shoulder with the tip of his baton.

“Hey, buddy, join the end of the line, like everybody else.”

The newcomer fixed the policeman as if he had not understood him.

“What do you mean, Officer? He’s just a nigger and...”

“That man has the same rights as you to the jobs offered this morning, mister. Now, move before I insist with my baton.”

“The same rights as a white man? Who said that?”

“The one paying for the project and the Governor, that’s who! Now, move or leave!”

The bully, grumbling under his breath, reluctantly obeyed and moved down the line by two positions, ending behind another black man. What he didn’t notice was the fact that a man wearing a dark outfit and who was standing some distance from the line, took some notes at that moment on a pocket notepad.

Some frenzy became apparent at the opening of the town hall doors, with those in line starting to push forward at once. That was when the man in a black outfit came to the fore, taking position in front of the start of the line and shouting in a good English tainted with a French accent.

“NO NEED TO PUSH: THERE ARE ENOUGH JOBS FOR EVERYONE HERE. STAY CALM AND FOLLOW THE DIRECTIVES WE WILL GIVE YOU AND YOU WILL BE ABLE TO REGISTER QUICKLY.”

That somehow made the pushing subside and the prospective workers filed in an orderly fashion inside the town hall, where they were directed into a large room routinely used for public assemblies. There, four tables had been set in a line, each with a large cardboard sign displayed behind them at the top of a pole. The signs said respectively ‘CONSTRUCTION WORKERS’, ‘GENERAL LABORERS’, ‘MECHANICAL SPECIALISTS AND DRIVERS OF HEAVY EQUIPMENT’ and ‘OFFICE SUPPORT AND OTHERS’. What attracted the most Thomas’ attention however was the fact that a

young black woman sat behind each table, with a young man in dark outfit standing behind, alert and scanning the newcomers. The words 'private security' came to mind to Thomas to describe those young men, one of whom was a mulatto. Lining up in front of the table announcing 'construction workers', he was soon intrigued by the way things proceeded. First, a candidate would walk forward to the table and answer a number of questions asked by the young black woman, who in turn would type on some kind of machine with a typewriter-like keyboard. Then, the candidate would be asked to stand with his back against a white screen, where a picture of him was apparently taken. Finally, the candidate would be asked to lay his right hand on top of a sort of glass panel. Then came something that excited greatly Thomas: before leaving, those candidates received and signed for twenty dollars in small bills. Briefly stopping the latest candidate to have been processed at the table ahead of him, Thomas asked him a question in a low voice.

"Hey, friend, what is that money they gave you for?"

"They say that it represents a ten dollar hiring bonus, plus an advance of ten dollars on our first pay."

"And how much are they paying to construction workers?"

"Seventy-five cents per hour." Answered the man before walking out, leaving Thomas more hopeful than ever. Seventy-five cents per hour was actually a very decent hourly wage for the time, a bit more in fact than the usual construction salary. Even if he ended working less than the normal twelve hours per day, six days a week, he would still end up earning more than enough money to be able to decently support his family.

When his turn came to go to the table, Thomas got a nice smile from the black woman sitting behind it.

"Good morning, sir! What is your job training or specialty?"

"I have fourteen years of experience as a carpenter and bricklayer, miss."

"When did you become unemployed, sir?"

"Four months ago, miss." said Thomas, his hands unconsciously gripping each other due to his nervousness.

"Then, you are in luck, mister: we have many openings still available for carpenters and bricklayers. May I have your full name, date and place of birth?"

"Certainly, miss! My name is Thomas Gardner, I was born near Jackson, Mississippi, on March 20th of 1898."

Thomas also answered numerous other questions about his place of residence, his family situation, his state of general health and his level of education before the young employee looked up at him.

"Mister Gardner, you are now enlisted in a project to enlarge and improve the Burlington Municipal Airport. While much of the work will consist in building long paved runways, a number of new buildings will be built at the airport, while the present buildings will be either refurbished or demolished. So, there will be many months of paid work ahead for you, sir. If you prove to be a good, reliable worker, there will be more work available at subsequent projects. As for the pay, you will get 75 cents per hour and will work forty hour-weeks, with eight hours per day from Monday to Friday. We will provide both breakfast and lunch for free to our employees and will cover any medical costs resulting from work accidents or illness. One last point: this project is officially a desegregated one, something supported by Governor Weeks of Vermont. The project managers and supervisors, as well as the state police, will make sure that no racial harassment or racist acts will be allowed at the work site, so if anything happens, don't hesitate to lodge an immediate complaint with the site manager. Now, if you could stand with your back against this white screen and stay still for a moment..."

Thomas did so, time to have his photo taken. However, what happened next baffled him: instead of taking a photographic plate out of the tiny camera facing him, Thomas saw his picture suddenly appeared on some kind of glass surface part of a flat apparatus, where a text also appeared. The young employee then punched a few notes on her keyboard and invited Thomas in putting his right hand flat on top of another glass surface. More keys were punched, making a printed sheet of paper come out of the slot of one of the machines laid on the table before the young woman smiled to Thomas and handed him four five dollar bills.

"Here is an enrolment bonus of ten dollars, plus a pay advance of ten dollars on your first weekly paycheck. If you will now sign this enrolment form, Mister Gardner."

"Uh, when do I start work and where do I go, miss?" asked Thomas while signing the said form.

"You will start working tomorrow morning, sir. Be back here for 07:30 and buses will carry you to the nearby Burlington Municipal Airport site."

"One last question, miss: who is paying for all this? I thought that the municipality was nearly broke."

“The Municipality of Burlington, like the State of Vermont, has been able to secure special, very low interest rate loans from a foreign investor, Mister Gardner.”

“Oh! That would explain the guy with the French accent.”

His remark made the employee smile in response.

“That’s alright, sir: I also am a foreigner. I was born in the French Martinique but learned English from a young age before working in New York for a few years. I am in fact an employee of the Lenoir Industries Consortium, based in France. Have a good day, Mister Gardner.”

“I already am having a good day, miss.” replied Thomas before walking out, the precious twenty dollars in one pocket. His next priority now would be to go buy some food, so that he could offer a decent meal tonight to his family. As he stepped outside, there was some kind of raucous inside, with angry shouts and the noise of a brawl. Two of the fit men in dark outfits then walked out, firmly holding in a choke hold the big racist bully that had earlier tried to jump the line ahead of a black man.

“YOU FUCKING BASTARDS! YOU DON’T HAVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE ME A JOB LIKE THIS, NOT WHEN YOU GIVE ALL THOSE JOBS TO DIRTY NIGGERS.”

“You could have got a job if you would have shut your mouth and tried some tolerance for a change, mister.” shot back one of the security men. “Now, leave and don’t try to come back or to enlist at other work sites of our company. If you do, you will be refused at once and turned away.”

The two security men then let go the bully, pushing him away before going back inside. The bigot gave a hateful look at Thomas as he was starting to walk away and would probably have attacked him if not for the fact that a city policeman was watching him closely from less than ten feet away. Thomas decided to stay in place for the moment and waited until the bully was out of sight, then smiled to the policeman.

“Thank you very much for your vigilance, Officer.”

“Just doing my duty, sir. Have a good day!”

“You too, Officer!”

Only then did Thomas leave the town hall square, taking a street opposite to that taken by the bully.

07:18 (New York Time)

Friday, September 12, 1930

Road to Burlington Municipal Airport

“It looks like it’s going to rain today, Mary. Maybe they will send the workers home earlier. On the other hand, our fields of vegetables can use rain right now.”

“Well, even if they send the workers home early, I will still need to prepare breakfast and lunch for them, so I will still have a busy day, Sean.”

The mature couple travelling in their beaten up old Ford pickup truck loaded with sacks of fresh vegetables then fell silent as Sean drove along the dirt road leading to the municipal airport. Sean and Mary Brennan were both of Irish stock and proud of their ancestry. In the case of Sean, his grandfather, Patrick Ó Braonáin, had emigrated to the United States at the height of the Great Famine of 1845-52 in Ireland, leaving the county of Kilkenny to establish himself in Vermont, where he had worked on a farm. Through hard work, Patrick had managed to acquire his own farm, which he had passed to his son Erasmus, who in turn had passed it to Sean at his death. However, no amount of hard work could help much in these present financial hard times, with the prices of agricultural produces going down as part of the Great Depression. Sean and Mary’s farm had been hit hard by those deflated produce prices and they had been growing near desperate, until a number of construction and public works projects had been started some three weeks ago, both across Vermont and in the neighboring states. Those projects, employing thousands of previously unemployed workers, had helped directly many farmers by buying in bulk produces, meat and dairy products and using those supplies to feed for free two meals a day to the workers. All those workers now had money to buy food for their families, something that had also helped indirectly farmers around the state. Such generosity and charity, apart from helping greatly his farm, had also struck deeply Sean’s mind, as it contrasted greatly with the stories of ruthless exploitation of the poor, greed and cruelty by British landlords towards their starving Irish tenants during the Irish Great Famine, during which over a million Irish had starved to death, with some two million more leaving their cherished ancestral home to emigrate to the United States.

Sean was still thinking about those stories from his grandfather about the bad times in Ireland when his pickup truck arrived at the work site of the municipal airport. The policeman guarding the entrance to the work site smiled on recognizing Sean and Mary and waived them in without further ado. Finally, Sean stopped in front of the large trailer housing the kitchen, which itself was connected to a big marquis tent complex

where the workers could eat breakfast and lunch. Charles Munroe, the head cook of the kitchen, came out at once with four big men in order to help unload the produces from the pickup truck. Munroe, a jovial and somewhat overweight man in his late forties, greeted Sean with a handshake.

"Nice to see you, Sean. So, let's bring in all these fresh vegetables, so that they could be weighed and I could pay you for them."

"I'm going to get ready at the service counter, Charlie: those workers are soon going to assault it, demanding their breakfast."

"That's fine with me, Mary."

A few minutes only were enough to empty Sean's truck and carry the sacks inside, where Munroe did a quick inventory and calculated their worth before signing for their delivery and paying for them. Sean grinned with satisfaction as he pocketed the dollars given to him by the head cook and signed the receipt for the produces.

"Decidedly, it is a pleasure to do business with this project, Charlie."

"Hell, talk about my own pleasure at having a decent paying job here, Sean. Do you know how many people this project is helping out of poverty, both directly and indirectly?"

"Hundreds, I suppose."

"Make it a few thousands, and I am only talking about around Burlington. Apart from the 300 men working directly at this site, you can add farmers like you, who supply the site with food items, plus the store owners in town where the workers are now able to spend money on food, clothing and other items. In turn, that means that these store owners themselves are not facing anymore the prospect of bankruptcy and have started rehiring their old employees, whom they had been obliged to let go at the onset of this Great Depression. I would say that, for each worker on this site, at least five more people are benefiting from this project. And they say that there are now dozens of such projects going on in Vermont and the neighboring states."

"Yeah, I heard that Mayor Jackson is quite happy about this project, while the Governor is reaping a lot of kudos as well."

"Well, that sure won't hurt their chances at reelection during the next ballot. I suppose that you will come back this afternoon to pick up Mary, as usual?"

"You're right! Will she be finished by four thirty?"

"Yes! See you this afternoon, Sean!"

"And have a good day, Charlie!"

Going back to his pickup truck and sitting behind the wheel, Sean then started his engine and left.

Inside the kitchen trailer, Mary found that the other assistant cook, Helen Fitzpatrick, was already in and was busy starting the gas ovens and stoves.

"Hi, Helen! I will get a big pot of coffee going for our workers."

"Hi, Mary! Please do: these guys are fuelled by coffee. And make it strong!"

"Oh, don't worry about that: I myself don't drink dishwater."

The next fifteen minutes or so were busy for the two women and Charlie, with the first workers starting to enter the cafeteria tent as Mary manned the hot plates of the service counter. The first one to get to the counter was Thomas Gardner, a polite, hard working black man whom Mary liked as a customer.

"Good morning, Misses Brennan! Could I have two eggs easy over, with some bacon and potatoes?"

"You sure can, Thomas, and please call me Mary instead of Misses Brennan. I must have told you already at least five times."

"Sorry, Misses...uh, Mary. I am accustomed to be polite with ladies."

"Nothing wrong with that, Tom, but next time you call me 'Misses Brennan', you will get my spatula on the head."

"Uh, understood, Mary."

"That's better! Here you go!"

From there, time flew by as she and Helen served the 300 or so workers, who then ate quickly in order to start working on time at 08:30. They would then return at 12:15 for lunch and return to work for 13:00, finally leaving the work site at five thirty in the afternoon. That work schedule was actually much lighter than what had been common in the recent past, while providing free meals for the workers was certainly a first. When Mary reviewed with Charlie what they had available to them to prepare lunch, she beamed on seeing that they had received a quantity of fresh lamb meat.

"Look at those nice lamb cuts! We have everything here to prepare a good old Irish stew."

"Then, be my guest, Mary." Replied the head cook, smiling to her. "I am putting you in charge of that stew."

"Oh, thanks Charlie! I promise you that the men will love it."

"I'm sure that they will, Mary: you are indeed an excellent cook. You should start your own restaurant one day."

"Hum, maybe I should...once we are out of this depression."

16:17 (New York Time)

Road between downtown Burlington and the municipal airport

Sean Brennan, who had turned on the road to the airport only three kilometers earlier, was surprised at first to see in the distance a sort of roadblock formed by a number of cars and pickup trucks parked across the road, forming a chicane. There was also a small crowd standing around the roadblock. Sean's surprise gradually turned into fear as he got closer: all the men appeared to be armed, either with shotguns, rifles, iron bars, baseball bats and picks' handles. Some of them also wore the long white robes and hoods of the Ku Klux Klan, who were well known for their anti-black violence and depredations in the Southern states. One Klansman armed with a shotgun and standing in the middle of the road then waved him to slow down and stop, something that Sean had but little choice to do right now. Stopping level with the Klansman, who had his hood off at the time, Sean lowered his window to speak with him. He then felt a shock on recognizing the Klansman as being the Chittenden County Sheriff in person! The Sheriff looked briefly in the cab and the back before addressing Sean in a suspicious tone.

"Why are you going to the municipal airport? To pick up some nigger working there?"

"I was just going to pick up my wife, who works at the site's kitchen."

The Sheriff fixed Sean for a moment, then made a waiving gesture.

"Alright, you may pass, but you better have only your wife aboard when you will return."

"Understood, sir!" replied Sean, wanting to get away from this roadblock as quickly as possible. With the racists on the road stepping to the side to let him pass, Sean drove slowly through the chicane formed by four cars, then accelerated towards the airport. As he did so, he recognized another armed man as being a member of the municipal police. That left a bitter taste in his mouth, with his fear soon turning into anger and disgust. That racist mob reminded him too much of the gangs of enforcers

and middlemen used during the 19th Century by British landlords in Ireland to oppress and squeeze their starving Irish tenants.

When Sean arrived at the entrance gate of the work site, he saw that the workers had still not finished their work, while the buses used to transport them home were lined up and parked near the kitchen. Rolling down his window, he spoke urgently to the municipal policeman posted at the gate.

“QUICK, WARN THE SITE MANAGER NOT TO SEND THE WORKERS BY BUS DOWN THAT ROAD: A CROWD OF ABOUT SIXTY ARMED RACISTS HAVE PUT UP A ROADBLOCK SOME TWO MILES BEHIND ME.”

“What?! Are you sure, Mister Brennan?”

“Yes I am! They have parked four cars across the road to form a chicane and they are all armed with either shotguns, rifles, crowbars or pick handles. Some also wear KKK robes, including the County Sheriff himself. I also recognized one of your colleagues, Dan Spitzer, as part of the crowd.”

“Oh my God!” said the young policeman, horrified. “Go to the manager’s trailer, near the kitchen: I will join you there.”

“Understood!”

Sean then sped towards the kitchen trailer, breaking at the last moment and turning around, to finally stop and park in front of it. Mary, who was waiting outside the kitchen trailer, watched him jump out and run away with utter bewilderment.

“SEAN, WERE ARE YOU GOING?”

“I WILL EXPLAIN LATER: SOMETHING BAD IS BREWING UP.”

Climbing the few steps of the manager’s trailer, Sean did not bother to knock on the door before opening it and entering the trailer, surprising the project manager, who was in the process of reading some kind of document.

“Mister Brennan? What...”

“QUICK, SIR! DELAY THE DEPARTURE BY BUS OF THE WORKERS: A BIG BUNCH OF ARMED RACISTS HAVE PUT UP A ROADBLOCK ACROSS THE ROAD TO DOWNTOWN BURLINGTON.”

Sean then took a minute telling the shocked manager, who was a Frenchman, about what he had seen, including the presence of the County Sheriff and of at least one municipal policeman as part of the armed crowd. Looking lost at first, the manager then picked up the microphone of the radio linking him with the security guards of the site,

who were part of the Air France security branch. He ordered the head of the guards to come to his trailer, then decided to call as well the project manager for the whole state of Vermont, who was collocated with the Governor of Vermont in the town of Montpelier, the state capital. He had time to repeat to him what Sean had told him before the senior security guard entered the trailer at the same time as the municipal policeman who had been guarding the gate of the site.

“Is there a problem, Monsieur Vaillant?”

“Very much so, Monsieur Julien: Mister Brennan encountered an armed racist mob at a roadblock three kilometers down the road to downtown Burlington. They probably want to stop the buses transporting our workers and then beat the black ones up. I called Monsieur Vernier in Montpelier, but I don’t know frankly what to do next. According to Mister Brennan, there are some police officers that are part of that racist mob.”

Robert Julien tightened his jaws on hearing that: the degree and extent of racism in the United States that he had seen since his arrival a month ago had angered him to no small degree with its meanness, ignorance and plain stupidity. Unfortunately, being a visiting foreigner here, he didn’t have the legal right to do much about it, except maybe exercise his right to self-defense. An idea then came to his mind.

“We do have one SUPER COLIBRI and two COLIBRI II here at the airfield: we could use them to move at least our black workers by air, so that they are not exposed to these rednecks.”

George Vaillant nodded his head on hearing that.

“That sounds like an excellent idea that could avoid any violence today.”

“But what about those racists at the roadblock?” protested Sean Brennan. “I still have to bring my wife home and I can’t abandon my truck here. Besides, those thugs need to face justice for this.”

“You are right, Mister Brennan: we can’t let those bastards get away scot free like this, as they were probably ready to murder or seriously wound our black workers.” said Julien, thoughtful. “I may not have the authority here to make arrests, but I think that we still could make the next best thing: get evidence that could support legal prosecution against them.”

The Air France security man then turned to look at the young policeman who had manned the gate of the site.

“Could I use you as a witness for our next move, Officer Kenley?”

"Uh, sure! What do you have in mind, Mister Julien?"

"You will soon see. Come with me outside."

However, before they could go out of the trailer, the telephone on Vaillant's desk rang, freezing them at the door. The project manager nearly jumped on his telephone and picked up the receiver.

"Michel Vaillant here!"

The voice that answered him then was definitely an American one.

"Mister Vaillant, this is John Weeks, Governor of Vermont. What exactly is going on in Burlington?"

"Mister Governor, we have a large crowd of armed racists who have put up a barrage across the road linking the Burlington Municipal Airport and downtown Burlington, with the apparent goal of stopping the buses carrying our workers home and beating up the black workers."

The manager then gave the details to the Governor, who was silent for a moment before speaking again, some bitterness evident in his voice.

"The County Sheriff himself, part of those jackals... I will be damned if I will let any lynch mob act as they please anywhere in my state. What they are trying to do amounts to armed insurrection and I will respond to it accordingly. I am going to put my National Guard in action on this. In the meantime, evacuate your workers as safely as possible."

"Understood, Mister Governor. We will use our SUPER COLIBRI and COLIBRI IIs to evacuate our black workers by air and will wait for your guardsmen to arrive before moving the rest by bus. Thank you for your intervention, Mister Governor."

The manager then put down his telephone receiver and looked at Julien and the young policeman.

"The Governor is going to send some guardsmen to help here and agree to us evacuating our black workers by air."

"Excellent! I'm going to alert our pilots."

Mary Brennan came in the trailer just after the departure of the two men and looked anxiously at her husband.

"Sean, what is going on?"

"Rednecks have shown up, Mary." said Sean before taking a minute to explain to her what was happening.

"And what will we do in the meantime, Sean?"

“What I will do is go get my trusty shotgun in the truck and stand ready to defend this site if those morons show up here.” was Sean’s reply before he ran out of the trailer.

17:07 (New York Time)

Improvised barrage on the road to the municipal airport

Chittenden County Sheriff John Coolidge, standing beside one of the cars forming a chicane across the road to the municipal airport, stiffened when he started to hear engine noises coming from the direction of the airport. He then shouted to the 68 other men manning the roadblock with him.

“I HEAR ENGINE NOISES! GET READY TO GREET THOSE NIGGERS THE WAY THEY DESERVE, MEN!”

He however quickly felt that something was wrong: the noises were not that of car engines. Looking up at an angle of about thirty degrees, he then saw a group of five small dots approaching from the airport at medium altitude, a sight that made him swear violently.

“THE FUCKING BASTARDS ARE RETURNING TO DOWNTOWN BURLINGTON BY AIR! LET’S SHOOT THEM DOWN WHEN THEY WILL PASS OVERHEAD!”

The 36 men at the roadblock who were already carrying an assortment of rifles, shotguns and carbines took positions against the cars of the roadblock, using them as supports to steady their aim. Those who had baseball bats or steel crowbars in their hands but had left firearms in their cars ran at once to retrieve them. By the time that the small group of planes, three of which had weird shapes with large propellers, was overhead, 45 men at the roadblock were aiming firearms at them. Coolidge, who had himself retrieved his Remington caliber .30-06 bolt-action rifle from the trunk of his car, judged the altitude of the aircraft to be around 400 meters, too high for shotguns but certainly within range of rifles.

“LET THESE NIGGERS HAVE IT, BOYS!”

Up above, in one of the two Vermont Air Guard Curtiss FALCON escorting the one SUPER COLIBRI and two COLIBRI II loaded with black workers, Captain Richard Simmons swore when he heard the distinct sound of gunfire and saw multiple muzzle

flashes among the crowd of men at the roadblock. Whoever was down there at the roadblock had just ratcheted up significantly the criminal level of their acts.

“Fucking rednecks! This is pretty close to armed insurrection.”

His observer, Sergeant Willis Cleburne, suddenly screamed with pain in his rear open cockpit, at the same time that two bullets pierced the canvas surfaces of the right wing of their aircraft. Twisting his head backward, Simmons saw that his observer now lay inert in his aft seat, blood visible on his face. That sight positively enraged Simmons, who grabbed his radio microphone to call his wingman, Lieutenant Mike Johnson. More bullets hit his plane as he spoke in the radio.

“Blue Two, this is Blue One: we are getting gunfire and my observer has just been hit. Follow me and dive on those bastards at the roadblock. Use your machine guns and silence those shooters, over!”

“Blue Two, understood!” replied Johnson after a short delay and with some reticence in his voice. He however followed Simmons’ FALCON in a tight turn to the right, followed by a steep dive towards the cars assembled on and around the road. Johnson saw from the corner of one eye two SUPER COLIBRI approaching at low level, coming from the direction of Montpelier. From his pre-mission briefing with Captain Simmons, he knew that the Governor intended to use the two SUPER COLIBRI parked at the Barre-Montpelier Airport to transport quickly to the site of the roadblock all the Vermont National Guardsmen he could find, with the aim of disarming and arresting the racist mob. Johnson was not himself anti-segregation and kept his distances from black people, but he didn’t condone acts of violence, like lynching and beatings, and believed in the rule of law and order. The news that Sergeant Cleburne had been hit further motivated him as he dove down behind Simmons’ FALCON while taking the safeties off his two fixed machine guns. The distinct sound of a bullet striking his aircraft then made him angrily clench his teeth together.

“You want to play that game, you bastards? Then we will play together!”

Down at the roadblock, Sheriff Coolidge understood his mistake when he saw two of the planes turn and dive on his group.

“Christ! They are going to strafe us. GET IN YOUR CARS AND RETREAT, MEN!”

However, the men at the roadblock barely had time to start running towards their cars and pickup trucks before the first strafing pass by Captain Simmons. The bullets from

that first pass pierced a number of the cars and also hit five men, who went down with screams of pain. Some of the other rednecks stood their ground and tried to hit the two planes diving at them. Four of those men, plus another five hurriedly getting into pickup trucks, were hit by Lieutenant Johnson's pass. Coolidge himself, who was shouting orders around, was killed instantly by a bullet to the head, leaving the crowd leaderless. The panicked racists failed to notice the two SUPER COLIBRI landing across the road some 300 meters west of the roadblock, and that until the two aircraft took off at the vertical after unloading a total of 57 Vermont guardsmen. Even before they could approach those guardsmen, who were hurryingly taking prone firing positions on both sides of the road, the convoy of cars and pickup trucks was hit again by the second strafing passes of Simmons and Johnson. One pickup truck, its driver killed by a machine gun bullet and with two of the seven men in its back also hit, veered off the road at high speed and plunged into the roadside drainage ditch, hitting its bank hard and projecting the occupants of the truck's back high in the air. Those occupants then brutally landed in the adjacent field, sustaining more injuries. A sedan car was also hit and similarly crashed into the drainage ditch, flipping over on impact and then performing three spectacular rolls before coming to a rest in a field, belly up. The remaining cars and trucks, in a state of utter panic, tried to drive past the Vermont guardsmen positioned across the road, but were greeted by dense rifle fire from the Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifles of the soldiers. Some of the rednecks then worsened their situation by trying to fire back at the guardsmen, attracting in turn an even fiercer hail of bullets at the cars and trucks. Firing frantically their rifles at an average individual rate of fire of one round per four seconds, the 57 guardsmen, many of whom were experienced hunters and qualified marksmen, peppered all the vehicles in the redneck convoy as it tried to drive past them, hitting its occupants, piercing radiators and blowing up tires. Only one car, already with four bullet holes in its steel body and a flat tire, managed to drive past the guardsmen, only to find itself the target of the concentrated fire from 22 of the soldiers. With all its occupants killed or gravely wounded, it coasted to a stop after another sixty meters or so. Not hearing return fire anymore, the major in charge of the guardsmen got up and shouted at his men.

"CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! FORM UP IN A SKIRMISH LINE AND START SWEEPING DOWN THE ROAD AND THE ADJACENT FIELDS. DISARM AND ARREST THE SURVIVORS AND COLLECT THE DEAD AND WOUNDED AND LINE THEM ON THE ROAD. IF ANYONE TRIES TO RUN AWAY, GIVE THEM ONE

WARNING TO STOP, THEN SHOOT THEM DOWN IF THEY DON'T COMPLY! SERGEANT McKINNON, TAKE FOUR MEN AND GO CHECK THAT CAR THAT PASSED US!"

Major Charles Brubacker then went to check if his unit had suffered any casualties in the exchange of gunfire. He felt a flash of anger on seeing that one of his men had been seriously wounded by a bullet to his chest.

"Those bastards! They are going to learn that they are in Vermont, not Alabama or Mississippi."

As his men started walking down the road and the adjacent fields in extended line, he saw the two SUPER COLIBRI aircraft that had carried his men starting to come down to land at the vertical on the road near him. Waiting until they had landed and had slowed down their propellers to idle, he walked to the first one and spoke to the Air France Security Branch man whose head was sticking out of the forward port side door of the impressive machine.

"WE ARE GOING TO COLLECT THE DEAD AND WOUNDED AND ARREST THE SURVIVORS. I WILL NEED YOUR PLANES TO BE READY TO TRANSPORT THE WOUNDED TO THE HOSPITAL IN BURLINGTON."

"NO PROBLEMS, MAJOR!"

Brubacker then walked away along the road to catch up with his line of advancing men. Dealing with the wounded and the dead proved to take much longer than he had expected, as only thirteen of the rednecks were captured alive and intact, to have their hands promptly tied in their backs and to be then made to sit down in a tight group on the road, with five guardsmen watching them closely. Brubacker was shocked to find how many weapons the rednecks had, with those weapons now strewn along the road and drainage ditches or inside crashed cars. What however shocked and angered him the most was when he found the body of Sheriff Coolidge, still wearing his KKK robe and hood. Brubacker was not naïve and knew that there were plenty of racists in Vermont, even though they were much less numerous in proportion to the general population of the state compared to the southern states of the country, but finding that someone who represented the law in this county had been part of this lynching mob brought bitterness to him. Anger was then added to his bitterness on noticing that many of the cars and pickup trucks had out of state plates.

14:18 (New York Time)
Saturday, September 13, 1930
Burlington Town Hall, downtown Burlington
Vermont

“SILENCE, PLEASE! THE GOVERNOR IS NOW GOING TO SPEAK.”

The crowd of over forty radio reporters, press photographers and journalists grew quiet as the governor of Vermont, John Weeks, took place behind the microphone set at one end of the public meeting room in the Burlington Town Hall, with the mayor of Burlington taking position to his right and back. Weeks had a stern expression as he started speaking to the media men.

“Gentlemen of the press, a most disgraceful and criminal event happened yesterday afternoon, when a group of 69 armed men put up a barrage across the road linking Burlington with its municipal airport. From the confessions taken from many of those men who were arrested yesterday by the Vermont National Guard, their goal was to intercept and stop the buses due to bring the workers employed at the construction site at the airport back to their homes in Burlington, then to take out the black workers in the buses and beat them up. Thankfully, a citizen going to the airport was able to alert the site manager at the airport to this threat to his workers. That manager then called Montpelier to inform me of the situation. Since this situation amounted to no less than an armed riot, I ordered the Vermont National Guard and Air Guard to take action to either disperse those rioters or arrest them if they refused to disperse. Concurrently, the construction site manager at the Burlington Municipal Airport decided to use the planes parked at the airfield to carry safely by air the black workers targeted by the rioters, while the white workers waited at the airport for the road to be reopened. As a safety precaution, I ordered two armed planes of the Vermont Air Guard to escort the planes transporting the black workers to Burlington. I also ordered the national guardsmen available in Montpelier to use two planes parked at the Barre-Montpelier Municipal Airport and fly to the site of the roadblock. Those two planes, which are capable of taking off and landing vertically, were to land near the roadblock and dismount the guardsmen, so that they could arrest the rioters. My men went with the intent of using the minimum force possible. However, the rioters chose by their actions to escalate the situation at once. When the planes carrying the black workers towards Burlington passed overhead, the rioters started shooting at them with dozens of rifles. The

transport planes suffered only insignificant damage, due to their construction making them resistant to bullets, but the two Vermont Air Guard planes escorting them were struck by multiple bullets, with one of those bullets striking and killing the observer in the lead aircraft. That was when the lead pilot decided to return fire and dove with his wingman on the rioters, using his machine guns to silence their gunfire. A number of rioters were hit at that time, with the rest then deciding to beat a hasty retreat. However, when they encountered the guardsmen who had been landed across the road at some distance from the barrage, they refused to stop and opened fire on the soldiers, who in turn returned fire. When the firefight concluded, with all the rioters' vehicles immobilized, 21 rioters were dead and 35 others were wounded, while one guardsman was seriously wounded. The surviving rioters were then disarmed and arrested and the wounded were flown to the Mary Fletcher Hospital, here in Burlington.”

The Governor then took a short pause, managing his effect, before speaking again in a firm tone.

“Those surviving rioters are going to be charged with murder, attempted murder, armed insurrection, rioting, illegal assembly with intent to commit violence and resisting arrest. Two points about those rioters have particularly aggravated me, on top of the violence they committed against my guardsmen: first, I was incensed to learn that the Sheriff of Chittenden County himself, John Coolidge, was part of the crowd of rioters and was in fact leading them, wearing a Ku Klux Klan robe and hood. Two Sheriff's Deputies and one Burlington Municipal Police officer were also part of the rioters. While Sheriff Coolidge was killed during the firefight with my guardsmen, one of his deputies was wounded and arrested, along with the other deputy and the municipal police officer. On learning of his presence among the rioters, Mayor Jackson immediately fired that municipal police officer, who will now have to face the same charges as the other rioters. The second point that aggravated me was the fact that a goodly number of the rioters had come from out of state, with the sole goal of committing violence against black residents of Vermont. Those out of state rioters came from Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania. This effectively turned the actions of the rioters into a coordinated act of armed sedition across state lines and I have instructed the State's Attorney General to prosecute those rioters vigorously and to enlist the help of the BOI¹ in this affair. I intend later today to get in touch with the

¹ BOI : Bureau of Investigation. The first name of what would become the FBI.

governors of the states concerned, to apprise them of the circumstances of this incident and to gain their cooperation in investigating the individuals from their respective states who were arrested yesterday. That is the information I have for you at the moment. You may now ask questions.”

Dozens of questions were immediately shouted by the reporters, forcing the aide of the governor to ask repeatedly for calm and to choose which reporter could ask a question. The first journalist to ask a question proved to be a local one.

“Jerry O’Neil, Burlington Free Press! Governor, do we know why those rioters planned to stop those workers? What made them target the black workers from the construction site at the airport, rather than simply targeting black people in downtown Burlington?”

“A pertinent question, Mister O’Neil, and one to which we got an answer by interrogating the arrested rioters. Basically, the rioters claimed to have been incensed by the fact that black men had gained some of the jobs at the airport improvement project, at the expense of white workers who could also have been selected. They also were angry about the fact that the airport construction site was not segregated and that black and white workers shared the same facilities and had equal salaries for similar skills.”

Many of the out-of-state reporters stiffened on hearing that, with one of them being the next to ask a question.

“Carl Steinberger, from the New York Post. Mister Governor, why was that construction site not segregated? Did you order it to be so?”

Weeks’ face then showed some irritation at that question and he fixed the reporter in the eyes while answering him.

“Mister Steinberger, each state in the United States is presently free to adopt or not regulations enforcing racial segregation in public places. Vermont is not part of the states enforcing such segregation rules and, as far as I am concerned, will never do. Vermont is known to be a most tolerant and open-minded state, something that I am rightly proud of.”

“Mister Governor, some say that racial integration at the Burlington Municipal Airport and at many other large construction sites across Vermont and the surrounding states was actually a clause mandated by the financial backer of the projects, the French-based Lenoir Industries Consortium. Is that true?”

Weeks took a moment to think over his answer, realizing how tricky that question was in many ways.

“Yes, the loans from the Lenoir Industries did contain an anti-segregation clause, which I accepted in the contracts for the various construction sites around Vermont financed by French loans. Before anyone would criticize such a clause, let me say this: first, I am personally against racial segregation, so I had no compunction into accepting that clause. Second, nearly 3,000 Vermont workers who were previously unemployed and had nearly zero prospects of finding a new job are now employed at the various construction sites across the state meant to improve our aviation infrastructure. As you must know, the Lenoir Industries is a World leader in aviation facilities and networks, with the Air France company and the Blériot-Kruger Aircraft company being subsidiaries of the Lenoir Industries. On top of employing directly those 3,000 workers, those projects are further helping the economy of the state by buying or renting construction equipment and materials from suppliers based in Vermont and by buying foodstuff from our local farms in order to feed their onsite workers during work hours. Overall, these projects are making wonders to help Vermont ride the present economic depression, in contrast to the ham-fisted economic and financial policies of the Hoover Administration, which are actually contributing to this depression.”

“Mister Governor, it was mentioned that there are more construction projects around other states that are also financed by loans from the Lenoir Industries. Is that correct and, if yes, in which states?”

“It is correct, mister. Apart from Vermont, the states of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine have also signed loans and understandings with the head of the Lenoir Industries, Miss Tasha Lenoir.”

“And what is being built right now in Vermont as a result of those contracts, Mister Governor?”

“The projects under construction in Vermont include the extensive improvement and enlargement of three airports in the state: Burlington Municipal Airport; the Bennington Airport and the Barre-Montpellier Airport. Those work projects include the building of long, paved runways, new control towers with radar systems, passengers terminals, hangars and support and emergency services facilities. On top of these three airport projects, there are also construction sites to build new schools, roads and low income housing. Finally, the Lenoir Industries will help the future of Vermont by effecting

a transfer of technological and scientific knowledge to our technical schools and universities. That last point is much more important and significant than many would believe at first, gentlemen. Next school season, Vermont students will be able to learn the latest aeronautical, chemical and electronic engineering knowledge directly at the Champlain College and at the University of Vermont. Vermont will thus become a new center of advanced technology studies in the United States.”

“Wait! Hasn’t France refused before to share such advanced technological knowledge with the United States, Mister Governor?”

“France indeed did, mostly because of the present racial segregation policies enforced around the United States. The other states that signed contracts with the Lenoir Industries will also benefit from a similar transfer of technological and scientific knowledge.”

“What about the other states in America, Mister Governor?”

Weeks shrugged and smiled then.

“It will all depend on their legal and actual state of racial segregation or non-segregation, gentlemen. No racial integration and equality, no transfer of technology and no modern airport facilities.”

“Mister Governor, what pushed Miss Lenoir in changing her long-held policies concerning the United States?”

“First off, Miss Lenoir has not really changed her said policies: we changed our own policies by accepting to prevent and ban racial segregation at the work sites she is helping to finance. Second, if left to run unchecked, the present depression is threatening the economic situation of the whole World, not only that of the United States. Miss Lenoir is simply applying one of the remedies that could stop that depression, namely financial stimulation through large public works programs.”

“Jack Penfield, from the Washington Post! Mister Governor, aren’t you worried that, under the guise of this public works program, Miss Lenoir and her consortium could be attempting to subvert the United States’ economy and its politics? Isn’t this constituting foreign meddling in American affairs?”

With the rest of the reporters avidly waiting for his response to that, Weeks eyed severely the Washington reporter.

“Mister Penfield, if you equate a foreign industrial powerhouse lending a financial hand to a number of American states with foreign meddling in American affairs, then I would say that you are being paranoid and are ready to keep us mired into a

catastrophic economic depression, which by the way was caused solely by the unabashed greed and myopic practices of American bankers, speculators and stock market traders. Vermont and the other states involved in this work program got basically zero help from the federal government, which keeps denying the seriousness of the situation and even worsened it by foolishly starting a trade tariffs war with Europe with its Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act. So, excuse me and the other governors involved for grabbing and shaking a lending hand when it appeared. On this, I will now terminate this briefing, as I have many important telephone calls to make. Have a good day, gentlemen.”

Weeks then turned around and walked out of the meeting hall via a back door, pursued by shouted questions from the journalists and reporters.

16:05 (New York Time)

Thursday, September 18, 1930

Office of the Director of the Bureau of Investigations (BOI)

Department of Justice building, Washington, D.C.

“So, Clyde, what did you find to date on this affair in Burlington and the involvement of this Miss Lenoir in the public works program around the New England states and New York?”

Clyde Tolson, the Assistant Director of the BOI, who had been called to John Edgar Hoover’s office along with three senior field agents and one senior lawyer, briefly consulted his notes before answering his Director.

“Well, to say that this affair is quite interesting in many ways would be an understatement, sir. While the battle between the armed segregationists and the Vermont guardsmen can be characterized as a fairly straightforward clash between armed rioters and state law and order forces, the present involvement of Miss Lenoir in the public works programs going on around the New England states, the New York state and New Jersey, is proving to be of truly surprising scope. As far as we know, Miss Tasha Lenoir has pledged a total of 210 million dollars in very low interest, long-term loans and in technological support to the states involved, all under the express condition that no racial segregation or discrimination be exercised in the hiring, pay and treatment of the workers hired for those programs. And this is said to be for the first year alone, with more money to come in the following years.”

The dollar figure left Hoover, a squarely built 35 year-old man, with his mouth opened ajar.

“Did you say 210 million dollars, Clyde? How rich is this Tasha Lenoir exactly?”

“You could say filthy rich, sir. In fact, she is rumored to be the richest woman in the World and could well be the richest person in the World as well, something that I would be inclined to believe. The extent of her fortune is not known, as Miss Lenoir is quite discrete about her personal worth and actually lives a fairly frugal lifestyle, but she is easily a multi-billionaire...in American dollars. Her industrial and scientific empire extends worldwide and her political clout and influence in France and around Europe is very significant. Her fortune has exploded further recently, after her consortium’s prospection teams founds huge deposits of oil in Arabia, following which they signed exclusive exploitation deals with the local sheiks. The Lenoir consortium, in league with the French oil company ‘Jupiter’, has already started importing Arabian oil to the European market and is making a ton of money with the sale of that oil.”

“So, if she is really swimming in money, then why getting involved here, around the New England states and New York? Is she trying to buy political influence here?”

On that, Tolson hesitated a bit before answering.

“Possibly, sir. The fact that she insisted on that non-segregation clause points to some political motives on her part to finance those programs. However, a couple of our best analysts and lawyers who looked at Miss Lenoir’s various operations, both here and around Europe, are speculating that her motives are more of the social kind.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That there are strongly altruistic traits and possible motives to her actions, sir. All of the companies she has founded or acquired to date function according to what you could call highly socialist-like policies concerning their hiring and employment of workers. The employees working at the various companies and establishments of her consortium, including those run by the three women who are her closest friends, enjoy pay, benefits and working conditions superior to those of any other employers. We are talking here about forty-hour work weeks, paid vacations, paid maternity leave, complete equality in pay and conditions between male and female employees, a retirement pension plan and full health care coverage.”

Hoover, who had fired all the female agents of the department as one of his first acts on becoming Director of the BOI, felt anger at those words and slapped a hand hard on his desk.

“That doesn’t sound socialist: that sounds downright like communism to me. So, that Lenoir is trying to shove communism down our throats? Hell will freeze over before I let that happen. What else do you have on her?”

“Well, that her empire is not only an industrial and financial one: it is also a scientific and technological one, sir. Miss Lenoir is universally acknowledged to be a true scientific genius, with her specialties being advanced physics, chemistry and electronics. She has either opened or supported a number of scientific research and teaching establishments, where promising and established scientists and engineers are learning about the revolutionary knowledge and inventions from her. Such establishments include, among many others, the French Institute of Advanced Sciences, the Naval Technical Institute, the Chalais-Meudon Aeronautical Research Center and the Paris Applied Electronics Institute. She also trains and educates at her facilities a number of French university researchers and faculty members, who in turn teach their new knowledge to their university pupils. Until recently, that knowledge had been severely controlled and restricted to French establishment and citizens, something that has clearly helped France become possibly the most advanced nation on Earth. However, a number of French scientists and specialists belonging to parts of Miss Lenoir’s consortium have recently arrived at a number of universities and colleges around the New York State and New England, where they have started teaching Lenoir’s advanced knowledge to American teachers and students alike. Apparently, that was offered by Lenoir as a kind of sweetener to convince the state governors to accept her program. In view of what that advanced knowledge could bring to their states, those governors understandably jumped on that offer. From what our field agents heard from the American teachers who are now recipients of that new science package, this has the potential to attract the best students around the United States to those universities and colleges and will in turn boost further the economy and prestige of those states, at the detriment of the learning establishments of the other states not involved in Lenoir’s program.”

Hoover frowned then, clearly skeptical.

“Is that science package really so advanced? Aren’t we blowing up the scientific reputation of that Tasha Lenoir at bit? After all, the United States harbor many of the finest scientists and teaching establishments in the World. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for one, comes to my mind.”

“Uh, sir, the M.I.T. was one of the first universities offered that science package, and they jumped on it at once. As for the level of technological advance the Lenoir Industries enjoys over us, I will let Jack here speak about it: he investigated the Air France component of the consortium and came back blown away. Jack?”

Jack Vance, a tall and lean man in his forties, did his best to look confident as he spoke, knowing how badly Director Hoover took contradictory opinions.

“Sir, the planes Air France is using since the mid 1910s, when one of its amphibian planes made the first transatlantic air crossing, are justly acknowledged to be far superior to anything the American aircraft industry can produce right now. Just two weeks ago, Air France inaugurated a new line with a new aircraft: a direct flight between Los Angeles and Manila, in the Philippines, with the ‘SUPER PÉGASE’ supersonic transport. Now, I have to mention the fact that the distance between Los Angeles and Manila is a bit over 7,300 miles. Yet, that SUPER PÉGASE covers that distance in less than five hours while carrying up to 120 passengers at a cruising speed of 1,560 miles per hour, and this in one single leg. American residents in the Philippines and American government officials and high level army and navy officers immediately jumped into that bandwagon, resulting in that new line being already fully booked most of the time. Prior to that, the best those Americans could get to travel between the Philippines and the United States was to use Air France planes in two legs, with a refueling stop in Honolulu. In contrast, no American-designed and built plane can yet cross the Atlantic in one shot. I also had discreet conversations with military pilots of our Navy and Army and they are all absolutely green with envy at the sight of the planes used by Air France. This actually brings me to one aspect of the technology transfer package offered by Miss Lenoir to the New York and New England states: the Blériot-Kruger aircraft company, which is part of the Lenoir Industries consortium, has entered in partnership with a couple of aircraft and engine manufacturing companies established around those states, but with the same non-segregation clause than for the public works programs. Engineers from Blériot-Kruger have arrived at those companies and are now passing along much knowledge that was previously kept secret by France.”

Hoover stayed silent for long seconds while digesting all this. He still hated the idea of having a foreign entity come in like this to the United States and barge into its domestic affairs. However, he could see that trying to stop and roll back the programs initiated by Lenoir could well trigger a violent political backlash, especially from the state governors presently benefitting from Lenoir’s generosity. Even President Hoover would probably

refuse to move against Lenoir's projects, unless the Congress members from the Southern States raised enough of a stink about this business of non-segregation clause, something that was still quite possible. He finally decided to play it safe...on both sides.

"Very well! Keep investigating this work program business and the motives of this Tasha Lenoir, discretely. If she makes a single illegal move, then we will nail her. That is all, gentlemen."



Japanese troops invading Manchuria.

CHAPTER 4 – AN UNSTABLE WORLD

18:05 (Paris Time)

Saturday, May 7, 1932

Main lounge of the Château du Haut-Buc

Buc, southwestern suburbs of Paris

“...that President Paul Doumer has died this afternoon from the gunshot wounds inflicted yesterday, when a mentally deranged Russian immigrant shot at him with a pistol as he was attending a book exposition at the Salomon Hotel, in Paris. The writer who had been talking with the President at the time, Claude Farrère, was wounded multiple times when he tried to deviate the madman’s aim. Farrère is presently in stable

condition in hospital and is expected to recover within a few weeks. As for the shooter, an individual named Paul Gorgulov, he was then restrained and arrested by the Sûreté agents acting as bodyguards for President Doumer. He will now be judged on the charges of premeditated murder and..."

Terry Clarkson used the TV remote unit to lower the sound of the large flat screen high-definition color television set in one corner of the main lounge of the mansion, then looked at Tasha, sitting next to her with Hien in one of the sofas of the room.

"I give an 'F' to these presidential bodyguards: that idiot should never have been able to get this close to President Doumer with a gun."

Tasha made a weak smile as she replied to that.

"Terry, don't be too harsh on these Sûreté guys: first, they have not received the kind of intensive training that security personnel receive in the 27th Century. Second, such a shooting of a major French politician is still quite rare and this is an act by an unpredictable, deranged person. They probably had no reasons to fear an attack then."

"Still, a good bodyguard should always be alert and expect anything. This brings me to one thing: we should 'invent' and start production of neuronic stun pistols, to be sold solely to French security forces. Such pistols would have made stopping this Gorgulov guy much easier and safer. I can also see a definite need for them for your Air France Security Branch officers, as it would give them an effective weapon against aircraft hijackers that would not risk puncturing a pressurized cabin."

Tasha was thoughtful for a moment as she mentally dissected Terry's suggestion. It actually made a lot of sense and could indeed help save many lives. Furthermore, Tasha had up to now introduced into France so many highly advanced electronic designs that were considered close to magical that 'inventing' a neuronic stun pistol would probably not cause too great a reaction.

"Well, replicating the technology of stun pistols would be easy enough: we possess such stun pistols for our personal defense and I have their technical schematics in the data files contained in my laptop computer. In fact, I could easily build a stun pistol myself within a week or two. However, we will then have to make sure that only French military and police forces can acquire them, not simple French citizens and, especially, foreign governments and individuals."

"Could you tune the frequency of the neuronic ray so that it would be invisible to the naked eye, instead of looking like a light blue beam of light, Tasha?" asked Pham Ti Hien, making Tasha's head nod once.

“That should be easy enough, Hien. Good point: it would make the use of stun pistols much more discreet. I will start to work on it tomorrow.”

“How much do you think that this assassination will affect French politics, Hien?” asked Terry, acknowledging the Vietnamese-American as the most knowledgeable one of them about French politics, thanks mostly to her position as founder and chairman of Radio France.

“Well, without wanting to be mean with poor President Doumer, the fact was that he didn’t actually hold or used real significant political powers in everyday life. The President of the Council, or Prime Minister if you prefer, has the real political power in France. He and his ministers decide what policies France will follow or enforce and also draft the national budget and assign the economic priorities around the various ministries. Whoever will replace Doumer as President of the Republic will probably have little impact on the future of the country. On the other hand, Pierre Laval and his cabinet are still in power and may stay in power for a few more months. I won’t even try to guess for how long, though: French politics are like a revolving door. Most government cabinets survive no more than a year, while many of them have stayed in power for only a couple months...or less.”

“You are too right about the chronic instability of French ministerial cabinets, Hien.” said Tasha, a bitter smile on the corner of her mouth. “God knows how much more difficult it has made our work at improving France and making it stronger along these past twenty years.”

“Should we reveal our big secret to the next President of the Republic, Tasha?”

“No!” was Tasha’s instant reply. “The last one to whom we told that we were from the future was President Gaston Doumergue, whom Paul Doumer replaced last year. Doumergue did respect our request not to pass on our secret to his successor and to let us decide who is worthy of knowing that we are from the future. I didn’t trust Doumer with our secret when he took his post and still didn’t as of yesterday. My inclination is to not inform whoever will replace Doumer, unless he proves to be a truly exceptional leader. As for Paul Laval, the guy may be an efficient politician and bureaucrat, but I can’t trust that weasel with our secret. There is something that smells wrong with him. Unfortunately, the historical files we had with us when we were transported by accident to the year 1912 are extremely limited and don’t mention Laval. On the other hand, many important historical details are missing from our data files, so the non-mention of Pierre Laval is no guarantee that he will prove to be a good Prime

Minister of France. The one meeting I had with him was however no case of 'love at first sight'. So, let's keep mum about our collective secret until further notice, girls."

13:36 (Paris Time)

Monday, May 16, 1932

Tasha Lenoir's electronic laboratory

Aéro-parc Blériot, Buc

Answering the telephone set near her work table in her electronic research laboratory, Tasha was happy to recognize Hien's voice at the other end of the line.

"Hien? To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"To a piece of concerning news, Tasha: yesterday, the Japanese Prime Minister, Tsuyoshi Inukai, was assassinated by a group of young militarist naval officers."

"Oh! Were those officers arrested?"

"Yes, but the reports on this from our news office in Tokyo indicate that those officers enjoy the support and favor of the majority of the Japanese population. That, with last year's Japanese invasion of Manchuria and this January's Japanese attack on Shanghai for rather spurious reasons, tends to support what our data files hinted at: militarism is on the rise in Japan and will eventually cause a war with China, then with other countries around Asia and the Pacific. This could become very serious in the next few years."

"I agree! I know that the French government is loathe to intervene in Asia's affairs, in order not to antagonize the local powers and preserve our commercial links in the region, but we still have the freedom to restrict or refuse military contracts with the Japanese government. I will go talk with Johanna, Terry and Louis about this after this call. On your part, tell your reporters in Japan to follow the situation closely, but tell them as well to be careful: those Japanese militarists just proved again that they respect little but power itself."

"Understood, Tasha. Uh, by the way, how is your newest project advancing?"

"Very quickly, actually. Reinventing the concept in a form understandable to today's technology is proving to be much easier than I thought at first. I should have the first working prototype ready for trials in three to four days."

"That fast?! Tasha, you will never cease to amaze me. Well, have a nice day!"

“You too, Hien!” replied Tasha before putting down the receiver. She then stayed motionless for long seconds as she thought about what was to happen around the Pacific in a few years...or sooner. All the things that had been changed during the last twenty years thanks to her actions and those of her friends, starting with World War One, were making it more and more difficult to predict what was to come next around the World. However, greed and the search for power were still major constants in human behavior and geopolitical affairs and still would be in the year 2624. In the 27th Century, she had been the head of a gigantic and powerful industrial consortium that was spanning not only Earth but most of the Solar System as well. As such, her power and influence had been on par with many of the most powerful politicians of the time, while those politicians had quickly learned not to ignore or cross her without some very serious reasons. Here, in the 20th Century, the level of technology may be much lower, but those in charge were still Humans, with all the weaknesses that implied.

10:19 (Paris Time)

Friday, May 27, 1932

Office of the Director of the Sûreté Générale

Ministry of Justice, Quai d’Orsay, Paris

“It is a honor for me to receive you, Miss Lenoir. Please, have a seat. Would you like something, coffee or tea?”

“No, thank you Monsieur Noël. You are too kind.”

Taking place in the easy chair offered by the Director of the Sûreté Générale, the name of the French national police at the time, Tasha took a few seconds to examine Léon Noël: in his mid forties, he was undeniably handsome and strength of character showed on his face. He also had the reputation of being a very competent man and was also said to be completely incorruptible.

‘Hum, I wouldn’t mind dating him. Too bad that he is married.’ thought Tasha. Noël, who took a chair opposite her, smiled to the mature but still beautiful Eurasian woman facing him.

“So, Miss Lenoir, what did you want to discuss with me?”

“Please, call me simply ‘Tasha’.”

“Only if you call me simply ‘Léon’.”

“With pleasure, Léon. Well, you do know that I have invented many highly advanced devices in the past and am continuing to do so at the present, right?”

“Of course, Tasha! Your scientific genius is in fact renown all over France and around the World.”

“Then, I can tell you that I had an idea for a specific new device for years already, but was kept too busy with other projects to start working on it...until recently. The recent murder of our President did a lot to spur me into starting to work on that project. I have now completed that project and tested my device and am now ready to offer it to the French government, for its exclusive and discreet use.”

Noël's eyes immediately narrowed as he stared with intense interest at the Eurasian scientist. A goodly number of inventions by Tasha Lenoir during the past twenty years, most of which had then been offered in exclusivity to the French government, had helped propel France at the forefront of advanced nations in the World and had also made wonders to boost its economy and quiet down its social atmosphere, the latter by vastly improving the standard of living of many in the lower classes of the French society. While some, typically competing industrialists and bankers, were either jealous or resentful of her, or both, the vast majority of French citizens considered her with near veneration as a model of caring, compassion and generosity. When Tasha Lenoir offered a new invention, it was never a trivial thing and only a fool would not pay attention then, and Noël was no fool.

“I am all ears, Tasha.”

Nodding her head once at that, Tasha then picked up her large purse, which she had put in her lap, and opened it. Noël tensed up at once on seeing her extract from her purse what looked furiously like some sort of pistol. However, he relaxed quickly when she handed him the object, holding it with two fingers in a non-threatening way.

“This is a new type of non-lethal weapon that is perfect for self-protection, or to restrain a violent individual without risking to wound or kill nearby innocents. I call it a neuronc stun pistol.”

“A neuronc stun pistol?” said the Director of the Sûreté while examining the strangely shaped pistol. It had a fairly short and thin tube instead of the barrel and slide of a normal pistol, while its handle was finely contoured, proving very comfortable to hold. Altogether, it was more compact than most handguns he knew and was also much lighter.

“Yes! Instead of firing solid projectiles, this neuronic stun pistol projects a thin beam of energy whose frequency and characteristics make it react with the nervous system of persons and animals targeted by it. When hit by such a stun beam, the target’s nervous system, including the brain, will experience a severe nervous shock that will knock out instantly the biggest man. Its power level can be adjusted between ‘light’, ‘medium’ and ‘heavy’ discharge, depending on the size and stamina of the target. You would use a light stun on a small woman, a medium stun on most average people and a heavy stun on a raging brute or charging animal predator. The beam itself is tuned to a frequency that is not visible to the naked eye and a discharge sounds only like a soft humming noise. My pistol is thus a very discreet weapon, on top of being compact and light, and should be perfect for your detectives and undercover agents, as well as for French intelligence agents working undercover. In the case of a hostage situation, for example, your agents would be able to stun the hostage taker even if he is using a hostage as a shield, and this with only the risk of stunning for a few minutes the hostage, with no permanent sequels afterwards. I am ready to offer my stun pistol for sale to the French government, with the sole condition that none of them will be provided or resold to anyone but properly accredited French government agents, police officers and military personnel. The only exception to that rule will be Air France Security Branch officers...and me and my close friends.”

His mind now in turmoil, Noël raised his eyes from the pistol in his hands and looked at her with disbelief.

“This...this is simply incredible! If not for your reputation as a scientific genius, I would not believe you about this pistol. What kind of power source is it using and how long does its effects last?”

“It is powered by a removable battery pack contained in the handle and which is easy and quick to replace with a fresh pack. One full pack is good enough to power up to twenty seconds of continuous fire on heavy discharge mode. I have concurrently developed a recharger unit able to simultaneously recharge and check up to six battery packs at a time. As for the effects of my pistol, it will depend on the intensity and duration of the beam and the stamina of the target. Generally, a big and strong man will be knocked out for at least fifteen minutes by a heavy discharge with a duration of one tenth of a second. That would be more than enough time to then allow your agents and officers to put the suspect into handcuffs before he could regain consciousness.”

"Tasha, this is like a gift from heaven: this weapon has the potential to save thousands of lives and to make the job of my police officers much safer. Have you actually tried it on living animals?"

"Yes! One short light stun discharge was able to knock out for half a hour a German Sheppard dog suffering from rabies. I believe that there are temporary confinement cells in the basement of this building, am I right?"

"Indeed!" said Noël, seeing where she was heading to. "You want to use a suspect as a demonstration target?"

"Correct! The meaner, more violent and powerful the suspect, the better."

"Well, I think that we have the perfect guinea pig for you downstairs, Tasha. Follow me!"

Giving back the pistol to Tasha, Noël then got up from his chair and guided Tasha out of his office and down a long corridor before getting to a large staircase and going down three levels with her. The last level proved to be a lot less welcoming in appearance, with bare stone and brick walls instead of varnished wood and plaster. There was also a solid steel door guarded by two French policemen standing on each side of it, plus a third policeman sitting at a desk near it. All three policemen came to rigid attention at the arrival of their director, with the one at the desk saluting him.

"Good morning, Mister Director! What could we do for you and the lady?"

"Good morning to you as well, Constable. I believe that a pimp was arrested last night while severely beating up one of his prostitutes. Is he still being held here?"

"Yes, Mister Director, and he is making a major nuisance of himself by screaming and insulting everyone approaching his cell. He even tried to attack the agent that brought his breakfast this morning, but the bars of his cell thankfully allowed our agent to pull back in time. That guy is like a mad dog, Mister Director, a very strong and very mean mad dog."

"That sounds exactly like what we were looking for, Monsieur Noël." said Tasha with a smile, attracting a dubious look from the policeman, who however didn't dare reply to that. Instead, he looked at his boss while fetching a large key ring hooked to the wall behind his desk.

"I suppose that you want to see that suspect, Mister Director?"

"I do! If you could please show me and Miss Lenoir to his cell."

"Certainly, Mister Director!"

The constable then quickly unlocked the steel door and opened it, then entered a rather sinister-looking hallway made of stone and lined on both sides with cell doors. As they walked down the long hallway, Tasha couldn't help wish that Terry, her personal bodyguard, could be with her now, as many of the occupants of the cells looked quite dangerous. The occupant of the cell in front of which they finally stopped however proved to be in a class of his own. A big brute of a man standing a good 185 centimeters and with wide shoulders and big hands, his face bore many scars from past fights, including a crooked nose and battered ears. A mean smile came to the man's face at the sight of Tasha.

"Well, well! That's nice of you to bring me a pretty woman like this."

While containing her revulsion, Tasha looked at the constable escorting her and the Director.

"The prostitute that he is accused of beating, did she survive, mister?"

"Last news about her are that she will survive but will need a few weeks in hospital, madam."

Her mind made, Tasha then looked at Léon Noël.

"I would like to enter his cell, Monsieur Noël."

Both the Director and his policeman looked at her as if she was crazy.

"Miss Lenoir, you can't be serious!" objected Noël. "According to his arrest report, it took three agents to immobilize him."

The pimp laughed out loud then and grinned to them.

"Yes, and two of them also needed to go to the hospital afterwards. But if the lady is nice enough to want to visit me..."

At that moment, Tasha briefly turned around and presented her back to the cell, time to grab her stun pistol and set it to 'heavy stun', then turned back, hiding her small pistol in a fold of her pleated skirt.

"Open the door, please!"

Still not liking this, and seeing that his constable was understandably reluctant to obey Tasha, Noël took the key ring from him and unlocked the cell door, watched by the disbelieving pimp, who was still sitting on his bench/cum bed. He also discreetly grabbed the handle of his revolver under his vest while opening the steel door to let Tasha in, ready for the worst. He felt adrenaline flow through his veins while watching tensely Tasha enter slowly the cell. Thankfully, she took one step to the left side after entering, allowing him a clear line of fire if the pimp ever rushed at her. The pimp, who

was not exactly the most intelligent man on Earth, was still wondering what luck had brought him this when Tasha calmly spoke to him.

“So, you feel powerful by beating up a woman? How about you try the same with me, you big coward?”

The pimp instantly filled with rage at being mocked by that woman, so close to him and offering him a possible hostage to help him escape this jail. Jumping to his feet, he launched at Tasha while screaming like a furious beast, both hands up and ready to grab her by the throat. That was when Tasha quickly pointed her pistol and fired a half second energy burst that produced a barely audible buzz. The effects left the Director and his constable with their mouths ajar: the pimp jerked violently once, as if receiving a strong electric discharge, with his arms flailing around a couple of times before he collapsed on the floor of his cell like a broken puppet, his eyes closed. Looking down impassively at the unconscious pimp, Tasha next looked at the Director and his agent.

“Could you please verify his vital signs, Monsieur Noël, so that you could see that he is still alive and well?”

His heart still beating furiously, Noël obeyed her after a couple of seconds and knelt beside the inert pimp, his agent close behind him with his truncheon at the ready. After a few seconds used to check his pulse and breathing, Noël got back up and fixed with new respect the small pistol still in Tasha’s hand.

“I would have not believed this to be possible without seeing it with my own eyes, Miss Lenoir. That stun pistol of yours is incredible!”

“Stun pistol? What’s that?” asked the constable, understandably confused. Tasha raised her hand as an answer and showed him her neuronc stun pistol.

“This! It is a new, non-lethal weapon that I just invented and, with luck and the approval of the Minister of Justice, could soon equip you and the other police officers around France. However, I will ask you to stay mum about this weapon and to not talk about it, even to your colleagues, until further order.”

“I am certain that the good constable will keep his mouth shut about your stun pistol, Tasha.” said the Director, passing a clear directive to his agent. “As for the Minister of Justice, I believe that we need to go see him at once. Please follow me!”

Leaving the overwhelmed constable to lock back the cell door, Tasha and Noël walked out of the cell block and climbed back the stairs to the second floor of the

building, where Director Noël led Tasha to an anteroom occupied by a secretary and one police agent on guard duty.

“Is Minister Reynaud in his office, Miss Anjou?”

“Yes, Monsieur le Director! Do you want to see him?”

“Yes, miss!”

As the secretary was grabbing her telephone receiver, Noël looked at Tasha and spoke to her in a low voice.

“By the way, for how much did you intend to sell your stun pistols to us, Tasha?”

“For such a bulk buy, I believe that 400 francs per pistol would sound like a reasonable price.”

“That is indeed reasonable. I think that it should fit in the minister’s budget.”

It took only a few minutes of talking with Minister Reynaud before the lot of them left his office together, on their way to the Prime Minister’s office. By the end of the next day, a first contract for the production and sale of a first batch of 5,000 stun pistols was signed, to start equipping the agents of the Sûreté Générale, with more orders soon coming from the Ministry of War and the Ministry of the Interior, but with the firm caveat that no stun pistols would be resold or given to foreign customers or simple private citizens. In that, it joined an already extensive list of items, mostly weapons and advanced electronic devices, reserved for the exclusive possession and use by French government units and departments.

21:01 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, June 7, 1932

Café terrasse, Champs Élysées

Paris

Putting down her cup of espresso coffee after taking a sip from it, Terry Clarkson looked down the wide Avenue des Champs Élysées from the table she was sharing with Tasha Lenoir, Louis Blériot and Marc Lebrun, Tasha’s personal driver.

“I love the Champs Élysées: so much movement and life, yet so relaxing. It must be my favorite place in Paris.”

“It is indeed a nice place to pass some time with friends.” said Louis Blériot, who was also sipping on a coffee. The four of them had left a nearby restaurant some fifteen

minutes ago after enjoying a fine supper there and were now exchanging small talk around a table of a café terrasse. Louis then lowered his voice while looking at Tasha.

"So, was that Japanese naval attaché really rude with you when you told him that your consortium would not sell its latest models of radars to the Japanese Navy?"

"Rude? He damn near drew his katana sword at me! Terry had to show him the door...in no uncertain terms. He left with quite threatening words, saying that I and France would regret our decision."

"And?... Are you taking him seriously on that, Tasha?"

"I certainly do! With the way the militarists are taking over the government of Japan or scaring it into obeying them and with the way they used such flimsy excuses to first invade Manchuria, then attack Shanghai and Nanking, anything is possible with them."

Louis then lowered his voice further while bending forward.

"And what do your special sources say about Japan's intentions?"

Tasha did not need to ask Louis to be more explicit to understand to which 'special sources' he was alluding to: the historical files that she and her three friends had on them when they had been accidentally transported to the past, some twenty years ago.

"Unfortunately, my sources are quite vague on the subject. I however expect some big trouble around the Pacific in the years to come, with Japan playing the regional bully."

Terry, whose sensitive microphones implanted in her ears had picked up some key words coming from the television set fixed on the wall behind the nearby bar counter, suddenly raised a hand to silence them.

"Shhh! You better listen to this!"

Her three companions, turning their heads toward the TV set, saw that it was tuned to the evening news program on Radio France TV 1, which aired at six in the evening. A grave looking news presenter sitting in front of a giant screen showing a map of China was reading from a note in his hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have just received the following news: Japan, invoking a recent border incident in Northern China between Chinese and Japanese troops, has officially declared war on the Republic of China. Japanese troops are said to be already disembarking in a number of Chinese ports, including Shanghai and Canton. As a result, the French Foreign Ministry has just published an advisory notice for all French citizens, warning them to avoid traveling to China until further notice."

“Merde!” exclaimed Louis Blériot. “We have a lot of French citizens living in the Shanghai’s French Concession. Air France still has a daily flight between Hanoi and Shanghai, right?”

“Correct!” answered Tasha, now deeply preoccupied as she watched the television set. “It uses a turboprop CIGOGNE II amphibian on that line, which uses the ‘Quai de France’ in Shanghai to load and unload its passengers and freight. I may have to order a temporary beefing up of that route soon: I can imagine the climate of fear and panic that is now reigning over Shanghai and other Chinese ports.”



Japanese soldier standing at the site of a massacre of Chinese civilians committed by the Japanese Army in Shanghai.

CHAPTER 5 – THE SHANGHAI INCIDENT

09:42 (Shanghai Time)

Saturday, June 25, 1932

French passenger ship S.S. ANNAM

Moored at the Quai de France, Whangpoo River

Shanghai, Republic of China

“DAMN IT, MONSIEUR LECLERC, CONTROL THAT CROWD BETTER! THIS SITUATION IS TURNING INTO A NEAR RIOT!”

The poor Third Officer, a young merchant navy ensign with only four years of experience at sea, having only a handful of sailors and Shanghai Municipal Police agents with him to help keep order in the large pack of fearful people trying to embark on the S.S.

ANNAM, could only show the hundreds of people pushing each other on the quay to Captain Jean Foucault.

“I’M DOING MY BEST, CAPTAIN, BUT I NEED MORE MEN!”

“WE DON’T HAVE MORE MEN! JUST MAKE SURE THAT THEY DON’T SWAMP MY SHIP.”

Mentally recognizing that the poor ensign was doing his best but still grumbling to himself, Captain Foucault returned inside his enclosed bridge to review the status of his engines. His ship, a fairly small passenger liner with a maximum normal capacity of 240 passengers, normally served short to medium routes around the South China Sea, with its port of call being Haiphong, in French Indochina. Three days ago, a representative of the French Governor of Indochina had called and requisitioned his ship to help in the emergency evacuation of thousands of French citizens trapped in the French Concession of Shanghai by the advance through the city of Japanese troops. While the Japanese had declared war only on China, they had been very clear about the fact that they were going to take and keep the whole of Shanghai, including the French and International Concessions. Many French residents of Chinese descent or of dual Chinese-French nationality were understandably fearful of what a Japanese occupation would bring to them. Foucault thus fully expected to have to accommodate well over his maximum capacity for this trip to Haiphong.

Some 250 meters away, in the middle of the Whangpoo River, the French gunboat DOUDART DE LA GRÉE was watching the evacuation proceed while covering the approaches to the S.S. ANNAM. In that the captain of the gunboat justly had big worries, as no less than two Japanese destroyers, one gunboat and one light cruiser were slowly cruising up and down the river, always staying in direct line of sight of the ANNAM and of the gunboat. The Japanese government had been declaring for two days now that a number of what it called ‘Chinese terrorists’ were hiding inside the French and International concessions and had warned the French, British and American Consuls in Shanghai to immediately hand over those ‘terrorists’ on request. Undoubtedly, some of those now trying to get aboard the ANNAM were probably part of the list of ‘terrorists’ alluded to by the Japanese. As the captain of the gunboat was looking at the nearest Japanese destroyer through his binoculars, he saw it suddenly veer and accelerate towards the S.S. ANNAM. Understanding at once that the

Japanese destroyer was going to try to block the passenger liner at quayside by taking a station close to it, the captain started shouting orders around at his crew.

“THE JAPANESE ARE GOING FOR THE ANNAM! GUNNERS, LOAD YOUR WEAPONS AND BE READY TO FIRE ON MY COMMAND! ENGINES FULL AHEAD! HELM, STEER TWENTY DEGREES TO PORT AND BLOCK THE PATH OF THAT DESTROYER! NAVAL INFANTRY SQUAD, PREPARE TO REPEL BOARDERS!”

As his men hurried to obey him, Commandant Henri Giffard stepped next to the helmsman, his expression resolute and ready to give more orders as needed. Inside his brain, he knew that, however this ended, his boat would probably not survive this day. His orders had however been clear: to show restraint but also to protect the S.S. ANNAM and the French citizens on it at all cost if they or his own gunboat were fired upon by the Japanese. To do this, he had a 21 year-old, 54.4 meter-long river gunboat displacing close to 200 tons, with a maximum speed of fourteen knots. Its armament, which had been modified from the original one in 1917 and again in 1928, now totaled one old 75mm gun, two modern 25mm automatic cannons on pedestals and four 8mm Hotchkiss machine guns. Thankfully, his 75mm and 25mm guns were provisioned with Metallex-filled shells that gave them significant extra punch, something that could soon prove vital. He also had aboard a squad of nine naval infantrymen, hurriedly shipped to him from Haiphong as reinforcements only two days ago. With those men and their modern automatic weapons, Giffard was hoping to be able to turn away any attempt at boarding by Japanese soldiers or sailors.

It soon became apparent to Giffard that his gunboat was going to lose the race with the Japanese destroyer, which was nearly three times as fast. Grabbing the lanyard activating his boat's horn, he blew two long whistles to signify to the Japanese destroyer to turn around. Not surprisingly, the Japanese captain ignored him and kept running towards the S.S. ANNAM. As things went right now, the DOUDART DE LA GRÉE was going to miss hitting the stern of the Japanese destroyer by a good thirty meters if Giffard kept his present heading. Clenching his teeth, he patted the shoulder of his nearby helmsman.

“Give me the wheel, Sailor!”

“Yes, Captain!”

Stepping behind the steering wheel, Giffard turned it, sharply increasing his turn to port and pointing his gunboat ahead of the destroyer's bow. He may not be able to cut his

path now, but with luck he would force the Japanese captain to turn away in order to avoid a collision. What helped him now was that the distance between them and the S.S. ANNAM was now quite short and the Japanese would have no choice but to slow down soon, on pain of smashing into the Quai de France. The response from the Japanese destroyer was to open fire with its four, turret-mounted 120mm guns. At such a short range, it should have been nearly impossible to miss, but three of the four shells actually did just that and flew across the top works of the DOUDART DE LA GRÉE: the range was so short and the French gunboat so low on the water that the Japanese guns, themselves mounted relatively high atop the destroyer's hull and superstructures, didn't have sufficient depression angle to hit it. As for the fourth shell, it went through the top aft corner of the gunboat's deckhouse but, the deckhouse being made of fairly thin wooden planks and beams, the shell simply flew through it without exploding, continuing on and ricocheting on the surface of the river. Adrenaline now flowing through him, Giffard had a mean smile before shouting an order: he now had his casus belli!

"ALL GUNNERS, FIRE AT WILL ON THAT DESTROYER!"

His 75mm gun, set on his bow, was the first to open fire, closely followed by automatic bursts from the two 25mm cannons, firing at a cyclic rate of 220 rounds per minute. The first 75mm shell, filled with 3.6 kilos of Metallex, an extremely powerful explosive invented by Tasha Lenoir in 1912 that had over three times the detonating power per gram of TNT, pierced the port side of the Japanese destroyer's hull and exploded inside its port machinery room, when it hit one of the massive boilers. The blast tore open the machinery room of the destroyer, sending hot fragments all around, knocking out half of the ship's power plant, as well as the main electrical feed to the ship's systems. The two 25mm cannons, on their part, started sweeping the decks of the destroyer with their high explosive-fragmentation rounds, aiming in particular at the 120mm gun turrets with the hope of quickly silencing them. The French sailors manning the four 8mm Hotchkiss machine guns of the DOUDART DE LA GRÉE and the nine naval infantrymen added their fire to that, shooting up the superstructures of the destroyer and aiming at any Japanese sailor or officer visible to them. The one machine gun on the destroyer that had a clear line of sight on the gunboat replied as best it could, supported by a few sailors armed with bolt-action rifles, but the French small arms fire was overwhelmingly superior in volume and the gunners of the lone Japanese machine gun were soon shot down in quick succession.

On the S.S. ANNAM, Captain Foucault watched with horror that mortal fight happening barely 150 meters from his ship: that was most likely liable to attract Japanese retaliatory fire on his liner and its passengers. Realizing that this was going to end badly, he then did the only thing left that he could do.

“RADIO ROOM, TRANSMIT THE FOLLOWING AT ONCE AND IN CLEAR: GUNBOAT DOUDART DE LA GRÉE ENGAGED BY JAPANESE DESTROYER JUST OFF THE QUAI DE FRANCE. SEND TO THE NAVY HEADQUARTERS IN HAIPHONG AND REPEAT THE MESSAGE UNTIL YOU GET AN ACKNOWLEDGE!”

‘At least now, we won’t simply be sunk with nobody in France knowing what happened here.’ Thought Foucault. Praying that the other Japanese warships would show at least some restraint and not fire directly at his ship, he looked again at the furious firefight between the DOUDART DE LA GRÉE and the MINEKAZE-Class destroyer. To his utter disbelief, it appeared that the much smaller gunboat was actually winning that fight, with all of the main guns of the Japanese destroyer now silent and with the much larger warship on fire. Understanding that the window of departure opened by the brave fight of the gunboat would not stay open very long, Foucault went out on the open bridge wing and shouted down at his men controlling the access to the ship from the quay.

“STOP ALL BOARDING IMMEDIATELY AND RETRACT THE GANGWAY! UNTIE ALL MOORING CABLES! WE ARE DEPARTING NOW!”

Thankfully, the loud noise of the fight between the gunboat and the destroyer, plus the whizzing over their heads of a number of stray bullets, had made the crowd disperse in panic away from the quay, something that gave the chance to Ensign Leclerc and his few sailors to withdraw at a run to the ship, while other sailors cast away the mooring cables of the S.S. ANNAM. With its decks crammed with refugees, the small liner soon started moving slowly away from the Quai de France, foregoing the help of tugboats at the price of a screeching noise as its hull plates rubbed against the quay for a few meters. By that time, the burning Japanese destroyer OKIKAZE was slowly sinking while developing a severe list to port, while the wily little DOUDART DE LA GRÉE, damaged but still fighting, used the bulk of the destroyer to mask itself from any possible gunfire from the other three Japanese warships in sight. As the ANNAM started taking speed, passing by the damaged gunboat, Captain Foucault went out on the open bridge of his ship and solemnly saluted the gallant little boat and its crew. He saw at least one officer aboard the DOUDART DE LA GRÉE return his salute, while sailors kept manning

their weapons or tended to their wounded. Using the bridge intercom, Foucault then called again the radio room.

“Radio room, have you received an acknowledge from Haiphong yet?”

“Affirmative, Captain! They replied two minutes ago.”

“Then, send a second message to Haiphong: Gunboat DOUDART DE LA GRÉE successfully fought off Japanese destroyer OKIKAZE when the latter tried to cut off our escape route and fired on our gunboat. OKIKAZE on fire and sinking. Our gunboat still afloat and fighting. Have just left the Quai de France with over 400 French citizens aboard. Will attempt to sail out to the open sea. Out! Send in clear and ask for an acknowledge.”

“Understood, Captain!”

Foucault had just finished his call on the intercom when a weak noise of engines overhead made him look up at the sky above. He then saw a large, four-engine aircraft approaching at medium altitude, some six kilometers to the Southwest. Grabbing his binoculars and pointing them at the aircraft, he felt relief on recognizing the distinct colors of an Air France plane: it must be the scheduled Air France flight from Hanoi, which was supposed to help in the evacuation of French citizens from Shanghai this morning. Unfortunately, with all that had just happened in the last fifteen minutes, he doubted very much that the Japanese would let that plane land and pick up refugees.

Aboard the Air France CIGOGNE II turboprop aircraft, the pilot excitedly pointed down to his copilot the burning Japanese destroyer.

“MERDE! THINGS ARE GOING BADLY DOWN THERE!”

His copilot, a beautiful French-Vietnamese woman close to forty, clenched her teeth on seeing the burning destroyer and the nearby French gunboat, along with the three other Japanese warships now closing in.

“We will never be able or even permitted to land on the river with this naval battle going on. It would be suicidal for us to even try.”

Captain Georges Meudon nodded his head at the remark from Trung Ti Hoa, who had started her Air France career nineteen years ago as a simple stewardess.

“You are too right about that, Hoa. You better go aft to warn our two passengers about this.”

“Got it!”

Undoing her seat harness first, Hoa then got up from her copilot's seat and went aft to the First Class Cabin, where their sole two passengers were. She went directly to the French Foreign Ministry official sent from Hanoi with one naval officer as aide.

"Monsieur Legardeur, I have some bad news: our gunboat in Shanghai that was escorting the liner S.S. ANNAM apparently got into a fight with one Japanese destroyer approaching the ANNAM. Somehow, our gunboat seems to have won that fight, with the Japanese destroyer now burning. However, three more Japanese warships are closing in. I am afraid that it will be impossible for us to land on the Whangpoo River in the present circumstances."

"Damn! What about the ANNAM?"

"It just slipped off the Quai de France and is heading down the river."

"I'm going to the cockpit to see things from there, Monsieur Legardeur." then said the naval officer, a commander, making the diplomat nod his head once.

"Please do, Commander Barnabé! Report the situation to me after that."

"Will do, monsieur!"

Grabbing first both a pair of binoculars and a still camera, the French Navy officer then followed Hoa back to the cockpit, where he looked down towards the Quai de France, now two kilometers away. It didn't take long for his trained eyes to judge the situation on the river.

"Merde! The ANNAM will be lucky if the Japanese let it sail to the open sea after this. As for our gunboat, it appears to be still in fighting trim. I better take some photos of all this now."

He then executed himself, taking eleven pictures as the CIGOGNE II overflew the Quai de France and then started to circle slowly at medium altitude over the ANNAM and the DOUDART DE LA GRÉE. Barnabé then saw something that made him swear violently.

"BON DIEU DE MERDE! THAT JAPANESE LIGHT CRUISER JUST LAUNCHED TWO TORPEDOES AT THE ANNAM!"

"WHAT?!" exclaimed in disbelief the pilot, who banked his plane to have a better view of the cruiser and of the liner ship. He effectively saw two torpedo tracks coming from the Japanese cruiser and heading straight to the liner. Commander Barnabé took the time to photograph the torpedo tracks as they were getting near the ANNAM, then looked at the navigator-radio operator of the CIGOGNE II, giving him an urgent order.

"Radio the following at once to Hanoi: our gunboat fought off a MINEKAZE-Class destroyer while protecting the S.S. ANNAM. The Japanese light cruiser YURA just

launched two torpedoes at the ANNAM as it was leaving quayside. Transmit now and get an acknowledge!”

“Uh, right away, Commander.”

Barnabé then just had time to turn around to look down again, in time to see the two torpedoes make direct hits against the port side hull of the ANNAM, with their explosions raising huge geysers of water.

“Damn! The ANNAM will never survive such hits: it is not built to resist battle damage.”

A muffled ‘WHOMP’ then shook the aircraft, following which the pilot shouted in alarm.

“THE JAPANESE ARE SHOOTING AT US! WE HAVE TO LEAVE, NOW!”

“NOT YET! LET ME TIME TO PHOTOGRAPH THE ANNAM ONE LAST TIME.”

“OKAY, BUT MAKE IT QUICK! JACQUES, SEND TO HANOI: ARE BEING FIRED ON BY JAPANESE CRUISER YURA.”

“On it!” said between clenched teeth the navigator-radio operator as he worked frantically his Morse code key. One minute later, with Barnabé done taking pictures, the pilot of the amphibian airliner turned towards the Southwest, taking a return heading to Hanoi. As he did so, Hoa shouted a warning.

“TWO AIRCRAFT APPROACHING FROM TWO O’CLOCK! THEY ARE FAST ONES!”

“THEY ARE JAPANESE FIGHTER PLANES!” said Barnabé after a quick look out of the cockpit’s windows. “GO TO YOUR MAXIMUM SPEED!”

Not waiting for her pilot’s directives, Hoa immediately pushed all the way forward the throttles of their four powerful turboprop engines, each of which developed up to 2,500 horsepower. The sudden acceleration nearly made Barnabé lose his balance as the amphibian quickly accelerated gradually to its maximum speed of 610 kilometers per hour. The two Japanese fighters, apparently unable to match such a top speed, gradually fell behind, with no chance to shoot once at the heavy amphibian. Barnabé, seeing them recede in the distance, blew air out in relief.

“Thank God that the Japanese Ki-25 fighter can’t fly faster than 435 kilometers per hour.”

He then turned to face the navigator-radio operator.

“I believe that it is now time for us to send a detailed radio report to Hanoi, François.”

17:55 (Paris Time)

Sunday, June 26, 1932

Élysée Palace, 8th Arrondissement

Paris, France

Vice Admiral Georges Durand-Viel, Chief of Staff of the French Navy, had been waiting impatiently outside the Council of Ministers' meeting room of the Élysée Palace, the official residence of the President of France, for a good hour now. He jumped on his feet as soon as Vice Admiral François Darlan, the Chief of Cabinet of the Minister of the Navy, Georges Leygues, emerged from the room.

"So, have they decided on what actions we will take in response to the outrage committed by the Japanese in Shanghai?"

"They are still discussing about how strong our reaction should be, but the ministers have at least agreed to send as much reinforcements to Indochina and the South China Sea as we could spare, to prepare for anything that could happen there. Minister Leygues is thus ordering us to send as quickly as possible to the South China Sea a strong squadron centered on the aircraft carrier GLOIRE. He also wants to send in advance a few fast units, which will be tasked to do an area reconnaissance in advance of our squadron. Concurrently, the Army is to send troop reinforcements by sea to Indochina, to protect our colony there, while the Air Force will move a number of combat squadrons to the airfields in Indochina."

"And what kind of rules of engagement are we expected to follow?"

"That is still being debated, but the President of the Council, backed by the President of the Republic, are giving our ships the right to fire at any approaching Japanese ship or aircraft that will refuse to turn away. Also, any Japanese warship that will try to approach within a hundred nautical miles from the coasts of Indochina will be warned first, then sunk if it refuses to turn away."

Durand-Viel blew air in relief on hearing that: he had feared that, like typical politicians, the ministers would endlessly squabble while taking no firm decisions, leaving the French forces in a straightjacket of restrictive orders.

"I can live with that. You are staying here for the moment, to keep following the ministers' discussion?"

"Yes!"

“Then call me at Navy headquarters the moment that they take more decisions: I am going back to the headquarters to start preparing and moving our ships.”

Durand-Viel then turned around and walked away at a fast pace, letting Darlan return inside the meeting room. His mind was in turmoil as he started mentally reviewing what he could send quickly to the South China Sea. Thankfully, the last ten years had seen a number of ultra-modern new warships of revolutionary design enter service into the French Navy, all equipped with the latest technologies that the Lenoir Industries Consortium could provide. The Japanese fleet may be much superior in numbers to the French fleet, but it didn't know about many things that could be found on the newer French ships.



Map of French Indochina in 1932.

CHAPTER 6 – WAR IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

05:18 (China Time)

Friday, July 22, 1932

Bridge of the guided missile aviation destroyer BOURRASQUE

Sailing northeast, off the Chinese coast, near the island of Formosa

The man sitting in the Captain's chair on the bridge of the French guided missile aviation destroyer BOURRASQUE was small, but he radiated quiet authority and toughness. Capitaine de Frégate (Navy Commander) André Lemonnier was young for his rank and position, being 36, but nobody doubted his competence or resolve. While he appeared calm and relaxed, watching the actions of his bridge crew as dawn approached, his mind was all but calm as he was reviewing mentally the events of the last few weeks. The French government didn't even have time to fully decide its response to what was now widely called 'The Shanghai Incident' before Japan had publicly declared war on France, under the pretext that the gunboat DOUDART DE LA GRÉE had attacked and sunk, supposedly without provocation, the Japanese destroyer OKIKAZE in Shanghai. While some had been surprised at this quick decision by the Japanese to go to war, many had pointed out that, after invading and grabbing Manchuria under a flimsy pretext and then attacking China proper, the Japanese militarist leaders were probably hoping to easily grab more territories and resources from France, a country that Japan easily surpassed as a military power...at least in theory. Lemonnier had to concede that the Japanese calculation had been mostly correct at the time, with the British and American governments refusing to face the Japanese on the subject of Shanghai, even though they had also lost some of their own citizens to acts of Japanese brutality. However, the British and American decisions not to react could be explained by the fact that thousands of their citizens were now being held as virtual hostages by the Japanese, which had occupied the various international concessions in China and now controlled them. In France, though, popular anger and rage at the Japanese actions had forced the Herriot Government to stand firm and react, which it did by sending large air and ground reinforcements and also sending a strong battle fleet to protect French Indochina and prevent the Japanese from grabbing it. The BOURRASQUE was part of that battle fleet sent from France but, being one of the three fastest and most modern ships in the fleet, had also been given the task to go ahead on a reconnaissance mission, to find if the Japanese were effectively planning to send a battle fleet towards Indochina. Now, the BOURRASQUE was about to skirt the coast of Formosa, heading for the general location of the Chinese coast off Shanghai while searching for any potential Japanese fleet.

Looking at the clock on the bridge that showed the local time, Lemonnier saw that dawn would come in the next ten minutes or so and gave an order to the bridge duty officer.

"Monsieur Gaétano, have 'Claudette' and 'Monique' ready to depart on their scheduled patrols."

"Yes, Capitaine!" replied the lieutenant before grabbing the microphone of his ship's intercom. "Air Operations, roll 'Claudette' and 'Monique' out of their hangars and have them ready for launch."

Near the mid length of the catamaran-hulled warship, navy aircraft technicians got active on getting that order and opened the steel curtain door of one of the two big 24 meter by 12 meter aircraft hangars which occupied much of the deck surface amidships. Within minutes, they were rolling out on the aft landing deck one of the two SUPER COLIBRI 'B' VTOL aircraft assigned to the BOURRASQUE. Able to take off or land at the vertical from small surfaces, like the deck of a ship, the SUPER COLIBRI 'B' were machines specialized in maritime patrols, anti-submarine warfare and search and rescue at sea, while the 'A' variant served as an armed assault transport aircraft and the 'C' variant was an unarmed civilian transport. The crew of the destroyer had affectionately given to the two machines, characterized by their large, ducted and pivoting rotors powered by two 5,000 horsepower turboprop engines, female first names: 'Claudette' and 'Monique', names which were also used as their usual radio call signs. Once out of its hangar and stopped in the middle of the 36 meter long and 30 meter wide flight deck, the pilot of the SUPER COLIBRI pushed a button that made the wings and rotors of his machine unfold from their storage positions, with technicians then checking that the unfolding had been completed correctly before the pilot lit up his two turboprop engines one by one. Some seventeen minutes after rolling out of its hangar, 'Claudette' jumped up in the air and then made a sideways step to port, in order to take a safe distance from the bulk of the ship and its antennas, before accelerating and climbing towards the North and the Formosa Strait. As soon as the machine was off the flight deck, technicians pushed out 'Monique' with the help of a small aircraft tractor and prepared it for launch as well. Fifteen minutes later, 'Monique' was in the sky and heading towards the Northeast and the Detroit of Luzon. On the bridge, Lemonnier watched the two aircraft depart, then gave a series of orders.

"Helm, stay on present heading. Engines : reduce speed to ten knots. Sonar, start listening for possible submarines in the vicinity. We will see what our birds find before deciding which side of Formosa we will skirt."

"Oui, mon Capitaine!"

Lemonnier took a moment to look at the sky and the sea around his ship: clouds partially covered the sky, while the sea was moderate, something that made him nod with satisfaction. He knew that his ship could easily manage much worse sea conditions than this. Despite not being what was normally considered a major warship, with a full load displacement of only 2,300 tons, the BOURRASQUE's revolutionary catamaran hull form, with its two very slender bows shaped like axe heads, was designed to cut through waves as it advanced, instead of slamming down on them like conventional ship hulls did. That allowed a much smoother ride in rough seas and permitted it to stay at high speeds when other ships would be forced to slow down to minimize stress on their hulls. Also, the twin catamaran hulls, each with a maximum beam of eight meters and separated by eighteen meters, greatly diminished rolling and made the ship very resistant to capsizing, two qualities highly appreciated in a warship. The turbo-electric drive machinery of the BOURRASQUE, with its four fifteen megawatt gas turbine generator sets, two 1.5 megawatt cruise diesel generator sets and four steerable and reversible waterjet propulsors, allied to the slender hull form, allowed the destroyer to attain a maximum speed of 51 knots, a speed that had been recorded during its sea trials a year ago. Since then, the BOURRASQUE had kept discreet during its voyages, staying out of foreign ports as much as possible, not showing its full capabilities to potential observers and keeping hidden from sight its true main armament. If and when the Japanese Navy decided to clash with the BOURRASQUE, it was going to get quite a shock, though Lemonnier.

07:43 (China Time)

SUPER COLIBRI 'B' 'Claudette'

At medium altitude over the Formosa Strait

"Radar to pilot: new surface contact, bearing 335, distance twelve nautical miles. From the weakness of its radar echo, it is either a small fishing boat or a submarine kiosk."

"Very well, radar: we are going to visually investigate."

Making his SUPER COLIBRI turn slightly to the left, or port as sailors said, First Lieutenant Éric Salvail concentrated his vision on the surface of the sea ahead, trying to see what their search radar had detected. Up to now, they had detected and investigated a good 25 boats and ships of all sizes, most of them fishing boats but also three cargo ships and one lone British destroyer, the latter heading southwest, probably towards Hong Kong. In all cases, Salvail had kept his aircraft well off in the distance, to avoid as much as possible visual detection by hiding into the rising Sun to the East. This time, he intended to make his final approach from the East again. If his target was indeed a Japanese submarine, he hoped that the Sun would hide his approach from lookouts standing in the boat's kiosk. He quickly revised mentally what he knew about the various types of Japanese submarines in service. The one common factor about them was that they had poor performances once submerged and had very shallow maximum diving depths. With the reasonably clear waters of the Formosa Strait, he would probably still be able to see a Japanese submerged submarine travelling at its typical maximum depth of 45 meters or less.

A bit over a minute later his gunner, Petty Officer Second Class Régis Farmand, who was scanning the surface of the ocean ahead with the zoom lens incorporated into his gun sight, shouted in excitement.

"I SEE THE TARGET! IT IS A SUBMARINE NAVIGATING ON THE SURFACE."

"Okay, Pierre, time to prove that you are good at recognizing ship types," said Salvail to his co-pilot, Second Lieutenant Pierre Rochambeau. The co-pilot didn't respond to that challenge, instead grabbing a ship's recognition booklet and opening it before looking at the small silhouette in the distance with his binoculars. It took him about twenty seconds before he spoke, excitement evident in his voice.

"It is a Japanese submarine! Probable type is RO-26. I'm going to take pictures of it."

"Make it quick, Pierre, before I sink it."

"What are you going to use, Éric?"

"I will first pepper it with our two fixed 25mm cannons. Hopefully, that will pierce its pressure hull and prevent it from diving. Then, I will drop two of our bombs to finish it off."

The co-pilot nodded once at that: they were presently carrying a total of six Lenoir GP-250 bombs hooked to the weapons pylons under the two voluminous side fuselage fairings of their aircraft. In what Pierre judged to have been an absolute stroke of genius, the various types of bombs used by the Aéronavale, all of which were produced by the Lenoir Industries Consortium, had been equipped some ten years ago with new multipurpose fuses, which had replaced the older but still effective contact/delay fuses. Those new fuses, on top of keeping the contact/delay capability of the old fuses, were also able now to be detonated via a hydrostatic fuse, essentially transforming the weapons into dual aerial bombs/anti-submarine depth charges. Now, a SUPER COLIBRI crew didn't need any more to choose between bombs and depth charges as part of their weapons load before departure: they simply loaded the bombs available and switched on the proper fusing mode in flight, using a special connection box installed in the cockpit. That had both greatly simplified the job of the support crews of SUPER COLIBRI, SUPER FRELON and COLIBRI II assigned aboard aviation-capable warships and simplified the logistic trail, with the old depth charges being phased out of service. As Pierre stowed away the booklet and grabbed the still camera contained in a canvas pocket hooked to his side door, Éric cut down the power of his two engines, slowing his aircraft down significantly before initiating a shallow dive towards the surfaced submarine. The lookouts on the submarine apparently didn't see his SUPER COLIBRI approach, most probably because of the Sun being just behind the diving aircraft. That allowed Éric to get to within 2,000 meters of the submarine without being seen. With a savage resolve, he pressed the trigger of his cannons as the submarine's kiosk was centered in his heads up display sight.

"Take that for the S.S. ANNAM, you bastards!"

The two 25mm automatic cannons buried in the side fairings started spitting explosive-fragmentation shells at a muzzle velocity of 900 meters per second and at a rate of 220 projectiles per minute. With one in three shells also being tracer shells, Éric was able to quickly correct his fire, bracketing the submarine's kiosk within two seconds of fire and hitting its hull at least twice. The submarine was barely starting to dive when he overflew it at an altitude of less than 300 meters. Performing a wide turn to the right, Éric came back behind the submarine, as the kiosk was about to disappear under the surface. Selecting the 'depth charge' mode and a detonating depth of 25 meters, he carefully pointed his plane before releasing two GP-250, 250 Kilo bombs, then hurriedly banked his aircraft away to avoid the huge geysers of water that his bombs were going to create.

Those geysers and shock waves still shook his aircraft, reminding Éric about the huge explosive power of Metallex-filled munitions. With numerous pairs of eyes looking back at the last location of the submarine, a triumphant shout from one of their two side door observers/gunners came on the intercom.

“WE GOT HIM! I SEE THE BOW NOW RISING AT THE VERTICAL OUT OF THE WATER, SURROUNDED BY A LARGE PATCH OF OIL AND DEBRIS.”

“QUICK, PIERRE, TAKE A FEW PICTURES OF THAT BOW AND DEBRIS BEFORE THEY COULD SINK UNDER THE SURFACE.”

“ON IT!”

With Éric flying in wide circles around the site of the sinking, Pierre was able to take three good pictures before they resumed their original course northward.

“I am going to send a radio message to the BOURRASQUE, to announce our victory and to warn it to watch for other possible submarines.” said the co-pilot.

“Go ahead, Pierre. I hope that we will be able to find another submarine during this patrol. This one has wetted my appetite.”

08:09 (China Time)

SUPER COLIBRI ‘Claudette’, hiding in clouds northwest of Formosa Island Eastern China Sea

“Damn! That first submarine may have wetted my appetite, but this is liable to give me a VERY big indigestion.”

Pierre Rochambeau could only nod his head at Éric Salvail’s remark while looking down at the sea to their starboard side. Only a few minutes after sinking that Japanese submarine they had spotted west of Formosa Island, their radar had picked up two similar contacts, presumably Japanese submarines as well. They had then decided to veer to the Northeast, to again put the Sun in their back when they would dive on those two contacts. However, numerous strong radar echoes had then appeared at the detection limit of their surface search radar. Deciding to go investigate first those new echoes after signaling by radio the two suspected submarines’ positions to the BOURRASQUE, ‘Claudette’s crew had flown north for nearly 130 kilometers before coming into sight of a powerful Japanese battle fleet. When informed of that by radio, the order from the BOURRASQUE had been to find the exact composition of that fleet, its speed and heading and whether more ships were following from further north. Up to

now, Rochambeau had counted six battleships or battlecruisers, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and twelve destroyers, all heading south to pass down the Formosa Strait, with their destination being most probably the eastern coast of French Indochina. He strongly suspected that a support group of tanker ships and ammunition transport ships meant to resupply that battle fleet would follow it from some distance, as warships typically had a much higher cruising speed than a fleet oiler or transport ship. So many heavy combat units burned a lot of fuel, even at a cruising speed of twelve knots, so there would certainly be more than just a couple of tanker ships following behind. Pierre then wondered with some apprehension what could be found to the East, on the other side of Formosa Island.

08:23 (China Time)

Combat information center of the BOURRASQUE

Sailing towards the Strait of Luzon

Despite having been in command of the BOURRASQUE for nearly a full year now, Captain André Lemonnier still felt as if he was stepping on another planet every time he went to the ship's combat information center, or CIC in short, situated deep in the section bridging the two hulls of his guided missile aviation destroyer. In contrast, the battle bridge of the previous ship he had served on, a cruiser built at the turn of the century, had been like a steel cavern filled with pipes and chart tables, with only a couple of radio sets as electronic equipment to be seen. Now, as he was entering the CIC through an armored door, he found himself in a semi-dark compartment filled with electronic cabinets, display consoles and control stations, where officers and operators sat watching glowing display screens and pushing fluorescent buttons. Even the basic arrangement of the work stations was like nothing he had seen before, but he had to concede that it had proven to be a highly efficient one, allowing for the quick exchange of information, data and orders around the officers and operators in the compartment. He of course couldn't know that the CIC layout that was now standard in new French warships had been 'proposed' by someone who had copied it from the bridge arrangement found aboard the space patrol cruisers of the Terran Federation, in the 27th Century. What Lemonnier did know was that Vice-Admiral Durand-Viel, the Chief of Staff of the French Navy, was a brilliant engineer who always had been attracted by advanced technologies and who had fought to modernize the French Navy as much as

he could. In that, Durand-Viel was said to have been more than open to the new technologies proposed by the Lenoir Industries Consortium, technologies which were now drastically transforming French warships and making them so much more powerful and efficient.

Going to the main tactical situation display console, Lemonnier stood to the right of his operations officer, Capitaine de Corvette (Lieutenant Commander) Michel Kersaint, and spoke to him while examining the large glowing display screen of the console.

"So, what did 'Monique' find to the East of Formosa?"

"A full carrier battle fleet preceded by a submarine picket line proceeding south-southwest on the surface, Captain. By the count of our aircraft crew, that fleet is composed of the aircraft carriers AKAGI and KAGA, two battlecruisers, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and twelve destroyers. 'Monique's crew took the time to identify each individual ship from a distance, then proceeded north to check for any other possible group of ships following in the wake of that fleet."

Lemonnier's expression was somber as he read the names of the Japanese ships, displayed electronically beside the dots showing their positions.

"So, what looks like a shore bombardment force is coming down the Formosa Strait, while a carrier force is coming down from the east of Formosa Island. This easily represents two thirds of the combat power of the Japanese fleet and includes their only two fleet aircraft carriers. I doubt that the Japanese will simply conduct a quick raid on the coasts of Indochina with all these ships. They probably have troopships following those combat fleets, so that they could land in Indochina after our defenses would have been pounded by these heavy units and by carrier-borne aircraft."

"Both 'Claudette' and 'Monique' are already flying north, precisely to find out if such troopships are following, Captain."

"Good! Send an urgent encrypted message to Hanoi and to Vice Admiral Dubois, on the GLOIRE, with a collated report on all these Japanese warships. In the meantime, I will be writing a short message asking for long range maritime patrol planes to be sent as quickly as possible over the Formosa Strait, the Eastern China Sea and the waters east of Formosa. I would like to be able to recuperate both of our SUPER COLIBRIs before going into battle."

"Which Japanese fleet would you prefer to engage first, Captain?"

“Definitely the carrier force.” answered without hesitation Lemonnier. “If we could take out those two carriers or at least damage them enough to stop their air operations, that will simplify greatly the job of our Aéronavale².”

Lemonnier was about to go sit in his command chair nearby when a radio operator made an announcement in a strong voice.

“Captain, ‘Claudette’ is just reporting that it has spotted a group of tanker ships escorted by a few destroyers, following some 110 nautical miles behind the battleship force.”

“I knew it! Plot those new ships and include them in your consolidated report, Monsieur Kersaint.”

“Aye, Captain!”

Some twenty minutes later, it was the turn of ‘Monique’ to send an urgent radio message, this time warning that it had spotted a large troop convoy with sixteen troopships and cargo ships of various sizes escorted by four light cruisers and six destroyers. Lemonnier tightened his jaws at that news: he now knew that the Japanese intended to seize Indochina from France and not simply bombard it. If they ever managed to grab the colony, that would constitute both a painful blow to France’s overseas possessions and a possible first step to losing all the possessions France had in the Pacific, starting with French Polynesia. Anger then came to him at the thought that the mighty British Empire was presently cowering before the Japanese, refusing to act in order not to put at risk its own colonies in Asia. You didn’t deter a potential aggressor by hiding from sight. However, the present stance of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald did not surprise Lemonnier, in view of the pacifist reputation of MacDonald, who had opposed the entry of Great Britain into World War 1 and had blocked the funding meant to fortify the British naval base in Singapore a few years ago.

10:40 (China Time)

Bridge of the French destroyer BOURRASQUE

Sailing through the Strait of Luzon

² Aéronavale : Naval aviation, in French.

Lemonnier was standing on the navigation bridge of his destroyer when a sailor brought him a message fixed to a clipboard.

“Message from Vice Admiral Dubois, on the GLOIRE, Captain.”

“Thank you!”

Taking the message and reading it quickly, Lemonnier smiled nearly at once: now was going to be his chance for the BOURRASQUE to prove itself in combat, as he was being ordered to proceed at top speed to a position on the port flank of the Japanese carrier force, where he was to attack and sink both enemy carriers. Going to the navigation chart table at the back of the bridge, he calculated quickly a new heading before shouting a series of orders.

“HELM, NEW HEADING: 075! MACHINES AHEAD FULL! MAKE OUR SPEED FIFTY KNOTS! TO ALL CREWMEMBERS: DON IN TURN YOUR COMBAT SURVIVAL SUITS AND GO TO YOUR BATTLE STATIONS.”

Obedying his own orders, Lemonnier went to one of the haversacks hooked to the back partition of the bridge and took out of it his personal combat survival suit, then quickly put it on, imitated by half of the bridge personnel. The combat survival suits issued a few years ago to all the crewmembers of French combat warships were baggy affairs designed to facilitate quick donning and were able to fit a variety of sizes. They were made of a multi-layered sandwich of fire resistant polymer, puncture resistant Durex fibers, neoprene and soft wool liner and were meant to protect sailors from both fire and cold water, on top of helping them float effortlessly on the surface of the ocean. The suit, which had a hood with a face-fitting neoprene contour, also came with a large facial mask covering the eyes, nose and mouth and connected to a dual breathing system that could be switched between open air breathing and closed cycle breathing system connected to a small pressurized air bottle contained in the haversack. In the case of onboard firefighting team members, the breathing tube could be connected to a larger, backpack-mounted air bottle. That individual suit system was quite expensive to buy, but it helped the crewmembers of French warships to go into combat with much more confidence about their ultimate survival. The aircrews of the French Aéronavale also wore these suits and had in fact received top priority in getting such suits issued to them. Some six minutes later, all the men aboard had their survival suits on, but with the breathing masks left dangling on their chests by a strap. By then, the BOURRASQUE had attained the impressive top speed of fifty knots, thanks to its four powerful gas turbine main engines, a speed very few other ships in the World could even approach.

Thankfully, the sea state was still moderate, allowing the destroyer's sharp-edged twin axe bows to cut through the rising waves ahead of it. Any warship with a conventional hull which would have tried to keep up with the BOURRASQUE, even if it had enough power for it, would have ended slamming down hard repeatedly on the waves, shaking its crew to the bones and risking a hull structural failure. To say that Lemonnier was most proud of his ship would have been a severe understatement.

15:21 (China Time)

CIC of the French destroyer BOURRASQUE

Forty kilometers off the port flank of the Japanese carrier force

210 kilometers east of the coast of Formosa Island

"The PÉLICAN II sent from Haiphong is now in position on the flank of the Japanese fleet and is ready to observe and report, Captain."

"Excellent! Weapons Officer, do you have a clear radar signature from our targets?"

"Yes, Captain! I have programmed the flight profile for our missiles into following a medium altitude approach, followed by a steep final dive. That way, our missiles will be high enough to be able to receive command signals from us and send us television pictures of the targets before diving."

"Then, proceed with the first missile firing."

"Yes, Captain! Opening the armored cover of our first missile's silo now."

On the forward top deck of the BOURRASQUE, near the junction between the port hull and the structure bridging the two hulls, one of the twelve innocuous-looking steel covers which were nearly flush with the deck opened up, revealing the top of a square-sectioned canister standing at the vertical. Not visible to outside observers, another, larger steel plate that was part of the inner surface of the port side hull also opened just above the waterline, uncovering the exhaust gas evacuation channel of the port heavy missile silo group. Four seconds later, a five-ton MARTEL heavy strike missile jumped out of its launch canister, the flames and gases from its solid rocket booster engine first erupting out between the two hulls of the destroyer via the evacuation channel of the silo group. The missile then climbed quickly at the vertical, attaining its programmed cruising altitude of 2,000 meters before its inertial guidance system made it point onto the pre-calculated heading provided by the weapons officer of the ship through his control

console. Accelerating in seconds to its top speed of Mach 3, the missile switched to its cruise ramjet engines as soon as its solid rocket booster had burned out. The missile rapidly covered two thirds of the distance between the BOURRASQUE and the Japanese carrier force, guided solely by its inertial guidance system then, once at a pre-designated point, switched on both of its terminal guidance systems, comprised of a high definition radar and a targeting TV camera. With the view from its targeting camera retransmitted to the BOURRASQUE and helping the weapons officer to adjust the final aim of the missile, the MARTEL then dove on the aircraft carrier AKAGI at supersonic speed.

15:28 (China Time)

Open bridge wing of the Japanese destroyer SAWAKAZE

On the port side destroyer screen of the Japanese carrier force

Able Seaman Shibahara, doing his duty as one of the lookouts of the destroyer SAWAKAZE, suddenly saw movement in the sky to the East, making him raise his binoculars. However, the Sun blinded him for a short moment before he could see briefly what had attracted his attention: a long, thin object with small wings flying westward at an altitude of about 2,000 meters, some six kilometers away. That object was however incredibly fast and zoomed overhead before Shibahara could even alert his bridge duty officer with a shouted warning. Both men only had time to watch for two seconds the fast object dive on the fleet carrier AKAGI before it crashed through its flight deck amidships. A titanic explosion then broke the 42,000 ton carrier in two when the 1,500 kilo Metallex warhead of the MARTEL detonated inside the machinery space of the ship, and this after piercing the flight deck and the hangar deck of the AKAGI. Watched by the unbelieving eyes of the Japanese sailors and officers on the other ships of the carrier force, the two halves of the unfortunate AKAGI quickly overturned and sank in minutes.

Shibahara was barely recovering from his shock when a second flying object zoomed over the SAWAKAZE, again coming from the East.

"ANOTHER FLYING BOMB FROM THE EAST AT MEDIUM ALTITUDE!"

Again, nobody had time to react in any meaningful way before the carrier KAGA was hit, with a good forty meter section of its stern breaking away under the force of the missile's

warhead blast. With its rudders and propeller shafts cut away, what was left of the fleet carrier soon started to sink from the stern. This time, two of the escort destroyers had time to get close to the doomed carrier and were able to save nearly 300 men out of its crew of 2,000 souls before the hulk capsized and sank.

With the carrier force commander having gone down with the AKAGI, the surviving ships of the force didn't know what to do at first, until the commander of the escort ships, standing on the bridge of the old battlecruiser KONGO, started issuing orders by radio, enjoining the other ships to continue on their original heading and speed. He however also ordered the heavy cruisers CHOKAI, MAYA, ATAGO and TAKAO to break off from the force and sail eastward at top speed, to find the source of whatever had sunk the two carriers. Barely two minutes after issuing these orders, the KONGO was itself hit by a MARTEL missile that penetrated deep amidships and exploded inside one of its boiler rooms. With half of its machinery space gutted and with its hull integrity severely compromised, the nineteen year-old battlecruiser slowed down to a mere eight knots as its crew desperately fought to save their ship. By the time that another MARTEL missile hit the KONGO, giving it the coup-de-grace, the four heavy cruisers were racing eastward at near their top speed of 35 knots, using their Model 1913 radars to scan ahead of them for their mysterious attacker(s). They were starting to get the first radar echoes from a lone ship ahead, some 25 kilometers away, when a missile dove from head on down at the TAKAO. Piercing at supersonic speed the top deck just forward of the cruiser's first 203mm main gun turret, the missile went through bulkhead after bulkhead before penetrating the armored barbette of that main gun turret and exploding inside. The huge blast, contained at first within the barbette and turret, blew open the covers of the ammunition and propellant bags lift cages and reached all the way into the main forward magazine. With over 140 tons of propellant bags then igniting, the resulting explosion both blew the heavy cruiser in two and propelled high in the air the forward 203mm gun turret, like the cork of a Champagne bottle flying off.

With fear now gripping the guts of the captains of the remaining three heavy cruisers, but with their sense of honor and duty pushing them on, the ATAGO, MAYA and CHOKAI continued straight ahead at full speed, hoping to get soon within gun range of their lone assailant, which was barely visible on the horizon and was still impossible to identify properly. Three minutes later, a sixth missile struck, this time targeting the

ATAGO. However, the heavy cruiser had some luck then: instead of penetrating the hull of the cruiser, something that would have sunk it, the missile hit its forward superstructures at the level of the bridge. All the men inside the bridge were instantly killed as the big missile burned through it and penetrated deep inside the superstructure block before exploding. While not deadly, that hit proved both spectacular and frightening: the gigantic blast literally opened up the superstructure block of the ATAGO like a sardine can, blowing off both funnels and razing the block nearly down to the level of the weather deck. The blast wave, travelling down the funnel uptakes, killed by overpressure all the sailors present inside the boiler rooms, along with most of the men occupying the aft portions of the superstructures. When the ATAGO, now with nobody left to steer it, emerged out of the big cloud of smoke caused by the missile strike, the Captain of the MAYA, sailing on a parallel course to the port side of the ATAGO, could only contemplate with horror the fuming heap of scrap metal that had been the superstructures of the unfortunate cruiser.

“By the Kamis! Even a fifteen inch battleship shell could not do that kind of damage! What are these Frenchmen shooting?”

He then shook himself back to his own tasks and shouted orders around him.

“HELM, ADOPT ZIGZAG COURSE! GUNNERY OFFICER, OPEN FIRE AS SOON AS THAT FRENCH SHIP IS WITHIN MAXIMUM RANGE OF OUR GUNS.”

Unfortunately, that French ship proved impossible to catch, being apparently much faster than the Japanese cruisers, despite the latter being among the fastest heavy warships afloat. The Captain of the MAYA died four minutes later, when a seventh missile hit his cruiser and penetrated all the way to its forward 203mm ammunition magazine, blowing the whole ship up in one titanic explosion. The cruiser CHOKAI survived the MAYA for only seven minutes, when it was hit and sunk by another MARTEL missile.

On the BOURRASQUE, Captain Lemonnier let his men in the CIC yell their joy at their overwhelming victory against opponents that would up to now have been expected to easily destroy or keep away a simple destroyer. Lemonnier, while showing more restraint, realized that this truly marked a new era in naval warfare, an era that the French Navy had entered into with both feet, well ahead of all other navies in the World. He was still debating whether to expend another precious and expensive MARTEL on the floating hulk of the ATAGO when his communications officer spoke to him on the intercom.

“Captain, the squadrons from the REDOUTABLE are now on approach. They say that they will take care of the Japanese destroyers and of the battlecruiser HIEI. They will also hunt down the four submarines that we had signaled ahead of the Japanese carrier force.”

“Very well! Contact Vice Admiral Dubois on the GLOIRE and ask for further instructions for us.”

“Understood, Captain.”

16:12 (China Time)

SUPER FRELON 0414NCR (11th Naval Attack Squadron)

Overflying the remains of the Japanese carrier force

The Blériot-Kruger SUPER FRELON was often described as an ‘ugly brute’, but never by its pilots. Its raw power, outstanding performances, heavy armament and its ability to land at the vertical on small ship decks made it a favorite of both combat pilots and of naval infantrymen, who were the ones most often benefiting from the close support and tactical strike missions flown by Aéronavale SUPER FRELONS. While it was propelled by two turboprop engines rather than by jet engines and was not a supersonic aircraft, as a subsonic low level strike and close support aircraft it had no equal. With a maximum speed at altitude of 900 kilometers per hour, a maximum speed at sea level of 710 kilometers and dragster-like accelerations due to its very high power to weight ratio, which was necessary to perform vertical take-offs and landings, it was a pure delight to fly and was extremely difficult to target by ground-based machine guns and anti-aircraft cannons. Even if it got hit by projectiles, its thick Durex armored skin covering the cockpit, engines and vital systems made it a hard aircraft to knock down. As for its armament, even when in ‘clean’ configuration it still packed four internal 25mm automatic cannons, twelve launch tubes for heavy 150mm rockets embedded inside its two side fairings and forty launch tubes for 75mm rockets, which retracted in and out of its belly. If going ‘dirty’, it could use five belly weapons pylons with a total carrying capacity of 7,500 kilos of bombs, missiles and fuel drop tanks. Many in fact called it ‘the flying tank’ for all those reasons. Today, it was flying its first ever wartime combat missions and its pilots were resolved to leave a deep impression in the Japanese sailors...at least those who may survive.

In the lead SUPER FRELON of the twelve aircraft that had just arrived over the remains of the Japanese carrier force, Capitaine de Corvette (lieutenant commander) Alain Brisson, the commander of the 11th Naval Attack Squadron ('Tridents'), examined for a moment the surface of the sea below and ahead, counting the number and types of the Japanese warships still afloat, then keyed the microphone of his radio.

"Trident One to all Tridents: Blue Flight will follow me and perform diving attacks on the battlecruiser HIEI. Red Flight will concentrate on the two light cruisers leading the Japanese destroyers, while Green Flight will take on the destroyers in succession. Be sparing with your ordnance: there are plenty of targets left here to deal with, and I want them all sunk. None of these ships are to be allowed to return to Japan. Execute now!" Followed by three other SUPER FRELONS, Brisson then pushed his aircraft into a steep dive aimed at the battlecruiser HIEI, the sole remaining heavy combatant of the Japanese carrier force. As the warship grew in his heads up display, or H.U.D., he spoke briefly with his navigator-radar officer, sitting in front of and below his own seat.

"Roger, I am selecting two GP-500 bombs for this first pass and setting them for delayed detonation. Read me aloud at intervals our speed and altitude as we dive."

"Understood, Alain! We are now at 3,400 meters and 750 kilometers per hour." With his comrade reading out their speed and altitude, Brisson carefully aligned the HIEI in his sight. As he had expected, the Japanese battlecruiser started zigzagging to try to throw off the aim of the four aircraft now diving on it. However, the anti-aircraft fire coming up from it, or from its escort destroyers, proved to be positively puny. In this the Japanese Navy was no worse than most other navies around the World: the threat to warships coming from aircraft was still largely underestimated, with anti-aircraft armament taking third place after heavy guns and torpedo tubes when time came for ship designers to draw the blueprints of new warships. Apparently, the lesson served to the British Fleet in 1915 at the Battle of the Jade had not sufficed to make that lesson sink in, no pun intended. Diving down a slope that was slightly at an angle with the centerline axis of the Japanese ship, Brisson's goal was to aim low at the waterline of the battlecruiser's port side. Since the last turn made by the HIEI was to starboard, his bombs should then hit the ship squarely if it turned to port after he dropped his bombs.

"BOMBS AWAY!"

As Brisson pulled hard on his stick to get out of his dive, enduring in the process a crushing six Gs of centrifugal force, his navigator kept his eyes on the HIEI to observe the fall of their bombs.

“ONE HIT AND ONE NEAR MISS!” shouted Roger Stravisky. “ONE BOMB EXPLODED JUST OFF THE PORT SIDE OF THE HIEI AND PROBABLY CAVED IN A FEW HULL PLATES. OUR OTHER BOMB HIT SQUARELY THE BASE OF THE FORWARD SUPERSTRUCTURE TOWER.”

“ALRIGHT, LET’S SEE HOW THE OTHERS MANAGE.” replied Brisson. Climbing back while performing a wide full circle turn to get back in attack position, the two men watched anxiously as their three wingmen dove in succession on the wounded battlecruiser. The first and second aircraft achieved only near misses on the HIEI, but the third aircraft placed its two bombs right on top of the funnel uptakes of the battlecruisers, piercing the armored deck protecting the machinery spaces of the warships and then detonating inside the boiler rooms of the HIEI. That proved to be the coup-de-grace for the battlecruiser, which then broke in two and sank within minutes. However, Brisson did not wait for the remains of the HIEI to disappear under the surface of the sea before rallying his three wingmen by radio.

“Blue Flight, from Trident One: split up and engage any enemy destroyer not already engaged by other aircraft. Good hunting!”

In the CIC of the BOURRASQUE, where Captain Lemonnier followed by radar and radio the progress of the attack by the SUPER FRELONS from the aviation cruiser LE REDOUTABLE, the communications officer brought him a new message some ten minutes after the HIEI had been sunk.

“Message from Vice Admiral Dubois, Captain.”

“Thank you!”

Reading quickly the message handed to him, Lemonnier nodded his head in satisfaction : the orders from Vice Admiral Dubois, embarked on the fleet carrier GLOIRE, fitted totally with his present mood. Going to the navigation chart table situated next to the tactical plot console, he spoke to his navigator while pointing an area in the middle of the Eastern China Sea.

“We have new orders from Admiral Dubois. We are to proceed north at high speed and intercept a troopship convoy coming down from Fukuoka and heading towards the Formosa Strait. One of our long range PÉLICAN II maritime patrol aircraft is shadowing that convoy and will guide us to it. It is composed of four light cruisers, six destroyers, sixteen troopships and transport ships and two oil tanker ships. The admiral wants us to sink in priority the troopships.”

The navigator, Lieutenant First Class Hervé de Jumonville, nodded his head in understanding at the last sentence: by now, the Japanese Army had gained a well-deserved reputation for both barbarism and cruelty towards its enemies, be they soldiers or civilians. When neutral observers had reported the massacre of hundreds of French citizens in Shanghai by the Japanese Army, following the sinking of the S.S. ANNAM, it had raised a huge outcry of indignation and calls for revenge in France. While France normally adhered to the letter of the recently signed Geneva Convention, the unofficial directive from Paris to its expeditionary task force had been to show no mercy to Japanese Army soldiers.

On the Japanese battleship MUTSU, sailing at the head of the bombardment force now going down the Formosa Strait, Vice Admiral Osami Nagano was getting frankly worried and also indecisive. The three submarines ahead of his fleet didn't answer anymore on the radio, while the battlecruiser KONGO, part of the carrier force, did not respond either on the radio, and this after sending a single short but alarming message about the carriers AKAGI and KAGA having been sunk by unknown enemies. The 52 year-old, bald admiral just couldn't make any sense of the present situation. One bridge duty officer then suddenly shouted in alarm while pointing outside at one of the armored windows of the battle bridge.

“SOMETHING IS COMING DOWN!”

That was all that the officer could say before Nagano saw in a flash a large flying object dive between the bridge superstructure and the second forward main gun turret. He wasn't able to see that object slam nose first against the weather deck and then penetrate it. A fraction of a second later, the deck of the battle bridge was projected upwards by a titanic explosion from under it that made it smash against its roof, killing instantly Nagano and the whole bridge crew. That explosion, which touched off the ammunition magazine of the 'B' turret, also blew the MUTSU in two, leaving its two mangled parts to quickly sink in minutes afterwards.

More heavy MARTEL missiles rained down at intervals of six to seven minutes, with the PÉLICAN II maritime patrol aircraft trailing the bombardment force from a distance and helping the guided missile aviation destroyer MISTRAL adjust its fire. The MISTRAL ended up expending nine of its 24 MARTEL heavy surface-to-surface missiles in one hour, sinking or severely damaging six battleships or battlecruisers and one

heavy cruiser before the three surviving heavy cruisers decided to turn around with their escort destroyers. That, however did not save those cruisers, with the MISTRAL continuing its merciless missile fire. The MYOKO, HAGURO and ASHIGARA succumbed to MARTEL missiles in the following half hour, leaving intact on the surface the two light cruisers and twelve destroyers of their escort, now withdrawing north at high speed, their nearly panicked crews praying that no more missiles would rain down on them. In that, their prayers were heard, but it didn't save them from the wrath of the French Air Force planes based in Hanoi. Twelve minutes after the smoking wreck of the ASHIGARA had disappeared under the surface of the sea, twelve OURAGAN jet fighter-bombers arrived over the Japanese light cruisers and destroyers and dove on them, raining bombs, rockets and 25mm cannon shells on them. Once those jet fighter-bombers departed, out of munitions, twelve SUPER FRELON attack aircraft took the relay, finishing off the survivors of the escort force.

Some ninety kilometers north of the graves of the bombardment force, its resupply squadron was still going its merry way south at twelve knots, mostly unaware of what had been happening during the past three hours except for intercepting a couple of radio messages not addressed to the squadron. Since those radio messages did not include any order for him to turn around and withdraw, the commander of the resupply squadron had decided to continue on, as would have done any other disciplined Japanese naval commander. That sense of discipline however earned him the wrath of four PÉLICAN II armed maritime patrol aircraft, which used their 150mm heavy rockets to good effect. Each of those 150mm rockets, fired at a maximum velocity of 900 meters per second and from outside the effective range of the few Japanese anti-aircraft guns, packed a powerful warhead containing 26 kilos of Metallex explosives, which had the explosive power of 86 kilos of TNT. Once the surviving Japanese ships, crippled by rocket fire, had either stopped dead in the water or slowed to a crawl, the PÉLICAN IIs rained bombs on them to finish them off.

The last Japanese force to experience destruction and death was the invasion force, with its sixteen transport ships and two tanker ships escorted by four light cruisers and six destroyers. Four PÉLICAN II started engaging the escort ships of the invasion force at around five in the afternoon, some two hours before sunset. The BOURRASQUE arrived on the scene some forty minutes later, to find that the escort

ships had already been sunk to the last by the patrol aircraft, which had used both medium air-to-surface missiles and 150mm rockets to do the job. Captain Lemonnier, scanning the now disorganized Japanese transport ships with his binoculars, had a mean smile before giving a few orders around the bridge.

“HELM, STEER TO STARBOARD TWENTY DEGREES, MAKE HEADING 355! ENGINES AHEAD FULL! MAKE SPEED FORTY KNOTS! GUNNERS, MAN OUR 100mm TURRETS! NO SENSE USING EXPENSIVE MISSILES AGAINST SUCH SLOW AND UNARMED TARGETS WHEN WE CAN USE OUR GUNS.”

His gunners, who had sat in frustration for hours, doing nothing while their ship fired missile after missile, responded with gusto, manning the four twin dual-purpose 100mm gun turrets of the BOURRASQUE. It took only 25 minutes for the BOURRASQUE to overtake the fleeing transport ships, pass them and turn to block their path, its gun turrets pointed and aimed by radar. The first 100mm shell was fired from a distance of eleven kilometers from the lead Japanese troopship, splashing just in front of its bow. Adjusting his fire with a couple more shells, the gunnery officer of the BOURRASQUE, Capitaine de Corvette (Lieutenant Commander) Charles Lagarde then switched to ‘fire for effect’ against three separate Japanese troopships, targeting them simultaneously with the help of the four fire control radars of the ship, backed up by the optical rangefinder/gun sight of each twin gun turret. Pumping out an average of ten shells per gun per minute, the BOURRASQUE fired away at a combined rate of sixty 100mm shells per minute, or one shell per second. Each 13.5 kilo High-Explosive shell, containing six kilos of Metallex explosive, was enough to cause some major damage to the unarmed troopships. The latter, despite being on average large transport ships, with some being requisitioned passenger ships, fared badly under the rain of shells, not having the multiple watertight bulkheads and armor of warships. The few 75mm guns installed on the open decks of some of the troopships, being mounted on pedestals with no proper fire control systems, proved totally ineffective and never achieved even a near-miss on the BOURRASQUE. Most of the troopships started sinking after receiving six or more shells each, but the bigger, requisitioned passenger ships, needed up to fifteen hits before sinking. All the while, the soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army’s Fifth Infantry Division could only watch helplessly while suffering massive casualties from the gunfire. Few of the troopships’ rescue boats and rafts had time to be lowered into the water before their ships sank, leaving thousands of soldiers to cling to floating debris or swimming on the surface of the sea. Those few troopships which attempted to escape

destruction by turning towards the Chinese coast at top speed were at once intercepted and sunk by one of the three marauding PÉLICAN II patrol aircraft circling over the troop convoy. By the time that the Sun went down and night fell, the survivors from the troopship convoy found themselves alone in the water, surrounded by floating debris and covered with fuel oil, with an incoming storm making the waves stronger and more dangerous. When the Sun rose again the next morning, less than 300 survivors still clung to debris or sat in embarkations.

20:26 (China Time)

Flag command center, French aircraft carrier GLOIRE

Ha Long Bay, off the port of Haiphong, French Indochina

Gulf of Tonkin

Vice Admiral Louis-Athanase Dubois had a satisfied grin on his face as he finished rereading the last messages and reports from the ships of his task force and from those of the resident Indochina Squadron. Things could hardly be better than this right now. Then looking at the officers of his fleet command staff, he asked one question to his chief of logistics.

“When will all fuel and fresh rations resupply operations be completed, Captain Romarin?”

“Late tonight, at around two in the morning, Admiral. We did burn a lot of fuel during this long trip from France. Our pantries were also quite low in fresh produces and meat.”

“Well, since most of Japan’s combat fleet is now at the bottom of the sea, thanks to the superb job of our aviators and of the men of the BOURRASQUE and the MISTRAL, we thankfully can afford to take the time to finish our resupply operations. This thus leads us to our operations to come.”

Dubois, a big man, bent over while resting both of his hands on the edge of the large chart table around which he and his staff were assembled.

“Gentlemen, France sent us here with three clear goals in mind. First, we are to protect Indochina from any possible attack or invasion by the Japanese. From the reports of our ships and aircraft, we can now say that this first goal has been mostly fulfilled. We only need to exercise vigilance and patrol the maritime and land borders of Indochina and prevent any isolated Japanese ship, aircraft or ground unit from

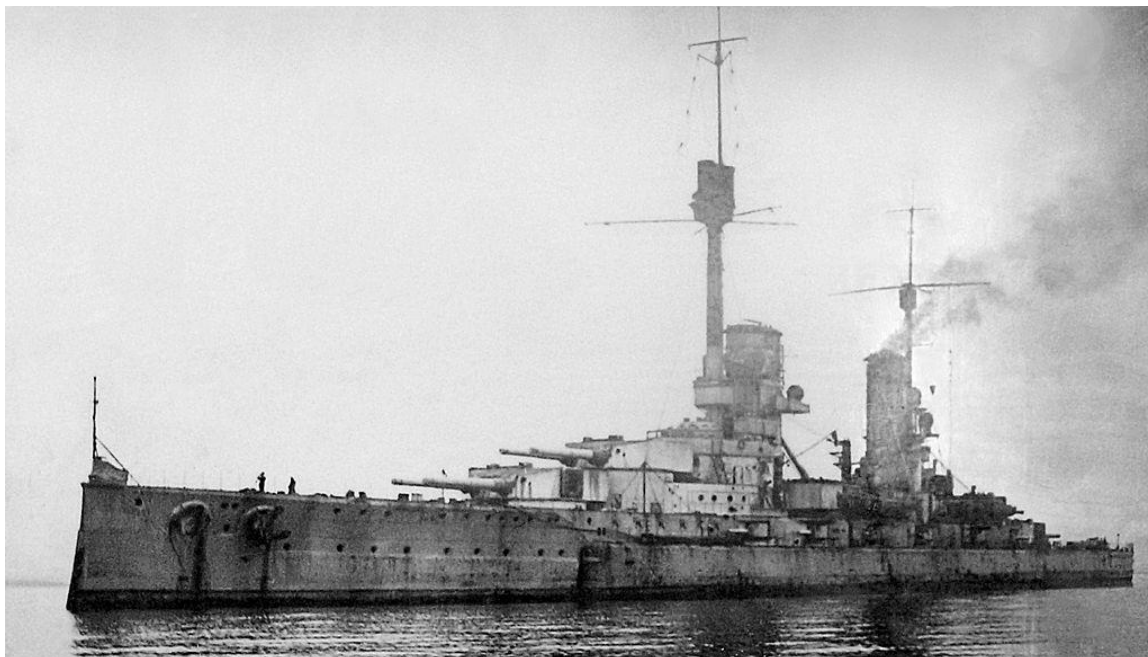
approaching. Thankfully, the Chinese Army is still in control of the southern provinces of China which border Indochina, so we will know well in advance if any Japanese ground force decides to push our way. The second goal we had was to avenge our citizens murdered by Japan in China. As far as I am concerned, that goal is still only partially fulfilled: those directly responsible for those murders are still in China and still hold many of our citizens hostage, along with other foreign nationals. Finally, our third goal, given to me by the President of the Council and the Ministers of War and of the Navy, is to prevent any further acts of Japanese aggression against us in the future. That goal, in my opinion, is the principal one for us. There is no point in extinguishing a fire if we let the pyromaniac who started it ready to light a new fire shortly after. What I intend to do next is to use our modern ships and aircraft and the long reach of our missiles to hurt the Japanese badly until they give up. Furthermore, I intend to do that by striking at the head of the monster, not at its tail. At the same time, we will cleanse the Eastern China Sea of the Japanese ships we will find in it, be they warships or commercial transport ships. That way, we will indirectly be fulfilling our second goal, by depriving the murderers of the Japanese Army in China of any supplies or reinforcements sent to them from Japan.”

“And how do you intend to strike the head of the monster, Admiral?” asked Captain Émile Lacroix, the captain of the aircraft carrier GLOIRE. His question made Dubois smile and look at Rear Admiral Gensoul, the commander of the First Strike Fleet.

“I will give that job to Admiral Gensoul's ‘Teutonic Squadron’.”

Marcel Gensoul rolled his eyes as the other senior officers around the chart table broke out into laughter: he commanded a squadron of ex-German battleships and battlecruisers captured and taken over by France in 1915, after the swift French victory that had ended the First World War in late 1914. Those ex-German warships, which had been at the forefront of naval construction at the time, had since then been modernized and refitted at least once during the past decade and still constituted a very powerful force. However, their French crews were dodged with the derisive nickname of ‘Teutons’³ given to them by other French sailors, something that was considered by those crewmembers a fighting offense in any bar, club or restaurant in France where it was uttered.

³ Teuton : From the word ‘Teutonique’ (Teutonic in English). Unfriendly nickname given to German soldiers by French people in WW1.



Ex-German battleship SMS KRONPRINZ WILHELM (renamed MARNE in French Navy service)

CHAPTER 7 – NAVAL POWER

08:05 (Japan Time)

Friday, July 29, 1932

Small fishing village on the west coast of the island of Ko-Jima

290 kilometers south of Tokyo

“MOTHER! MOTHER! COME AND SEE!”

The Japanese woman in her thirties, who had been busy feeding the chickens her family kept in cages at the back of their small wooden house, looked up at her six year-old son, who was running towards her.

“What is it, Hiroki?”

“Big ships, lots of them! They just arrived!”

The woman couldn't help feel some apprehension at once on hearing that: anything out of the ordinary in and around their small fishing village could be a sign of possible bad news. Putting down her basket of feed grains, she followed her son, walking around her house and going to the side facing the sea. There, she had to slow down and stop,

struck by what she could now see: over a dozen large gray ships were effectively visible mere kilometers off the coastal village. In comparison to them, the few fishing boats which were at sea and catching fish looked minuscule.

“By the Kamis! There is a whole fleet of them!”

“Are they Japanese ships, Mother?” asked little Hiroki.

“Uh, I don’t know: I know nothing about ships. They must be Japanese warships, since they are this close to the mainland.”

08:19 (Japan Time)

CIC of the guided missile battleship ARDENNE (ex-SMS KÖNIG)

Anchored off the island of Ko-Jima (290 kilometers south of Tokyo)

“ We are firmly anchored in place off Ko-Jima and have established with the best precision possible our present position, using the northern tip of the island as a visual point of reference, Admiral.”

“Good! Put our verified position in the fire control calculator and calculate the fire solution for our missiles. Make sure that we do this with the utmost exactitude: the precision of our shooting will depend on it. In the meantime, I will climb back up to the bridge.”

“Understood, Admiral!”

Leaving his gunnery officer to take care of the firing calculations in the CIC, Rear Admiral Gensoul used the elevator cage linking the CIC with the bridge to go up. In view of his age, he was most grateful for the fact that, when the ship had gone through an extensive overhaul and modernization program at the Kruger Marine Shipyards near Marseilles, someone had thought about adding an elevator cage to the ageing ex-German battleship, thus saving him today from having to climb up a total of five flights of stairs. However, that refit program had done a lot more than just add an elevator cage. The old, coal-fired boilers and steam turbines had been completely removed, along with the middle ‘Q’ main gun turret, opening for other uses an enormous volume of internal space amidships. Part of that volume had been used to install six ultra-modern Kruger Marine geared gas turbines, which had then been connected to the three propeller shafts. Apart from taking less than a third of the volume of the original propulsion machinery, the new gas turbines delivered nearly three times as much power, saved thousands of tons in weight and also made it possible to switch to liquid distillate fuel,

which was a much more efficient fuel than coal and was a lot easier to store and move around the ship. All that, along with the rebuilding and slight elongation of the bow, which now included a bulbous bow under the waterline, had boosted the top speed of the battleship from 21 knots to 31 knots. Even better, all that extra space had made possible to add larger fuel compartments, boosting the cruising range from 8,000 to 12,000 nautical miles. As for the space previously taken amidships by the 'Q' turret, with its two 305mm main guns and its thick armored barbette, it had been used to house in a heavily armored box a total of a hundred vertical launch silos, sixty for heavy surface-to-surface missiles and forty for medium surface-to-air missiles, enough to more than compensate for the loss of the two 305mm guns, of which four twin turrets were still installed on the ship. The installation of those missile silos had of course been accompanied by a complete rebuilding of the ship's superstructure and the addition of numerous radars and other modern electronic systems to control and guide those missiles. After all that had been done, some of the space saved by the change in machinery still remained, which had then been used to greatly enlarge and improve crew accommodations, something that had done a great deal to improve crew morale. Finally, the anti-aircraft gun armament had been completely revised and greatly reinforced, while space had been found for a landing platform and a hangar for two SUPER COLIBRI VTOL aircraft. With the two sister ships of the ex-KÖNIG and the four ex-German battlecruisers in French service since 1915 having received a similar modernization and rebuilding program, like in the case of seven French-built battleships, the French Navy now possessed a battle fleet second to none in the World. Today, its awesome firepower was about to be unleashed for the first time, against Japan.

08:19 (Japan Time)

Fishing village on the west coast of the island of Ko-Jima

Keiko, Hiroki's mother, had returned to feeding her chicken after looking at the big ships for a moment. Since her house was between her and the ocean, she jumped up in surprise when a loud, thunderous noise rolled in from the sea. That noise, instead of resonating for only a few seconds, continued on, shaking the wooden huts and houses of the village. Running around her house, Keiko arrived in view of the sea in time to see something that left her mouth open ajar in shock: rising fast and in quick succession from the ships moored offshore were dozens of large, pencil-like objects

trailing long plumes of flames and smoke. Accelerating upwards at the vertical for the first couple of seconds, the objects then lowered their trajectory to fly northward, all apparently heading in the same direction. Keiko, like the other inhabitants of the village, could only stand and watch for the four minutes during which the ships fired off 270 MJOLNIR⁴ heavy surface-to-surface ballistic missiles. Only at the end did Keiko realized that the objects were heading directly towards Japan. Her heart filling with dread, she looked at the ships, now partially covered by a large cloud of drifting smoke, with a mix of anger and fear: anger at an enemy that would come this close to Japan; fear at the sight of the titanic amount of firepower just demonstrated by that enemy.

08:27 (Japan Time)

Imperial Japanese Army General Staff Headquarters

Ichigaya Heights, Shinjuku District

Tokyo, Japan

Field Marshal Prince Kan'in Kotohito, Chief of Staff of the Imperial Japanese Army, threw a jaundiced look at the colonel who had just given him his first briefing of the day.

"That's it? Our whole invasion fleet, along with the Fifth Infantry Division, vanished around Formosa a week ago and the only thing that we know is that it was attacked by French planes? Have we at the least sent some reconnaissance aircraft to find out what happened to our fleet?"

The graying colonel from the Operations Department apologetically bowed to Kotohito while answering him, watched by the other staff officers assembled with the Prince in the main briefing room of the headquarters.

"We did, Your Highness! A total of nine reconnaissance planes were sent, but only one returned...full of holes. The pilot of that plane said that a French fighter plane of the SUPER FRELON type attacked him while he was exploring the waters of the Formosa Strait. Before he was attacked, he had time to spot a large field of debris and floating oil on the surface of the ocean."

"And do we know where that French plane came from? Was it using Hong Kong as its base?"

⁴ Mjolnir: Name given to the mythical war hammer used by the Norse god Thor.

"We don't know, Your Highness. However, we know that the SUPER FRELON does not have the range needed to fly from Indochina and get to the point where our reconnaissance plane was intercepted. Our Intelligence Department thinks that the French plane possibly came from the aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE, which is known to be part of France's Indochina Naval Squadron."

"So, French warships may be roaming around Formosa, or possibly even nearer to us. What does the Navy intend to do now, Colonel?"

"Uh, to be frank, Your Highness, I am not sure that the Navy itself knows what it will do next. When I last visited the Navy Headquarters, the staff there was in a near state of shock after losing their battleship and carrier forces."

"Hum, maybe I should go there and boot the ass of Prince Fushimi, to wake him up. However, whatever the Navy decides to do, we will certainly not stay idle. I want to make the French pay for this. How many chemical bombs filled with mustard gas⁵ do we have in storage that our bombers could drop on Hanoi?"

"I would have to check on that, Your Highness, but I am certain that we have at least 400 tons of mustard bombs in stock."

"Good! After this briefing is over, I want our bomber force to prepare a chemical strike mission on Hanoi, using our stocks of mustard gas. I doubt that the French will be expecting that. As well, contact our China Army headquarters and tell them to get rid of the French hostages held by us in Shanghai and Nanjing."

"HAY!" Replied the colonel while bowing again to Kotohito. "Do you wish that to be made publicly, as an object lesson to the French, or discreetly, Your Highness?" Kotohito only thought about his answer briefly before speaking.

"Make it a public mass execution: we don't care one bit about the sensibilities of those Gaijins⁶ around the World who may be offended by this. None of them had the guts to even declare their support to France up to now. Also, since we hold some American and British citizens, that may reinforce our message..."

⁵ Mustard gas : Chemical warfare agent that causes horrible blisters and can burn both the lungs and the eyes of a victim who would be exposed to its vapors or liquid droplets. Mustard gas is both persistent and very toxic and was first used in World War One by the Germans.

⁶ Gaijins : Pejorative Japanese word describing non-Japanese people and particularly Europeans and Americans.

BAOUM

A powerful blast wave suddenly blew in all the windows of the briefing room, projecting razor-sharp shards of glass around the room and shredding its occupants to pieces, on top of having the pressure wave make them fly off their feet, to crash violently against the wall opposite the windows. Having instinctively turned away from the windows as his first reaction to the blast, Prince Kotohito avoided being disfigured by flying glass shards but instead had dozens of shards stab his back and neck before crashing face-first against the nearest wall. He was barely conscious and in great pain when the second of the thirty MJOLNIR heavy missiles aimed at the Army General Staff Headquarters made a direct hit on the building housing the headquarters. Its 1,500 kilo Metallex-filled concrete-piercing warhead, which had the equivalent in explosive power to 2,640 kilos of TNT, detonated after a short delay, long enough for the warhead, diving at a speed of 4,000 kilometers per hour, to dig its way to the basement levels before exploding. Over half of the large headquarters building was instantly destroyed, its debris flying high in the air before falling in a deadly rain around the Shinjuku District, where the building was located. The rest of the headquarters was gutted by the blast wave, with all of its occupants killed at once.

However, that was only the start of four minutes of sheer terror and destruction for the inhabitants of Tokyo as the 270 MJOLNIR heavy bombardment missiles fired by the French First Strike Fleet rained down on six distinct targets around the city. While those missiles didn't have the kind of high precision terminal guidance systems which were going to be used in 21st Century weapons, their inertial guidance systems made them able to hit within 300 meters of their calculated target position, and this up to their maximum range of 350 kilometers. Being more precisely classified as an area bombardment missile, the MJOLNIR was meant to destroy large ground installations, like industrial plants, shipyards and military bases, and its employment doctrine called for the firing of at least six or seven missiles against a point target in order to ensure good chances of a direct hit. In the case of the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff Headquarters, it suffered no less than four direct hits, completely obliterating it and leaving four huge craters in its place. The flying debris from the building, along with the 26 other missiles aimed at the area, turned much of the Shinjuku District into a field of

smoking ruins, something worsened by the fact that the nearby Army Ministry building was itself targeted by thirty more MJOLNIR missiles. Each of the other targets around Tokyo and nearby Yokosuka were targeted by a minimum of twenty heavy missiles, with the all important Yokosuka Naval Arsenal receiving fifty MJOLNIR missiles and the nearby Yokosuka Japanese Navy Academy being targeted by twenty missiles. The one vital point in Tokyo that was not targeted was the Imperial Palace, and this for political reasons.

As the missiles from Rear Admiral Gensoul's First Strike Fleet devastated the Tokyo area, the seven guided missile battleships of the French Second Strike Fleet, split into two widely separated groups, fired a total of 220 MJOLNIR missiles at five targets around Kobe, Nagoya, Maizuru, Kure and Sasebo, missiles which started to hit and spread death and destruction at about the same time as the missiles fired at Tokyo. Then, after five minutes of pure hell for those either working or living in the targeted areas, the explosions stopped, leaving behind huge craters, blown buildings, houses crushed by falling debris and tens of thousands of dead and wounded Japanese. The survivors, left shell-shocked by the series of powerful explosions, slowly crawled out of the ruins of their houses and workplaces as the smoke and dust gradually dissipated, revealing a landscape of utter destruction. While the French High Command had expected heavy civilian casualties from those bombardments, that prospect had been judged to be acceptable, in view of the main goal, which was to destroy as much of the Japanese military command infrastructure, aircraft factories and naval bases and shipyards as possible and at the same time killing as many as possible of the militarist leaders who were the cause of this war. As the French military saying went: 'On ne fait pas dans la dentelle!' (We don't deal in lacemaking). More would soon come to put even more weight in that saying.



Japanese soldier holding the head of a prisoner he has just killed in China.

CHAPTER 8 – OUTRAGE

09:36 (China Time)

Monday, August 1, 1932

Spanish consulate, International Settlement

Shanghai, China

Spanish Consul Jose Maria Marquéz looked up from the document he was reading when someone knocked lightly on the door of his office.

“Yes?”

His secretary, a middle aged Spaniard woman who could speak Chinese, half opened the door at his call. The consul was struck at once by the grave expression on her face.

“I am sorry to disturb you like this, sir, but a Spanish journalist just came to the consulate with some dreadful news from the French Concession. He asked to urgently speak with you. Should I let him in?”

"Of course, Miss Obrador! Send him in!"

Marquéz got up from his chair and went around his desk to greet with a handshake the medium-sized man in his thirties who walked in.

"Good day to you, sir. I am Jose Maria Marquéz, Consul of Spain in Shanghai."

"And I am Rodrigo Dominguez, from the ABC newspaper. I am however afraid that this is not a good day...for many."

"Oh, what do you mean?"

"To make it short, sir, I just came out of the French Concession, where I witnessed the Japanese troops there engaged in an orgy of killings."

Marquéz' expression hardened at once on hearing that: this was unfortunately not the first time that the Japanese Army would engage in what would be considered in Europe as barbaric acts of mass killings.

"Are they killing Chinese inside the French Concession, Mister Dominguez?"

"No! The Japanese are hunting down and killing every French person that they can find, be they men, women or children. I myself was nearly bayoneted by a Japanese soldier and I was only saved by my Spanish passport."

Marquéz nearly stepped back in horror on hearing that.

"How...how extensive is that killing?"

"Japanese soldiers are on the prowl in the whole concession, from what I saw. They don't even bother to carry away the bodies of their victims and I stumbled on more than one pile of dead European-looking persons. Another thing: many of the dead women and teenage girls I saw looked like they had been raped before being killed, while some of the men and boys had been decapitated."

Both shocked and stunned, Marquéz showed an easy chair to the journalist, then sat down heavily in another chair, his face ashen.

"Dear Mother Mary! Why would the Japanese commit such atrocities against the French?"

"That is probably in retaliation for the massive bombardments made by the French against Japan three days ago, sir. The Japanese claim that over 200,000 Japanese citizens died in those bombardments. So, do you think that you could influence the local Japanese Army commanders into stopping those massacres, sir?"

Marquéz slowly shook his head in response.

"They wouldn't listen to me. In fact, the local Japanese Army commander is probably the one who issued the order to massacre the French occupants of the concession."

"Do you know by chance how many French citizens reside in Shanghai, sir?"

"The latest figures I am aware of mention around 2,000 persons." replied the Consul, closing his eyes in grief. However, the reaction of Dominguez to that number deeply shook him.

"Two thousands? But...just in the portion of the concession I traveled through, I saw at least 5,000 bodies, all European-looking. From the extent of the killing and shooting I saw and heard, there must be at least 10,000 people that are already dead around the French Concession."

"TEN THOUSANDS? But that would mean that the Japanese are not killing only French citizens."

"Because of the language barrier, the Japanese soldiers are probably killing anyone that looks French, sir."

Marquéz wobbled in his chair as the implications of this became clear to him.

"But, there are thousands of White Russians who had fled the Bolshevik Revolution and who sought refuge here in Shanghai in the past years. There are also thousands of other European and American citizens living in the French Concession. Are you sure about the number of dead you saw?"

"Sir, my job as a journalist accustomed me to count rapidly the size of crowds at particular events. If anything, I may have underestimated the number of bodies I saw and I can certify that the huge majority of them looked European and not Chinese."

It took Marquéz nearly a minute to regain his composure after hearing those words. Getting up from his chair, he went back to his desk, where he grabbed the receiver of his telephone and started composing a number.

"Mister Dominguez, would you be ready to accompany me and my military attaché in an inspection tour of the French Concession?"

"Are you mad, sir? That would be our death warrant!"

"Maybe not: I am now going to call the British, American, Italian and Portuguese consuls to inform them of what you saw and to ask them to accompany us to the French Concession. It will probably be more difficult for a Japanese officer to attack a whole diplomatic convoy rather than a single car."

With Dominguez watching on anxiously, Marquéz spent a good half hour on the telephone, calling a number of other consulates around the International Settlement. That half hour however left him more disappointed and frustrated than hopeful. Putting down the receiver, he gave a disillusioned look at the ABC reporter.

"Out of the seven consulates I just called, only the American Consul-General accepted to go with me to the French Concession. He is going to bring with him the commander of the U.S. Marine unit based in Shanghai."

"Only one?" exclaimed Dominguez, shocked. "What about the British Consul-General?"

"He was the first to refuse my request to accompany me, saying that the situation was too dangerous and unstable. Do you have a camera with you?"

In response, Rodrigo patted the leather pouch he carried by a strap across his chest.

"I always have a still camera with me these days, sir. However, I didn't dare using it while trying to leave the French Concession: a Japanese soldier seeing me taking photographs of the victims probably would have shot me on sight."

"A sensible precaution on your part, Mister Dominguez. With some luck, you may just be able to use your camera from my diplomatic car while we tour the French Concession. The American Consul-General promised to be here within thirty minutes. That will give me time to grab one of our local interpreters who speaks both Chinese and Japanese, along with my naval attaché."

As promised, a big black sedan flying the American flag showed up at the entrance of the Spanish consulate some twenty minutes later. Marquéz, closely followed by Dominguez and the consulate's Japanese interpreter, Hiro, went first to speak to Consul-General Edwin Sheddan Cunningham, talking to him through his opened rear window.

"Thank you for accepting to come with me, Mister Cunningham. This is Mister Rodrigo Dominguez, the Madrid journalist who came to warn me about a massacre in progress inside the French Concession."

Cunningham first shook hands with the Spanish journalist, then looked up with concern at Marquéz.

"We have been hearing a lot of rifle shots coming from the French Concession since early this morning. We in fact can still hear shots right now. I am not sure that the Japanese will pay any regards to our diplomatic status once we are inside the French

Concession. We may thus have to bluff our way through. If you don't mind, I will take the lead: I am very good at bluffing and I also speak both Chinese and Japanese. At the worse, Major Huntsman, who is riding with me, will help reinforce my bluff."

Marqu ez gave a quick look at the tough-looking Marine Corps senior officer wearing his Class 'A' uniform, then looked back at Cunningham, a nearly bald, 64 year old man. The American Consul-General was an old hand in China and had been serving in Shanghai for a good twelve years already.

"I was planning to make the French Municipal Council Building, on Avenue Joffre, our first destination, in case Japanese soldiers ask us where we are going."

"Sounds fine with me." replied Cunningham. "If you don't mind, I would like to go inspect afterwards the Shanghai American School, on Avenue P tain. If you are ready, we can start rolling now."

"I am!" said Marqu ez, who then went to his diplomatic car, in which his driver was already sitting behind the wheel. Both sedans soon were rolling towards the French Concession, situated south of the International Settlement.

At first, things went fairly well, with the few Japanese Army checkpoints they encountered inside the International Settlement letting them pass without much ado. However, that changed drastically as they entered the territory of the French Concession. They encountered a Japanese Army roadblock at the entrance of the Concession, where Cunningham needed a good minute of talking to convince the Japanese lieutenant in charge of the roadblock to let them pass. Behind the American consulate car, Marqu ez blew air out in relief as they were finally allowed to roll inside the French Concession.

"Damn! Those Japanese soldiers looked mean as hell to me."

"They don't only look mean, sir: they are!" replied Dominguez while eyeing something to their front left. Looking in that direction, Marqu ez stiffened on seeing over a dozen bodies sprawled around the sidewalk. Some of those bodies were those of women and girls, something made evident by the fact that their skirts and panties had been pulled out of the way, leaving their groins exposed. Cold rage filled the Spanish diplomat as he understood that these women and girls must have been raped before being killed.

"You may start taking pictures, Mister Dominguez, but make it discrete. I will warn you if I see Japanese soldiers around."

Rendered nearly sick by the sight of the bodies, Marquéz watched their surroundings as Dominguez took a few pictures. However, the two cars, while slowing down for a moment, did not stop and they soon turned on Avenue Joffre, the main artery of the French Concession. There, proofs that a massacre had occurred became overwhelming, with bodies sprawled everywhere, some of them decapitated. All the bodies were apparently those of Europeans and many of the dead women and girls, some as young as nine or ten, showed signs of rape. At one point, Marquéz had to stick his head out of his window in order to throw up after seeing over twenty human heads, which had been impaled on top of the spikes of an iron park fence. He still had his head out when a dozen Japanese soldiers suddenly ran out of a building's entrance and ran across the street, where they pointed their rifles and made the two diplomatic cars stop. His horror quickly turning to fear, Marquéz could only sit and watch in his car as a Japanese officer started a shouting match with Cunningham, who was sitting in his own car.

"For God's sake, Mister Dominguez, hide this camera, NOW!" shouted the diplomat, near panic, as three Japanese soldiers approached his car with their long rifles pointed at him and with bayonets fixed to their weapons. Thankfully, the reporter acted quickly and discretely, hiding his camera behind his back and then sitting tight against the bench seat's backrest. The first Japanese soldier to get to their car then shouted repeatedly one word while nearly touching Marquéz' nose with the tip of his bayonet.

"PASSPORTS! PASSPORTS!"

Moving slowly and deliberately, Marquéz took out his diplomatic passport and presented it to the soldier, who briefly examined it and that of Dominguez. When he looked at the Japanese passport presented by Hiro, the translator, the soldier calmed down noticeably and spoke with him for a few seconds before going to join his officer, leaving two soldiers near the Spanish diplomatic car. Hiro, his face quite pale and with cold sweat on his forehead, turned in his front passenger seat to speak to the consul.

"The sergeant went to see his officer, to know what he will decide about us. I however would be quite surprised if they let us continue further."

"Well, we now can only hope and pray, I suppose."

Hiro, one of the rare Japanese Catholics around, nodded his head at Marquéz' pious wish. His prediction soon turned out to be accurate, with Cunningham's car turning around before stopping side-by-side with Marquéz' car. The American Consul-General then spoke to Marquéz through the opened windows of their cars.

“We have to turn around now: that Japanese lieutenant threatened to shoot us if we continued towards the Municipal Council Building. Follow me closely: we are going to check the Shanghai American School.”

“We are with you!”

Telling his driver to turn around as well and follow the American car, Marquéz kept his eyes wide open, scanning the streets and buildings around him as they rolled westward down a side street towards Avenue Pétain. Up to now, he had seen well over 3,000 European-looking bodies lying around, noticeably more than the known French population of the Concession. That could only mean one thing: the Japanese Army was presently engaged in an indiscriminate massacre of all the European-looking people they encountered inside the French Concession. Marquéz knew that the large majority of the Caucasian people living in the French Concession was actually not French. Most of them were in fact White Russians, who had fled the Soviet Union during the Bolshevik Revolution, while there were also many American, British, Dutch German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish citizens living here. The reason why the Japanese would engage in such an indiscriminate act escaped him, but it was bound to have heavy consequences around the World.

The trip to the Shanghai American School, situated on the Avenue Pétain, was both tense and horrifying, with hundreds more bodies sprawled around and with many decapitated heads in evidence. Thankfully, the few bands of Japanese soldiers they saw were apparently too busy looting, raping and killing inside various buildings and houses of the sprawling French Concession to take notice of the two diplomatic cars. However, Marquéz’ heart sank when they arrived at the grounds of the Shanghai American School. Normally, at least two U.S. Marine soldiers stood guard at the entrance gate of the campus, along with a few French Concession policemen. Now, he could see none of those soldiers and policemen around the gate. The American consular car, still in the lead, stopped beside the guardhouse flanking the gate, where Major Huntsman got out of the car and entered the guardhouse. He was back out in seconds, his face grim.

“OUR MARINES WERE KILLED, ALONG WITH THE LOCAL POLICEMEN.”

Huntsman then got back in his car, which drove off towards the nearest building of the campus. Stopping in front of that building, which was the administrative and faculty

center of the school, the occupants of both cars, save the drivers, got out and nearly ran inside. What they found was dozens of bodies of men and women, some of them shot but most showing stab wounds from bayonets. As Edwin Cunningham was surveying the scene of carnage, Marquéz noticed something.

“Hey, I see the bodies of male staff, along with those of older female staff, but none of the younger secretaries are visible.”

Cunningham swore loudly as he understood what that could imply.

“Those fucking barbarians! They may just have kidnapped those young secretaries to bring them to their barracks.”

He didn't have to finish his sentence, as Marquéz understood at once what those Japanese soldiers wanted to do to the school's secretaries. Now truly worried about the fate of the students of the institution, the two consular teams left the administrative building to go inspect the other buildings of the campus. Their worst fears were realized when they found over 200 dead teenage boys inside the school's gymnasium. Cunningham then understandably broke down and cried on contemplating that horrible sight. As a grim Major Huntsman did his best to console the old diplomat, Rodrigo Dominguez took multiple photos of the bodies piled inside the gymnasium. As for Marquéz, he was devastated to see that his earlier hunch was a correct one.

“Damn! Not one single girl in sight!”

Major Huntsman, his expression grim, soon looked at the two Spaniards and at their Japanese translator.

“Let's search the rest of the school. Maybe the girls were locked up in a separate building.”

Marquéz was then tempted to say that Huntsman's hope was a wishful one but stopped himself in time and followed the Marine major out of the gymnasium.

While working quickly, in case that some Japanese soldiers returned to the campus, the group of diplomats searched the other buildings of the campus but found only the bodies of male staff members and students, plus those of a few elderly women, but didn't see a single student girl. That seemed to be too much then to Major Huntsman, who nearly collapsed in tears while mumbling.

“Kate... Please, God, tell me that she is safe.”

Cunningham, still traumatized, managed to explain Huntsman's reaction to Marquéz in a shaky voice.

"The Major has a fifteen year old daughter. Her name is Kate and she was studying at this school."

"Santa Maria!" exclaimed in a low voice Marquéz. "But why all this? Why are the Japanese killing indiscriminately all the foreign people in the French Concession? I may understand their anger at the French after these reported air bombardments on Japan three days ago, but this school is clearly marked as an American-owned and operated facility. Why would the Japanese risk becoming at war with the United States?"

"I...I frankly don't know. It just doesn't make any sense."

"Uh, if I may, sir." Said timidly Hiro, who had stayed mostly back up to now. "I may have an answer to your question."

That earned him at once four pairs of hard eyes. Marquéz however kept his reply neutral: he knew Hiro as being a gentle, timid and sensitive young man whose interests in life were poetry and classical music.

"Go ahead, Hiro."

"Well, sir, I know a young Japanese Army officer whom I have befriended during the last few weeks. Basically, we have the same tastes in music. To keep things short, he told me yesterday that his commanders in Shanghai and in the rest of China have been unable to get directives or orders from Japan since the French bombings of three days ago. Apparently, those bombings completely wiped out the Japanese Army High Command in Tokyo, along with many military and industrial facilities around the rest of the country. As a result, the Japanese Army commanders in China have decided to act on their own and not wait for directives from Tokyo before launching retaliatory actions against the French in China. My friend said that his division commander was telling his officers that, to make sure that no French person could escape by using a false passport, all non-Chinese persons inside the French Concession should be equally targeted when the time to act came."

"But, why didn't the Japanese commanders in China ask for directives from the Japanese government, if their High Command was wiped out?" Protested Huntsman, who had regained some of his composure. Hiro shook his head slowly while making a pinched half-smile.

"Things don't work like that in Japan, Major. The Japanese government doesn't control the Japanese Army: it is actually the other way around. Please remember that

Prime Minister Inukai was assassinated last May by young navy officers, an act that was actually verbally supported by the Japanese Army.”

Marqu ez nodded his head at Hiro’s explanation, which made sense in its own crazy way. As for Cunningham, he got angry on hearing the young Japanese man’s words.

“I don’t care what twisted logic those damn Japanese officers used to justify their actions of today: this is still an atrocity and an act of war against the United States!”

“Then, I suggest that we leave now and return to our respective consulates to spread the word about these atrocities, before some Japanese soldiers could return here. If we get killed now, then nobody will be able to alert the rest of the World about this.”

While still angry, Cunningham saw the wisdom in Marqu ez’ suggestion.

“You are unfortunately right about that, Mister Marqu ez. Major, you will put all your Marines on full combat alert as soon as we are back at the consulate. Let’s go!”

10:48 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, August 2, 1932

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

President Herbert Hoover picked up yet another newspaper from the pile on his desk and opened it to scan the titles of the articles in the first pages. As with the other newspapers he had checked to date, the titles expressed outrage at the horrible massacre of American citizens committed in Shanghai. More importantly for him, those newspapers all asked the same question: what was he going to do to avenge these atrocities and punish the Japanese? As an American citizen, Hoover was as outraged about this as the average American but, as the President, he had to face a few unpleasant realities that seemed to escape most of the newspapers’ editors and columnists. His secretary then stuck her head through the door connecting her office with the Oval Office.

“Mister President, the Secretaries of War, State and Navy are here, along with the Chief of Naval Operations and the Army Chief of Staff.”

“Let them in, please, Miss Fairbairn.”

Putting down the newspaper he had been reading, Hoover got up from the presidential chair to go greet his visitors with handshakes, then pointed to them the few chairs and sofas assembled around a low coffee table in one corner.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, gentlemen. I am afraid that we have much to talk about and many hard decisions to take."

Himself taking place in an easy chair at the head of the coffee table, Hoover waited for his visitors to be seated before starting to speak to them in a somber tone.

"Gentlemen, you must have understood that I called you in so that we could discuss the tragic events of yesterday in Shanghai. As you probably know already, the nation is screaming for revenge against Japan. However, I believe that our most urgent priority right now is to safeguard the lives of the Americans still in Shanghai and in other Chinese cities occupied by the Japanese. Secretary Stimson, have you received more information from our consulate in Shanghai?"

The tall, thin and mustachioed Secretary of State slowly nodded once his head at that.

"The State Department has in fact received five supplemental reports from our consulates in Shanghai, Nanking and Beijing during the night, with the most recent one received from Shanghai only three hours ago, Mister President. Our consulates in Shanghai, Canton, Nanking and Beijing are now surrounded and besieged by Japanese troops, with our China Marines detachments the only thing preventing their storming...for the moment. Unfortunately, our Marines are heavily outnumbered and their reserves of ammunition are limited, while they do not possess heavy weapons save for a few machine guns, contrary to the Japanese, who can bring in artillery guns. Our consuls report that other Western consulates and embassies around them are also under Japanese siege. However, the Japanese are presently holding their positions."

"What about the girls kidnapped from the American School in Shanghai?" asked General Douglas MacArthur, the Army Chief of Staff. "Does our consul there know where they could be?"

Stimson lowered his head in both sadness and cold anger before answering MacArthur.

"There...there was some information about those girls in the last message received from our Shanghai consulate. The bodies of many teenage Caucasian girls, most of them naked and showing stab wounds, have started to float ashore along the banks of the Whangpoo River during the night. Chinese fishermen and local inhabitants found those bodies and informed our consulate of this by telephone but, due to the Japanese troops besieging our consulate in Shanghai, our staff there was unable to go

verify those reports and identify those girls. We must assume that at least a few and possibly all of those American girls are now dead, murdered by Japanese soldiers after being raped by them.”

Hoover had to close his eyes then, overwhelmed by horror, while MacArthur angrily slammed his fist on the coffee table.

“Those barbarian bastards! We must make them pay for this!”

“And we will, gentlemen!” replied Hoover, firming up his voice. “We are here this morning precisely to decide how to do that. First, I need to know what our present military capabilities allow us to do. Admiral Pratt, our navy will obviously be at the forefront of any intervention by us around China and Japan. What could we do with our present fleet?”

The white-haired and mustachioed old navy officer sitting next to General MacArthur on a sofa took a couple of seconds to think over his answer while taking out a file from his leather briefcase.

“Well, if you would have asked the same question two weeks ago, my answer to you would be: not much. The Japanese Navy was then a very potent force, with its major warships equipped with radar and with planes superior to ours in both numbers and performances. However, the huge naval battle that took place around Formosa has essentially gutted the Japanese Navy. The French Naval Attaché in Washington passed to us four days ago a detailed report of that battle, with many air photographs to support their claims about Japanese ships sunk. That French report truly stunned me, as it revealed a level of technical sophistication and firepower on the part of the French Navy that I would not have believed possible before. Basically, French warships and aircraft sank a total of nine Japanese battleships and battlecruisers, two fleet carriers, eight heavy cruisers, six light cruisers, 22 destroyers, seven submarines and 27 support ships and troopships. Right now, the Japanese Navy is left with only a motley collection of light cruisers, destroyers, coastal patrol boats and submarines, most of which are in the Eastern China Sea, covering the sea lanes supporting the Japanese Army units occupying China.”

Hoover was left as surprised and skeptical as the others on hearing those figures.

“And what were the losses incurred by the French in that battle, Admiral?”

“According to the French Naval Attaché: zero, Mister President. I was understandably skeptical about that at first, but that rear admiral then gave me some stunning details about the weapons used by the French during that battle. Basically,

most of the Japanese heavy units were sunk by guided missiles fired from a few French warships, while much of the smaller Japanese ships were sunk by missiles, rockets or bombs launched from French aircraft. They in particular possess a heavy anti-ship missile with a range of sixty miles, a 3,300 pound warhead and a radar guidance system. They call that missile the 'MARTEL'. Here is a picture of one such missile, given to me by the French Naval Attaché, Mister President."

Pratt passed a color picture to Hoover, who examined it for a few seconds before passing it to his Secretary of War, Patrick J. Hurley.

"I must say that this missile does look very impressive, Admiral. However, do you really believe those fantastic claims from the French?"

"I do, Mister President! We already knew that French planes are way superior to any planes built by other countries, but we now must assume that the French Navy possesses a technological advance similar to the one their aviation enjoys. Furthermore, they can thank for that the same people who gave them their huge advance in aircraft design: Miss Tasha Lenoir and her friend, Johanna Kruger. The Lenoir Industries entered the shipbuilding business some eleven years ago and also developed a series of new naval weapons systems that now systematically equip most French warships."

Hoover let out a sigh of annoyance then.

"Her again? Well, we can discuss about her later, on another day. So, what can our fleet do to strike back at the Japanese, Admiral?"

"Despite not having the sophisticated weapons and electronics of the French fleet, we do have a powerful fleet of battleships that could be sent to pound Japanese coastal installations. If we could gain the support of the French Air Force to protect our ships from Japanese air attacks, then I say that we could really hurt the Japanese."

"Good! General MacArthur, what kind of Army force could we send to China, to help relieve our consulates and protect our remaining citizens in China?"

"We do have one infantry division that is close to full manning and that is based in the San Francisco area, while I could get a second division to be beefed up within a couple of weeks. However, I must caution that the present level of preparedness of our soldiers is quite low, due to numerous past budget cuts and restrictions on training activities and personnel manning. I also would need the support of the Navy to transport and land those troops in China, along with their supplies and combat equipment. To be

frank, we never attempted such a large movement of troops across an ocean before, Mister President.”

“Well, we will have to learn as we go, General. Admiral Pratt, what can the Marine Corps send quickly as reinforcements to China?”

“Uh, I am afraid that I would have only the equivalent of two regiments available for that task, Mister President, and they would have to be formed with sub-units pulled from many different regiments. As with the Army, Navy support would be essential to them. If I may, Mister President, I would strongly suggest that we coordinate our efforts with the French. French forces are well placed and equipped to help support our troops and ships around China and Japan, while I am sure that the French Army, which is relatively small, would not spit on getting the help of an additional 30,000 ground troops.”

“Hum, this may be hard on our national ego, but your suggestion makes a lot of sense, Admiral. Does anyone here have objections about coordinating our response with the French?”

Seeing that nobody around the coffee table seemed to have objections to that idea, Hoover then slapped one hand down on the table.

“Then, that’s what we will do! Liaise extensively with the French, but act and move quickly, gentlemen: the nation’s patience may be short-fused. Secretary Stimson, I intend to ask today to the Congress to declare war on Japan. Get our diplomatic staff out of Japan at once, then boot out the Japanese Ambassador and his whole staff.”

“Yes, Mister President!”

18:01 (Paris Time)

French bistro in the 7th Arrondissement

Paris, France

“SILENCE, GUYS! SILENCE! THIS COULD BE IMPORTANT!”

Quieted down by the shouted calls from one member of their group, which was sitting at a long table and drinking wine in their favorite local bistro, the Frenchmen twisted their necks to look at the large, flat screen color television set hooked on one of the walls of the establishment. They saw French Prime Minister Édouard Herriot in the process of taking place behind a lectern and adjusting his microphone. When he spoke, it was with a somber face and a solemn tone of voice.

"Citizens of France, the hour is grave. You must know by now that the forces of Japan committed yesterday in Shanghai unspeakable acts of atrocities and war crimes against thousands of French, American and European citizens, acts that could only be qualified as 'barbaric'. At the latest news, close to 2,000 French citizens were murdered by Japanese soldiers in the French Concession in Shanghai, along with over 9,000 non-Chinese citizens. 'Murdered' is in fact not enough of a word to qualify what happened in Shanghai, as many of the women and girls killed were raped first."

Angry and horrified exclamations went around the bistro's customers, who were now listening with religious attention as Herriot made a short pause for effect, then resumed speaking.

"Such crimes will not go unanswered or unpunished, that I promise you! We already struck the Japanese militarist leaders hard a few days ago, when our fleet bombarded a number of targets around Tokyo and in other locations in Japan. However, it seems that the Japanese Army leaders in China have not learned their lessons and think themselves safe from us because they still hold many Westerners as hostages. Well, they are wrong! We will get to them and will make them pay! The good news is that we will not be fighting alone from now on: we have received pledges of military support for our campaign in China and around Japan from the American, Australian, Belgian, British, Dutch and Soviet governments, pledges that we warmly accepted. The civilized World is now at war with Japan and the days of Japanese militarism are numbered. In view of this most welcome international support, I have decided that a full military mobilization is not necessary and that only a limited recall of selected reservists is in order, to fill critical positions in our military ranks. Those selected reservists will be notified in the next couple of days to come. You will understand that I will not say publicly this evening what our forces will do next, as we wish to preserve the element of surprise and keep the Japanese off balance. However, I promise you this: we will save our compatriots in China and we will destroy the Japanese military machine in such a thorough way that it will never rise again. Our brave soldiers, sailors and aviators will see to that. Pray for them and be proud of your country, my fellow citizens. VIVE LA FRANCE!"

"VIVE LA FRANCE!" shouted back many of the bistro customers, fired up by the call to patriotism, while raising their glasses high.

21:23 (California Time)

Thursday, August 4, 1932

Air France hangars, Los Angeles International Airport

Santa Monica, Los Angeles

California, U.S.A.

Rolling in a long column and coming from the main gate of the airport, two dozen military trucks stopped on the tarmac in front of two huge aircraft hangars in the maintenance area of Los Angeles International Airport. A big U.S. Marine Corps major then jumped down from the cab of the first truck and shouted at the top of his lungs, which were powerful indeed.

“ALRIGHT MEN, LET’S GET OUT OF THESE TRUCKS AND GET READY TO BOARD OUR PLANES. DON’T FORGET THE SPARE AMMUNITION!”

Some 432 men of the newly activated 2nd Battalion/4th Marine Regiment jumped out of their trucks and formed up quickly in twin files, each pair of marines holding the rope carrying handles of a wooden ammunition box containing either rifle rounds, loaded magazines for B.A.R. squad light machine guns, belted rounds for medium machine guns or hand grenades. With their Springfield 1903 caliber .30 bolt-action rifles or B.A.R. squad machine guns carried slung from their shoulders, along with a few Browning 1916 .30 caliber medium machine guns, the 432 marines then walked in cadence towards four waiting aircraft parked in front of the Air France hangars, where ground crew personnel were busy preparing the aircraft for departure. Despite their disciplined nature, the marines could not help hesitate and lose step at the sight of the aircraft waiting for them.

“My God! What are those things?” exclaimed one marine. His company commander, a tough-looking man with a barrel chest and a rather ugly face, was also taken by the aircraft.

“Don’t know, Marine, but we are going to fly Air France on this one and, from the looks of these aircraft, we will be traveling first class.”

Many marines grinned with appreciation when they saw the young and extremely attractive Air France stewardesses waiting with the other crewmembers of the planes near the opened forward left side doors. The battalion commander ran to the crew of the

first plane in line, where he saluted its pilot, a fairly small, mature man in his mid forties who was wearing a large moustache.

“Good evening, sir! I am Major Alexander Vandegrift, Commander of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment. I have a total of 432 men with me, plus four tons of ammunition.”

“And I am Adolphe Pégoud, pilot of this SUPER PÉGASE. Have you been briefed about our trip, Major?”

“Uh, I was told little, except to prepare my battalion in a hurry for a transfer to China, Mister Pégoud. Everything is moving incredibly fast, I must say.” Pégoud smiled at those words and pointed his plane behind him.

“Well, things are going to get even faster for you and your men, Major. You are going to travel to Clark Airfield, in the Philippines, in four SUPER PÉGASE supersonic airliners and our cruising speed will be 1,300 miles per hour, or twice the speed of sound.”

Vandegrift’s mouth opened wide under the shock of hearing that.

“But, that’s incredible! And where will we be refueling on the way? Hawaii? The Philippines are close to 7,500 miles from here.”

“There will be no refueling stop for us, Major: the SUPER PÉGASE routinely flies non-stop from Los Angeles to Australia, Manila and Hong Kong. It has in fact a range of 8,300 miles when cruising at Mach 2. It can also cruise at even higher speeds, up to a maximum cruise speed of Mach 3, or 2,000 miles per hour, but that then cuts the range of the plane down to 4,100 miles. Once at Clark Airfield, you will transfer to other, much slower planes that will fly your men to our aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE. The REDOUTABLE will be your actual base of operation for your mission into China.”

Vandegrift smiled on hearing about the REDOUTABLE: marines were well accustomed to serving on warships, something that was nearly second nature to them.

“Excellent! Well, we might as well load up now. Where do you want us to put our ammunition boxes?”

“In the central baggage compartment of our planes, along with your weapons and backpacks. Just make sure that all the weapons are unloaded before boarding the planes and that your men don’t walk around with grenades hooked to their pockets: one grenade dropped by accident would mean the loss of an aircraft.”

“I understand! I will now go split my battalion in four groups of equal size prior to boarding. It won’t take long.”

"We have ample time, Major. By the way, each of our four planes can seat up to 120 passengers."

Only then did Vandegrift notice the four medal ribbons sewn above the left chest pocket of Pégoud's uniform.

"You have the French Legion of Honor, Mister Pégoud? May I ask where and when you earned it?"

"You may." said proudly the French pilot. "I earned it as a fighter pilot in the First World War, along with the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille Militaire. I later earned the Honor Medal of Aeronautics for my accomplishments as a test pilot. You may however find out that five of the flight crew members for our four planes are also decorated war veterans. Marie Marvingt in particular has twice as many medals as me."

"One of your stewardesses is a decorated war veteran?"
Pégoud made a horrified face at those words.

"Don't tell Marie that she is a simple stewardess, Major: she will rip you to pieces for that! She pilots one of our four SUPER PÉGASE and flew over eighty war missions during World War One, plus flew countless humanitarian and rescue missions all around the World after the war. Now that she is approaching retirement age as a pilot, she has been assigned by Air France to its supersonic transpacific routes, which are considered by our crews as choice assignments."

"Wow! Decidedly, this mission is full of surprises and novelties. If you will excuse me, I will now go organize my men for boarding."

Forming his battalion in four groups of roughly the same sizes and making sure that all weapons were unloaded and made safe took Vandegrift about twenty minutes, after which he sent each group to board one of the four SUPER PÉGASE. To the pleasure of the marines, the young Air France stewardesses greeted them with big smiles aboard the planes and showed them where to store away their ammunition crates, weapons and backpacks. After a short conversation with Adolphe Pégoud in the cockpit of his plane, Vandegrift borrowed the use of the intercom for a moment to speak to his men, now seated in the very comfortable padded seats of the long and narrow single class cabin.

"Your attention please, men! We are about to depart for Clark Airfield, in the Philippines, where other planes will then fly us to a French aviation cruiser cruising off the Chinese coast. The trip to the Philippines will however be only about six hours long,

as the plane we are in will be cruising at a measly 1,300 miles per hour. The stewardesses will soon brief you on the safety rules and procedures concerning this aircraft. Listen carefully to them and don't argue or ignore them, or I will personally boot your ass up to the stratosphere. One of the rules aboard Air France planes is a complete ban on smoking. With such a short flight, I am sure that you will be able to show some patience in that matter. And don't go smoke inside the lavatories, or I will smoke your ass! One last thing: we will be served a late meal during the flight, courtesy of Air France. That meal includes one free alcoholic beverage. I know that the Prohibition is still in effect in the United States, but we are now technically on French territory, so I will allow you to have that drink, but only once: we are going to be possibly in combat within the next couple of days and I will need you fresh and alert. The seats you are using can recline for sleeping, so rest as much as possible before our arrival. That will be all."

Vandegrift then went to take his own seat near the front access doors, next to the commander of his Golf Company. Lewis 'Chesty' Puller had just been promoted to the rank of captain but the 34 year-old, barrel-chested junior officer was no beginner when it came to combat. In fact, Puller had already seen years of combat in both Haiti and Nicaragua and had earned the prestigious Navy Cross for bravery under fire. He had also served in the past as adjutant to Vandegrift while both had been in Haiti, so the battalion commander knew very well his company commander and had complete confidence in him. Puller gave him a questioning look as Vandegrift sat down in his seat.

"You were serious when you announced that this plane can do 1,300 miles per hour, sir?"

"I was, Chesty. Remember that the French are well know to dominate completely the aviation domain with their aircraft designs and their air weapons. I believe that this mission may teach us many valuable lessons about the tactical and strategic use of planes in war, so keep your ears and eyes wide open. Aaah, they are starting their engines now."

Effectively, a strong, high-pitched whine had just started and grew increasingly in loudness in the next seconds. Then, a second and a third engine started up. Soon, their plane, followed by the three other SUPER PÉGASE, was rolling towards one end of the airport's runway, following the taxiway connecting it to the hangars and main tarmac areas. After turning on the runway and stopping for a few seconds, the engine noise

then rose dramatically, while the SUPER PÉGASE strained on its brakes, like a wild animal on a leash. Their aircraft literally jumped forward when Pégoud released the brakes, pushing Vandegrift and the other marines deep against the back of their seats and making quite a few men yell in approval as they accelerated quickly along the runway. After only a few seconds of rolling, the nose of their plane pitched up sharply and they rose off the ground, climbing at an incredible rate that truly impressed Vandegrift.

“Wow! What a takeoff! This was fun! What do you think, Chesty?”

“Uh, I’m not sure, sir: this is the first time that I fly in a plane.”

Looking at Puller, Vandegrift was amused to see that the captain’s knuckles were white, as his hands gripped his armrests with all his strength.

“You will get used to it quickly enough. No need to worry: we are in very good hands with these Air France crews.”

The three stewardesses soon proved him right when they started serving a hot meal and drinks to the marines once they reached their cruising altitude and speed. The quality of the food, which had also been served in quite generous portions, proved worthy of a top restaurant, with Vandegrift and Puller devouring their beef bourguignon with both delight and gusto. All the marines were then treated after their meal with glasses of old scotch, with the head stewardess showing one of the bottles to Vandegrift while smiling warmly to him.

“These bottles of scotch are courtesy of Miss Tasha Lenoir, the owner of Air France, who wished to thank the United States for helping France in this war.”

“Bottles of Glenn Grant 24 year-old malt scotch? That must be the best scotch available in the World! Please transmit my thanks to Miss Lenoir for this, miss.”

“I will, sir.”

Taking a sip from his drink, Vandegrift closed his eyes in appreciation as the strong but smooth scotch went down his throat, its fumes filling his nostrils.

“It IS the best scotch in the World!”

Looking around him, he saw that his men were appreciating their scotch at least as much as he did. This mission was indeed starting on a good footing.

18:09 (Manila Time) / 03:09 (California Time)

Thursday, August 4, 1932 (Manila) / Friday, August 5, 1932 (California)

Lead SUPER PÉGASE, landing at Clark Airfield

Island of Luzon, Philippines

"My God! They told us the truth about how fast this plane is : we are now over Clark Airfield." said Vandegrift after looking at his watch. Lewis Puller, who was looking out and down through their window, pointed at the main tarmac of the airfield.

"Yeah, and look at that lineup of aircraft down there, sir: they sure ain't American!"

Bending sideways to look out, Vandegrift slowly nodded his head in comprehension at the sight of the sixteen strange aircraft, each sporting twin huge ducted propellers, lined up on the tarmac. Compared to them, the few American planes visible looked like primitive toys.

"They are probably the French planes which are due to fly us to the REDOUTABLE, Chesty. Decidedly, despite the short delays on this mission, the French seem to know what they are doing."

"That's definitely a good thing for us, sir, as we will utterly depend on their support for our mission."

An announcement by one of the stewardesses, using the plane's intercom, then cut him off.

"Your attention, please! We are now about to land at Clark Airfield, in the Philippines. The local time, which is the same as in Shanghai, is now 18:10, on Thursday, August Fourth."

All the marines who had watches immediately synchronized them to that new time, out of old military habit. Lewis Puller soon found out that, as unsettling as their takeoff had been for his nerves, the landing proved much more nerve-wracking for him. He finally blew air out and relaxed a bit once their plane was on the ground and had decelerated to near walking speed.

"Oof! I think that I will need a couple more flights to truly get accustomed to this, sir."

"Come on, Chesty! The food was great, the drinks were strong and the stewardesses were beautiful: what else could you ask for?"

"It's just being off the ground that unsettled me, sir. But I agree that it could have been much worse."

As their plane was taxiing towards the tarmac where the French aircraft were parked, Vandegrift saw that a large crowd of men wearing a variety of American uniforms was also on the tarmac, watching the four SUPER PÉGASE approach.

"Well, it seems that the whole personnel of this airfield has decided to come and take a look at us. I think that I will go make a public announcement before we disembark."

Rising from his seat, Vandegrift went forward to speak with the head stewardess.

"Miss, could I use your intercom for a moment?"

"Of course, Major! You want to talk to your men?"

"Yes, then I will need to communicate with my men in the three other planes, if that's possible."

"No problem, Major: I will switch you to the pilot, who will retransmit your message by radio to the other planes."

"Excellent! Thank you, miss!"

"You're welcome, Major."

Taking the handset of the intercom offered by the stewardess, Vandegrift turned towards the rear to face his men, then pressed the microphone switch.

"Your attention, please! We are about to disembark at Clark Airfield, where we will transfer to waiting French planes which will fly us to the aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE. There are presently dozens of American servicemen on the tarmac who appear quite curious about our present planes. I will thus remind you that our mission is secret and is not to be divulged to other persons not involved in this operation. If you are asked where we are going and why we are here, or what our mission is, clam up! I don't care if the one asking is an officer: he still is not entitled to learn about our mission. Remember: loose lips sink ships! If someone becomes too insistent, then direct them to me or to Captain Puller. Make sure that you don't forget anything behind when we will disembark: our nice stewardesses would probably not be happy if forgotten grenades start rolling down the aisle when they will fly away."

Laughter greeted his last remark as the head stewardess switched the intercom to the cockpit, allowing Vandegrift to speak with Adolphe Pégoud, who agreed to pass his message by radio to his other marines.

When Alexander Vandegrift walked down the forward airstairs door of his SUPER PÉGASE, a French military officer wearing a camouflage pattern combat uniform immediately stepped forward to greet him. Not knowing French military ranks but judging that the Frenchman must be of a rank at least equal to his own rank, Vandegrift decided to salute him, to which the newcomer saluted back before shaking his hand and speaking in a heavily accented English.

“Major Vandegrift? I am Lieutenant Colonel Maurice de Castrie, Commander of the First Battalion, Fifth Naval Infantry Regiment, presently stationed aboard the aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE. I came to help bring your battalion to our ship and to help install your unit aboard our cruiser.”

“That is much appreciated, Colonel de Castrie. Your ship keeps being referred to as an ‘aviation cruiser’, yet you came with sixteen big planes. How big is the REDOUTABLE?”

That question made de Castrie smile in amusement. However, when he answered Vandegrift, it was in a most serious tone of voice.

“The REDOUTABLE actually qualifies as a cruiser under the terms of the Washington Naval Treaty, displacing 9,960 tons standard and was originally armed with nine 194mm guns in three triple turrets. Those guns were replaced by twin 203mm turrets during a recent refit. However, its architecture is most unorthodox, being a trimaran ship, with three widely separated hulls linked together by a common top deck and side structures. The two side hulls each support a 240 meter-long flight deck, or 792 feet-long if you prefer. Two large aircraft hangars occupy the volume between the hulls and under the flight decks. At maximum displacement, with 44 aircraft aboard and with 2,000 tons of aviation fuel in its tanks, the REDOUTABLE tips the balance at close to 14,000 tons. It is a truly remarkable ship and I am proud of serving on it. I am sure that you will like it.”

“I already am impatient to see it, Colonel. May I ask about what kind of planes these birds are?”

“You may, Major. They are Blériot-Kruger SUPER COLIBRI ‘A’ assault transports, capable of taking off and landing vertically. They are heavily armed, can carry up to 34 fully equipped troops or a maximum payload of five tons and can reach a top speed of 800 kilometers per hour, or 500 miles per hour for you Americans.”

“Dear God! Any chances that the United States would be allowed to buy some of these babies after this?”

“You will have to ask that to Mister Blériot, Major. Are your men ready to board my planes? I must say that time is short: your consulate, like many others in Shanghai, has been under siege for a week now and the Japanese could decide to launch an all-out assault at any moment.”

“I will get them organized in a minute, Colonel.”

Vandegrift kept his promise, with his 432 marines all sitting inside the waiting SUPER COLIBRI in a matter of minutes, the ammunition crates they had been carrying piled along the centerline of the cargo cabins of the planes and then covered and fixed in place with cargo nets. Vandegrift avidly examined visually the inside of the cargo cabin of his plane, where he was sitting next to Colonel de Castrie. It was easily wide enough and high enough to accommodate a light truck. A large aft cargo ramp, along with two forward side doors, allowed for a quick exit when landing in a battle zone. The padded folding seat he was occupying along one side of the cargo cabin was certainly very comfortable, much more so than he had expected from a seat in a military plane. As the cargo ramp of his plane was rising and closing up, de Castrie spoke in his ear, in order to be heard over the engine noise.

“For your information, three planes arrived from France yesterday and are waiting for you and your men on the REDOUTABLE. They are technically civilian planes but they will be used by us in the Shanghai operation due to their unique capabilities. They also brought quite a few items of interest for your men, gifts from the Lenoir Industries Consortium.”

“Gifts? What kind of gifts, sir?”

“The kind that could save lives, Major: bullet-resistant vests and helmets, along with lightweight radios.”

That left Vandegrift quite surprised and confused.

“And to what do we owe those ‘gifts’, Colonel?”

“Consider them as a ‘thank you’ from Miss Tasha Lenoir, the owner of the Lenoir Industries Consortium, for the military support that the United States is providing to France in this war. A high-level representative of Miss Lenoir is waiting for you on the REDOUTABLE.”

De Castrie didn't say more then, although he could have, preferring to let that Lenoir representative speak with Vandegrift later on, aboard the REDOUTABLE. Their plane then started to roll, distracting Vandegrift from the conversation. The engine and propeller noise suddenly rose dramatically and the plane jumped ahead as if catapulted, forcing the marines to hold on with all their strength to the overhead, bus-like hanging straps in the cargo cabin, in order not to tumble out of their seats. The SUPER COLIBRI then started to climb at a vertiginous rate after only a very short roll on the ground of maybe 200 meters or less. While more than a few marines suddenly felt sick to their stomach, de Castrie grinned from ear to ear.

"I love those short takeoffs in a SUPER COLIBRI: they are fun!"

Vandegrift, who was swallowing bile, gave him a dubious look.

"If you say so, Colonel."

Thankfully for the marines, the rate of climb soon decreased and their flight became much more normal as they flew northward in the diminishing light of the setting Sun.

A bit over two hours later, an announcement by intercom from the pilot woke Vandegrift out of the nap he had been taking.

"Attention all hands: we are now on approach to the REDOUTABLE. We should land in about seven minutes."

Vandegrift couldn't help reflect on that out loud after looking at his watch.

"From takeoff in Los Angeles to landing on a ship off the Chinese coast, all in less than seven hours... The Commandant of the Marine Corps will never believe me."

"He better believe you, Major," said de Castrie in a serious tone, "as it is now the new reality of warfare... at least for France."

While said half in jest, that declaration left Vandegrift thinking about it. From what he had seen so far, the French forces seem to indeed be a breed apart from the rest of the planet, with highly advanced equipment and what appeared to be a new, forward-thinking military doctrine to go with its modern weapons. Compared to that, the United States forces could be justly said to be poorly equipped, with old equipment in too few numbers. The general level of training could be described as 'poor', as budgets for training had been barebones for years, while lowly paid soldiers and sailors were led by a geriatric officers corps where seniority rather than merit ruled promotions. Vandegrift then decided that he was going to use this mission to the utmost to learn as much as possible about modern warfare, so that he could later write a comprehensive report

destined for the Corps Commandant. With luck, that report was going to raise true interest, rather than being dismissed out of hand, like what happened to too many reports in Washington these days.

His plane soon slowed down to a near crawl, making evident to Vandegrift that it was going to land at the vertical or near vertical. It did land vertically a minute later on the forward half of the left side flight deck, to then roll forward a bit and turn sharply to the right, passing in front of the forward-most 203mm twin gun turret and then turning right to go down the right side flight deck, which was already half-filled with parked aircraft. Some eighty meters down that flight deck, Vandegrift's plane lined itself up with a parking spot and stopped, with the whining noise of its engines gradually shutting down. The cargo master of the SUPER COLIBRI 'A' soon lowered the rear cargo ramp, revealing the dark flight deck and superstructures of the REDOUTABLE, which was obviously under night blackout rules at this time. The crewmembers moving around the flight deck used small red filtered lamps attached to their foreheads by a kind of bandanna, as the absence of the Moon made the night pitch black. Getting up from his seat, Vandegrift looked at de Castrie, who was also getting up.

"I will need you to show me where we can store safely our ammunition, Colonel."

"No problem, Major: I have men standing ready to guide and help you around this ship. You may find that the architecture of the REDOUTABLE has little in common with that of a traditional aircraft carrier, since it is a multihull ship."

"About that, could you tell me who decided to build such multihull warships for your navy, Colonel? From what I heard, you seem to have adopted fully this concept, which is downright revolutionary for warships."

"Well, we do have a Navy Chief of Staff who is a top engineer himself and who believes in new technologies, but I suppose that the Kruger Marine Shipyards, which built this aviation cruiser, has the biggest hand in this new trend. Their shipyard, near Marseille on the Mediterranean coast, specializes in designing and building multihull ships, and that up to the truly gargantuan size. They also built our fleet flagship, the aircraft carrier GLOIRE, along with six sister ships of the REDOUTABLE. Aah, I believe that Captain de Valmont came down from the bridge to greet you and your men."

Looking out of the rear of the plane, Vandegrift effectively saw a group of three men waiting near the foot of the aft cargo ramp. What they were wearing however intrigued

him. They appeared to be blue and orange colored, loose-fitting sorts of coverall with hoods

“Uh, what kind of uniforms are they wearing, Colonel? They look a bit strange to me.”

“We call those ‘Sea Combat Survival Suits’, but our men often call them ‘Penguin Suits’. Don’t get that nickname wrong, though: the men appreciate those suits a lot, since they greatly boost their chances of surviving battle damage or even a sinking. They are fire resistant, waterproof and help their wearers survive for up to four hour in icy waters, while making them float effortlessly. They also come with a breathing mask and a small air bottle that the men can use to get safely out of a smoke-filled compartment. They actually cost quite a lot but, in my opinion, it was money well spent. Come: I will present you to my captain.”

Walking side by side with de Castrie down the 2.4 meter-wide cargo cabin and ramp, both men came to attention and saluted in front of Captain de Valmont, who returned their salute.

“Captain, I present you Major Alexander Vandegrift, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Regiment of the U.S. Marine Corps.”

“Welcome aboard the REDOUTABLE, Major Vandegrift.” replied Valmont, who was much smaller than the big, beefy Vandegrift. While his English was fair, his accent could be described as ‘atrocious’. “How many men do you have with you?”

“With me counted in, my battalion has 433 men, sir. We also brought with us four tons of ammunition crates.”

“My men will take care of storing this ammunition away at once, Major. Your men will only need to pile their crates on the eight wooden cargo pallets that you can see lined up against the superstructures. I understand that you and your men have traveled a long way and crossed many time zones today and you must be quite tired by now. We will thus guide you and your men to your quarters right away. The rest can wait for tomorrow morning, when we will discuss our plan to assault Shanghai. Colonel de Castrie, I will leave you in charge of our American guests.”

“Yes, Captain!”

De Valmont then turned around and left after a last exchange of salutes, leaving de Castrie and two of the ship’s junior officers alone with Vandegrift. The latter could hear a Frenchman shout directives in English to the marines, telling them where they could drop their ammunition crates. That process took all of four minutes, after which de

Castrie led Vandegrift and his marines inside the forward superstructures of the ship, using a watertight steel door. The French naval infantry commander spoke out loud in English as he guided the marines down a series of passageways and inclined ladders, trying to be heard by as many of the marines as possible.

“We are now going down to the aft part of the Upper Deck, where the accommodations for embarked soldiers are. It is the level directly under the flight deck and over the aircraft hangars. My battalion is already lodged on that deck.”

“I hope that our coming will not force your men to squeeze themselves too much, Colonel.”

Vandegrift’s comment somehow made de Castrie smile.

“Do not worry about that, Major: there is plenty of room aboard the REDOUTABLE, due to its multihull design, which provides a lot more usable internal volume than on more conventional warships. In fact, the REDOUTABLE has facilities for a complete regiment of up to 1,800 men, lodged in great comfort.”

Those words made Vandegrift stop cold on its track, out of surprise and disbelief.

“Wait! You are telling me that a 10,000 ton cruiser, on top of housing and operating dozens of planes, can also carry a whole regiment? How can that be possible, unless France cheated when declaring its Washington displacement as being only 10,000 tons?”

“France didn’t lie about this ship’s displacement, Major: the Kruger Marine Shipyards simply accomplished miracles when designing and building this cruiser. Don’t forget that much of this ship is made of large empty volumes, like the aircraft hangars, which take a lot of internal volume but weigh basically nothing. We also have large holds used as garages for our combat vehicles and as magazines for aircraft ordnance or fuel for the ship and its aircraft. While the Washington displacement of the REDOUTABLE is really just below 10,000 tons, its full load displacement goes up to a whopping 15,000 tons, when fully fuelled and with troops and army equipment aboard. As for the accommodations for your battalion, I am certain that you will find them more than adequate.”

Vandegrift soon had to agree with de Castrie on that last point, when they arrived in the facilities reserved for embarked troops, with de Castrie then starting to describe them.

"We are now on the Upper Deck and inside the Second Battalion Lines. You will find on this deck facilities for two other infantry battalions, plus space for a regimental staff. Each battalion sector is subdivided in company and platoon blocks, with each block containing both sleeping and washing facilities for its occupants. Contrary to what is still the norm in most other ships, we use double bunks instead of triple or quadruple bunks and each sailor or soldier has his own individual storage locker, plus one of the two large drawers at the base of each double bunk. Let me show you a standard platoon block while we start assigning spaces to your men."

First taking out of a pocket a notepad and a pen, the French officer led the marines down a two meter-wide passageway before turning left into another large passageway. There, he stopped first near a large storage cage enclosed by mesh steel wire.

"We have just entered one of the three company blocks of the Second Battalion Lines, which each consist of three platoon blocks and one company level command and support block. You may now assign one of your companies to this 'A' block, Major."

"Very well: I will assign this block to Captain Puller's Golf Company."

De Castrie noted that down in his notepad, then showed a door to their left.

"This is the door to the company officers cabins. That section contains two cabins for junior officers, each with a double bunk bed, plus an officers' washroom and a company commander's cabin with a single captain's bed. To our right is a squad room with six double bunk beds, to be used by one of your heavy weapons squads. Next, we will visit one of the three platoon blocks lining this passageway. As you can see, those facilities were designed to keep together the various embarked units and sub-units, with their respective commanders close to their troops. But first, we will let Captain Puller and his platoon commanders drop their packs in their respective cabins."

On a nod from Vandegrift, Lewis Puller and three lieutenants entered the company officers' section, with a curious Vandegrift following close behind. What they saw floored them, with Puller in particular being quite impressed by his quarters, which covered eleven square meters of floor surface and included a full-sized work desk and chair, a padded easy chair, two storage steel lockers and a captain's bed. There was also a lockable weapons storage locker on one wall.

"My God! This is fit for a king!"

"Wait till you see the accommodations for your troopers, Captain." said de Castrie with a smile. Spurred on by that declaration, Puller quickly dropped his backpack and kit bag at the foot of his bed and followed de Castrie and Vandegrift out of

the officers' section, going to the adjacent platoon block, which consisted of three rifle squad sections and one communal washroom and shower section. The marines of the first squad designated by Puller to occupy the squad section they visited were left with mouths opened ajar: six double bunk beds, twelve individual storage lockers and a long weapons storage rack shared the space with a small desk and chair, one easy chair and a large, round table with eight fixed stools around it.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed a corporal as he surveyed the room. "When I think that I had only one stretcher out of a three-high stack and nothing else on the last troopship I was in a year ago."

"You will find that your bunk by itself includes an intimacy curtain, a small reading lamp and a small storage tablet, Corporal." said de Castrie, prompting the marine to go look at one of the bunk beds. "Out of this squad section, we will find along the platoon assembly area a small room with two double bunks, reserved for the platoon NCOs, plus two other squad sections and a washroom section with sinks, toilets, showers and a general washing area, plus an ironing board and iron."

"Damn! I can't wait to see my own quarters, Colonel." said Vandegrift, utterly impressed by all this. "Are all your ships this comfortable, Colonel?"

"Oh no! Compared to older ships, which are still in a large majority in our fleet, the REDOUTABLE is a floating palace and is a prized assignment for both sailors, officers and naval infantrymen. However, all our new ship constructions now vie for this standard, especially if they are of multihull design. Some admirals at first screamed about what they saw as an 'unbelievable waste of space', but the improvements in crew morale and efficiency caused by these better accommodations quickly proved them wrong. The reenlistment and retention rates also shot up, saving us a lot of money and time in crew training and also raising the level of collective experience of our crews."

Vandegrift slowly shook his head at that.

"Decidedly, I will have to report on all this to the Corps Commandant after this operation. Talking of the operation, when will we be able to discuss it, Colonel?"

"Tomorrow morning, after breakfast. My junior officers will now guide the rest of your marines to their respective quarters, while I will lead you to your own cabin."

"I am dying to see it, Colonel."

Vandegrift was not disappointed one bit when he entered the cabin assigned to him within the Second Battalion Lines: it measured four meters by four meters and would

have been worthy of a cruiser captain. The cabins for the senior officers of the battalion staff were only slightly less posh. As the marine officers were walking out in the passageway, one captain suddenly jerked his head around and exclaimed himself out loud.

“HEY, I JUST SAW TWO WOMEN WALK BY AT THE NEXT PASSAGEWAY INTERSECTION!”

“Come on, Allen!” replied Vandegrift. “Women, on a warship in combat operations? You must be hallucinating out of fatigue after our long trip.”

“Uh, he is actually correct, Major.” said de Castrie. “We presently have twelve female aviators from Blériot-Kruger who arrived aboard earlier today in three pre-series prototypes which will be used in our operation in China. Those prototypes have a larger troop capacity than our present SUPER COLIBRIS and are also faster, being jet aircraft. Those women also brought a few items of equipment that could prove crucial for your men in combat, once on the ground in China. However, all that will be explained in detail tomorrow morning, when you will be able to meet these female aviators.”

“If you say so, Colonel.” replied Vandegrift, more than a little skeptical about the notion of having women around during a combat operation.



French soldiers engaged in street fighting.

CHAPTER 9 – OPERATION ‘SAFEGUARD’

09:04 (China Time)

Friday, August 5, 1932

Naval infantry command center, Upper Deck

French aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE

Off the Chinese coast, Eastern China Sea

Led by one of the French junior officers provided to his battalion as interpreters and guides, Alexander Vandegrift, his company commanders and senior command staff officers went to the onboard command center of the French naval infantry after breakfast, expecting to be briefed about the French plan to land troops in Shanghai’s International Settlement and French Concession. What they didn’t expect was to see six women as part of the crowd of French officers standing around the big map table of the command center. All of them appeared to be mature women in their forties or fifties and one was a tall black woman with coffee-colored skin and short brown hair cut at the neck. Vandegrift then remembered what de Castrie had told him yesterday about the three civilian transport aircraft sent to help in the oncoming operation. Still skeptical about those women, he however didn’t remark about them and took place with his

marine officers around the map table, opposite Captain Robert de Valmont and Lieutenant Colonel Maurice de Castrie. A number of French officers, either aviators or naval infantrymen, also stood around the map table, with the six women lined on one side to the right of Vandegrift. Throwing a discreet look at the women, Vandegrift was shocked to see that all of them had multiple medal ribbons sewn on their aviators' coveralls, while one wore a Belgian Air Force flight suit with the rank shoulder pads of a major. Now thoroughly unsettled, he had to force himself to pay attention to Captain de Valmont, who was now speaking in English.

"Welcome to this command briefing, Major Vandegrift. Be assured that the help and military support provided to us by the United States in this war has been most welcomed by France."

"And France can be assured of the United States' complete support in this war, Captain de Valmont. Know that a strong naval task force is being prepared and will soon sail towards Japanese waters to support your fleet."

"That naval task force will be most appreciated, Major, as this coming operation is only one small part of this war, which has as a final goal to break forever the power of the Japanese militarists who caused this war by their greed for power and conquests. We on the REDOUTABLE will be only the first blow against the Japanese in China and this operation will concentrate on saving our citizens who have survived to date the Japanese atrocities in Shanghai. I will now give the floor to Colonel de Castrie, who will direct this operation. Colonel..."

De Castrie nodded his head once, then started speaking, also using English.

"Thank you, Captain! Since most of the people around this map table either speak or understand English, we will thus conduct this briefing in English, for the benefit of our friends from the United States Marine Corps."

Vandegrift nodded approvingly at that, having been a bit worried about problems of miscommunication between his men and the French. What probably had helped a lot in this was the fact that English was the international communication language of aviators around the World, while Europeans were recognized to be in general more fluent in foreign languages than the typical American. Also, he himself and some of his officers could understand French to varying degrees, having previously served for months or even years in Haiti, which had now been under American military occupation for about 35 years. Still, de Castrie used the services of one of the junior officers loaned as guides to the marines to translate in French at intervals what was being said in English,

pausing frequently and long enough to allow the translating to be done. His first move was to have copies of air photo maps distributed around the table.

“What you are getting now, ladies and gentlemen, are air photo maps of various parts of Shanghai, the results of a number of air photo reconnaissance missions effected during the last two days by some of the TRIDENT jet fighter-bombers based on this ship. They are yours to keep and use for this operation. We will also distribute later on printed maps of Shanghai and of its surrounding area. Since we had until recently people in Shanghai actively engaged in keeping those maps current, I can assure you that those maps are still accurate and most relevant. Our reconnaissance planes concentrated their attention on the zones of the International Settlement and of the French Concession, plus the areas of Shanghai adjacent to them. They also looked for signs of Japanese troop deployment in those zones. Thankfully, a number of consulates in the International Settlement, while under Japanese siege, are still transmitting reports on their respective situations, reports that their governments were kind enough to pass on to France on receipt. You will be relieved to know that the American consulate, at the Kalee Hotel, is still sending periodic reports via its radio equipment.”

“That is certainly good news, Colonel.” replied Vandegrift, feeling relief at that news. “What is the present situation at the American consulate? Is it surrounded by Japanese troops?”

“There are a few Japanese troops blocking the access to your consulate, but the bulk of the Japanese forces in Shanghai are busy hunting for any French citizens they could find. Major Huntsman and a platoon of marines are defending the American consulate, but their reserves of both food and ammunition are getting dangerously low. They also have to care for over 300 American citizens who took refuge in the consulate at the start of the Japanese onslaught. They certainly could use a hand...and they will get it, Major. Substantial troop reinforcements have been arriving by air in Hanoi during the last few days and we are now ready to make our first move against the Japanese in Shanghai. Furthermore, we in the REDOUTABLE will make that first move in Shanghai.”

Grabbing a long, wooden pointer stick, de Castrie then used it to point in succession at a few marked locations on the air photo map of downtown Shanghai.

“Our first priority will be of course to force the Japanese to lift their siege of the various consulates in the International Settlement and French Concession and to throw the Japanese out of downtown Shanghai, in order to rescue the foreign citizens trapped

inside the city. To do so, we will land troops and vehicles at four distinct locations: the American consulate in the Kalee Hotel, the riverfront promenade on the 'Bund'⁷, the boat ramps and wharves on the Whangpoo River near the French consulate and the campus grounds of the Shanghai American School. Unfortunately, it is too late already for the students and staff of the American School: the Japanese massacred them on the first day of killings and raped and murdered the teenage girls studying there. However, the wide grounds of the school's sports field and track oval will constitute for us an ideal place to land our planes there."

Vandegrift and the marine officers present grimly nodded at that last sentence by de Castrie: they already knew about the massacre and mass rapes at the American School, something that had firmly decided them to have a policy of 'no mercy' towards the Japanese troops they would encounter in Shanghai. De Castrie then pointed back at the area of the Bund and its seafront promenade.

"The first troops to land in Shanghai will be the men of my naval infantry battalion, who will travel to Shanghai by landing craft, sailing up the mouth of the Yangtse River, then turning onto the Whangpoo River. We will use the boat ramps and wharves near the French consulate to unload our tracked armored amphibians from our LCTs⁸ and then drive up and down the Bund. Nearly simultaneously, eighteen of our SUPER COLIBRI 'A' assault transports will land at the vertical along the Bund's promenade and will unload one company from my naval infantry battalion, which will have light trucks, plus one of your companies, Major Vandegrift. Their job will be to secure the Bund, chase the Japanese from that zone and then start advancing westward to free the foreign installations and grounds in the International Settlement. Also, at the same time, the three COBRA 'C' of Miss Clarkson will land at the vertical just beside the American consulate, in order to drop off one company of marines, which will then reinforce the defenders of the consulate. Finally, the remaining six SUPER COLIBRI 'A' based on this ship will land on the campus grounds of the Shanghai American School, in order to drop a marine company that will then secure the grounds and prepare it for the incoming planes of our second assault wave, which will arrive from Hanoi some thirty

⁷ The Bund : Name given to the popular riverfront promenade in downtown Shanghai. The Bund was lined with foreign consulates, banks and trading companies.

⁸ LCT : Landing Craft Tank. Military designation for landing craft designed to carry tanks and heavy vehicles.

minutes after our first landings. H-Hour is set for 15:00 hours this afternoon, so we will have to move fast from now on. During our landings, the SUPER FRELON strike aircraft from the REDOUTABLE will fly as a protective cover and will provide close air support on call. Yes, Major Vandegrift?”

“Uh, I don’t want to sound picky, but why use civilian planes for such a dangerous operation?”

De Castrie, who had expected that question, pointed at the tall black woman standing with five other women around the map table.

“Because they are of an advanced design still not in service with French forces, Major. However, Miss Lenoir, the owner and founder of both Air France and of the Lenoir Industries Consortium, graciously offered the use of the three existing pre-series prototypes of the Blériot-Kruger COBRA ‘C’ VTOL transport, which are much faster than our present SUPER COLIBRI assault transport, can carry more troops and can land in smaller, more restricted landing zones, all things that make them perfect to land troops just beside the American consulate, which is not located directly in front of the open expanse of the Bund. If you were worried about being piloted by civilian aircrews, then you can relax: all of these ladies are decorated war veterans who flew combat missions during World War One, while two of them, Miss Terry Clarkson and Major Hélène Dutrieu, are recipients of the Légion d’Honneur. By the way, Major Dutrieu is a reserve officer of the Belgian Air Force and will carry in her plane, along with one of your platoons of marines, a reinforced rifle squad of the Belgian Army, which she will drop at the Belgian consulate after landing your marines at the Kalee Hotel. Another reason for their presence here is that they brought some gifts for your marines, courtesy of Miss Lenoir. Those consist of stocks of armored vests and helmets, advanced portable radios, some automatic weapons and twelve light all-terrain vehicles that will give your marines some mobility on the ground. All of those equipments are already in French Army use, by the way, and we have the spares to maintain and repair them if needed. Miss Clarkson will brief you further on those things after this meeting.”

“Very well, Colonel. We will gladly accept that extra materiel, as we came rather bare bones and in a hurry from the United States. Talking of materiel, your ‘LCTs’ and armored amphibians are new concepts to me and the Marine Corps and I am really curious about them. I would thus like to be able to have one of my officers accompany your battalion, in order to observe your equipment and tactics in action.”

"I see no problems with that, Major Vandegrift. If you will designate one of your officers, I will then have him introduced to our amphibious equipment and will bring him with me on my own tracked amphibian. As for your marines who will land by air, I have planned a short familiarity training session for eleven o'clock this morning, to show them how to board and unload safely from our assault transports. Please have your three rifle companies on the forward part of the starboard landing strip for eleven, ready for that training."

"They will be there, Colonel." assured Vandegrift, feeling better by the minute about this mission. The truth was that the concept of 'landing craft' and 'armored amphibians' was totally unknown to the U.S. Marine Corps, which still used only rowboats or motor launches to effect landings on a hostile shore. Furthermore, marines who landed on a hostile beach did so with no heavy equipment at all, as they would have to wait for a port to be taken before transport ships could dock and unload vehicles, heavy weapons...and horses. As for this business of 'vertical air landings', it was also a totally new concept for him. Overall, this operation had the potential to teach a lot of precious lessons to the Marine Corps and Vandegrift was firmly resolved to learn as much as possible about French amphibious tactics and equipment, so that he could later submit a full report to the Corps Commandant, Major General Hebard Fuller.

The briefing turned out to be a rather short one, ending less than ten minutes later and freeing the various officers to go prepare their troops and equipment. After assigning his battalion's second-in-command, Captain Gerald Thomas, to follow Lieutenant Colonel de Castrie during his sea assault, Vandegrift went to meet the six women present in the room, exchanging salutes with H el ene Dutrieu before shaking the hands of the women.

"Thank you for volunteering to support my marines on this operation, ladies. You will have to pass my appreciation for this support to Miss Lenoir on your return to France."

"It is a pleasure to help support your marines, Major. My name is Terry Clarkson, chief test pilot at Bl eriot-Kruger, and my companions are Major H el ene Dutrieu, Beatrix de Rijk, Jeanne Herveu, H el ene de Plagino and Louise Besson." replied the tall black woman, who appeared at once to be the leader of the group of women, despite the presence of Major Dutrieu. That somewhat surprised Vandegrift: a civilian leading over a commissioned officer? Also, as a born Virginian, the notion of a black

woman in a combat leadership position certainly felt wrong to him. He however didn't remark on that as the black woman continued.

"May I ask first what kind of weapons your troops brought with them, Major? We may be able to garnish your arsenal a bit with some weapons we brought with us."

"Basically, the main individual weapon in my battalion is the Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifle in .30 caliber, while my squad leaders, typically corporals or sergeants, carry Thompson Model 1928 .45 caliber submachine guns. We also have a number of B.A.R. .30 caliber light machine guns and Browning M1919 .30 caliber medium machine guns. As for me and my officers, along with my machine gunners, we carry Colt 1911 .45 caliber pistols as personal weapons. We brought as well a few crates of fragmentation grenades."

"Hum..." said Terry Clarkson, apparently not impressed one bit. "While it would be a bit late to fully rearm your battalion, I can propose to you a few compact and light submachine guns to boost the firepower of your officers and machine gunners...if you are interested, of course."

"What do you have precisely, Miss Clarkson?" asked Vandegrift, out of pure curiosity. In response, she grabbed a compact weapon she was wearing from a shoulder via a sling and quickly unloaded it before presenting it to Vandegrift, who took it and started examining it with intense interest.

"This is a SC-1 submachine gun, chambered in 7.63 X 25 millimeters caliber. However, the extra SC-1s we brought for your men are a variant chambered for your .45 ACP pistol round. It weighs less than five pounds, compared to the ten pounds of your Thompson M1928, and is barely more than half its length when its stock is folded. It is fed by a thirty-round box magazine placed behind the pistol grip in a fashion called 'bullpup configuration', which makes it even handier and more compact to carry and use. Due to its twelve inch-long barrel, its muzzle velocity is 300 meters per second in .45 caliber variant, or 990 feet per second if you prefer. The standard model in 7.63 X 25 mm has an even higher muzzle velocity of 1,580 feet per second, which gives its bullets very substantial stopping and penetration powers. This weapon has been a standard weapon with the French forces for over a decade now and has proved very reliable in jungles, deserts and Winter environments."

Making sure first that the submachine gun had been properly unloaded and made safe, Vandegrift then tried its trigger pull and bolt catch before looking through the top sights, ending up quite impressed with its design.

"A really nice weapon, Miss Clarkson. Which company produces it?"

"Mine!" was her answer, making Vandegrift snap his head up to look at her. "I own the 'Clarkson Armaments' company and am a qualified weapons systems engineer. I designed this weapon, along with most of the modern individual weapons now used by the French Army, Navy and Air Force."

That had the effect of making Vandegrift reevaluate quickly his first impressions about Clarkson: a black woman who was both the chief test pilot at Blériot-Kruger, arguably the most advanced aircraft manufacturer in the World at the moment, and the owner of a firearms plant, was certainly someone worth paying attention to. There was also the business of the triple row of medal ribbons sewn over the left chest pocket of her flight suit, medals which included the French Légion d'Honneur in Commander's Grade.

"Miss, if you are really ready to offer this weapon to my men, then I will be happy to grab sixty of those SC-1s in .45 caliber. Do you have that many with you on this ship?"

"I have in fact plenty to spare with me, Major. Apart from weapons, we also brought compact lightweight radios, armored vests and helmets and twelve light all-terrain vehicles, all intended for your battalion. One last point about all that equipment: they are now yours and the property of the U.S. Marine Corps, as gifts from Miss Tasha Lenoir, my close friend and employer. Consider them as a goodwill gesture from France to thank the United States for its support in this war."

That brought a grin on the faces of Vandegrift and of his officers.

"Such gifts are most welcome, Miss Clarkson. When would you like to start distributing your radios, helmets, vests and submachine guns?"

"How about right now, before your men go train on the flight deck to familiarize themselves with our planes?"

"That sounds fine with me, miss."

Leaving together the command center, Terry let time for Vandegrift and his officers to collect all their marines, then led them to the large compartment housing the quartermaster section of the French naval infantry unit. There, she showed a row of boxes piled to one side and three sets of armored vests and helmets lined up on the service counter, along with SC-1 submachine guns and a number of surprisingly small radio sets.

"We will start with the distribution and fitting of helmets and armored vests. Those come in three basic sizes: small, medium and large. In view of the average size of American men, I also added a few extra-large size outfits to the lot. If you will have your men lined up in single file in the passageway, we will start outfitting them one by one by making them try demonstration models first, then giving them one set of the correct size. Your officers and machine gunners will then be able to grab a SC-1, along with spare magazines, cleaning tools sets and magazines pouches. Since I don't know about your precise battalion radio net diagram, I will let you decide who gets what kind of radio."

"Well, that last part should be easy enough." replied with a smirk Vandegrift. "The only radios we normally have in the Marine Corps are at company level and up, and those sets are not exactly portable. For the rest, we mostly use field telephones and lots of loud shouting."

His answer made in turn Terry smile in amusement.

"In that case, indulge yourself fully, Major Vandegrift: we have pocket-sized radios with light headsets suitable for squad and platoon communications, plus light backpack radios for company and battalion communications. By the way, the same models of radios are in service with French forces, so you will be able to communicate with your French naval infantry comrades without problems, something that may prove crucial in this operation. Be aware that French close support aircraft have radios compatible with those ground radios, so you will be able to communicate with them if you ever end up in a jam."

"Excellent! Then, let's start this show."

Vandegrift was the first to go through the distribution process and was pleasantly surprised at how light and comfortable the armored vests and helmets proved to be. A small but nice touch was the fact that the helmets had miniature American flags painted on their front, while detachable American flags and U.S. Marine Corps insignias were attached to the vests. With new water bottles, ammunition pouches and cargo pouches coming with the vests, they basically replaced completely the rather limited web gear used up to now by the marines, with the long bayonet for their Springfield 1903 the only original item left. From there, the process went on with commendable speed, with a number of French supply clerks helping with the distribution and fitting process. The whole thing took less than fifty minutes, at the end of which three days' worth of field

rations were distributed to each marine before they were sent back to their respective squad rooms in order to go store away their old web gear. From there, they regrouped and went up to the starboard flight deck, which was half packed with parked aircraft. The marines were just in time to watch a TRIDENT jet fighter-bomber land on the port side flight deck, its tail hook catching one of the arresting wires and then stopping well before the end of the 240 meter-long flight deck. The commander of Foxtrot Company, Captain Merritt Edson, who was a qualified naval aviator, looked on with envy.

“Damn! If only I could pilot such a plane...”

Looking away with difficulty from the jet fighter-bomber, Edson then followed his battalion commander towards the bow end of the starboard side flight deck. There, close to one of the two huge aircraft elevators of the REDOUTABLE, were parked twelve small wheeled vehicles of rather unusual design. For one, they had six wheels attached to three evenly spaced axles. Second, their chassis had a very generous ground clearance of close to fifty centimeters. To top the cake, they all had a large, shrouded propeller with rudder at the back. The marines were still scratching their heads at that when Terry Clarkson spoke up, nearly shouting to be heard above the noise of the various flight deck activities.

“Please listen up, gentlemen! What you see here are twelve Kruger COCCINELLE all-terrain vehicles, also known as ‘The Bug’. These light all-purpose vehicles are fully amphibious and have six permanently engaged, large low pressure tires that give them a very low ground pressure, thus making them able to drive in mud, snow and sand. Its 73 horsepower engine can also be connected to the large shrouded propeller at the rear, which propels the COCCINELLE at speeds of up to eleven knots, while the top road speed is 56 miles per hour. It is steered via differential steering, like a bulldozer, and uses an automatic, four-speed transmission. While its chassis and frame are made of steel, the body is made of Durex polymer, an extremely tough plastic that is also lightweight and makes this vehicle basically bullet-proof. The windows are also made of Durex so, when the windows are rolled up, the occupants enjoy good protection all around, except for the top, which has only a flexible, accordion-like plastic roof sheeting that slides along rails fixed to the anti-roll bars of the vehicle. The vehicle can safely swim with six men inside, or while carrying up to 3,000 pounds of cargo. While it is not armed in its basic form, a variety of machine guns can be adapted to it. You may be interested to learn that, apart from equipping on a large scale French military units, its civilian variant is also on public sale in France and in the rest of Europe, where hunters,

prospectors and other people traveling in the wild positively love the Bug. Those twelve COCCINELLEs now belong to your battalion and will help give you some precious mobility once on the ground in Shanghai. I will now ask Major Vandegrift to designate twelve or more marines who will be driving those in Shanghai, so that I could then give them a short training period on them. The rest of you may take rides as passengers if you wish so, but try not to get in the way of flight deck operations while watching the driver training. Major Vandegrift...”

Vandegrift, quite happy at this latest gift, promptly stepped forward and designated 28 selected marines for driver and maintenance training before making the rest of his battalion sit a bit off the starboard flight deck, in a corner formed by the low bow superstructures of the centerline hull, where they would not run the risk of being in the way of either aircraft or circulating flight deck support vehicles, which actually included a few COCCINELLEs. After some twenty minutes spent giving a quick instruction period on the maintenance and operation of the COCCINELLE, Terry then got in one of the vehicles with a first marine driver, with Vandegrift and Captain Puller joining in as passengers. Even though Terry made sure that the marine driver didn't drive too fast and stayed well within a safe, unoccupied zone of the flight deck, that driver and his two officers had true fun with the ATV, ending up doing 'donuts', on-the-spot turns and short speed dashes and occasionally yelling in delight as if he was on a horse in a rodeo. Thankfully, no accidents or mishaps happened during the one hour taken by the practical driver's training, something that greatly relieved Terry, who had been afraid that an over-enthusiastic marine would drive the ATV off the flight deck and into the ocean, some 19.5 meters below the deck.

By the time that the driver training was completed, it was time for the marines to get familiarized on how to safely embark and disembark from the two types of aircraft they were going to ride in today: the CONDOR 'C' and the SUPER COLIBRI 'A'. That training was actually completed much faster than the driver training, allowing the marines to go have an early lunch before preparing for combat in China. The one marine not to eat with the battalion was Captain Gerald Thomas, the deputy commander of the unit, who had to depart before lunch with the bulk of the ship's naval infantry battalion in the four LCTs of the REDOUTABLE. Those thirty meter-long landing craft slowly backed out of their floodable dry docks at the stern of the three hulls of the cruiser, then turned west and picked up speed towards the Chinese coast, some 150

kilometers away. A light rain was starting to fall, while the wind was picking up, as Alexander Vandegrift watched the four LCTs disappear in the distance.

“Good luck, Gerald. We will be right behind you.”

14:46 (China Time)

Leading LCT-1, on approach to the ‘Bund’ riverfront promenade

Whangpoo River, downtown Shanghai

Republic of China (occupied)

Captain Gerald Thomas couldn’t help flinch a bit when a series of ‘plink’ signaled the first bullet impacts against the armored deck house of the landing craft he was riding in with Lieutenant Colonel de Castrie. Thankfully, the whole landing craft was proof against rifle and light machine gun fire, or so he had been told. He was no green soldier, having fought Caco bandits in Haiti for years, but he had a healthy respect for the possible effects of incoming bullets, having seen too many men wounded or killed around him in the past. One other thing that he had learned over the course of five years of cumulative service in Haiti was a decent French, something that was now turning out to be quite practical for him. Turning his head to look at de Castrie, who was standing with him behind the wheelman of the landing craft, he pointed to him the nearly empty Whangpoo River, in which only a few small boats were navigating.

“How come we haven’t met yet at least one Japanese warship on the Whangpoo River, Colonel?”

“That’s because they were all sunk in the past few days by our planes, which have concentrated their firepower on any Japanese ship or recognizable ground installation they could find, Captain Thomas. The propensity of the Japanese to fly big Japanese flags over each of their headquarters or casernes kind of helped us in that. Well, we are approaching the designated boat ramps near the French consulate. We better go down now and get into my command amphibian.”

Nodding to that, Thomas followed de Castrie down the steep ladder connecting the deck house with the vehicle deck below it, then entered by a rear hatch the big, fifteen ton ‘CRABE’ armored tracked amphibian, in which a heavy weapons squad and de Castrie’s command element rode. That vehicle, along with the fifteen other CRABEs carried by the four LCT-1s, had inflamed at once the enthusiasm and imagination of Gerald Thomas, who now wished fervently that the U.S. Marine Corps could get similar vehicles

in a near future. Being fully amphibian and being able to swim in the water at a top speed of ten miles per hour, thanks to its two rear-mounted shrouded propellers and its big V-12, 500 horsepower engine, the CRABE could carry up to twenty infantrymen on top of its crew of three men and was armed with one 7mm Gatling machine gun mounted in the overhang of a small, one-man turret at the front. According to de Castrie, the twenty inch-wide tracks wrapped around the armored hull of the CRABE, plus its multiple, small diameter road wheels, gave the vehicle a very low nominal ground pressure that made it very performing over soft ground, mud, snow and sand. If that was all true, then Thomas truly wanted to see the CRABE enter Marine service one day. Taking place in an empty folding seat along one side of the troop compartment of the command CRABE, Thomas checked one last time his new SC-1 submachine gun, making sure that it was ready to be used. Like the Frenchmen riding with him in the amphibian, he wore a Durex helmet and an armored vest, two more items that he wished to see equip the whole Marine Corps. In fact, he liked about everything about the weapons and equipment used by the French naval infantry, which made the U.S. Marine Corps arsenal look like a pauper's possessions.

The big V-12 suddenly came to life in its separate compartment at the front right side of the vehicle, telling him that they were about to touch land. Thomas could now hear the two gunners of the LCT-1 firing their machine guns to engage Japanese positions on the shore. Forty seconds later, the landing craft lurched as it bumped against something. Then the big, wide steel bow ramp went down in a noise of chains, to thump down on a hard surface. The command amphibian started rolling forward at once, first going up and down the small hump that prevented water from entering the vehicle deck and then climbing a marked incline. Dozens of bullets started impacting at once against the armored hull of the amphibian, denoting a fierce Japanese response to the arrival of the French. In turn, the gunners of the amphibians replied with their machine guns, with each turret pouring out over 3,000 rounds per minute with their machine guns. Maurice de Castrie, who was observing their surroundings via the episcopes of his small commander's position, started giving orders by radio to his other vehicles, making them disperse along the shore in a circle enveloping the buildings housing the French consulate. After a last order, he came down from his station and shouted in French at the soldiers sitting in the troop compartment.

“FIX BAYONETS! FOLLOW ME OUT AND ENTER AT ONCE THE NEAREST BUILDINGS OF OUR CONSULATE COMPOUND IN GROUPS OF FOUR TO START FLUSHING OUT THE JAPANESE. REMEMBER: NO MERCY! HEAVY WEAPON SQUAD: YOU STAY WITH ME!”

As soon as the riflemen had fixed their long bayonets to their 7mm automatic ARC-1 rifles, which had single shot grenade launchers attached under their barrels, de Castrie shouted more orders.

“LOWER THE RAMP! GET OUT!”

Preaching by example, de Castrie rushed out as soon as the rear ramp of the amphibian was lowered, then made a ‘U’ turn to pass at a run by the left side of the vehicle, sprinting towards the main gate of the French consulate compound. Gerald Thomas followed close behind him, not wanting to be mistaken for a laggard or, worse, for a coward. The moment he stepped out, he was greeted by a steadily falling rain, an oppressively hot and humid air and whizzing Japanese bullets. The noise level was also deafening, with the sixteen armored amphibians firing their machine guns at the Japanese soldiers who had revealed themselves by their fires or by their silhouettes framed by windows or sticking out over low walls or building corners. At least twenty Japanese soldiers in the vicinity were also adding to the noise with their rifles and with a couple of machine guns. However, the tremendous firepower of the French amphibians, with their Gatling machine guns sounding like a buzz saw when they fired, were doing a good job of keeping the heads of the Japanese down most of the time. Thomas, running only a few paces behind Lieutenant Colonel de Castrie, barely had the time to imitate him and jump sideways to find refuge behind one of the pillars of the consulate’s main gate, avoiding a line of bullets hitting the ground nearby and approaching him and de Castrie, a gift from a Japanese machine gun rattling away from one window of a consulate annex. Barely seconds later, with the Japanese gunner persisting in his efforts to get both officers with his firing, a loud ‘WHOOSH’ followed by an even louder explosion blew the window, the Japanese machine gun crew and the room they stood in to rubble. Looking behind him towards where whatever had destroyed the machine gun had come, Thomas realized with a shock that the overhang box crowning the turret of each amphibian and which housed its Gatling machine gun also contained rocket launching tubes. De Castrie smiled on seeing Thomas’ dumbfounded expression.

“75mm ROCKETS! WE FRENCHMEN LIKE TO SERVE THEM WITH ALL KINDS OF SAUCES: FROM THE AIR, FROM THE SEA AND FROM THE GROUND.”

“HELL! I DON'T MIND THAT MENU, AS LONG AS YOU SERVE IT ONLY TO THE JAPANESE.”

De Castrie laughed at that before leaving the shelter of the pillar and resuming his sprint towards the entrance of the main consulate building, closely followed by Gerald Thomas and the men of the heavy weapons squad. Stopping halfway behind the shelter of what must have been some kind of gardener's hut, de Castrie then looked at one soldiers carrying a rather impressive weapon made up of nine steel tubes bundled together and pointed the main entrance of the chancellery building.

“GRENADIER, BLOW THAT DOOR DOWN, THEN FIRE A GRENADE INSIDE!”

“YES SIR!”

Thomas, who had not had a chance yet to ask about that type of weapon, watched with intense curiosity as the soldier shouldered the butt of his weapon, like he would with a machine gun, and aimed it via a sort of short, fat optical sight fixed atop it. With both of his hands gripping the two pistol grips of the weapon, he then pressed the trigger. What happened next somewhat mystified the American officer: the whole nine tube assembly recoiled a good six inches, its recoil apparently absorbed progressively by some kind of buffer system incorporated into the butt assembly, while one of the tubes erupted, spitting out a projectile at high speed. That projectile could not have been much more than a inch and a half in caliber, yet its effect was terrific: on impacting the doors of the chancellery, it exploded with the force of a medium artillery shell and completely blew in the massive wooden double doors. The French soldier waited a few seconds for the smoke to partly dissipate, then fired a second time. Thomas didn't miss the fact that a different tube of his weapon erupted. He then understood in a flash how that weapon worked on noticing a large hinge under the tube assembly, halfway from the muzzles: it was like an old fashion break-open shotgun, but with nine barrels instead of the usual two and with a recoil mechanism to absorb what must be a punishing recoil force. However unusual that weapon was, it certainly was highly effective, as the second grenade flew inside the chancellery via the blown open doors, with its explosion gutting the entrance lobby. The moment it exploded, de Castrie rose up and shouted an order.

“RUSH IN, MEN!”

Again leading his naval infantrymen, the French lieutenant colonel sprinted to the entrance of the chancellery and entered it, not even slowing down before passing through the blown doors. What he, Thomas and the grenadiers found inside was a devastated lobby area and the bodies of seven dead Japanese soldiers, plus a tipped

over light machine gun. With more French soldiers rushing in, de Castrie made them disperse in small groups through the building in order to hunt down any remaining Japanese soldier in it. Hearing an approaching whistling noise, he and Gerald Thomas approached a window to look outside. Both of them smiled on seeing the armada of approaching aircraft.

"Help is about to arrive, Captain Thomas. Soon, the whole 'Bund' area will be in our hands."

Thomas nodded at that but didn't reply, as one thing still preoccupied him: the fate of the Americans that had been sheltering in the United States consulate, some two city blocks from the riverfront.

15:02 (China Time)

Lead COBRA 'C' VSTOL transport aircraft

Flying down Kiangse Road, downtown Shanghai

Altitude: 23 meters

Alexander Vandegrift was more than just a little apprehensive right now as he stood behind the pilot's seat of the COBRA 'C' and peered outside via the cockpit's windshield: with the falling rain, visibility was poor, while they were flying slowly and perilously close over the buildings lining Kiangse Road, along which the American consulate stood. He however had to concede that Terry Clarkson, who was at the commands, was displaying some impressive piloting skills right now and seemed quite calm. She suddenly pointed down at a six storey building made of red bricks.

"There is the Kalee Hotel! Get your men ready to run out, Major: we will be landing within a minute right at the corner of the consulate, on Kiangse Road."

"Understood!"

Going back into the long passenger cabin, which was filled with 42 marines and one COCCINELLE ATV, in which their spare ammunition had been piled in, Vandegrift shouted out loud to be heard above the din of the turbofan engines of their aircraft.

"WE ARE ABOUT TO LAND BESIDE THE CONSULATE. GET READY TO DISEMBARK! I WANT FOUR MEN TO BE READY TO RELEASE THE TIE-DOWN STRAPS HOLDING OUR VEHICLE THE MOMENT WE TOUCH THE GROUND. ONCE OUT, ENTER THE CONSULATE AND TAKE DEFENSIVE POSITIONS AT ITS WINDOWS AND DOORS. OOH, MARINES!"

“OOYAH!” replied the 42 men in the cabin. Vandegrift then walked down the cabin all the way to the aft cargo ramp, where the plane’s cargo master, a Moroccan woman in her forties named Judith Benchetrit, was sitting next to the command box of the ramp.

“Miss Benchetrit, as you know already, a number of American citizens are going to be evacuated in this plane after my marines will get out and enter the consulate. I will signal you from the main entrance once all of the civilians will be out of the building. They may be confused and panicky but I will do my best to calm them down before they board this plane.”

“That would be much appreciated, Major. We will take good care of them.”

“I know you will, miss. Again, thank you very much for your help and that of your friends.”

“You are most welcome, Major.” replied Judith with a warm smile. Seconds later, the plane bumped softly on the ground and the jet engines went to idle power, prompting her to punch the ‘open’ button of the aft ramp, while Vandegrift firmly gripped his SC-1 submachine gun and shouted out.

“RELEASE THE TIE-DOWN STRAPS NOW! FOLLOW ME, MARINES!”

Vandegrift didn’t wait for the cargo ramp to be fully down on the ground before jumping out on the pavement of Kiangse Road and running past the corner of the Kalee Hotel and towards its main entrance, his marines close behind him. The COCCINELLE carried by Terry Clarkson’s COBRA was last out, driving quickly to the main entrance and stopping in front of it. The two other COCCINELLES given to Golf Company, along with the 83 remaining marines of the unit, soon followed. While Terry Clarkson’s COBRA and the one piloted by Beatrix de Rijk stayed on the ground, H el ene Dutrieu’s COBRA lifted off at once the moment the marines were out, to rise above the buildings and then pivot around to head west, towards the Belgian consulate, where 22 Belgian soldiers were going to get out and reinforce the consulate’s defenses.

Inside the lobby of the Kalee Hotel, Major Vandegrift found an aging marine captain and five soldiers defending the entrance.

“CAPTAIN, ASSEMBLE OUR CIVILIAN CITIZENS AT ONCE AND LEAD THEM TO THE TWO AIRCRAFT WAITING OUTSIDE ON KIANGSE ROAD!”

“Uh, it will take some time for that, sir: they are still in their temporary quarters on the upper floors.”

“WHAT?!” exclaimed Vandegrift, becoming furious. “You were warned yesterday to have our people ready to move at a moment’s notice. Where is Major Huntsman?”

“He is dead, sir: he was killed yesterday by a Japanese sniper.”

Vandegrift didn’t reply at once to that as he eyed the marine captain. The officer was definitely getting old for his rank, even when compared to the average found in the American forces, in which promotions had been slow for decades and were still mostly based on seniority rather than merit.

“We will clear this out later, Captain. Right now, you are to go get those civilians down to the lobby at once and out to those waiting aircraft, who are by the way sitting in the street in plain sight of the Japanese. So, make it damn quick and tell these civilians that they are limited to two bags per person, no more. Now, MOVE!”

“Uh, yes sir!”

The old captain then ran to the main staircase, leaving a fuming Vandegrift to wait in the middle of the entrance lobby, while Lewis Puller distributed his men around to various defensive positions around the ground level and first floor of the building.

15:05 (China Time)

Track and field grounds

Campus of the Shanghai American School

Avenue Pétain, French Concession, Shanghai

“COME ON MEN, LET’S MOVE AND CLEAR THIS CAMPUS! THE SECOND WAVE IS DUE TO LAND HERE IN LESS THAN THIRTY MINUTES.”

Spurred by the orders shouted or radioed by Captain Merritt ‘Red Mike’ Edson, the marines of Foxtrot Company dispersed in squad groups, either at a run or aboard the six COCCINELLEs brought with them aboard six SUPER COLIBRI ‘A’. Those were now off the ground and on their way back to the REDOUTABLE, where they were due to load up with vehicles and supplies for the French naval infantry battalion. Hitching a ride in one of the six wheeler ATVs serving as his command car, Edson went to the school’s gymnasium building, a large red brick building with a peaked roof. However, as he was

approaching it, the wind brought to him a horrible stench that made the driver of the ATV gag.

“My God! This is worse than anything I smelled in Nicaragua or Haiti, sir.” Edson didn’t reply to that, knowing too well what was causing that smell: the decomposing bodies of over 200 American teenage boys killed by the Japanese over four days ago. Fighting his own nausea, Edson told his driver to park near the gymnasium but upwind from it, then got out and ran to the main entrance. The stench nearly overtook him when he opened one of the doors but he forced himself to enter and go to the main hall. One look inside was enough to tell him that the Japanese had not even bothered to collect the bodies of the dead boys or to bury them. Sick to his stomach, he walked out of the building and returned to the ATV, where he sat and stayed silent for a few seconds, trying to chase from his mind the vision of horror he had just seen. His driver didn’t ask him anything then, understanding what was happening, himself ready to vomit. Their horror however quickly turned into hard resolve, with Edson pointing at the administrative building, where the noise of a firefight had just started.

“Drive to the administrative building, Corporal Henderson, and zigzag on the way: there may be a few Japanese snipers around.”

“Yes sir!”

15:18 (China Time)

Lobby of the Kalee Hotel

Kiangse Road, downtown Shanghai

“WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN DOING DURING ALL THAT TIME, CAPTAIN? OUR PLANES HAVE NOW BEEN WAITING ON THE GROUND FOR NEARLY FIFTEEN MINUTES AND HAVE STARTED TO TAKE RIFLE FIRE.”

Captain Arthur Ramsay felt in his small shoes as a furious Major Vandegrift was shouting at him nearly nose to nose.

“The civilians insisted on taking the time to pack their things before starting to move downstairs, sir.”

“And you didn’t tell them then to forget their damn things and to hustle down? Captain Ramsay, you are utterly useless here! I thus relieve you of command! Get out with those civilians and leave Shanghai, NOW!”

Paling on hearing what basically signified the end of his career in the Marine Corps, Ramsay saluted Vandegrift, then ran away towards the growing crowd of American civilians coming down the stairs of the lobby. The steamed up Vandegrift was however not finished being frustrated, as he saw a rather portly mature woman coming down with a procession of Chinese servants carrying over ten suitcases and travel chests of various sizes. Charging towards her like a raging bull, he blocked her path and pointed a hard finger at the woman.

"I said 'two bags per person', miss. Anything over that will have to be left behind."

"Those are the only things left from my residence, mister." Replied the woman with a supremely arrogant expression. "I am not leaving anything behind."

"Fine! Then you will stay here with them!" said resolutely Vandegrift before looking at the Chinese servants. "YOU, PUT THOSE BAGS IN THAT CORNER OVER THERE!"

"YOU CAN'T DO THAT! MY FATHER IS A SENATOR!"

"AND I AM IN CHARGE OF THE MARINES DOING THIS OPERATION, MISS! TAKE TWO BAGS OF YOUR CHOICE WITH YOU AND GO, OR STAY HERE. CHOOSE NOW AND CHOOSE QUICKLY: THE PLANES WILL LEAVE IN NO MORE THAN FIVE MINUTES, WHETHER YOU ARE ABOARD OR NOT. NOW, GET OUT OF MY FACE!"

Her knees turning into near jelly under the hard stare and harsh tone of Vandegrift, the woman didn't dare press her case further and, swearing under her breath, grabbed two of her suitcases containing her most expensive pieces of wardrobe and joined the file of American citizens leaving the hotel.

Alexander Vandegrift blew air out in relief when the two COBRAs were finally able to take off, filled with American civilian evacuees. That was when his operations officer, Captain William Whaling, came to him to bring some news to him. Thankfully, those news were good ones.

"Sir, Captain Twining and his Echo Company have successfully landed on the riverfront promenade, along with a company of French naval infantry mounted on armored light trucks, and are now in control of their section of the Bund. Also, Foxtrot Company has signaled that they have now secured the perimeter of the American

School's campus ground and that the first planes of the second wave are now in sight of the campus."

"Aaah, excellent! What are our casualties at this point?"

"Very light, despite the fierce resistance by Japanese soldiers, sir. To date, we suffered only two dead and eleven wounded. We can mostly thank those French armored vests and helmets for that, sir: many of our men say that they were hit by bullets but didn't suffer any wounds from them."

"The Corps should definitely secure a good supply of those vests and helmets after this. Hell, it should secure about every piece of equipment and weapons that those French soldiers are using here. When I think that we were laughing at the French in the past and calling them 'Frogs'. They are probably the ones laughing at us now."

15:51 (China Time)

Terry Clarkson's COBRA 'C'

On approach to the REDOUTABLE

Eastern China Sea

Consul-General Edwin Cunningham, who was traveling with his wife Elizabeth with other evacuees aboard the COBRA 'C' piloted by Terry Clarkson, was lost in morose thoughts, oblivious of the anxious conversations exchanged around the passenger cabin. The deaths of so many of his fellow citizens, particularly those of the young students of the Shanghai American School, was heavily weighing on him. He knew that he would never forget those deaths and was starting to toy with the idea of retiring from the State Department on his return to the United States. At the age of 64, he certainly had accumulated enough years of service to be eligible for retirement. An exclamation from his wife suddenly took him out of his reveries.

"Ed, I see an aircraft carrier! It must be our destination."

Looking out of the nearest window, Cunningham effectively saw what appeared to be an aircraft carrier some miles away, on the right flank of their plane, which was banking left.

"But, then why is our aircraft turning away from it? It doesn't..."

He stopped halfway in his sentence, while his eyes opened wide from shock.

"MY GOD! IT JUST EXPLODED!"

With cries of alarms raised by his exclamation, many evacuees rushed to the right side windows to look at the ship, now half hidden by a large, thick cloud of smoke.

Cunningham then saw something rise at the vertical from the cloud, flying on top of a long plume of flames.

“What the hell is this?”

The answer came a few seconds later with an announcement in a female voice coming from the speakers system of the cabin.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking. Please do not be alarmed, as what you just saw was the French aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE firing off a number of missiles at some distant Japanese warships. Do not worry as well about those enemy warships, as they are still far away beyond the horizon and soon won't be a threat anymore. We shall be able to land in a few minutes, once the REDOUTABLE has finished firing its missiles.”

“Missiles? What is that, Ed?” asked Elizabeth, confused, to which her husband could only shrug his shoulders.

“I frankly don't have a clue. From what we could see to date of the aircraft and equipment the French were using today, we probably can expect more surprises and novelties. The important thing is that we and our compatriots are now safe.”

Elizabeth seemed to calm down after that. She looked despondently at the other Americans cramming the cabin, including many small children and even a couple of babies with their young mothers. That diversity only made more evident the near lack of teenagers in the lot, the result of the monstrous atrocities committed by the Japanese Army at the Shanghai American School. However, Elizabeth was not ready to hate the Japanese as a group because of those atrocities. She knew well and had frequented many Japanese citizens who lived in the Hongkou District, near the consulate. She in fact counted many good friends among those Japanese residents of Shanghai. However, she knew enough about Japan to know that there was a stark difference between the average Japanese civilian and the members of the Japanese militarist class, who had been grabbing more and more control away from the Japanese civilian government in the last few years. Even Japanese civilians feared the Japanese Army Intelligence, the Kempetai, which was widely known to routinely conduct arbitrary arrests, tortures and even extra-legal executions, including of Japanese citizens. She had once met a senior Kempetai officer during a diplomatic reception and one minute conversing with him had been enough to convince her to excuse herself on a pretext and leave for the kitchen, in order to be away from him.

Elizabeth, like her husband, was pulled out of her thoughts when their aircraft finally landed on the immense flat deck of the waiting warship. When the rear ramp went down, she saw that a number of French officers and sailors were waiting for them on the flight deck, some distance from the plane. They walked up to the plane as soon as the engines shut down, with a young junior officer then speaking to the evacuees in a commendably good English.

"Welcome on the aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE, ladies and gentlemen. If you will please follow me and my men, we will guide you to your temporary quarters, where we will then compile a list of names to be then sent to Washington. I was told that Consul-General Cunningham was aboard this plane."

"That's me!" answered at once Edwin Cunningham, stepping forward as well. The French officer nodded in satisfaction at that.

"Excellent! If you don't mind, Captain Robert de Valmont would like to discuss with you the events of the last few days in Shanghai. Unfortunately, no French diplomatic staff has been found alive yet and we would like to learn what you heard and saw."

"I will be happy to help in any way possible, mister. My wife is with me, so give me a minute with her before I accompany you."

"Take all your time, sir."

Returning to the side of Elizabeth, Edwin gently took her hand and looked down into her eyes.

"This shouldn't take too long, my dear. In the meantime, rest and relax as much as you can."

The young French officer who had spoken with Cunningham patted the shoulder of a graying chief petty officer and discretely pointed Elizabeth to him while speaking in a low voice.

"She's the wife of the American consul. Make sure that she gets one of the empty senior officer's cabins in our naval infantry battalion lines."

"Understood, sir!"

With that done, the junior officer smiled to the American consul as the latter joined back with him.

"If you will follow me, sir..."

09:20 (Washington Time)

Monday, August 8, 1932

Office of the United States Secretary of State

State Department building, Washington, D.C.

Henry Stimson was reading the preliminary report which had been received during the night from Consul-General Cunningham via the American embassy in Hanoi, when his intercom box buzzed, announcing a call from his secretary in the anteroom of his office.

"Yes, Miss Sturgis?"

"Sir, the French ambassador just arrived, accompanied by his military attaché. He wishes to speak with you. Shall I introduce them in, sir?"

"By all means, Miss Sturgis!" replied Stimson before getting up from his padded chair and walking around his big work desk, in time to greet his French visitors with a handshake.

"Ambassador Rainier, General Vaugivard, welcome! Would you like something to drink, tea or coffee, before we start discussing together?"

"I won't say no to a coffee, Mister Secretary." replied Rainier, whose eyes denoted fatigue, like those of his military attaché. "We spent part of the night reviewing urgent notes and directives received from Paris and concerning the situation in China."

"Then coffee it will be! Miss Sturgis, could you have strong coffee brought in, please?"

"Right away, Mister Secretary." said the mature woman before walking out. Stimson then smiled to the French ambassador.

"Don't worry about getting a cup of brown water, Ambassador Rainier: we at the State Department have learned to appreciate good, strong coffee, rather than the swill they serve in downtown Washington restaurants."

"That is most appreciated, Mister Secretary, as what we came to discuss is most important, as well as urgent."

"Then, let's sit and make ourselves comfortable, gentlemen."

Going to a corner of his office where a coffee table and sofas were set, Stimson offered his visitors one of the sofas before sitting opposite them in another sofa.

"So, you must have come to discuss the situation in China, I guess."

"You guessed right, Mister Secretary," said Rainier. "While our initial amphibious assault on Shanghai went well, we are quickly running out of troops to bring into Shanghai. Also, moving by air to Shanghai our available troops, with their vehicles, heavy weapons and supplies, is burning up enormous quantities of kerosene fuel. Our reserves of kerosene in Indochina are quickly being depleted, while bringing new reserves by ship all the way from France will take quite some time. If we run out of kerosene in Indochina, then our capacity to fly in fresh troops from France will be severely impacted and so will be our China campaign. We know that the United States has important stocks of fuel in both the Philippines and in Hawaii, much nearer from China than France is. Since American and French troops are already fighting side by side in Shanghai, my government is hoping that the United States could make some of those stocks of fuel available to our ships and aircraft."

"That sounds to me like a most reasonable request, Ambassador Rainier. I will place a call with the President right after this meeting, to ask him to make that fuel available to France. Anything else?"

"Yes, Mister Secretary. Since both of our countries have declared war on Japan, we believe that a joint military command should be formed for our China campaign, where senior commanders could better coordinate our military efforts rather than via an exchange of letters and meetings thousands of miles away from China. Since the hub of our air operations is in Hanoi, I would suggest that our regional headquarters there could be a good place to locate such a joint command center."

"Again, a most sensible proposition. However, this point would be more the purview of Secretary of War Hurley and of Secretary of the Navy Adams." Somehow, that didn't seem to satisfy Rainier much, who made a smirk.

"Surely, Mister Secretary, you must be aware that, for your army and navy to agree to anything together is a feat by itself and, when they achieve that feat, it is only after long and bitter discussions. I am afraid that we don't have the time for such discussions. If we don't pour quickly a lot more troops in Shanghai, that will give a chance to the Japanese Army in China to regain its balance and flood Shanghai with new troops. Couldn't President Hoover simply order your army and navy to cooperate together?"

It was then the turn of Stimson to make a smirk.

“Well, I have long dreamed of seeing that happen one day, Ambassador Rainier. I however agree with you that we must act quickly on this and I will impress that on the President.”

This time, it was Major General Vaugivard who spoke up next.

“Mister Secretary, we also came to plea for more American ground troops to be sent quickly to Shanghai. Please understand that Japan has something like forty army divisions in China right now, with a number of those divisions either in or around Shanghai. On our part, we now have on the ground in downtown Shanghai less than two regiments, even when including your marine battalion. France is about to run out of available troops in Indochina and the distance between China and France is making any mass reinforcement very slow. Even if we had all the time in the World to bring troops and equipment by ship, the size of the present French Army cannot compare with that of the Japanese Army, unless we start mobilizing the whole nation. Basically, France would greatly appreciate the sending of more American combat troops to Shanghai on a most urgent basis. Marine Corps units would be especially appreciated, in view of the stellar combat performance to date of your marine battalion presently fighting in Shanghai.”

Henry Stimson couldn't help smile out of pride at those last words.

“I was actually reading our consul-general's preliminary report when you showed up. I would like to take this occasion to thank France for generously providing our marines with some extra modern equipment.”

To his surprise, his compliment seemed to embarrass a bit the two Frenchmen, with General Vaugivard replying to him in an apologetic tone.

“Uh, we must say that our government had nothing to do with that extra equipment, Mister Secretary. It was actually a straight gift to your marines, done by Miss Tasha Lenoir, whose consortium produces all that military equipment.”

“Miss Lenoir? I was under the impression that the United States was not in her good graces because of what she calls ‘the abomination of racial segregation in the U.S.A.’. Is this some kind of commercial stunt on her part to somehow advertise her products?”

Stimson realized that he had used the wrong words when the two Frenchmen stiffened in response to them. His tone now distinctly less friendly, Rainier bent forward to emphasize his response.

"Mister Secretary, Miss Lenoir was the one who prohibited the sale of her military products to the United States, precisely in protest at the present and continued American policies of racial segregation. Her products are so advanced and superior to anything else that she doesn't need to resort to 'commercial stunts' to attract buyers. She is a generous, compassionate woman and a true patriot who even risked her life in the past to serve France, all reasons why she is a recipient of our Légion d'Honneur, in Commander Grade. She gave that equipment to your marines so that they could better fight by the side of our own troops. It is as simple as that. As for her aversion towards the American racial policies, my government shares it fully."

"I see! Please excuse me if I misread the intentions of Miss Lenoir. To return to the subject of extra combat troops for China, I will again have to refer your demand to the President, who will study it with Secretaries Hurley and Adams. Is there anything else you wish to discuss, Ambassador Rainier?"

"No, except to emphasize again the need to move quickly on this, Mister Secretary. Any delay may doom our present force in Shanghai."

"That is well understood, Mister Ambassador. I promise to treat this with the utmost celerity."

Just as the trio was getting up from their sofas, someone knocked on the door of Stimson's office. It turned out to be a junior secretary pushing a service cart on which a steaming coffee pot and sets of cups lay. Stimson then tried to repair the damage done by his words against Tasha Lenoir, pointing at the coffee service.

"Would you at least take the time to sip some of this hot coffee before going, Mister Ambassador?"

Rainier hesitated for a moment but one sniff of the coffee aroma convinced him.

"Hell, why not? I really could use a cup of strong coffee right now."

The trio went back to the low table and the sofas, where the junior secretary served them cups of coffee, which Rainier and Vaugivard sipped with delight.

"Aaah! This is good coffee, Mister Secretary. Thank you!"

"You are most welcome, Ambassador Rainier. So, in what state did your troops find the French Concession in Shanghai?"

That question made Rainier temporarily put down his cup as a haunted look came to his eyes.

"Please excuse my reaction to your question, Mister Secretary: the Consul-General of France in Shanghai was an old friend of mine. Our troops found his rotting head impaled on an iron gate spike of our consulate compound. His wife and three children were also killed by the Japanese. At the latest news, less than 300 French citizens in Shanghai, out of the original 2,000, have been found to have survived the Japanese onslaught, mostly by hiding in the basements of Chinese houses. As for the situation of the Russian expatriates who had been living inside the French Concession, their fate has been even worse: less than a hundred out of 8,000 survived. I put that on the decades-old hostility between Russia and Japan. The staff of the Soviet consulate on the Bund fared no better than ours and was massacred to the last. That discovery prompted us to contact the Soviet government, to see if the Soviet Union would be willing to help up in this war against Japan. While the Communist leaders in Moscow couldn't care less about Russian expatriates who had been supportive of the old imperial regime, losing their consular staff did infuriate them. Right now, we have good expectations that the Soviets will help us militarily by pushing against the Japanese forces in Manchuria and by attacking the Japanese on the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands, north of the Japanese Archipelago."

Stimson stiffened a bit on hearing that: he was no fan of the Soviets or of Communists, but did his best to hide his reaction.

"And the British, did you approach them to ask for their military assistance?"

"We did, but the British refused to help us. We suspect that they want to keep all of their available military assets in Asia around their local possessions and colonies, in order to protect those from any possible Japanese attack. They have in particular significantly reinforced the defenses of Hong Kong during the last few days, with a strong naval squadron staying near it."

"Hum, a rather timid stance, if I may say so." said Stimson, making Rainier smile weakly.

"'Timid' is a charitable word, Mister Secretary. However, we frankly didn't expect more from the present British Prime Minister, in view of his past record as a declared pacifist. The British public may however make him change his mind once the news of what truly happened in Shanghai will be better known."

Rainier took a last gulp of his coffee, then put his cup down and got up from his sofa, imitated by Vaugivard and Stimson.

“Well, I believe that I have to go now, Mister Secretary. Thank you very much for this excellent coffee.”

“It was my pleasure, Ambassador Rainier. Be assured that I will push vigorously your requests on the President. Have a good day, you and General Vaugivard.”

The Frenchmen then left after a last exchange of handshakes. Stimson, now pensive, went to sit back behind his desk, then grabbed his telephone receiver and formed the number for the White House telephone exchange. It took only seconds before he was connected with President Hoover.

“Mister President, this is Henry Stimson. I just got a visit from the French ambassador and his military attaché, who presented to me requests for more military assistance against the Japanese. I believe those requests to be both urgent and well justified and I believe that you, I and our heads of military services should discuss these requests as soon as possible... Tonight at seven thirty? I will be there, Mister President.”

With the President then hanging up, Stimson slowly put down his own receiver. Seeing that the report from Consul-General Cunningham was still opened on top of his desk, he resumed its reading at once.

15:53 (Paris Time)

Blériot-Kruger Aircraft Design Center

Aéro-parc Blériot, Buc

Southwestern suburbs of Paris, France

Navy Minister George Leygues and his Navy Chief of Staff, Vice Admiral George Durand-Viel, were met by Johanna Kruger in the staff lounge of her aeronautical design offices, after a secretary had warned the latter that she had two high-level visitors. The minister found Kruger to be still a very pretty woman at the age of 58, appearing in fact to be only in her mid forties. Tall for a woman, at 179 centimeters, she had long platinum blond hair and pale blue eyes and her body curves were still quite sexy. George Leygues however had to remind himself that he was now facing a true genius and the foremost aeronautical designer in the World. She also dabbled in ship designs from time to time, which was the reason for his present visit with Vice Admiral Durand-Viel, himself a noted naval engineer.

"Minister Leygues! Admiral Durand-Viel! To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

'Damn, she is hot!' couldn't help think the minister before gallantly kissing her right hand.

"We came for businesses concerning the present war with Japan, my dear Miss Kruger. Basically, while we had big successes in the initial phase of combat, our efforts are now starting to be squeezed by the logistical burdens of the military campaign. We are quickly emptying our fuel reserves in place in Indochina and we also find ourselves without adequate port facilities for the dozens of major warships now sailing around the South China Sea and the Eastern China Sea. To keep things short and to the point, we came to secure a long-term lease on the services of your incredible giant floating dry dock ship, the ATLAS. That ship is superbly equipped to serve as a mobile port, on top of having full salvage and repair facilities and having a tremendous lifting and transport capacity. I wanted for a long time already to acquire such a ship for the French Navy, but the Parliament always balked at the cost of such a ship. Now that we are in a bitter war to the finish with Japan, our parliament members finally accepted to fund the construction of such a ship. However, building such a colossus will take months, if not a year or two, so we came to see if we could not lease the services of the ATLAS as an interim solution. I do hope that your ATLAS is presently available, Miss Kruger."

Her response was a warm, reassuring smile.

"Do not worry, Minister Leygues: the ATLAS returned a week ago from an operation to refloat the RMS BRITTANIC, which its captain had been foolish enough to ground and impale on rocks off the coast of Maine."

Vice Admiral Durand-Viel wiggled his hand at those words, while wincing.

"I heard about that incident: that captain is not about to get a new command after that: to continue at high speed in thick fog and without radar, just to try to beat some transatlantic record..."

"Yeah! Human vanity: never fails to sink dreams. So, what exactly do you wish my ATLAS to do in this war, gentlemen?"

This time, it was Durand-Viel who answered her.

"First, we intend to load as much fuel, ammunition and spare parts aboard as we can. Then, we will sail it around Africa and across the Indian Ocean, to finally anchor it off the port of Haiphong, where she will be used as a floating base for our expeditionary fleet. I expect her to serve there for at least four or five months, possibly more, before it

returns to France. We would also need the services of its regular crew, so that it could train and support the sailors and officers I will provide as supplementary crewmembers. In the meantime, while the ATLAS is in Haiphong, I count on your shipyard to start building a sister ship that will be eventually incorporated into our navy. We intend of course to be most generous with our terms of the contracts involved. Your reputation of honesty and reasonableness in contract dealings is well know by now.”

“Why, thank you for your confidence, Admiral. On this, what do you say on going to visit and inspect my ATLAS this afternoon, so you can see exactly what it could do in the service of France?”

“The ATLAS is in Le Havre, miss?” asked Leygues, surprised. Johanna shook her head in response.

“No, it is moored at its berth, at the Kruger Marine Shipyards, near Marseille. We can fly there in only a bit over one hour. So, what do you say, gentlemen?”

Leygues and Durand-Viel exchanged a quick glance before the minister answered her.

“We will be happy to go inspect it this afternoon, Miss Kruger. I never visited your shipyards and was told that it was well worth the visit.”

“It is indeed unique in its design and functioning, Minister Leygues. Let me just place a couple of telephone calls and we will then leave for Fos-sur-Mer.”

17:48 (Paris Time)

Bridge of the ultra-heavy dry dock and salvage ship ATLAS

At quay at the Kruger Marine Shipyards, next to Fos-sur-Mer

Forty kilometers west-northwest of the port of Marseille

Mediterranean coast of France

“Here you are, gentlemen: the ATLAS, the largest ship built to date in the World. It is 430 meters in length, has a beam of 180 meters and has a standard displacement draught of five meters. Its dry dock section measures 350 meters by 130 meters and can contain the largest ship in our fleet, the aircraft carrier GLOIRE. Its standard displacement is 346,000 tons but its full load displacement can be as high as 540,000 tons, giving it then a draught of seven meters. You will thus be able to load a lot of fuel, ammunition and spares on this ship. Its large side hulls, apart from acting as ballast tanks, house all kinds of repair workshops, as well as supporting cargo handling and lifting cranes and having side platforms acting as ships docking stations along its flanks.”

"This will be perfect for our use, miss." said George Leygues, enthralled by the sight of such a majestic ship. "When do you think that you could sail it out to our naval base in Toulon, where we will fill it with fuel and ammunition?"

"How about in two days, Minister? That will give me time to assemble its crew and prepare it for its long trip to Haiphong."

"Perfect! And when could you start building another ship like this one for our navy?"

"Uh, don't you want to discuss first what special features you will want on that ship, before we start building it? You will probably want to have at least some anti-aircraft defenses on it, no?"

"We certainly would, Miss Kruger." intervened Vice Admiral Durand-Viel, taking over from his eager minister. "Could we visit first your shipyard, so that I can get a good idea of what you can build?"

"Of course we can, Admiral! Follow me!"

Being immense and covering a total surface of ten square kilometers, visiting the Kruger Marine Shipyards took a good three hours, even when using a car to go around it. What Leygues and Durand-Viel saw actually boggled their minds. The shipyard was not only huge, with one covered main construction floodable basin measuring 450 meters by 200 meters by fifteen meters and with two smaller basins, each measuring 200 meters by 110 meters by nine meters. They also functioned according to a construction technique that was truly revolutionary. Basically, instead of building a ship piece by piece inside a basin or on a slip, whole parts of ships, forming complete modules of up to 10,000 tons each, were built separately in covered, air conditioned ship construction annexes. Those modules, once finished and painted, were then lifted to the main basin, where they were carefully lowered in place and then welded to the other modules already there. Electrical welding was in fact one of the major innovations compared to the other shipyards Leygues had visited before, where hull plates were still mostly bolted together.

The trio was driving through a long covered hall in which a pair of railway tracks ran from end to end, connecting it to the local railway network, when Durand-Viel suddenly pointed at a row of big structures covered by large canvas tarps and surrounded by piles of large steel plates and beams.

"Hey, these looks like battlefield turrets! What are they doing here, Miss Kruger?"

"Don't you remember, Admiral? They are the eleven and twelve inch gun turrets we removed from the ex-German battleships captured in 1915, when we did extensive refits and modification on them at the request of the navy between 1926 and 1927. I asked a number of times the navy department to take them back, as they took a lot of place in my parts storage hall, but never got the navy moving on that. So, instead of simply scrapping such expensive pieces of armament, I decided to cocoon them in long term storage."

Durand-Viel felt excitement rise in him as he eyed the big turrets and their twin guns.

"And how many of those turrets do you have here, miss?"

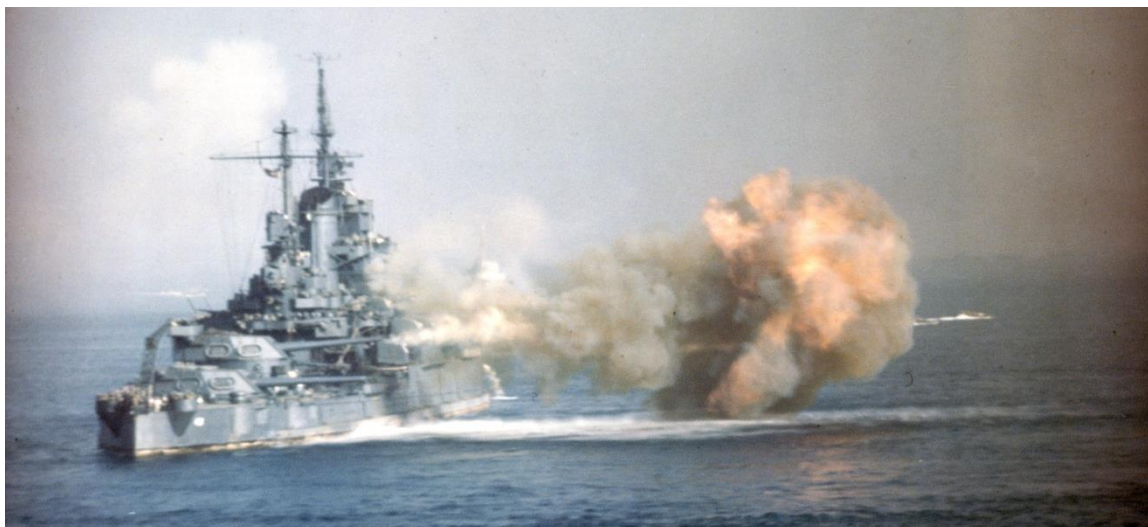
"I have four twin gun 305mm turrets and mounts assemblies, plus three twin 280mm turrets and mounts, all still perfectly functional. You want to use them to equip your own dry dock ship, Admiral?"

"Hell yes! They would be perfect to provide a strong anti-ship defense to it. Do you see any technical or design problem that could stop us from using them on our future dry dock ship?"

"None! In fact, those will constitute interesting exercises in redesign, especially when adding anti-aircraft defenses as well. I will start studying that point first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, miss! On my part, I will start assembling at once a supplementary crew for your ATLAS, so that it could leave as quickly as possible for Haiphong."

"And I will prepare at once a rental contract for your ATLAS, Miss Kruger." added George Leygues, making Johanna smile in contentment. While business concerning the ATLAS had been fair to date, any day and week that such a big and expensive ship sat unused cost her tens of thousands of francs. She may be rich by any standards but her fortune in no way approached that of Tasha Lenoir, who was now unofficially the richest person on Earth.



The American battleship USS IDAHO fires its 356mm guns against a shore target.

CHAPTER 10 – DEATH FROM THE SEA

06:11 (Japan Time)

Thursday, August 25, 1932

Bridge of the American battleship BB-46 U.S.S. MARYLAND

Flagship of the United States Navy China Task Force (TF-26)

Sailing off Sasebo, Island of Kyushu, Japan

“Admiral, the latest report from our marines on the ground in Shanghai.”

“Thank you, mister!” said Admiral Frank Brooks Upham as he took the message handed to him by a young ensign. Reading it quickly made him nod his head in satisfaction: the combined force of U.S. marines and French soldiers in Shanghai had been able to chase away the last Japanese soldiers and secure the perimeters of both the International Settlement and of the French Concession. With the imminent arrival there of the marine battalion that had been previously stationed in the Philippines, the allied commanders were now confident that they were going to be able to resist any attempt by the Japanese Army to retake downtown Shanghai. There were also signs that the Japanese units in China were starting to run out of ammunition and fuel, which had been the desired effect of the tight allied sea blockade which had cut the maritime links between Japan and the Chinese coast. The Imperial Japanese Navy was now a

mere ghost of its former self, with all its major combatants sunk and with only a motley collection of destroyers, submarines and coastal patrol ships left to it. Even now, French aircraft from the aircraft carrier GLOIRE and from the three aviation cruisers sailing near Japan kept scurrying the sea and looking up the various Japanese ports, in search of any surviving Japanese warships they could sink. That last thought made Admiral Upham snicker to himself: those arrogant and aggressive Japanese Navy officers who had been part of the militarist faction, instead of gaining 'glory' and extra power, had instead reaped death and had caused the near extinction of their cherished navy through their megalomania and xenophobia. Upham's mind then broached on the recent fate of Admiral Montgomery Taylor, who had been until two weeks ago the commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet and who should logically have been in charge of this task force. Taylor was without a doubt an excellent naval officer and a top fleet commander, but one factor had caused his demise: his deep sympathies towards the Japanese. He had publicly said that he agreed with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and had cultivated friendships with many Japanese navy officers, plus had pushed for U.S. leniency towards the actions of the Japanese Army in China. That had been tolerated for a while in Washington but the massacre of American citizens by the Japanese in Shanghai and the ensuing American public outrage had finally forced the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Pratt, to relieve Taylor of his command and return him to the United States. The single attempt by Taylor to protest his loss of command, by publishing an opinion piece in a major newspaper, had badly backfired on him and had resulted in his outright dismissal from the U.S. Navy, on top of gaining him widespread public condemnation. Upham's thoughts were interrupted when his flag operations officer approached him and came to attention.

"Admiral, our scout floatplane is in position over the Sasebo Naval Arsenal and is ready to direct our fire. All the main guns of the fleet are loaded and ready."

"Very well! Pass to the gunnery officer : commence registration fire and switch to fire for effect once we will have the correct range."

"Yes, Admiral!"

The operations officer then went to the nearest bridge telephone to pass those orders to the gunnery officer. Approaching one of the windows of the bridge, Upham raised his binoculars to his eyes to observe what he could of the Sasebo Naval Arsenal and of Sasebo Harbor, some ten miles away. Preliminary reconnaissance flights by his scout floatplanes had revealed important damage already done by recent French

bombardments, with a number of huge craters plastering the naval arsenal, but some of the dry docks had miraculously escaped destruction and needed to be taken out, in order to make the arsenal completely useless. Upham's strike force of eight battleships was here to do just that. Some forty seconds later, the U.S.S. MARYLAND was firing its first 406mm shell.

06:18 (Japan Time)

Sasebo Naval Arsenal

Hiro Nomura had been one of the few lucky engineers of the naval arsenal to come out unscathed from the terrifying bombardment that had wrecked the arsenal more than three weeks ago. Since then, he had been tasked to direct one of the cleanup work crews that had been laboring day and night to attempt to return the arsenal to some degree of functionality. He had argued then that what the arsenal needed was a complete rebuilding, a job that would take at a minimum close to two years, but the naval district commander had ordered him to shut up and get to it, so he had shut up and went to work, even though he believed that the work being done was close to useless: you didn't reactivate a naval arsenal just by shoveling away debris.

His night shift, with its some 200 laborers under his supervision, was about to be over when he had noticed the arrival on the horizon of a long line of large warships. From their department, he had quickly understood that they were not Japanese warships and had tried to lead away his workers as a precaution, but the young (and stupid in Hiro's opinion) naval officer watching the work crew had forbidden the men from leaving the site. That ensign, so typical of the kind of brainwashed young men coming out of the Imperial Naval Academy and of the Imperial Military Academy, had even drawn his sword and threatened Hiro with it when the latter had insisted. So, Hiro had kept his men working while mentally swearing at the young ensign. He however tensed up, now expecting the worse, on noticing a single biplane that had started to perform circles at medium altitude over the arsenal. He certainly got the worse three minutes later, when the first battleship shell came in with the noise of an approaching freight train and exploded some 300 meters away from Hiro but well within the limits of the naval arsenal. Crouching quickly first to avoid the blast of the explosion, he then got back up and shouted at the top of his lungs to the workers now frozen by fear.

“EVACUATE THE ARSENAL! EVACUATE NOW!”

The workers didn't hesitate for long to obey him and broke into a run, heading towards the nearby town. The naval ensign watching them and Hiro also reacted quickly, but not in the way common sense would have dictated. Running to Hiro and drawing out his sword, he pointed the tip of his blade at the naval engineer.

“RETURN TO WORK NOW! YOU DIDN'T GET PERMISSION TO LEAVE YET.”

“ARE YOU CRAZY? DON'T YOU REALISE THAT THOSE ENEMY SHIPS OFF SASEBO HAVE STARTED FIRING REGISTRATION FIRE ON THE ARSENAL? SOON, ANYONE STAYING HERE WILL BE KILLED!”

“YOUR WORDS ARE THOSE OF A COWARD! I WILL...”

BONK

The ensign collapsed, unconscious, at the feet of Hiro, unmasking one of the manual laborers of his work crew, who was holding a heavy steel shovel and who was smiling to him. The man was in his early fifties and Hiro knew him as a farmer who had been commandeered by the Navy to work at the arsenal.

“I believe that your decision to leave is the right one, Honorable Sir.”

“You are most right, good man. LEAVE NOW, MEN! RUN!”

Hiro then followed his own advice and started running as quickly as he could, just as a second shell landed and exploded within the arsenal's grounds. Two more minutes and the arsenal turned into a cauldron of raging, powerful explosions. The unconscious naval ensign didn't survive that bombardment, to Hiro's secret satisfaction, but his workers did.

After some 26 minutes of slow but steady and precise bombardment and over 900 406mm and 356mm shells expended, Admiral Upham decided that the job was now completed and ordered his task force of eight battleships and twelve destroyers to take speed and head towards its next objective, the Maizuru Naval Arsenal, situated on the western coast of Japan, near Kyoto. He knew that French battleships should be presently bombarding the crucial naval arsenal and naval base of Yokosuka, near Tokyo, and would then move south to the Kure Naval Arsenal, near Hiroshima. Once those four arsenals would be utterly reduced to rubble, Japan was then going to find itself incapable of replacing the warships it had lost in the last month. Ports, coastal industries and secondary naval bases would then be next targets for the combined

battleship guns of the French and American fleets, and that until most of the onboard ammunition will have been expended. After that, a trip to Indochina would follow, where the shell rooms of the battleships would be replenished. If by then Japan was still trying to fight and refused to surrender, another round of naval bombardment would follow...and another one...and another one, until common sense would prevail in Japan.



Soviet troops advancing against the Japanese Army in Manchuria.

CHAPTER 11 – MANCHURIA

05:46 (China Time)

Saturday, August 27, 1932

Road between Hailar and Tsitsihar, Manchukuo (Manchuria)

Northern China

The double file of tired and hungry Japanese soldiers had been following the muddy road to Tsitsihar all night, marching as fast as possible in order to escape the Soviet onslaught that had taken the men of the First Infantry Division completely by surprise a few days ago. With no prior signs of possible hostilities along the border between Mongolia and Manchukuo, the puppet state recently established by Japan in Manchuria, the sudden waves of Soviet armored vehicles, infantrymen and artillery guns had swept aside the border units of the Kwantung Army's Fourth Army, which was tasked with defending the northwest portion of Manchukuo. The 470 Japanese soldiers now withdrawing towards Tsitsihar were nearly all that was left of their regiment. One company had bravely stayed behind in order to block the enemy for as long as possible

and give a chance to the rest of the regiment to withdraw. However, that had not stopped Soviet planes from periodically bombing and strafing the columns of Japanese soldiers, gradually cutting their numbers down and forcing the remaining soldiers to abandon the severely wounded, who would have slowed the column down to a crawl. There were no trucks or other motor vehicles present in the column, as those had either been destroyed by Soviet fire, had broken down or had run out of fuel. Only a few officers still enjoyed the luxury of being on horseback. Most had stayed on their horses and kept yelling to their troops to march faster, but not Captain Kaito Imegushi, the senior surviving officer of the regiment slogging towards Tsitsihar. Instead of acting like too many Japanese officers, who typically treated their men like dirt, Imegushi had given his horse to a wounded man and was now marching at the head of his unit. His hope was to be able to join up with another unit, replenish his depleted ammunition supplies and form a new defensive line to block the Soviet advance towards Tsitsihar.

Arriving after another hour of march at a shallow stream where the road could be forded with only some forty centimeters of water up the men's legs, Captain Imegushi decided to make his men stop and rest under the cover of some sparse bushes once the stream was crossed. Letting first his men go fill their water bottles at the stream, he then told them to eat their last ration of cooked rice and dried fish: they would need all their strength to march the remaining distance from here to Tsitsihar. Leading his horse to the stream after the wounded man had been gently taken off it, Imegushi made the beast drink while he filled his own water bottle. Once it was full, he straightened up and observed carefully westward in the distance, trying to see if any Soviet unit was nearby. To his relief, he saw nothing. Guiding his horse to one of the bushes and tying its bridle to it, he finally sat down with a sign of relief: his feet were throbbing from the long march and he was positively famished. Taking out his own remaining ration, he started eating it cold, the way he and his men too often ate their food in the last few days. After his frugal meal was eaten, he called to him the four remaining junior officers of his unit, assembling them in front of him and speaking to them in a calm tone.

"Go around our men and check how much ammunition they have left on them. Do it quietly and don't interrupt their meal or their rest, then come back and report to me."

"HAY!" replied in unison the four lieutenants before dispersing. They were back some fifteen minutes later with news that were rather discouraging.

"Sir, most of the men have on average four clips of rifle ammunition on them, while some have even less. Only a handful of men still have a grenade or two."

"Hum, that's quite slim. Tell those that have more than one grenade to keep one and to give the rest to other soldiers around him. Pass as well the following directive: from now on, any man that will fall to Soviet fire must be stripped of his remaining ammunition by his comrades. Every bullet now counts."

"HAY!"

Kaito then laid down to rest a bit as his subalterns walked away. He used that time as well to think about his options. In truth, they were few. The harsh reality was that the Soviet Army had proven to be clearly superior to the Japanese Army in terms of equipment, firepower and mobility. In particular, the scarcity of anti-tank weapons in the Japanese arsenal, along with the small number and calibers of Japanese artillery pieces, had strongly played against Japanese soldiers, who had found themselves facing an onslaught by hundreds of Soviet light tanks and armored cars backed by a powerful and highly mobile field artillery. Contrary to the Japanese Army, where the mass of the infantry had no motor transportation, the Soviets had plenty of trucks to boost the mobility of their army. That had allowed them to quickly flank and envelop the Japanese units they encountered, cutting them off from their supply lines before pounding them with artillery fire.

Captain Kaito Imeguchi was about to order his men to resume their withdrawal walk when one of the sentries posted to watch westward suddenly shouted in alarm.

"CAVALRYMEN HAVE APPEARED TO OUR WEST!"

Grabbing his binoculars and raising them to his eyes, Kaito swore when he saw that the sentry was correct: three widely separated columns of cavalrymen were trotting towards him and his men. In turn, the reaction of those cavalrymen on seeing the Japanese told Kaito about their identity.

"Shit! Soviet cavalrymen! They are now splitting up to envelop both of our flanks. TAKE DEFENSIVE POSITIONS! ENEMY CAVALRY ADVANCING ON US!"

His men, despite their fatigue and throbbing feet, reacted at once, taking as much cover as they could get from the few dispersed bushes where they had been resting. On his part, Kaito ran to one of his few machine guns, which was being set up behind a bush, with only its barrel protruding out. Soon, Kaito was able to get more details about the enemy he was now facing.

“Cossacks! A whole regiment of them.” he said to himself in a disgusted tone. Japanese soldiers hated Soviet Cossack cavalymen for many reasons, but the main reason was the high mobility of the Soviet riders. Not needing fuel to move and making their tough horses live off the tundra, Cossack units had proven about as mobile as motorized units and, while often undisciplined, individual Cossacks were on average ferocious and dangerous combatants. Right now, that Cossack unit was apparently splitting up further, with cavalymen riding around both flanks of the Japanese infantry unit while keeping out of effective rifle range, while their central column was dismounting and forming a succession of skirmish lines, advancing on foot and at a crouch towards the Japanese. The one positive thing about them, in Kaito’s point of view, was that Cossacks rarely had radios with them. Thus, those Soviets were unlikely to be able to call up artillery fire or air support. Still, that left Kaito’s men outnumbered by more than four to one, with the enemy having as well a clear superiority in mobility. Understanding that withdrawing further was now impossible, Kaito resolved himself for a fight to the finish.

“DIG FOXHOLES AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN, MEN: WE ARE GOING TO STAND OUR GROUND!”

That order, far from making his soldiers panicky, reinforced their resolve and they started digging furiously with their short entrenching tool, which every Japanese infantryman carried as a standard piece of field kit.

Due to the distance at which both of the groups had spotted each other, the Japanese ended up having a good twelve minutes to dig until the first shots rang out. While still shallow, those holes did provide some precious cover and protection to the Japanese infantrymen.

“SLOW FIRE ONLY! DON’T WASTE ANY BULLET!” Shouted Kaito to his men, too conscious of how low in ammunition they were. In contrast, the Cossacks didn’t seem to have such a problem and were pouring a dense fire into the Japanese. The Cossacks were known to be expert riflemen, on top of being born horse riders, and quickly proved it by downing one Japanese after the other, most often with bullets to the head. Japanese fire was also lethal, with a few Cossacks going down at intervals as they advanced, but the 6.5mm TYPE 38 ARISAKA rifle, with its muzzle velocity being much lower than that of the Soviet 7.62mm Mosin-Nagant 1891/30 used by the Cossacks, lost the accuracy contest. The Soviet commander, seeing how low the

Japanese volume of fire was, correctly deduced that his enemy was low on ammunition and pushed forward his soldiers more aggressively. Soon, Soviet and Japanese soldiers were exchanging fire from a distance of less than 150 meters, with the shallow stream between them. Then, as Kaito had feared, Japanese soldiers started one by one to run out of bullets, with the Japanese positions falling silent as the Soviets were arriving within 100 meters. A grim Kaito holstered his NAMBU pistol and took out his sword before shouting an order.

“FIX BAYONET!”

Then, waiting for the Soviets to his front to get up and resume their advance, he jumped to his feet, his Katana sword held high.

“FOR THE EMPEROR! BANZAI!”

BANZAI!

The reaction of the Cossacks to this desperate charge was to stop, kneel and aim carefully their rifles before firing a devastating volley into the Japanese ranks of running soldiers. They had taken only a week or so to get accustomed to these Japanese bayonet charges and had by now developed an effective counter-tactic to it: basically, to stop and deliver a few well-aimed salvos into the masses of Japanese infantry, dropping most of them before they could get within bayonet range. Again, bullets proved superior to cold steel and, despite their bravery and fanaticism, Japanese soldiers fell by the dozen, wounded or dead. A grand total of 57 Japanese managed to stay alive until they arrived within bayonet-range of their enemies, but those 57 brave men then found themselves fighting with over 430 Cossacks and, while inflicting some losses to the Soviets with their bayonets, were quickly overwhelmed and killed. Captain Kaito Imeguchi fell on his face a mere twelve paces from the first Cossacks facing him, shot up with three bullets. A Cossack officer then finished him with a pistol shot to the head and a hateful declaration.

“Here is for all the Russians you massacred in Shanghai, you bastard!”



The Élysée Palace, official residence of the President of France.

CHAPTER 12 – ABUSE OF POWER

11:02 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, August 30, 1932

Department of Army Weapons Technical Direction

French War Ministry, Paris

France

“Can’t you accelerate on reopening that reserve production line? Our ammunition stocks are quickly evaporating with all that shooting in China... Okay, I will tell General Lemieux. Do your best in the meantime.”

The department administrator of the Army Weapons Technical Direction had barely time to put down his telephone receiver when five men entered his office, apparently introduced in by his secretary. The functionary rose from his chair to greet them.

“Yes, gentlemen? What may I do for you?”

The leading man stepped forward and offered his right hand while answering him.

“Good morning, Monsieur Daoust! My name is Alphonse Pinault, Aide to Prime Minister Herriot. I was told that you were the one in charge of explosives production for the Army.”

“Among other things, Monsieur Pinault.”

“Good! I came here on the request of the Prime Minister and am escorting those four gentlemen from the Soviet Ministry of Defense, who came to France to learn about the production process of our Metallex explosive. Could you get them copies of the chemical process we use to produce Metallex?”

Fernand Daoust felt both alarm and suspicion at once: Despite having been in production at French state arsenals since 1912, Metallex high explosive was still classified as a national secret, with complete interdiction to export it to other countries.

“Monsieur Pinault, I need to remind you that the formula and the production process of Metallex are classified ‘Secret, For French Eyes Only’. It cannot be exported to any other country and is for use only by French forces. To make an exception to those rules, I would need the express, signed permission of both the Minister of War and of Miss Tasha Lenoir, the scientist who invented Metallex in 1912. Do you have such permissions?”

From amiable, the expression on Pinault’s face changed to annoyed.

“No, but we came under the authority of the Prime Minister in person, who made a promise to the Soviet government to help them develop their own Metallex production line. Since the Soviet Union is the ally of France in the war against China, the need for this should be obvious, no?”

“Maybe, but the security rules concerning the secret of Metallex are very strict and cannot be broken. Even if Minister Boncourt signed up on this, you would still need to get the written approval of Miss Lenoir, the inventor of Metallex. When she gave us the formula of Metallex and allowed us to produce it in our state arsenals, it was under the express condition that only French forces would have access to Metallex and that it would never be exported or its production license given to another country. Any violation of those contract clauses would result in the immediate loss for us of the production license for Metallex, which would revert to being the exclusive property of Miss Tasha Lenoir.”

“But, that’s nonsense! We are at war! Do we really let a simple woman dictate our defense policies?”

"In this case, yes, Monsieur Pinault! I am sorry, but I will have to refer this to a higher authority."

Daoust was reaching for his telephone receiver when Pinault took a step forward.

"Do you realize what could happen to you by contradicting like this the express will of the Prime Minister? Who are you calling?"

Daoust gave the aide a dubious look, not intimidated one bit.

"Rules are rules, especially where army weapons are concerned. I am calling Major General Lemieux, the head of the Army Weapons Department."

"Screw General Lemieux! Prime Minister Herriot can replace him at will, like he can replace you in an instant."

Now fully on his guards, Daoust eyed hard the political aide.

"Mister Pinault, I find your insistence on this subject highly suspect. If you threaten me further, I will have to call in security."

That shut up Pinault long enough for Daoust to get General Lemieux on the line. On hearing what was going on, Lemieux became angry.

"I don't care what this political hack says. Exporting such an important military secret as the formula and production process of Metallex would have been first discussed between me, Minister Boncourt and Miss Lenoir before anyone would have gone to see you. This reeks of political opportunism. Tell these men to come and see me but don't give them any classified information on Metallex. In the meantime, I will advise Monsieur Noël, of the Sûreté Générale, of this irregularity."

"Understood, General." replied Daoust before hanging up and looking frostily at Pinault and at the four Soviets.

"General Lemieux is expecting you in his office, gentlemen. I am sorry, but I can't help you."

"Your obtuseness will be reported to the Prime Minister, mister." spat Pinault before leaving with his followers.

Before Pinault's group could negotiate the long corridors of the War Ministry and arrive at General Lemieux's office, the latter had the time to place a quick call to Léon Noël, whose Sûreté Générale was in charge of protecting state secrets and installations, and to place a second call afterwards. The response he got on that second call was definitely not a happy one.

"WHAT? I never gave my consent to give to the Soviets the formula of my Metallex explosive. They would be in fact about the last people I would want to get that formula. General, I can assure you that the Prime Minister never approached me on this subject and that nobody asked for my consent on this. This, in my opinion, is a very dangerous development and deserves to be taken very seriously. When those people will get to your office, tell them that I refuse to allow my Metallex to be exported to the U.S.S.R. or to give them its formula. If anything, I would suggest that the security around the plants producing Metallex should be reinforced. The Soviets may try to get clandestinely what they couldn't get by political means."

"I agree, Miss Lenoir. Uh, do you have any idea why Prime Minister Herriot would try such a stunt, miss?"

"Yes! Crudely speaking, our good Prime Minister is a communist stooge and an ass-licker of the Soviets. He believes everything that Party Secretary Trotsky tells him and wishes to introduce communist policies and practices in France. To be frank, I still don't understand what the French voters were thinking when they elected him and his clique."

"Well, me neither. Be assured that I will be firm with his aide, Miss Lenoir. Have a good day."

At the other end of the line, in Buc, Tasha Lenoir was pensive as she put down her telephone receiver. Of all the inventions that she had made the French government benefit from, that of the Metallex explosive was easily the most sensitive one, no puns intended. The destructive power of Metallex was so great, being 3.6 times that of TNT at equal weight, that she simply could not face the possibility that its secret could spread around the World. War was already a terrible thing, but war on a world scale with the general use of Metallex by all combatants would be beyond terrible. In fact, only a nuclear war could top such horror. She thus just could not take any chances that the secret of Metallex could be passed to such an unscrupulous, uncaring bunch as the present Soviet government, simply because the French Prime Minister was a communist stooge. This was clearly a good time to fully use her considerable hidden political powers, she thought while composing a new number.

17:04 (Paris Time)

Office of the President of the Republic

Golden Room, Élysée Palace

55 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, 8th Arrondissement

Paris

Édouard Herriot was hiding his irritation as he was being introduced in the study of the President of the Republic: no doubt that this last minute call for him to come to the Élysée Palace had to do with the raucus raised by his aide's visit to the War Ministry this morning. He certainly had not expected the strong reaction that had come from that visit, which he had expected to go with little or no trouble. However, according to Pinault, he had slammed into a particularly obtuse and rule-bound functionary, who had then called his superior in the ministry, thus starting this whole thing. Inside the Golden Room, he found President Albert Lebrun sitting behind his polished work desk, a stern expression on his face. Notably, Lebrun stayed sitting and didn't come to him to greet him, instead speaking to Herriot in a cold voice as a valet closed the door of the office behind Herriot.

"Prime Minister Herriot, I was informed that you sent your aide to the War Ministry, along with four Soviet explosives experts, where they tried to obtain copies of a chemical process that is classified 'Secret, For French Eyes Only'. Is that true?"

"It is, Mister President, but I can easily explain why I sent him there."

"Then, go on!"

Taking first the liberty of sitting down on a chair near the President's work desk, the short but solidly built Herriot then spoke up, his tone assured.

"Mister President, the Soviets are presently fighting our common enemy, Japan, and are helping distract the attention of many Japanese divisions that otherwise would have gone down to Shanghai to oppose our units there. By allowing the Soviets to be able to produce their own Metallex explosives, we would multiply the efficiency of their forces and thus also increase their ability to help our own forces in China. It is as simple as that, Mister President."

"Then, why go by such a sneaky way as in this morning, instead of following the official procedure to have a secret declassified? Well, I will tell you why: because you would have been rebuffed, and for very good reasons. Yes, the Soviets are presently our allies against the Japanese, but their policies also are often the opposite of ours and,

whether you accept that reality or not, the fact is that the Soviet Union is presently a one-party state and a dictatorship. Once we give the secret of Metallex to the Soviets, then there will be no way to reverse the results of that. Metallex has ensured French military dominance against our adversaries for twenty years now. It gave our forces the superior firepower that allowed us to crush the Prussians in 1914, thus saving our country from being invaded and occupied. It also helped us sink a British battle fleet when it tried to rob us of our just portions of our spoils of war in 1915. More recently, our Metallex-filled missiles, shells and bombs helped our navy to sink the bulk of the Japanese Navy and to obliterate Japanese command centers in Japan, thus saving us from possibly losing Indochina to a Japanese invasion. Us having the exclusive use of Metallex-filled munitions ensures the long-term security of France against all its enemies, present and future ones. That is why the formula and production process of Metallex is still a French state secret and will stay so forever, Prime Minister Herriot.”

“Aren’t you exaggerating the importance of that Metallex, Mister President?”

“Not one bit, Herriot. You know that I was educated as a mining engineer. As such, I know and understand well the power of explosives and their use. As War Minister in 1913, I was one of the few politicians and officials who watched a comparative demonstration of the power of Metallex against dynamite and TNT and that demonstration deeply impressed me. Well, I am not ready to let such a powerful weapon become available to a foreign government as unpredictable as that of the Soviet Union. That you tried to give to the Soviets the secrets of Metallex via such a sneaky way proves to me that you perfectly understood the implications of your actions and that you consciously chose to favor your sympathies for a foreign government over the long-term security of France. Coming from a common French citizen, I would call that ‘treason’. Coming from the Prime Minister of France, I call that ‘high treason’. I thus relieve you of your post as Prime Minister and dissolve your cabinet as of today. Furthermore, I have asked the Sûreté Générale to bring legal charges of high treason against you. Consider yourself assigned to residence until the start of your trial for high treason.”

Suddenly red with anger and fury, Herriot jumped on his feet and shouted at Lebrun.

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT! YOU DON’T HAVE THE LEGAL AUTHORITY TO DO SUCH THINGS AND RELIEVE ME AS PRIME MINISTER. ONCE THE PARLIAMENT WILL LEARN ABOUT THIS, IT WILL BE YOU WHO WILL BE THROWN OUT!”

Lebrun’s reaction was to look up at him with barely disguised contempt.

"I don't think so, Herriot. The leaders of both the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies have been briefed by me on this affair just before your arrival here and agreed with me that your actions have made you unfit to be Prime Minister of France. An interim Prime Minister will be named by me until new national elections can be arranged. You may now go to your private residence, but the Hôtel Matignon, being the official residence of the Prime Minister of France, is now out of bounds for you. And please don't try to leave France."

That was all too much for Herriot, who was a man easily angered. Shouting his rage, he charged Lebrun's desk like an angry bull, intent on going around it to grab the President by his collar. That was when Lebrun raised his right hand, unmasking the small, strangely shaped pistol he had been hiding under his desk. The pistol simply produced a weak buzzing noise for half a second, but that was enough to send Herriot crashing nose first on the carpet, knocked out cold by Lebrun's stun pistol. The President was contemplating the unconscious Herriot when the director of the Sûreté Générale, Léon Noël, rushed in the President's office with a stun pistol in his hand and with two presidential bodyguards right behind him. Noël had one quick look at the inert Herriot before eyeing with concern Lebrun.

"Are you alright, Mister President?"

"Yes, my good Noël. Decidedly, this little pistol is amazingly effective : Herriot never had a chance to touch me at all."

"Well, Miss Lenoir's inventions rarely disappoint, I must say."

"Indeed! Since he tried to attack me physically, I suppose that Herriot is now going straight to a cell."

"Definitely, Mister President. Jacques, Paul, pick up Herriot and cuff him, then bring him to the cells at the Sûreté."

Noël watched with Lebrun as the unconscious Herriot was carried out of the office, then looked at the President.

"The political repercussions of this affair could be severe, even though your actions were perfectly legal and justified. For one thing, a new cabinet will have to be formed and a new Prime Minister named. Since we are presently at war with Japan, France cannot afford to be without a government for very long. May I ask who you have in mind to replace Herriot, Mister President?"

"The first name that comes to my mind is that of Gaston Doumergue, my predecessor as President just before the short tenure of Paul Doumer. While he is now

officially retired from politics, he still is a very popular man in France and is well respected by all. However, if he accepts to become interim Prime Minister, he will still have to name a cabinet that will be both effective and acceptable to the Chamber of Deputies. That is not going to be an easy job.”

A crazy idea then came to the mind of Léon Noël, who gave a mysterious smile to Lebrun.

“Mister President, I just had an idea that could help Doumergue in his new job...if he accepts it, of course.”

“Go on!” said Lebrun, immediately interested to hear that idea.

09:59 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, August 31, 1932

Town hall plaza, town of Tournefeuille

West of Toulouse, High Garonne District

Southern France

The few people present in the downtown plaza of the small town of Tournefeuille, which counted just over 900 inhabitants, had to move out of the way when a SUPER COLIBRI approached for a vertical landing. Those Tournefeuille citizens were then able to see that the aircraft was painted the colors of the French government service. Only seconds after landing on the pavements of the plaza, the rear cargo ramp of the VSTOL transport was lowered and a big, shiny black Kruger PRESTIGE limousine with a small French flag flying from its front right corner slowly rolled out of the aircraft. It took up speed as soon as it was off the ramp and then drove down one of the streets connected to the plaza. Mere minutes later, the limousine stopped in front of a large but modest-looking house situated on the outer edge of the small town.

Jeanne-Marie Doumergue was washing a few fresh vegetables she had just picked up in her small garden when she saw through the window of her kitchen a big limousine stop in front of the house. She immediately stopped her work and turned around to shout at her husband, who was reading the morning newspaper in their lounge.

“GASTON, YOUR VISITORS ARE HERE.”

“I WILL TAKE CARE OF THEM. THANK YOU!”

Gaston Doumergue, a small man who was now 69 years old, hurried to the main door to receive his visitors, who had called him last night to warn him that they would come today. Gaston gave President Lebrun one of his typical affable smiles for which he was famous.

"Mister President, I am truly pleased by your visit. I am however a bit surprised by the presence of Miss Lenoir and Miss Hien with you and Director Noël."

"They came at my request, Gaston. I am afraid that we have to discuss things that are both urgent and highly sensitive. Do you have a place where we could talk in strict intimacy?"

"Of course! Follow me to my private study. Would you like my wife to bring us something to drink, tea, coffee or wine?"

"Maybe later, Gaston. Thank you for the offer."

"Then, this way, please."

The group of three men and two women then went up to Doumergue's private study on the upper floor of the house, a small room with a view on the farmers' fields bordering the town. The ex-president excused himself with a smile as he brought extra chairs in the small study.

"I am sorry if my study is a bit tight for a group meeting: this house actually belongs to my wife Jeanne-Marie, so I had to take whatever room was available for my private study. Requisitioning my wife's own study would have been rude...and ill advised."

Tasha grinned at his last sentence.

"Aaah, a man who is sensitive to his wife's needs and wishes: I like that!"

Doumergue nodded his head in response while taking place in his work chair behind his desk. He then gave a sober look to Lebrun.

"So, what is happening, Albert? The President of the Republic does not normally pay visits like this one to retired politicians, unless something important is at stake. That you came with the biggest private employer in France only reinforces my suspicions."

"You are right, my friend: something important and also worrying happened yesterday in Paris. Basically, I was forced to have Herriot arrested on charges of high treason."

That made Doumergue stiffen in his chair, while his eyes widened.

"My God! What did he do?"

“He tried to give French state secrets to the Soviets.”

Lebrun then spent some two minutes to explain the events of the preceding day in Paris, both at the War Ministry and at the Presidential Office. That left Doumergue shaking slowly his head in disbelief.

“I knew that he was enamored of the Soviets, but to try to give them the secret of Metallex... That certainly qualifies as high treason in my books, especially now, while we are at war with Japan. So, you need me to become Prime Minister and form a new cabinet, that's it?”

“Yes, if you accept, of course. However, the constant ministerial instability that we have witnessed in the last few years tells me that the way ministerial cabinets were formed is flawed and needs to be changed. We tried many times to create some kind of national political unity by forming ministerial cabinets with members coming from the various parties represented in Parliament. However, those cabinets too often ended up being dysfunctional, because the ministers all had different opinions on how to do things, or refused to listen to each other. That in turn resulted in governments that too often stood for only a few months to a year before having to be dissolved and replaced. Hell, since the start of 1930, the country has seen no less than seven different governments. This is no proper way to govern France, especially in a time of war.”

“First off, I accept to take the post of Prime Minister. Next, what do you propose that we do about the cabinet, Albert? We can't just ignore the political reality in the Chamber of Deputies, which is pretty much controlled by leftist parties at this time.”

“What I believe should be done would be to form a more homogenous cabinet with ministers who would collaborate and communicate with each other, instead of each following their personal beliefs and methods. Some non-political ministers could also be named to add true expertise in the domain of their ministries.”

“Is that last point why you brought Miss Lenoir and Miss Hien with you on this visit?”

“Not really, Gaston. Both of those ladies are already very busy administering and directing important sectors of our private economy, while Miss Lenoir also spends much of her time doing advanced scientific research, research that has greatly helped France to become the most advanced nation on Earth. However, they could advise you from time to time, using their, uh, ‘special and unique experience’, to help you find innovative solutions to political or economic problems.”

That made Doumergue, who knew about Tasha's and Hien's big secret, look sharply at Léon Noël.

"And Monsieur Noël, does he know..."

"He does, Gaston." answered Tasha Lenoir. "I revealed my secret to him two months ago, after I provided to the French security services my new stun pistol. You can thus discuss freely with him that aspect of me and of my three friends."

"Good! That will simplify a lot this conversation. Do you already have some recommendations or counsels in mind for me, Miss Lenoir?"

"I do have a few, Gaston, and please, simply call me Tasha."

"Very well, Tasha."

"Excellent! First, I would caution you not to forget that the World is presently going through a severe economic depression. While France has up to now been able to avoid the kind of economic and financial troubles that the Americans, Germans, British and many others are experiencing, our national economy is not immune to that depression. One way to keep avoiding that depression is to continue with our present interventionist policies of public works and vigorous exportation of our goods. The Americans have made the mistake of cutting their government expenditures to the bone while attempting to keep to a balanced budget. In reality, they are only fuelling more unemployment and plant closures. They further worsened their situation with their stupid import tariffs, which only resulted in retaliatory tariffs by the other nations of the World. Furthermore, they still haven't understood fully how their lax banking regulations and policies contributed to the creation of that depression and have yet to tighten those banking and stock trading regulations. On the interior front in France, don't lose sight of the expectations of the average French citizen: keep them happy and employed while helping the more unfortunates via social measures and you will avoid the kinds of riots and workers strikes the other countries of Europe are experiencing these days. I know that this sounds quite like the policies advocated by leftist and socialist parties here in France, but I happen to personally believe in them: trying to satisfy only the higher classes of your society always end up badly. Practicing social policies will also keep the French leftist parties off your back...mostly. On foreign affairs, be firm and pass the interests of France first and foremost. The present fighting in China may be a big burden for the French treasury, but we must fight it to the finish and ensure that Japan will no longer be able to represent a danger to us or to our overseas colonies in the

Pacific. That's it in a nutshell for the moment, but don't hesitate to call me or Hien whenever you will need new advices from us."

Doumergue, like Lebrun, nodded his head while listening to Tasha.

"All sound advice, Tasha. I will do my best to beat it inside the brains of my future cabinet ministers. Uh, can you tell us something about what you know about the next future years of France. What else can our country expect in the next decade or so?"

"I am sorry, Gaston, but the historical files we had with us when we were accidentally transported to the year 1912, instead of the Paris of the year 2624, were very limited and vague. Those files predict a world war that was supposed to be triggered by Germany in 1939, but the way the First World War played out for us, going on for only six months and ending with the crushing of Germany, did change many of the parameters that would otherwise lead to a war in 1939. Germany is still a demilitarized state and the main German troublemakers who would have caused this war are either dead or out of the game. On the other hand, we have a Soviet Union under Party Secretary Leon Trotsky that advocates the exportation of the Bolshevik Revolution to the 'bourgeois' countries of the World. That Soviet Union is by the way very different from what our historical files said about the U.S.S.R. in this century, so I would be hard pressed to tell you what to expect from it today. As for Japan, it basically started its war with China as predicted, but has now managed through the arrogance and thirst for power of its militarist leaders to find itself alone in China while fighting the Chinese, us, the Americans and the Soviets. Its military power is already mostly gone at sea and in the air and its army in China is now cut off from Japan and fighting with dwindling reserves of ammunition and fuel. By the time that we are finished with it, Japan will no longer be able to start a war across Asia and the Pacific in 1941, as originally predicted by history. However, all this does not mean that France will not face other possible wars in the near to medium future. We will thus have to insure that France stays a dominant military power for the foreseeable future, partly through my inventions. Now, Gaston, I would have one wish about your future foreign policies and that of the other French governments to follow."

"And what would that be, my friend?"

"To see France rule its colonies with leniency, care and good administration, while progressively letting them become independent. One thing that should be done would be a tighter check by Paris on the conduct of the various governors administering

our colonies overseas. Right now, those governors are pretty much free to act as they wish, within the constraints of their budgets, and this has on occasions resulted in either abuses, neglect of the local populations, misguided policies or outright mismanagement. One example of that is French Indochina, where some of the recent governors acted pretty much like local kings and paid little regard to the welfare of the locals. I personally believe that the populations of our colonies should be treated with as much care and respect as French citizens here in France. Many in France would be incensed by such a notion, but believe me on this: all of France's colonies will eventually gain their independence, either through a gradual softening of France's controlling hand, or through violent insurrections. This process will take many decades either way, but eventually letting go those colonies as friendly states with established commercial and cultural links with France will be so much better than waiting and see France losing them after bloody conflicts, with our troops forced out. If done well and in an organized, well planned manner, France will only come out stronger and safer, with precious regional allies around the World and a strong, worldwide commercial network that would benefit everyone. Call me a dreamer and an idealist, but that is what I truly believe to be the best long-term outcome for France."

Doumergue, like Lebrun and Noël, were silent for a moment while staring at Tasha, shocked to various degrees by her 'wish'. President Lebrun was the one to finally speak up.

"Tasha, your words mark you as a true humanist and your wish is a most positive one indeed, but I am afraid that you are severely underestimating the degree of hostility to which many French citizens would react to your words. Don't take me wrong: I am not a racist and like this idea of eventually nurturing our colonies to peaceful independence, but I am also a realist. Right now, implementing such a program would be tantamount to political suicide for any administration that would attempt this."

"Could we at the least start taking better care of those colonies, and I don't mean by that to help the French settlers there become richer on the back of the locals? How about finally spending some proper sums on building infrastructures like roads, railways and bridges, extend good education and schools to the locals and build manufactures that would provide them good jobs? Take for example Indochina. We are presently using it as a base of operation to prosecute our war against Japan. The Vietnamese are a proud, hard working people who are as intelligent as any of us, despite what racists would say, and they are presently contributing to our war effort. Yet, are we building in

exchange new infrastructures there that would both help our war effort and also contribute in helping the long-term development of the local economy? Well, I will tell you this: if this government doesn't do it, then I will, using my own money and resources."

"You could sink most of your fortune on such projects and end up with little return for it, Tasha." cautioned Lebrun. In response, Tasha looked at him with a resolute expression.

"Well, that would be MY money to spend I believe, Albert."



Tank on the move.

CHAPTER 13 – OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENTS

06:22 (China Time)

Tuesday, September 6, 1932

Region of Kalgan, 200 kilometers northwest of Beijing

Republic of China (occupied territory)

The two Chinese communist soldiers had been very careful in staying well hidden behind bushes and long grass while observing the Japanese Army fortified camp some 300 meters from them. The bulk of the People's Eight Army, to which they belong, was still quite a long way to the South, marching hard towards Kalgan with the intent of retaking that city. The job of the two Chinese fighters was simple but crucial: to find and report on the Japanese Army units standing in the way of the People's Eight Army's advance towards Kalgan. For such a job, discretion was certainly a lot more important than valor. As the old saying went, 'dead men tell no tales'.

"How many Japanese do you think that this camp contains, Zhou?"

"From the number of tents visible in the camp, I would say a minimum of 2,000 men, Li: it probably is the camp of an infantry regiment. I don't like the way the Japanese fortified their camp with lines of trenches and barbed wire: it would cost our forces dearly to take it."

The two communist soldiers had started sketching a rudimentary map of the camp when a growing noise made them tense up.

“What’s that?”

“Uh, I don’t know, Zhou: I never heard such a noise before. It is however growing rapidly and seems to be coming from the Southeast.”

Both soldiers looked in that direction, only to understand after a few more seconds that the noise was coming from the sky. That excited at once the two scouts: Japanese planes had been rare these last few days and there were rumors that French planes had started a couple of weeks ago to bomb Japanese forces in Northern China and Manchuria. Hoping that the small dots now visible in the sky would turn out to be French aircraft, the two scouts nearly shouted in joy when it became evident that the planes, eleven of them, were preparing to attack the Japanese camp. Completely enthralled, the Chinese watched with glee as the planes, fast and menacing ones with two propellers each, split up to form three parallel files and dove at a slight angle towards the Japanese camp. Then, as the eleven planes started overflying the camp, where alarmed Japanese soldiers were now running out of their tents, dozens of what looked like streamlined fuel tanks dropped in sequence off the aircraft. Instead of exploding on impact, as the two Communist soldiers expected, the tanks instead burst out in a series of gigantic fireballs which rolled on the ground and covered wide areas before gradually changing into huge rising clouds of thick black smoke, with the whole thing accompanied by a mighty noise of rolling thunder. Under the ecstatic eyes of the Communist soldiers, hundreds of Japanese soldiers running towards their defensive trenches were enveloped by the rolling balls of fire and burned alive, or were asphyxiated when the oxygen in the air was consumed by the flames. The Communist soldiers could not contain their joy at that spectacle and shouted out in triumph. Thankfully for them, none of the surviving Japanese soldiers noticed them before the planes came back for a second attack pass. This time, the planes fired volleys of rockets, targeting the few hard buildings of the camp plus the vehicle park and the ammunition dump. All those disappeared in multiple powerful explosions, with the ammunition dump in particular being turned into a spectacular display of fireworks. Just as the two Chinese soldiers thought that the planes were finished and would fly away, they turned for a third attack on the camp. This time, they fired their internal guns, which appeared quite powerful, judging from their muzzle flashes and their explosive shells. Those shells peppered and ripped apart

hundreds more Japanese soldiers, many of whom were vainly firing at the planes with their rifles. When the aircraft did fly away, their ammunition expended, there was little left of the camp, with only some 200 bewildered Japanese soldiers having somewhat survived the attack. Noting that down on their sketch, the two Chinese soldiers then cautiously retreated deeper into the vegetation, anxious to give the good news to their commander.

14:18 (China Time)

Thursday, September 8, 1932

Quai de France, port of Shanghai

China

Major Alexander Vandegrift looked on happily as fresh U.S. marines were coming down the gangway linking the Quai de France and the troopship THEODORE ROOSEVELT. With this fourth marine company now arriving, plus replacements for his battle casualties, his battalion was at last going to be at full strength. Another plus that had come on the THEODORE ROOSEVELT were the motor vehicles for his battalion, which had to leave them behind when they had travelled by air from Los Angeles to the Philippines, then to the French aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE. A first lieutenant in his mid twenties who had disembarked first came straight to Vandegrift and, stopping at attention in front of him, saluted him while announcing himself in a firm voice.

"First Lieutenant Samuel Griffith, arriving with Heavy Weapons Company of Second Battalion, Fourth U.S. Marine Regiment, sir!"

Vandegrift returned Griffith's salute before shaking his hand.

"Welcome to Shanghai, Lieutenant Griffith. How many marines did you bring with you from the United States?"

"I have brought the 174 men of the Heavy Weapons Company, plus 76 replacements for your combat casualties, sir. There is also a full motor transport company and a vehicle maintenance platoon, along with their vehicles and stocks of spare parts, aboard the THEODORE ROOSEVELT, sir."

"Excellent! The few 'Bugs' the French gave us provided us truly sterling services, but we were sorely short of heavy vehicles."

"'Bugs', sir?"

Vandegrift smiled at the understandable confusion of the young officer and pointed at the nearby Kruger COCCINELLE in which he had come to the Quai de France.

"That is a 'Bug', Lieutenant: a Kruger COCCINELLE All Terrain Vehicle, or ATV. This marvelous little thing can go anywhere, in either mud, sand, swamps or even water, as it is fully amphibious. It also happen to be resistant to bullets. Our marines positively love it. The French, or rather Miss Tasha Lenoir, the owner of the Lenoir Industries Consortium, gave us twelve of these bugs when we arrived from the States."

Griffith took a few seconds to look at the COCCINELLE before smiling to Vandegrift.

"It does look like a nifty vehicle, sir. Is the Corps planning to buy some more of these?"

"I sure hope so! The COCCINELLE is a great little vehicle. I would love to own one myself for my hunting trips in the States. I suspect that it would become extremely popular if put on sale in the United States."

"I bet, sir! You will be pleased to learn that the First Marine Brigade has started to pull out of Haiti and is urgently being reorganized for shipment to China, sir."

"That is definitely great news, Lieutenant." Said Vandegrift, smiling. "The fighting against the Japanese has been hard and intense and we certainly can use more marines here in China."

"Oh, by the way, sir, I have a message for you from the Corps Commandant." Taking the bulging envelope offered to him by Griffith and opening it, Vandegrift extracted and unfolded a single sheet of paper, which had been wrapped around a small box. Vandegrift's smile then turned into a grin as he read the short message.

"Major General Fuller is promoting me to lieutenant colonel, effective as of the First of September. YES! Could you help me pin those new rank insignias on my collar, Lieutenant? I would hate to go around improperly dressed."

"With pleasure, sir."

As Griffith was changing the collar insignias on Vandegrift's combat shirt, he asked a question in a low voice.

"Uh, how are those French soldiers, sir? Are they good fighters?"

Vandegrift answered him in a most sober tone and expression.

"Those French are true professionals, Lieutenant. Don't believe the bar talk about them. Their naval infantry is excellent, while their Foreign Legionnaires are some of the toughest, roughest bastards I ever saw. Most importantly, their equipment and weapons are top notch and make us look like a bunch of Stone Age paupers. You

should see one day the aviation cruiser our battalion was on: it truly is a technological marvel. Apart from being heavily armed with guns and missiles, the REDOUTABLE can carry a whole infantry regiment and its equipment, on top of carrying and operating over forty aircraft.”

“Does it look like that ship over there, sir?”

Vandegrift looked at the big French ship that had docked just after the THEODORE ROOSEVELT at the Quai de France and which was now lowering two side cargo ramps down on the quay.

“No! The PAS DE CALAIS, while having some similarities with the REDOUTABLE, is not an aviation cruiser. The French actually classify it as an amphibious transport ship. I was told that it is bringing to Shanghai a regiment of the French Second Armored Division.”

“An armored division? What’s that, sir?”

“Beats me! I guess that we will soon be able to see by ourselves, Lieutenant. In the meantime, have your troops wait along the promenade while our vehicles are coming out of the THEODORE ROOSEVELT. Once those have been unloaded, you will have our men climb into them. I will then guide your company to your designated barracks in Shanghai.”

“Yes sir!”

Seven American trucks had been put down on the quay by the cranes of the THEODORE ROOSEVELT when the rumble of a powerful engine and the noise of steel tracks made Vandegrift and his marines snap their heads towards the PAS DE CALAIS. Lieutenant Griffith’s eyes opened wide when he saw the vehicle that was now rolling out of the amphibious transport ship and slowly going down one of its side cargo ramps.

“Holy shit! What is that?”

“I don’t know, but it sure looks like a mean beast to me.” replied Vandegrift, as impressed as Griffith, while exclamations and remarks went up and down the ranks of the marines waiting for their trucks. What they saw was a tracked vehicle bigger than anything they had seen before. On top of being obviously very heavy, judging from the way the whole quay vibrated once the vehicle started rolling on it, it sported a huge gun with a long barrel that protruded past the front of the hull. Furthermore, that big gun was carried in a kind of armored box with highly sloped side walls, with the box itself being suspended about two feet over the hull, supported by a pair of steel pillars. The way that

the vehicle accelerated sharply once it was on firm ground and rolled on the Bund showed that it had plenty of engine power for its weight. As more similar vehicles followed the first one out of the transport ship, Vandegrift told Griffith to continue with the unloading of their trucks, then walked to the first French tracked armored vehicle, which had stopped on the Bund and had parked to wait for the other armored vehicles. Vandegrift arrived at the vehicle as a French officer was coming out by an armored hatch situated under the suspended box containing its gun. He saluted the officer, who wore the rank insignias of a lieutenant colonel, getting a salute in return, then spoke to him in his best French.

“Good afternoon, Colonel. I’m Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vandegrift, in command of the Second Battalion of the Fourth Regiment of the United States Marine Corps. May I ask what is this most impressive beast?”

The French officer smiled with pride at the words ‘most impressive beast’ and jumped on the ground to come to Vandegrift and shake his hand. He then proved to be able to speak a very decent English.

“Lieutenant Colonel Charles Delestraint, Commander of the 505th Tank Regiment, itself part of the Second Armored Division. This is a Hotchkiss-Clarkson C-1 main battle tank, the workhorse of our armored units.”

“Wait! Did you say ‘Hotchkiss-Clarkson’?”

“Yes! Why do you ask?”

“Because the pilot of the transport aircraft in which me and some of my marines landed next to the American consulate was named Clarkson. She is a black woman and told me that she was a weapons systems engineer.”

Delestraint nodded slowly his head in comprehension.

“Miss Terry Clarkson is well known to me, since she is the co-designer of the C-1 and of many of the vehicles and weapons we use in the French Army. She designed the gun turret system for our C-1. We discussed armored vehicle designs once and she is certainly very competent in that domain, on top of being extremely creative. Since unloading the tanks and infantry combat vehicles of my regiment will take some time, I will give you a little tour of my C-1. First, its main armament is a high velocity 100mm, 45 caliber Model 1930 gun, mounted in what we call an ‘overhang oscillating turret’. Since there are no crewmembers inside the oscillating part of the turret, the gun is fed via an automated loading system with 36 rounds ready to fire, with 58 more 100mm rounds stowed inside the hull, at the rear. The C-1 also has a coaxial 25mm automatic

cannon, a coaxial 7mm machine gun, one 7mm bow machine gun and a total of six smoke grenade dischargers, which allow us to rapidly deploy a thick smoke screen in front of the vehicle. The C-1 has a crew of four: the commander and the gunner, who sit inside the turret basket, and the driver and bow gunner, who sit forward next to the engine. That engine is a turbo-charged Salmson triple row 27-cylinder radial, rated to a maximum of 1,100 horsepower, which is in turn connected to a dynamo that feeds electricity to two geared electric motors situated inside the sprocket wheels. We call that an 'electric drive' and it provides a very smooth piloting of the tank compared to traditional mechanical clutch and brake gearboxes of other tracked vehicles, which tend to jerk while turning. With its high power to weight ratio and wide tracks, the C-1 is very fast and agile despite its combat weight of 36,400 kilos and can attain road speeds of eighty kilometers per hour, or fifty miles per hour for you Americans."

"This weighs over 36 tons? How thick is the armor on this beast?"

"I am sorry, but that figure is actually classified. However, I can tell you that its thickness and sloping makes the C-1 next to invulnerable to all non-French antitank weapons known today. The Japanese are going to shit in their pants when they will see it in action."

"And how many of these...tanks do you have in your regiment, Colonel Delestraint?"

"Ninety-eight C-1s, plus eighteen specialized variants used either for towing broken vehicles, bridging rivers and streams and remove obstacles. For this mission in China, a regiment of mechanized infantry and an artillery regiment have also been sent and should arrive tomorrow on another amphibious transport ship. Would you like to have a look inside?"

"Sure!" replied immediately Vandegrift, jumping on the offer. Delestraint then led him to the front left corner of the tank and climbed on it, stepping on one of the road wheels to do so and then helping Vandegrift climb atop the hull. The latter immediately noticed the highly inclined surfaces of the tank, very few of which were at the vertical. Delestraint then pointed a sort of small, compact mini-turret on the front right side, from which a three-barreled machine gun protruded. Vandegrift, who had studied military history at length, recognized at once the type of machine gun.

"A Gatling gun? You use that old machine gun concept in such a modern machine?"

That got him a sarcastic smile from Delestraint, who patted the top of the small turret.

"The Gatling gun concept may be old, but this is probably the best and most lethal machine gun in existence right now. It is a Clarkson 7mm Gatling Gun, is electrically-driven and can spit 3,000 bullets per minute. It is aimed remotely via a periscope by the bow gunner. CAPORAL VINCENT, COULD YOU TEMPORARILY GIVE YOUR SEAT TO LIEUTENANT COLONEL VANDEGRIFT?"

"YES SIR!" replied the bow gunner from inside the vehicle before climbing out of his hatch. Vandegrift slid down the hatch at once and landed in a comfortable, well padded seat that appeared to be mounted on spring supports. There were five small periscopes arranged around the hatch, plus a bigger periscope linked to a sort of handlebar with two vertical grips. Looking through the bigger periscope, which was right in front of his seat, Vandegrift was able to see clearly outside in a limited arc. Turning the handlebar and pushing and pulling on the two vertical grips, he saw that the machine gun turret followed his commands and could point anywhere within a frontal arc of sixty degrees, which was quite good in his opinion. He then saw the big steel container sitting on the floor to his front and left and whistled in appreciation: it had to contain at least 500 belted machine gun rounds, while more ammunition containers were stacked behind the one feeding the machine gun.

"Hell, I wouldn't want to charge this tank from its frontal arc: that would be pure suicide."

"Well, the Japanese will have to learn that lesson the hard way." said Delestraint, who was kneeling beside the opened hatch. "I will give a minute for my driver, Master Corporal Letourneau, to describe to you his position, then I will show you my own commander's station."

The said Letourneau then spent a minute explaining to Vandegrift how its commands worked, then took a moment to point at a few things around his station and that of the bow gunner.

"Thankfully for us French tankers, the designers of this tank took some time to think about the creature comfort features which equip this vehicle, sir. Next to me is a space heater and an air conditioning unit, plus an air filtration unit to protect us from poison gas. On your right side, you will see both an electric hot plate used to warm up our rations and a coffee pot heater to boil either water or soup. We also have a ninety liter potable water tank. All this, plus our crashworthy seats, makes it much more comfortable to operate this tank, sir."

"I see! I wish that our own military equipment designers could also think about such things. Thank you for your information, Master Corporal."

"It was a pleasure, sir."

Climbing out through the bow gunner's hatch, Vandegrift then walked on top of the hull with Delestraint towards the rear. He had to grip handlebars on the sides of the gun turret to go around it, so that he could get behind the turret, where Delestraint made him sit down on the steel deck before sliding down the commander's hatch, situated under the overhanging turret. Vandegrift was then struck by how well protected the commander and gunner were when their heads were out of their hatches: the hatches themselves opened up towards the front and had an armored Durex episcopes in it, thus provided both protection and vision in the frontal arc. To both sides, Durex episcopes integrated into the bases of the pillars supporting the overhang turret allowed good lateral vision and excellent protection. This sharply contrasted with the few armored vehicles Vandegrift had seen before, where the commander's head was completely exposed to bullets and fragments the moment he stuck it out of his hatch to have a better all-around view. To his left side, a large armored box and what looked like an automatic cannon were attached to the underbelly of the gun turret.

"Uh, I can see that this must be the 25mm coaxial cannon you told me about, Colonel Delestraint, but what is in this large armored box?"

"That is a twelve-inch high-power L.E.D. searchlight. It has a heavily armored front cover and its position under the turret and between the support pillars helps protect it from incoming projectiles."

"And what is the intended purpose of that searchlight?"

"It is meant to deter and counter enemy mass infantry assaults at night, both by blinding enemy soldiers and ruining their night vision and by providing illumination to our own soldiers, who can then aim their weapons more easily. It can also be used to search for hidden snipers at night and can even blind enemy pilots flying low at night."

"A nifty thing indeed, I must say," said Vandegrift before lowering his head below the hatch ring and looking around inside the tank. What he saw finished convincing him that this tank was decades ahead of anything the United States even knew about. Climbing out of the hatch, he faced Delestraint, who then asked him a question.

"And what type of tank does the United States Army uses, Colonel Vandegrift?"

At first giving a guarded look at the French officer, Vandegrift finally decided that Delestraint's question was a genuine one out of curiosity, and not some attempt at mocking the United States.

"As far as I know, we don't have anything that you would call a tank. We have a few armored cars that are little better than commercial type cars fitted with an armored body, that's it. The U.S. Army did consult with an American designer, Mister Christie, but the present severe economic depression and tight federal budgets have meant that no money was available for the acquisition of tanks."

"Uh, I see! Be assured that, if you ever need tank support for your battalion, I will be most happy to provide it."

"Thank you very much for that, Colonel Delestraint. I hope that we will be able one day to fight the Japanese side by side." said Vandegrift before shaking the Frenchman's hand again and saluting him before jumping off the tank and returning to his waiting marines. Lieutenant Griffith eagerly asked him a question in a low voice as soon as he was back.

"So, what did you learn about it, sir?"

Vandegrift gave him a sober look in return.

"It's called a C-1 tank, has a 100mm bite and weighs no less than 36 tons. Somehow, I am convinced that we wouldn't stand a chance against such steel monsters, Lieutenant. The good news is that it will be the Japanese who will have to face these tanks."

"Do the Japanese have tanks as well, sir?"

"I was told that they had some, but nothing like those C-1s. However, we haven't seen Japanese tanks in our own sector...yet. What support weapons did you bring with your company, Lieutenant?"

"We have four towed 75mm pack howitzers, four medium mortars and eight Browning M2 heavy machine guns, sir."

Vandegrift hid a grimace then: He had been hoping that, by some miracle, the Marine Corps would have somehow acquired recently some kind of antitank weapon but, as usual, the American soldier continued to look like a pauper in terms of heavy equipment.

"Well, it will have to do. One thing that I want you to impress on your men is to not underestimate the Japanese soldier because he is not a white man. The Japanese soldiers are tough, brave and experienced fighters and they never give up. Thinking like racists do will only get our men killed."

"Uh, understood, sir." replied Griffith, a bit taken aback by that unexpected piece of advice.

09:11 (China Time)

Saturday, September 10, 1932

Grounds of the Han Yang College, Siccawei District

West of the Shanghai American School

Just outside of the limits of the French Concession

"Golf Six, this is Six: send a platoon to take care of those damn snipers firing from the top floor of the Sciences Faculty Building, over."

"From Golf Six: I already sent men there. That problem will be fixed in a few minutes, over."

"Copy that! Six, out!"

Alexander Vandegrift mentally thanked again the gift of miniature radios his unit had received from Tasha Lenoir: if not for them, he would be down to yelling and using messengers to control his battalion during this fight to chase the Japanese from the Han Yang College, situated west of the Shanghai American School, just outside the limits of the French Concession. The Japanese had started yesterday to fire mortars from here at the grounds of the Shanghai American School, impeding the air operations on those grounds and making major nuisance of themselves. The Allied Command had then decided to push westward to chase away the Japanese, a job for which Vandegrift had volunteered his battalion. The fight for Han Yang College had now been on for a good four hours and, while Japanese resistance had been stiff, the marines had been making good progress, securing building after building. Another gift from Tasha Lenoir, dozens of compact submachine guns, had also proved priceless during the fighting inside buildings, adding substantially to the marines' firepower within those confined spaces, where their long Springfield 1903 rifles were a bit cumbersome. That in-house fighting had also proven again the tenacity of Japanese soldiers, who had fought to the death rather than surrender their positions. Yet another gift from Tasha Lenoir, her Durex helmets and armored vests, had greatly limited the amount of casualties suffered by the marines. Without them, Vandegrift would have lost already a good hundred men instead of the actual four dead and sixteen wounded marines he had actually suffered to date. He was now resolved to have a long conversation with the Commandant of the Marine

Corps once he would be back in the United States, to argue for a complete re-equipment program for the Corps, based on the French equipment he had seen to date in Shanghai.

Vandegrift watched one of his Nash QUAD light trucks as it slowly drove away at its top speed of twenty miles per hour, carrying two wounded marines towards the Red Cross General Hospital, situated inside the French Concession. While the Nash QUAD, produced in the United States since 1913, was an effective and practical vehicle, with its four-wheel-drive and four-wheel-steering systems making it perform well in soft soils and mud, its 28 horsepower engine made it a slow vehicle, especially compared to the various trucks and vehicles the French were using. An urgent-sounding voice on his pocket radio then switched his attention away from the QUAD.

"Six, this is Foxtrot Six: I can see about twenty tanks approaching from the Northwest, advancing in column down the street, some 400 yards away, over."

Vandegrift's blood surged through his veins on hearing that.

"Twenty tanks? Are they Japanese?"

"I believe so, Six. They are certainly not French, from their looks. I have no heavy weapons able to engage them right now, except for my light mortars. I will need extra support, fast, over!"

"Six, understood! Hold your ground for the moment. If they pass through your lines, concentrate your fire on the enemy infantry accompanying these tanks, to strip them of close range protection. In the meantime, I will be calling higher for heavy support. Six out!"

Grabbing the handset of the backpack radio carried by his signaler, Vandegrift spoke on the frequency used by the Joint Allied Command in Shanghai.

"Juliet Six, this is Mike Six, urgent call, over!"

He had to repeat his call another time before getting an answer in a highly-accented English.

"Mike Six, this is Juliet Six: go ahead!"

"Juliet Six, I have approximately twenty Japanese tanks approaching the Han Yang College from the Northwest, advancing in column along the road. I urgently need anti-tank support, over."

"Juliet Six, understood! We will send support right away, out!"

Vandegrift didn't ask for details about that support force then, as he suspected that the French commander had answered him before checking what was available. That was however alright with him, as he could now plan his defense against those Japanese tanks with a reasonable expectation of help being soon on its way. He thus gave back the handset to his signaler while also giving him an order.

"We're going down to our 'Bug'."

"Yes sir!"

Running down the stairs of the building they were in, the two men soon jumped inside their command Kruger COCCINELLE, which was waiting behind the cover provided by the back of the building. Vandegrift then gave a curt order to his driver.

"We're going to Foxtrot's location. Step on it and do zigzags!"

"Yes sir!" said the corporal before engaging his automatic transmission into 'drive'. As the small ATV emerged from cover, Vandegrift rolled up the Durex windows of their vehicle in order to provide some protection against Japanese bullets. That action proved a wise one, as bullets soon started clanking at intervals against the body and windows of the ATV. Vandegrift ignored those bullet strikes and consulted his map while they were careening across the grounds of the college. Most of the district of Siccawei was still in Japanese hands, like the whole region bordering Shanghai to the North and West. To the South were Chinese Nationalist troops, but those were poorly equipped, poorly trained and, more importantly, poorly led, being under the command of a Chinese warlord more interested in personal profit and power than in being a patriot. While the Japanese had suffered significant losses when they had been ejected from Downtown Shanghai, they still had the equivalent of two divisions surrounding the city on three sides. This fight was thus far from over.

They soon arrived at the college's administrative building, where the driver of the ATV parked behind the cover of a low brick wall. Jumping out of the ATV with his signaler, Vandegrift then ran inside the building and started climbing at once the main staircase, heading for the top floor. Once on that floor, a marine pointed him to an administrative office whose windows faced west and where the commander of Foxtrot Company, Captain Merritt Edson (aka 'Red Mike'), was with a signaler and a machine gun team. Edson, a man whose pudgy face hid a tempered steel-like character, smiled on seeing Vandegrift enter the room.

"Aaah, you came to watch the fun, sir?"

"I couldn't let you monopolize all the action, couldn't I?" replied Vandegrift before becoming dead serious. "So, what do we have here exactly?"

"We have nineteen Japanese Type 89 medium tanks, accompanied by about 400 infantrymen on foot, sir. The tanks have started deploying into an extended line, with about twenty Japanese soldiers following closely behind each tank. Because of that, and since we don't have anti-tank weapons, our fire is mostly ineffective right now." Vandegrift took the time to go to one of the windows of the room and look outside for a moment before speaking.

"From what the French told me earlier, the armor on the Type 89 is at most two thirds of an inch thick. Our heavy machine guns should be able to pierce the flanks of these tanks once they will be within 200 yards. Tell your .50 caliber gunners to hold fire until they have good flank shots on those tanks and tell your riflemen to concentrate aimed fire at the Japanese infantrymen following behind the tanks. I want those tanks to be stripped of their infantry escort before they can get inside the college grounds."

"Understood, sir!"

As Edson passed those orders to his company, Vandegrift did the same via radio for the rest of his battalion. However, his dilemma right now was that two of his companies were presently still fighting inside three buildings of the college, working to flush out or eliminate small but stubborn pockets of resistance from Japanese soldiers. The intensive rifle marksmanship training given to every U.S. marine, irrespective of trade or specialty, then started paying off handsomely, as slow, aimed fire from the marines' Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifles was poured on the Japanese who didn't hide well enough behind their tanks, downing them one by one. However, the Japanese didn't take that lying down, with the short barrels of the tanks' 57mm guns elevating to point at the various windows from where U.S. marines were firing. Coming from nineteen tanks, that gunfire soon started to cause significant casualties among the American defenders. Still, the marines kept peppering the Japanese infantry with deadly rifle fire while frequently changing positions to new windows in order to escape the tank fire. All the while, the line of Japanese tanks kept advancing, albeit slowly, soon entering the college grounds proper. By then, the number of Japanese infantrymen following close behind them had been cut by a third by accurate rifle fire, with the surviving Japanese now very careful to hug the protection of their tanks. That fit well with Vandegrift, as it also meant that those Japanese infantrymen could not fire often at the marines without exposing

themselves, something the Japanese were becoming more and more reluctant to do. When the first tanks arrived to within 200 meters of the first buildings of the college, Vandegrift gave one short order on the radio.

“Hotel Six, from Six: you can now open selective fire on the flanks of these tanks with your Ma Deuces⁹.”

The marine gunners, whose trigger fingers had been itching badly for minutes already, obeyed at once, firing short and well aimed bursts of .50 caliber bullets at the tanks that presented their flanks to them. To Vandegrift’s satisfaction and to the relief of his marines, the big bullets proved able to pierce the sides of the Japanese tanks. Six of the Type 89 soon stopped, smoke coming out of their perforated engine compartments or with their turrets stopping rotating, their servants dead or wounded. The Japanese infantrymen following those six tanks then had no choice but to leave the protection of the wounded beasts and started sprinting towards the nearest buildings facing them, one of which was the college’s administrative building. In a shooting performance reminiscent of the famous British ‘mad minute’¹⁰ of World War One, the defending U.S. marines fired shot after shot in a near frenzy against the running Japanese, downing all but a handful of them before they could get to their buildings. However, that left thirteen tanks, which were either presenting only their thicker frontal armor or were outside the firing arcs of the big American M2s, able to drive up to the first buildings of the college, where they split up to start flowing around and past them, while their surviving infantry escort rushed inside, intent on flushing out the defending marines. Vandegrift was starting to wonder how long his marines would be able to hold their positions when a loud ‘BOOM’, accompanied by an explosion that utterly gutted one of the leading Japanese tanks, gave him some extra hope. Running to a window in an opposite room that gave him a view of the internal grounds of the college, he felt exhilaration at the sight of ten French C-1 tanks now rolling and deploying on those grounds while firing their 100mm guns at the Japanese tanks. The latter, hopelessly outgunned and out-armored, tried to reply with their short, low velocity 57mm guns, only to see their shells bounce against the thick and highly sloped armor of the French tanks. The bow Gatling machine guns of the C-1 tanks also did their part, sweeping the Japanese infantry ranks

⁹ Ma Deuce : U.S. military slang for ‘M2’ heavy machine guns.

¹⁰ ‘Mad Minute’ : Term used to describe mass rapid fire by British riflemen armed with bolt-action Lee Enfield .303 rifles, with each rifleman firing an aimed round every 2-3 seconds.

with dense, fifty rounds per second bursts of fire. The few Japanese survivors, cracking under that ordeal by fire, then broke and ran, trying to retreat to safety. Those Japanese were either cut down by Gatling machine gun fire or by aimed rifle fire from defending marines, with none of the attackers making it back to their lines. That however left the marines with the problem of dealing with the Japanese who had entered their buildings during the tank assault or had been part of the previous pockets of resistance. That meant close combat inside buildings, a murderous affair at any time. What favored the marines then was the fact that they held the top floors, from which they were able to drop or roll grenades in the Japanese' faces, and their superiority in individual firepower, thanks to their submachine guns, while the vast majority of the Japanese soldiers were solely equipped with ARISAKA 6.5mm bolt-action rifles with five-round clips. Still, the casualties that the marines suffered in that desperate house-clearing fight were painful to Alexander Vandegrift, who had personally trained many of his men. What finished the Japanese was when they ran out of ammunition and were left with only their bayonets as weapons. Their fanatical ultimate charges were then stopped cold by barrages of rifle, submachine gun and even pistol bullets from the marines. The latter, having seen in the past weeks too many examples of the barbarity of the Japanese Army towards enemy soldiers and civilians alike, gave no quarters, finishing off wounded Japanese soldiers with either a bullet or a bayonet stab. When the fight quieted down and stopped, over 500 Japanese lay dead inside and outside of the campus buildings. Vandegrift, covered with both sweat, dust and splattered blood, then concentrated on consolidating the positions of his battalion and in counting his casualties. He sat down on a chair when his deputy, Captain Gerald Thomas, brought him the dreaded 'butcher's bill'.

"Twelve dead and 58 wounded... Damn! That's nearly a fifth of our battalion. However, it could have been a lot worse if not for those armored vests and helmets given by Miss Lenoir. Alright, let's give first aid to our wounded and have them transported as quickly as possible to the Red Cross Hospital."

"Right away, sir!" replied Thomas, saluting him before turning around and walking away. Vandegrift took the time to send a quick radio call to the Joint Allied Command Center, to inform it of the outcome of the battle, then wearily got up on his feet and walked out of the administrative building, heading towards the nearest French tank. The commander of that tank saw him approach and opened his hatch, sticking his head and torso out to greet Vandegrift, who extended his right hand for a shake.

"Thank you very much for the support provided by your tanks to my marines, Captain."

"It was a pleasure, Colonel. I am Captain Maurice d'Aubuisson, Commander of 'B' Squadron of the 505th Armored Regiment. How serious are your casualties, sir? I can call in some of our armored ambulances."

"That would be most appreciated, Captain. I have just lost nearly a fifth of my men, either killed or wounded. However, the Japanese suffered a lot more, partly thanks to you and your tanks. Do you know if the Japanese have still many more of those tanks around?"

"Not that many, Colonel. Our aircraft keep hunting them down whenever they spot them. These tanks must have been the last ones left in this sector. By the way, my orders are to stay with your battalion and provide it with armor support until further notice."

"Aaah, now you're talking!" replied Vandegrift, most happy to hear that. "I am sure that my marines and your tankers will make a great team."

"I don't doubt that for a minute, Colonel." said d'Aubuisson, grinning from ear to ear.

10:03 (Paris Time)

Wednesday, September 21, 1932

Château du Haut-Buc, Buc

Southwestern suburbs of Paris, France

Tasha Lenoir was wearing her futuristic female business suit from 2624 when she received her expected visitor from the American embassy in Paris. She actually came out of the main entrance of her mansion and walked down the few steps to greet him right outside the diplomatic staff car that had brought him from Paris.

"Welcome to the Château du Haut-Buc, Colonel. I am Tasha Lenoir."

"Colonel John Reese, U.S. Military Attaché to France. I see that you were warned of my visit, miss."

"Indeed! Minister of War Daladier called me late last evening to tell me about your visit and its motives. He also gave me 'carte blanche' in deciding what I could offer you in terms of products made by my consortium."

"Ah, that should simplify greatly our discussion, then."

"It will! But please, come inside and have a drink in my private study, where we will be able to talk in full intimacy. Your driver is welcome to enter as well to go have a coffee in the kitchen while we speak."

"That is most kind of you, miss. SERGEANT BROWNING, COME INSIDE WITH US!"

"YES SIR!" replied the marine who had driven the staff car. Once the trio was inside, Tasha put one of her maids in charge of guiding Browning to the kitchen and serving him, leaving her free to go upstairs with Reese to her private study. The U.S. Army colonel couldn't help make a remark as they entered the polished wood-paneled room.

"I must say that I was expecting much more luxurious surroundings, in view of your rumored fortune, Miss Lenoir."

"I do not make money for the sake of personal luxury and comfort, Colonel, as I am a fairly frugal person. Most of my money is used to improve the conditions of my employees and to invest in new ventures. I could live in a simple cottage and I would still be happy. This residence is mostly for protocol uses, when I have to receive important guests and visitors...like you. Please, take place in this sofa. Would you like to have something to drink: tea, coffee, wine?"

"A cup of espresso coffee would be really nice, miss: I love espresso coffee."

"On that I certainly can agree with you, Colonel." said Tasha, smiling, before going to an intercom box on her work desk and pressing a button. "Marie, could you please bring up a pot of espresso coffee and two cups to my study?... Thank you!" Tasha then went to sit opposite Reese in a well-padded swivel chair, crossing her long legs before speaking again.

"So, what does the United States exactly want, Colonel Reese?"

"Well, to be frank, this war against Japan and the fighting in China has finally opened the eyes of my government to the crying lack of modern equipment, or even the complete lack of equipment in certain categories, in the American armed forces. On the other hand, the commanders of our sea and ground units fighting around Japan and China all sent glowing reports about how advanced and effective the weapons, vehicles, ships and aircraft of the French forces are. Since we are fighting partners in that theater of operations, we were hoping that the ban you put years ago against the United States on the sale of aircraft and military equipment produced by your consortium would have softened up. I know that the reason you instituted that ban, namely the racial laws in

effect in my country, is still in force but, in the name of allied solidarity, could we hope to see a relaxation of that ban, Miss Lenoir?"

Tasha, her expression sober, sat back in her chair before answering.

"You are right about my reasons to institute a sales ban against the United States, Colonel, especially since I have seen no softening up in the racist attitudes, policies and actions of your Southern states in the past few months and years. If anything, I hear that extreme acts of discrimination and racial hatred, like the lynching of black men and boys in your southern states, have actually increased. That is not encouraging me to show good will towards the United States. However, as you may know, I did initiate months ago a program of technological assistance and exchange of knowledge with some of your states around the New England and New York states, states that are more liberal-thinking and which accepted in exchange for my investments my conditions of not practicing segregation. Fortunately, that program has gone well on the whole and is continuing to progress. I was also told that your government has finally decided to suspend its stupid, ill-considered Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act. For those two reasons, I am ready to lift partially my sales ban against your country, Colonel, but only for certain categories of equipment."

"Such as?" said Reese, who had feared getting a simple flat 'no' from Tasha. In response, she took from a low coffee table a printed document and handed it to Reese.

"Since Minister Daladier prevented me in advance of your visit, I took the liberty to put together in advance a list of the Lenoir products that are now open to be sold to the United States. There are a number of pieces of military equipment in that list, starting with non-lethal items meant to save or preserve lives, like Durex helmets and armored vests, sea survival suits and parachutes. I have also included in the list many of my models of tactical radios, plus some airborne and shipborne sets. In terms of vehicles, you are welcome to the Kruger, Laffly-Clarkson and Panhard-Clarkson range of transport and logistical support vehicles. I understand that the Kruger COCCINELLE in particular is well appreciated by your marines in China."

That last remark made Reese smile as he looked up from the document given to him by Tasha.

"Indeed! Along with your portable radios and your armored vests, those COCCINELLEs you gave to our marines have become very popular with our troops in China. The U.S. Army alone could use thousands of those vehicles."

Those words made Tasha sit back and look calmly into Reese's eyes.

“Frankly, Colonel, I don’t understand why an industrially powerful country such as the United States has been incapable of developing its own line of decent military vehicles. Your engineers have been able to examine for more than a decade the Kruger line of civilian cars which have been on sale in the United States for fifteen years and still are, plus could have studied the various models of armored vehicles produced by France and by other countries around the World. Hell, even the Japanese have tanks, although crappy ones! Yet, the United States has nearly nothing in terms of modern military vehicles, only a collection of slow, primitive trucks produced around the 1910s. Why? What happened to American inventiveness and spirit of enterprise?”

Reese, deeply embarrassed by her question, was saved by the arrival of a maid pushing a service trolley supporting a coffee service and a steaming pot of coffee whose strong aroma quickly filled the study. He used the time it took to be served a cup and take a first sip to think over his answer.

“In truth, you are right to question us on that subject, Miss Lenoir. I believe that the biggest factors in our failure to produce modern equipment were twofold: first, American defense budgets have been extremely tight for years, with much of what was available eaten up by the Navy to build its big battleships. That budget situation has only worsened since the start of the Great Depression in 1929, with federal revenues dropping sharply and further cutting into our budgets. Second, I will concede that many of our military leaders in Washington have shown a shocking lack of vision and leadership and have not been able to progress with the times. By the way, that is only my personal opinion, Miss Lenoir. I would appreciate if you would not repeat it publicly.”

“Don’t worry, my dear Colonel Reese.” said Tasha, grinning with amusement. “I won’t denounce you to your Washington superiors. You could also add to those two factors the constant political interference in military procurement contracts by congressmen who push for manufacturers established in their home states, and this irrespective of the merits of the equipment offered by those manufacturers. Now, if we look at the variety of planes available from the Blériot-Kruger line, the choice was a bit more difficult for me to make while putting together my list. Blériot-Kruger aircraft typically incorporate many of my most advanced electronic designs in terms of radars, radios and instruments. I am not ready yet to provide the United States with my most advanced electronic creations, as they are actually classified as French state secrets. However, I could sell to your country some of our turboprop-powered aircraft equipped

with first and second generation Lenoir electronics. Those aircraft are by the way going to be built in the United States, and not in France.”

That last piece of information froze Reese as he was about to take a new sip from his cup.

“Built in the United States? How could that be? All your manufacturing plants are here, in France.”

“Not all.” replied Tasha with a mysterious smile. I bought months ago part of the Sikorsky Aviation Corporation, in Stratford, Connecticut, and entered in a partnership with its founder, Mister Igor Sikorsky. That partnership included a major transfer of aeronautical technology from Blériot-Kruger to Sikorsky, plus the retooling of the Sikorsky plant and the building of new aircraft assembly lines. In about a month, your government and civilian commercial airlines will be able to purchase directly in the United States four types of Blériot-Kruger turboprop aircraft: the TURBO-BOURDON 6-seat utility amphibian, the CIGOGNE II amphibian airliner in turboprop variant, the SUPER COLIBRI VSTOL turboprop transport aircraft and the turboprop SUPER FRELON VSTOL naval attack aircraft. While the lines are presently geared mostly towards civilian variants, the SUPER FRELON line will be able to provide to your army and navy a very capable strike aircraft, which by the way is still in French frontline service and is fighting around the China Theatre. The SUPER COLIBRI transport to be built in Stratford is a civilian variant, but selected military items could be shipped from France to produce a local military variant for your forces.”

“But, that’s great!” exclaimed Reese, cheered up by that unexpected piece of good news. “I will certainly put this at the top of my list of recommendations for Washington.”

“And federal contracts to Sikorsky will also greatly help to take parts of your country out of its deep depression.”

“True! I wish that you had more partnerships like Sikorsky, so more of our future military equipment could be built directly in the United States.”

“Funny that you should say that, Colonel.” said Tasha, smiling. “I do have more plants in the United States which either belong partially or fully to me.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do! When the stock markets crashed in 1929, I used that opportunity to acquire a number of companies which had bottomed out in Wall Street but which, in my opinion, still had a good future potential. Applying my anti-segregation and pro-social

principles to those companies, which are all situated in the northeastern states of the U.S.A. by the way, I refurbished those companies, retrained their work force, replaced the old management and introduced new methods and new products to make them competitive again. All that cost me some tens of millions of dollars, but I consider that money well spent, with the final result being a string of enterprises at the forefront of technology and offering new, attractive and affordable products to the American public. Three of those companies were automotive plants who had been producing luxury cars. Now, those companies, Brewster in New York, Du Pont Motors in Wilmington, Delaware, and Locomobile of America, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, are producing Kruger cars and engines to supply our American customers while circumventing your Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act. One of their lines could easily and quickly be converted to produce military COCCINELLES for the U.S. Army. In fact, even the civilian variant of the COCCINELLE is proving popular in Europe and should be so as well with the American public. For the other types of logistical vehicles used by the French Army, you will have to ask the French War Ministry to buy some, as they are produced by either the Hotchkiss, Laffly or Panhard companies.”

Reese quickly wrote all that information down, then looked back at Tasha.

“What about your C-1 tank and various self-propelled artillery systems?”

“Again, those are not produced by my consortium. We only contributed to their designs. I need to make one important note here, Colonel: even if you buy some of our combat vehicles and weapons, you won’t get access to Metallex-filled munitions. Metallex is and always will be considered a French state secret and I, as its inventor, hold a veto on its production and use. However, there are export variants of our munitions that are filled with less powerful but still very potent high explosives.”

“I see!” said Reese, a bit disappointed. “You said that your consortium contributed to the designs of the various combat vehicles in service with the French Army. Would the Lenoir industries be ready to design new combat vehicles along lines specified by us?”

“No!” answered Tasha in a firm tone. “First off, I doubt that the French government will accept to sell its current line of combat vehicles to the United States. Second, I will not design or sell combat vehicles and guns to the United States as long as it practices segregation and allows the current atrocities and abuses committed against black people in its southern states to continue. The way things are going, this could take many decades still, so forget about that. Nothing stops you from trying to

copy our combat vehicles and weapons, however I suspect that your geriatric military leadership in Washington and your patronage-influenced Congress will screw the pooch in that matter. You now have a list of what I am ready to sell to the United States, Colonel. I suggest that you return to your embassy, study it carefully and liaise with Washington before returning with a precise list of what you are interested in buying from my consortium.”

“I will certainly do that, Miss Lenoir. I will call you once I have firm directives from my government.”

“Then, here is my card, Colonel.”

“Thank you!” said Reese while taking the small card offered by Tasha. He then emptied his espresso cup before getting up from his sofa and shaking hands with her.

“Thank you very much for receiving me and for agreeing to sell some of your products to my country, Miss Lenoir. I will contact you again as soon as Washington makes its mind on what it precisely wants.”

“And I thank you for your visit, Colonel Reese. Don’t forget your list of products.”

“Heavens, no! This list is now like gold to me.”

Putting the precious list in his leather briefcase, Reese then went down with Tasha to the main entrance, where they shook hands one last time before the American officer went back to his car and departed, his marine driver at the wheel. Tasha was pensive as she watched the car drive away: this was a bit of a gamble for her. Would this help to mend Washington’s ways and restrict the grip of bigotry and racism holding too many parts of the United States, or would this only provide more tools for policies of dominance and abuse?



Japanese Emperor Hirohito in imperial garb. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

CHAPTER 14 – OF EMPERORS AND PRESIDENTS

23:09 (New York Time)

Tuesday, November 8, 1932

State Governor's residence, Albany

State of New York, U.S.A.

"...and with over sixty percent of the votes counted, WNBT can predict with confidence that Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the actual governor of the state of New York, will win this presidential election in a landslide, defeating President Herbert Hoover. WNBT will continue to cover the ballot counting until the results will become official."

The twenty or so people assembled in the lounge of the Roosevelt and watching the results of the elections on the large flat screen color television set exploded in cheers on hearing the prediction made by the WNBT news anchor. Eleanor Roosevelt bent down to kiss her husband, who was sitting in his customary wheelchair.

"Congratulation, dear: you are going to be the 32nd President of the United States."

"Thanks, Eleanor! However, I still have to wait four more months before I will be effectively the President: inauguration is only next March. Hopefully, Hoover will not use

those four months to try to sabotage in advance my presidency. His inaction and wrong policies about the Depression already cost the country much.”

“Well, the way you convincingly defeated him should make him cautious about that, Franklin. Your main task now, apart from continuing your work as Governor of New York, will be to think about your future national policies, in order to be able to enact them as quickly as possible after your inauguration. Maybe you should seek some counsels about them from someone overseas.”

“You mean Lenoir?”

“Exactly! Look at how her investments and technology transfers helped our state and the New England states. Hell, just look at this television set we just watched, along with the fact that New York and Boston now have the only working commercial television stations in the whole of the United States, stations using the best television technology in the World by a far shot. Many doubters tried to pull you away from her projects, saying that her anti-segregation conditions were tantamount to foreign interference in American policies. Yet, none of their doom and gloom predictions came true, while the state’s economy is now mostly out of this damn Depression. You don’t even need to make public the fact that you would be taking advice from her: Tasha Lenoir doesn’t care about personal fame and her actions have only been motivated to date by altruism and humanism. She also has a social vision that I wholeheartedly subscribe to.”

The President-elect nodded his head at that last sentence, knowing how close the respective visions about a future society that his wife and of Tasha Lenoir held were. If anything, Eleanor was probably the biggest cheerleader for Lenoir in the United States. However, he didn’t consider that as a negative point, far from it, as the profound honesty, business savvy and sense of care of the French woman had also struck him. Compared to her, most of the big American industrialists and bankers he knew were little more than greedy amateurs.

“I think that your idea has a lot of merit, Eleanor. I will send Harry Hopkins to France for a few days as soon as I can let him go from here. I will need him a lot in the coming days and weeks while I assemble my cabinet.”

It was then the turn of Eleanor to nod her head: if there was anyone who was in the same class as Tasha Lenoir, it was Harry Hopkins, Franklin’s top assistant and also a good friend of Eleanor. Like Lenoir, Hopkins was scrupulously honest, was a very efficient and competent administrator and cared deeply about others around him, having

started as a social worker. Lenoir and Hopkins were truly a pair made to understand each other.

08:52 (Tokyo Time)

Monday, December 5, 1932

Imperial study, Imperial Palace

Tokyo, Japan

Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal of Japan, Shishaku (Viscount) Makino Nobuaki, went to his knees and bowed deeply, until his forehead touched the tatami carpet of the imperial study.

“Your Majesty, I have the report you requested.”

“Good! You may read it to me now.” replied Emperor Hirohito, also known as the Emperor Shôwa, who was kneeling on a cushion behind a traditional low table supporting sheets of paper, pens and an ink bottle. The 71 year-old, bald and bespectacled viscount nodded his head and extracted a folder from a thin wooden box he had brought with him, then started reading the document inside it.

“Your Majesty, I am sad to say that the situation is bad...very bad. At sea, our navy has all but ceased to exist and it now counts only a few coastal patrol ships, minesweepers and tugboats. All of its high seas warships have been sunk, either by the guided rockets used by French warships or from air attack. As for building new warships, it is now impossible to do so: all of our naval arsenals and shipyards able to build warships have been totally destroyed by rockets, bombs or enemy battleship shells. Furthermore, powerful French and American battle squadrons are continuing to cruise up and down our coasts while bombarding our shore installations and ports as they go. Enemy bombers are also adding to the damage by systematically bombing our military industries and facilities. Recently, these bombers started switching to civilian industries, like steel plants, electrical powerplants and oil refineries. The latter ones were anyway not working, since no shipment of oil has been received for months now. The whole country is now about out of fuel, except for coal, and transportation has generally ground to a halt. There is now a real possibility that some of our population will freeze to death this Winter, while also suffering from hunger due to the enemy blockade against our maritime trade.”

While keeping an impassive face, as was expected of him as the Japanese Emperor, Hirohito was severely shaken by the words from Makino.

“What about the Army? Is it winning against our enemies in China and Manchuria?”

“I actually had great difficulties in obtaining some answers to my questions on that subject, Your Majesty. Part of the reasons for that is the fact that our military command centers in Japan were destroyed early in the war by French long range rockets, with many of our top military leaders killed at that time. Another reason is that we have huge difficulties in keeping radio communications open between Japan and China, while army command centers in China and Manchuria have been systematically bombed from the air for months now. From what I could gather, the Army has suffered heavy losses and is retreating nearly everywhere. It also is out of fuel and is running out of ammunition. Even our infantrymen are running out of rifle bullets. The Soviets have now taken over two thirds of Manchuria and are closing in on Mukden, while the French and Americans have gained full control of Shanghai and its surrounding area. Our troops around Shanghai are also out of fuel and nearly out of ammunition, while the enemy sea blockade is preventing us from sending in fresh supplies to China. Soon, our soldiers will be down to only their bayonets.”

“How? How could all this happen? Our soldiers are the best and bravest in the World. How could those Gaijins¹¹ defeat our soldiers and sailors so decisively?”

“The answer is simple, Your Majesty: superior weapons and technology. The French possess weapons that we could only dream about. They have guided long range weapons that they can fire from well beyond the range of our own weapons, while their planes are faster and better armed than ours. As for our army, it found itself facing armored forces against which it was ill-equipped to resist.”

Makino then hesitated for a moment before continuing.

“Your Majesty, I must report to you another factor that has contributed to the setbacks suffered by our army in China. It concerns its leadership.”

Hirohito’s eyes narrowed while staring hard at his Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal.

“Go on!”

“Your Majesty, I found out that most of our army leaders in China are not obeying anymore the directives sent from Tokyo. They are also fighting independently from each

¹¹ Gaijins : derogatory term used by Japanese to designate foreigners, particularly Western ones.

other and no longer follow a single plan of operation. That is mostly due to our heavy losses of senior commanders and to our difficult radio communications, but there also have been clear cases of insubordination, with some local commanders ignoring directives from above or squarely refusing to obey them. Overall, I expect our Army in China to be utterly defeated and wiped out in the weeks and months to come, especially in Manchuria, where the harsh Winter conditions will make the situation even more unbearable to our supply-starved troops.”

“What about here, in Japan? Could the Army resist an enemy landing and invasion?”

“I am not sure about that, Your Majesty. However, there are no signs that the enemy is planning any ground invasion of Japan. Right now, the French and Americans are content with cruising up and down our coasts while bombarding them with heavy guns and with bombing our infrastructures from the air. I do not believe that they have the stomach to risk the kind of casualties a landing would cost them. To be frank, they don't need to land to defeat us: they just need to keep their sea blockade of Japan tight and let us starve in the dark during this Winter.”

“What about the Soviets? I was told a month ago that they were trying to take our possessions in the Kurile and Sakhalin Islands.”

“I regret to have to inform you that the Soviets have actually already captured all our possessions in the Kurile and Sakhalin Islands, Your Majesty. They could now attack Hokkaido¹² at any time with little opposition. This concludes my report on the war situation, Your Majesty.”

Makino then fell silent, waiting for any possible directive or command Hirohito could give him. Hirohito, hiding his agitation and emotions, mentally debated for a long moment about what to do, if anything, to try saving Japan from such a catastrophic situation. The biting, bitter irony was that this catastrophic situation was mostly of Japan's own making, with the arrogance and thirst for power of the militarist class having obscured its better judgment. In this, Hirohito had to attribute some of the blame to himself, for believing the promises from those same militarists. When he finally spoke, it was on a tone that clearly amounted to an order.

“Get a scribe at once! I need to proclaim an imperial edict.”

¹² Hokkaido : the northernmost island of the Japanese archipelago.

"Right away, Your Majesty." Replied Makino, bowing deep, before crawling backward and leaving the study. He was back a mere three minutes later with the head scribe of the Emperor, who quickly set up his ink, pen and paper on a small portable low table. Hirohito spoke again as soon as the scribe was ready.

"I, your Emperor, have contemplated with growing dissatisfaction the evolution of the war situation. It is now time to reconsider Japan's future actions in order to ensure its continued integrity and to keep our enemies away from sacred Japanese soil. I expect our army and navy commanders to draw the necessary conclusions from the present situation and to do what is honorable. I, Emperor Shôwa, spoke! Publish this edict across Japan and send it by air messengers to our army leaders in China right away."

"Hay!" replied in unison Makino and the scribe before withdrawing on their knees from the study.

00 :17 (Tokyo Time)

Tuesday, December 6, 1932

Main gate of the Imperial Palace

Imperial Grounds, Chiyoda Ward

Tokyo

Captain Junko Asagara couldn't say why, but he couldn't help feel especially nervous tonight. Taking his nervousness as a premonition, he had taken on himself to reinforce the night guard force at the main gate of the Imperial Palace, in which he was in charge of. The gate, situated at the end of the Seimon Ishibashi Bridge, was actually a strong, solid wooden gate which was part of the defensive wall surrounding the Imperial Grounds, which were in turn surrounded by a deep, water-filled moat running outside the walls. Maybe it was the unusual darkness of Tokyo at night, due to the lack of fuel and subsequent cuts in electrical power, which caused his nervousness. Right now, Asagara was standing against the guardrail of the walkway perched atop the wooden palisade of the main gate and he could see hardly anything through the obscurity around him. Only the light from some oil lamps showed through the windows of a few houses in the district surrounding the Imperial Grounds.

Asagara was about to go down to the level of the gate, in order to go check on how vigilant his imperial guards soldiers were, when he suddenly saw movement in the public park situated on the other side of the Seimon Ishibashi Bridge. The growing noise of feet marching in cadence then made him tense up. Soon, the movement he had perceived turned into a thick, long column of marching soldiers approaching the bridge. Feeling bad about this and not wanting to take any chance, Asagara quickly went inside the guard house, situated at the same level as the walkway, above the entrance gate, and shouted at the few soldiers sitting in their guard room.

"A STRONG COLUMN OF SOLDIERS IS APPROACHING THE BRIDGE. WAKE EVERYBODY UP AND MAN THE WALLS."

Next, he ran down the wooden stairs and went out of the guard house, then ran to the gate proper, where four of his soldiers were posted. Once at the gate, he gave firm orders to his men there.

"I am going to go out to identify these soldiers and learn why they are here. Lock the pedestrian door as soon as I am out and don't open it unless I personally tell you so. Warrant Nomura, you will be in charge if something happens to me. I smell something bad about this late night arrival."

"HAY!" replied the grizzled NCO while bowing to him. Asagara then stepped quickly through the pedestrian door, with the heavy steel bolts of that door being immediately pushed in place behind him. By then, the column of soldiers, led by an officer, was starting to cross the bridge in cadence. With his left hand on the pommel of his katana sword, Asagara walked to meet the newcomers halfway down the bridge. The officer leading the column shouted an order then, making his men stop. Once near him, Asagara was still unsure of what were the insignias on that officer's uniform, so deep was the darkness. The unknown officer then saluted Asagara while presenting himself.

"Lieutenant Fujimori, sent with 200 men of the Imperial Guards Division to reinforce the defenses of the Imperial Palace, sir!"

That made Asagara's eyes narrow.

"I was not informed about the sending of such reinforcements, Lieutenant. I am sure that Colonel Ito would have advised me of this in advance."

Lieutenant Fujimori smiled at that remark, the white of his teeth showing in the obscurity.

"Colonel Ito himself was only informed at the last minute of the need to reinforce the palace guard force, sir."

While Asagara nodded briefly his head to that, as if to acknowledge it, his body immediately tensed up: there was no Colonel Ito on the staff of the Imperial Guards Division.

“Just a moment, then: I am going to tell my men to open the gate for your soldiers, Lieutenant.”

Turning around as if to shout an order to his men, Asagara then grabbed his sword with his right hand and, pulling it out in a flash, delivered in one smooth motion a slashing blow straight out of the scabbard. The razor-sharp blade took the head of Lieutenant Fujimori, or whoever he really was, clean off, sending it roll down on the pavement of the bridge. Asagara then immediately shouted at the top of his lungs to his soldiers standing on the walkway above the gate.

“SOUND THE ALARM! THESE ARE TRAITORS ATTACKING THE PALACE!”

The guards captain then turned back to face the column of soldiers, only to be shot four times in the chest from close range. Falling on his knees, Asagara had the satisfaction before dying of hearing one of his soldiers blow hard in the big horn used to raise the alarm across the Imperial Grounds. The horn was blown another two times before the intruders, passing by Asagara's body, tried to rush the gate, hoping that the pedestrian door would be still unlocked. In that they were severely disappointed, slamming in vain their shoulders against the thick reinforced wooden door. The guards standing on the walkway then started firing in the dark mass of soldiers banging on the gate, with two of the guards priming grenades and then letting them drop into the mass. The effect was horrific, with sixteen men being immediately killed by the explosions and with another nine men being wounded by grenade fragments and by the explosive shock wave. An intense exchange of rifle fire followed between the guards on the walkway and the soldiers trying to break through the gate, with casualties quickly piling on both sides. What finally decided the outcome of the battle was when the guards posted inside a watchtower opposite the bridge, some 120 meters away, started firing with a machine gun into the mass of attackers, downing them by the dozens. More palace guards, alerted by the alarm horn and by the gunfire, soon arrived on the walls to deliver additional rifle fire against the assailants. The latter, trapped at the foot of the main gate, continued with fanatical desperation to try to break open the pedestrian door, but to no avail. Some of the attackers even tried to scale the wall by forming a human ladder, but were shot down in quick order. A volley of grenades thrown from the top of the walls and from the walkway then finished the fight by killing or wounding the surviving

attackers. With torches thrown down on the surface of the bridge to provide some illumination, the guards atop the gate's walkway then methodically shot any attacker that was still moving or moaning, until silence fell around the gate. Warrant Nomura, his sword in hand and with four guards at his back, cautiously went out via the pedestrian door to check the bodies from up close. Any doubt about a particular corpse attracted at once a katana slash or a bayonet stab. Nomura finally arrived where the body of Captain Asagara lay. Checking first if his officer could still be alive by some miracle, he lowered his head in sadness on finding no pulse at all. Getting back on his feet, Nomura then bowed deeply over his fallen commander.

"May the Gods honor your spirit, Captain."

15:22 (Tokyo Time)

Emperor's study, Imperial Palace

Tokyo

"So, Viscount Makino, do we know who attacked the palace last night?"

"Yes, Your Majesty: they were a mix of young army cadet officers from the Imperial Army Academy and of men from the Kempetai¹³."

"The Kempetai? Why them?"

"We are not sure, Your Majesty, but I suspect that the Kempetai is unwilling to see Japan withdraw from China. As for the army cadet officers, the staff of the Imperial Army Academy is well known for favoring a leading government role for the militarist faction."

What Makino kept to himself was the fact that the said militarist faction had long been supported by Hirohito himself, who had dreams of leading a vast Japanese empire encompassing most of Asia. Hirohito had personally agreed to the invasion of Manchuria and had privately condoned the harsh conduct of the Japanese Army in China towards Chinese civilians and soldiers alike. On his part, Hirohito felt bitter at seeing the Army, which he had supported for years, turn against him like this. If he didn't assert his imperial authority quickly and in a decisive manner, he was liable to see

¹³ Kempetai : Japanese Military Intelligence before and during World War II. The Kempetai had vast powers concerning internal security in Japan and security in conquered territories and engaged routinely in arbitrary arrests, tortures and executions of prisoners.

more such attacks on him from the militarists. While he disliked it, he now had no choice but to push back against them. For that, he had the perfect person to lead such a pushback, someone he could count to stay loyal to the Imperial family and with whom he ironically had many heated discussions in the past about the powers given to the Army.

“Tell Prince Takamatsu¹⁴ to lead sailors and soldiers loyal to the Imperial House in arresting the staff at the Imperial Army Academy and at the Kempetai headquarters in Tokyo. Furthermore, I want the Kempetai dissolved and made powerless across Japan: we cannot allow it to try again to usurp imperial authority. Those who will be arrested are to be accused of high treason.”

“It will be done, Your Majesty.” said Makino before withdrawing outside the study.

Now alone, Hirohito mentally reviewed the present, sorry state of Japan. Instead of seeing his dreams of a Japanese Asian empire becoming reality, he now had a defeated, ruined Japan facing cold and starvation in the dark this Winter. Worst even, he couldn't even count anymore on his old allies and supporters in the militarist camp. His mistake had been to believe the promises made by the militarists and to underestimate the level of arrogance and thirst for power of those same militarists. Now, he would have to reverse steam completely and disavow the Army if he wanted to save his authority as Emperor and avoid seeing Japan revert to being little more than a pre-industrial state.

11:39 (China Time)

Friday, December 16, 1932

SUPER COLIBRI 'B' from the aviation cruiser REDOUTABLE

Yellow Sea

“Radar to pilot: a group of surface contacts have just appeared on my screen.”

“What kind of contacts? How far and in what direction?”

¹⁴ Prince Nobuhito Takamatsu : Third son of Emperor Taisho and younger brother to Hirohito. Was pro-West and opposed bitterly the war in China and the invasion of Manchuria. Trained as a naval officer. He privately warned Hirohito in November 1941 not to attack the United States.

"I have over a dozen contacts right now. However, they are weak and small and appeared when only 26 kilometers away, at our heading 340. They may be made of wood rather than steel, which would explain their weak radar echo."

"Fishing vessels, maybe?"

"Possibly, but have you ever seen fishermen travel together as a large group on the same heading? My father is a fisherman and he would never guide other fishermen to a good fishing spot: he would keep it all to himself."

"Alright, we will go investigate those mystery ships."

The pilot of the SUPER COLIBRI 'B' maritime patrol aircraft then pushed forward his engine throttles and turned his plane slightly to his left. They were already flying fairly low, both to stay under the thick gray cloud cover which was announcing a possible storm and to be able to visually inspect the surface of the sea. Some two minutes later, the copilot pointed at something ahead.

"THERE! I see a flotilla of boats. They have sails."

"Fishing sailboats, this far at sea in this kind of weather? Something is wrong here." replied the pilot. Their navigator/bombardier, who was using binoculars, then spoke up.

"They definitely look like fishing boats, all fourteen of them, but they are not trailing any nets. Furthermore, they are sailing as a group towards Japan."

"All this smells suspicious as hell. Observers, stand ready with door guns! Richard, be prepared to fire our cannons and rockets."

"Understood!" said the copilot, who then selected their four 25mm cannons on his weapons control panel. Their navigator spoke up again once they were within 800 meters from the nearest Chinese junk.

"WARNING! THE DECKS OF THOSE JUNKS ARE FULL OF JAPANESE SOLDIERS."

"I knew it! With their own ships sunk and being short of fuel as well, the Japanese must have decided to requisition Chinese fishing junks to transport their soldiers back to Japan. If that's the case, the Japanese are liable to use hundreds of such Chinese sail ships to evacuate their soldiers out of China and back to Japan. François, send a message to the REDOUTABLE and warn it about the Japanese using Chinese fishing boats to transport their troops back to Japan. Our fleet will have to start doing a wide and tight surface search across the Yellow Sea, in order to stop and sink those troop-carrying ships."

"Transmitting now!" said their radio operator. Next, the pilot flew closer to the group of junks, in order to do a lateral flyby from 300 meters away.

"Okay guys, I want maximum eyes on those junks. I want to know if those Japanese soldiers are alone on those boats or if they forced their Chinese owners to man their junks for them."

The answer to that came a few seconds later, along with a few rifle shots.

"Starboard observer to pilot: I saw Chinese men at the wheel of those boats, with Japanese soldiers close to them. I even saw on one boat a small group of women and children forced by soldiers to stand along the bulwarks of their ship."

"The bastards! They are using the Chinese families living on those junks as human shields." raged the pilot, who was now facing a difficult moral dilemma. There was no way he could let pass those Japanese soldiers and allow them to return safely to Japan. On the other hand, with the common habit of Chinese fishermen to live with their families on their boats, they could easily have over fifty or more innocent Chinese civilians aboard those junks, civilians who would be killed by his weapons fire alongside the Japanese soldiers. Shooting a hateful look at the Japanese aboard the junks, the pilot decided to pass that dilemma to a superior level.

"François, call again the REDOUTABLE. Tell it that the Japanese are using Chinese civilians aboard the junks as human shields. Request instructions on what we should do."

The radioman didn't reply to that before activating again his microphone. The answer he finally got made his shoulders sag.

"Radio to pilot: the orders from the REDOUTABLE is to sink those junks regardless. None of those Japanese soldiers are to be allowed to get to Japan: they committed too many war crimes in China to be let go."

"How are we going to do this, Michel?" asked the copilot to the pilot, his voice subdued. The pilot debated mentally how to act for a moment, then took a decision.

"Forget the rockets, Richard. We will only use our cannons and machine guns. Aim our cannons low at the waterline, to create massive leaks and progressively sink those junks. In the meantime, our door gunners will engage the Japanese soldiers crammed on the decks while doing their best to avoid any Chinese visible in the open. With luck, those soldiers will sink to the bottom and we will then be able to save some of those unfortunate civilians."

"Sounds like a plan!"

With the copilot now flying their plane, the pilot briefed by intercom his two door gunners, who were each manning a 7mm Clarkson Gatling machine gun, telling them to avoid firing at the aft part of the junks, where the rudder wheel and the crew and family accommodations were. The SUPER COLIBRI 'B' then flew straight at the lead junk, with the copilot firing a short cannon burst which holed its bow at the waterline. As they overflew it from the rear, the door gunners started shooting up the Japanese soldiers on the decks of that junk and of the next one in line, doing their best to avoid the poop decks of the boats. Thankfully, with the Japanese being mostly out of ammunition, return fire was weak and inaccurate, while the Durex skin of the plane easily absorbed the few 6.5mm bullets which managed to strike the SUPER COLIBRI. What the French airmen couldn't know was that Japanese soldiers not only crammed the decks of the requisitioned junks: they also filled their holds. Each of the junks thus carried up to over a hundred soldiers, with the flotilla carrying close to a full infantry regiment, minus its heavy equipment and supplies, which had all been lost in Manchuria.

With all the junks now severely holed and progressively sinking, the pilot and copilot started flying around the flotilla while keeping a safe distance from rifle fire, waiting to see what would happen next. What followed enraged them to no small degree.

"THOSE BASTARDS ARE KILLING THE CHINESE BEFORE JUMPING OVERBOARD."

The pilot himself was livid as he stared at that scene.

"How could anyone display such mindless cruelty and barbarism?"

His copilot didn't reply to that, unable to find adequate words and feeling horrible helplessness as he watched the massacre of Chinese men, women and children. The pilot however had one thing to say...to his door gunners.

"GUNNERS, SHOOT ANY JAPANESE FLOATING ON THE SURFACE. SHOW NO MERCY! IF YOU SEE ANY SURVIVING CHINESE, WARN ME AT ONCE."

Unfortunately, the only surviving Chinese that they were able to fish out of the sea after shooting up the Japanese survivors was a lone little girl who had somehow managed to escape the grip of the Japanese and who had then jumped overboard, escaping certain death at their hands. Now nearly out of cannon and machine gun

ammunition, the crew of the SUPER COLIBRI took a return heading to the REDOUTABLE, a small crying Chinese girl held in the lap of one of the door gunners.

04:10 (China Time)

Saturday, December 24, 1932

Bridge of the battleship U.S.S. NEVADA (BB-36)

Bay of Ha Long, Gulf of Tonkin

Captain (Navy) William S. Pye discretely let out a sigh of relief as the lights of the waiting French dry dock ship ATLAS became clearly visible ahead of his wounded battleship. While engaged in shore bombardment fire off the Japanese coast, his battleship had fallen victim to one of its oldest enemies: the sea mine. To make matters worst, the NEVADA had struck that mine while performing a tight turn. The Japanese sea mine had thus struck near the stern and exploded, damaging both the rudders and the propellers of the ship. Unable to maneuver by itself, the NEVADA had then been taken under tow by the U.S.S. OKLAHOMA, which had then slowly proceeded with its charge on the long journey to the coast of Indochina and the safety of Ha Long Bay. That journey had proved demanding for both the crew of the NEVADA and to its captain, as the damaged hull and deformed propeller shafts of the battleship kept springing serious leaks. That had been compounded by passing through a storm that had broken the tow line between the OKLAHOMA and the NEVADA, nearly resulting in the loss of the NEVADA as it found itself helpless and out of control inside the storm. Thankfully, that storm had been short and the OKLAHOMA had been able to reestablish a tow line. That tow line had then proved solid enough to bring the wounded battleship into the Gulf of Tonkin, at which point three French tugboats had taken over from the U.S.S. OKLAHOMA, allowing it to return to its battle duties.

Using his binoculars to examine the French dry dock ship, Pye progressively became more and more impressed by it: that thing was a true giant of the seas and was easily the biggest ship he had ever seen. Right now, its gigantic bow was slowly splitting up in two, opening itself and revealing the cavernous dry dock inside. That dry dock was also covered by a tall steel structure supported by high pillars and covered on its top and flanks by metallic plating. That meant that the dry dock would be impervious to the elements, something that could only help make the repairs on the NEVADA easier.

Once the NEVADA was less than 600 meters from the opened bow of the ATLAS, the three French tugboats let go their tow lines and backed off, while the ATLAS itself started moving slowly forward. As the NEVADA started entering the dry dock part of the ATLAS, the executive officer of the NEVADA approached Pye and made a remark while contemplating the towering walls of the split bow now flanking the battleship on both sides.

"I can't help feel like Jonas being swallowed by his whale, sir."

"I get that feeling too, Commander Emery. What a ship that ATLAS is! Our navy should get one like it. It would provide us some truly precious services, especially in the vast waters of the Pacific."

"It certainly would, sir, but will our navy ever get the kind of budget needed to acquire such a ship? That thing must not come cheap."

"Too true! Let's profit from the generosity of the French while we can. You have the Chief Engineer ready with the detailed list of damages and of repairs to be effected?"

"Yes sir! We will be able to hand it to the French repair crew as soon as it comes aboard."

"Excellent! I understand that this repair crew will be made up of civilian contractors, rather than French Navy specialists?"

"Correct, sir! The ATLAS itself was leased from the Kruger Marine Shipyards, situated near Marseilles, for the duration of this war and its crew is mostly civilian, backed up by a few key French Navy engineering specialists, or that's what I was told. From what we have seen of French ships to date, I would say that those specialists should know their stuff."

"Hopefully so, Commander."

With their ship unable to contribute to its own propulsion, the two officers then fell mostly silent while watching the crew of the dry dock ship proceed slowly and cautiously as the ATLAS swallowed the American battleship. The bow of the dry dock ship then closed, along with the forward watertight gate of the dry dock basin. What followed both surprised and impressed Captain Pye. Eight huge articulated hydraulic arms ending in pneumatic cushion bags came out of the sides of the dry dock basin and slowly extended towards the NEVADA, until their pressurized rubber cushions gently made contact with the hull sides of the battleship, embracing them. The level of the water in

the basin then started lowering, with the hydraulic arms following the downward movement of the battleship, until its keel touched the bottom of the basin. Dozens of big rubber pads lining up the bottom of the basin then started lifting and pivoting, adapting themselves to the shape of the NEVADA's lower hull and bottom. After less than one hour, Pye found his ship upright and safely held in place in the middle of a now dry basin.

"Damn, we definitely need a ship like this."

Pye was starting to wonder how the workers from the dry dock ship would come aboard his battleship, its weather deck now being a good fifteen meters above the floor of the basin, when two telescopic ramps swung out of the sides of the basin, one to the left of the NEVADA, the other to the right, and started pivoting towards the battleship while slowly lowering their end section. After four minutes, the ramps arrived over the forward and aft decks of the NEVADA and rested their ends, which included large pneumatic rubber pads to distribute their weights on the deck surface. Finally, end ramp sections unfolded, creating moderately sloped access surfaces. Pye, watching all this with intense curiosity, then realized that the telescopic ramps were much more than simple walkways: they were over four meters wide and looked strong enough to support vehicles like heavy forklifts and medium trucks. As soon as the ramps were in place, a group of seven men and women wearing blue work coveralls walked down the port side ramp. Pye hurried down from the bridge to greet them as they stepped on the forward weather deck of the NEVADA. The man leading the group, a small but solidly built one wearing the shoulder pads of a French Navy commander, saluted Pye after stopping in front of him, his group behind him. His English then proved more than fair.

"Capitaine de Frégate¹⁵ Jean Larivière, requesting permission to come aboard, Captain."

"Permission granted, Captain Larivière. I am Captain William Pye, in command of the battleship U.S.S. NEVADA. Are you in command of this dry dock ship?"

Larivière smiled at that question and pointed at the bearded man in his fifties standing to his right.

"Oh, no! Mister Georges Saint-Arnaud is the boss aboard the ATLAS, which is a civilian ship under contract for the French Navy. I am acting as the liaison officer between my navy and your battleship, Captain. We brought with us five of the

¹⁵ Capitaine de Frégate : French Navy equivalent to the rank of 'Commander' in the U.S. Navy.

department heads of the ATLAS, who will start assessing the extent of the damages and will start planning the repairs.”

Larivière then noticed that Pye was giving a dubious look at the two women who were part of his group.

“If I may, I would like to present to you the staff from the ATLAS that I brought with me, Captain. Here, we have the chief engineer, Paul Villemin, who will direct the repair work in concert with your own chief engineer. Next to him is the head of our welding department, Maurice Duhamel. To my left is Mademoiselle Denise Poirier, our chief electrical engineer and, finally, Mademoiselle Sylvie Chartrand, the logistics officer of the ATLAS. Mademoiselle Chartrand will take care of providing temporary accommodations for your crew aboard the ATLAS, so that the work could be more easily done on your battleship, and will also be in charge of moving supplies and ammunition in and out of your ship.”

Still not convinced, Pye eyed critically the two women: Denise Poirier was a sexy-looking, tall blonde in her early forties, while Sylvie Chartrand was a medium-sized brunette in her mid-forties. For Pye, the notion of having women repairing a warship was nearly tantamount to a joke. Larivière tightened his jaws on seeing Pye’s attitude but he stayed calm while speaking in a polite but firm tone.

“Misses Poirier and Chartrand have been on the command staff of the ATLAS for over five years, Captain Pye, and are highly qualified and competent in their specialties. Mademoiselle Poirier is a certified genius and, apart from having a master’s degree in electrical engineering, also holds bachelor’s degrees in electronics and in naval architecture. As for Mademoiselle Chartrand, she has been the logistics officer of the ATLAS for seven years now and, prior to that, was in charge of logistics at the Kruger Marine Shipyards, the shipyard that built the ATLAS. Believe me, Captain: those two women are as competent as any man could be.”

“Very well! If you will accompany me, I will lead you to my chief engineer, who has made a detailed list of the damages inflicted by that damn Japanese sea mine, which hit and exploded near our outer starboard propeller shaft.”

Pye, leading the staff from the ATLAS, was about to enter with them the forward superstructures of the battleship when Larivière suddenly stopped, as if he had heard something. Pye, also stopping and turning around, saw that the French officer was apparently listening to someone on a thin radio headset he was wearing. Before he

could ask him what it was about, Larivière suddenly broke into a big grin and nearly shouted out.

“OUR HIGH COMMAND HAS RECEIVED FROM JAPAN A REQUEST FOR AN ARMISTICE! THE WAR IS ABOUT TO END!”

“God damn! That’s what I call good news! And on the day before Christmas, on top of it.” replied Pye, equally happy.

10:06 (Paris Time)

Tuesday, December 27, 1932

Élysée Palace, 55 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré

Eight Arrondissement, Paris

France

When Tasha was introduced with Terry, Hien and Johanna in the Presidential Study, she found President Lebrun and Prime Minister Doumergue waiting for them. While the two politicians seemed to be in a good mood, they also appeared most serious. As the President of the Republic, Albert Lebrun was the one who greeted them on their entrance.

“Aah, my dear friends! Please, have a seat! Would you like some coffee or tea?”

“Tea would be fine, Mister President.” Replied Tasha before taking place in a sofa, along with her three friends. Lebrun used his intercom to order a tea service, then went to sit with Gaston Doumergue in a sofa opposite the one occupied by the four women. They exchanged pleasantries at first, along with stories of how they spent Christmas, until the tea service arrived and everybody had a cup of steaming tea. Once the servant left and the doors of the office closed, Lebrun became serious at once.

“Thank you for coming so quickly at my request, my friends. I and Gaston need your informed advice concerning the request by the Japanese government for an armistice. Right now, I have directed that all offensive operations be stopped and that our forces in China take a defensive posture, and this until France will have decided precisely what we want from Japan. The Council of Ministers, with our military chiefs of staffs present, has already discussed yesterday this subject and a number of options were discussed and proposed at that meeting. What me and Gaston would like are your opinions on those options, or even extra options of your own on the subject.”

“Thank you for your confidence in us, Mister President.” said Tasha, fully realizing the weight her words and those of her friends could have on such a heavy decision. “May I ask first what the status of the Japanese forces in China are, so that we could make an informed judgment?”

“Certainly, my dear Tasha. Here is a copy of the Intelligence briefing given yesterday to the ministers on the situation in China.”

Tasha took the file offered by Lebrun and opened it, finding inside a document stamped ‘SECRET DÉFENSE’. She read it quickly, then passed it to Terry Clarkson. The group stayed quiet until Johanna and Hien had also a chance to read the document, then Terry spoke up, giving her opinion first as the one in her group with deep military experience and knowledge.

“Mister President, I would go with the option of delaying our official response until all the Japanese soldiers in China have been dealt with. Those soldiers and their officers have committed too many atrocities and barbaric acts to deserve anything but death for their crimes. The Kwantung Army in particular has a lot of blood on its hands and should be exterminated to the last soldier, in my opinion. That outcome is anyway close at hand, with those Japanese soldiers mostly out of ammunition and being pushed hard from the North and West by Soviet forces. That they tried to return to Japan on requisitioned Chinese fishing boats show how desperate their situation is. It was truly nice to see that our planes were able to detect those attempts at sea transit and then sank those boats. It was unfortunate that the Chinese aboard those boats were also killed, but I am certain that they would not have survived long after arriving in Japan.”

“I also agree with that option, but mostly for another reason, Mister President.” said Pham Ti Hien. “The military leaders of the Kwantung Army and those of the Japanese Expeditionary Army in China included many of the most extreme-right militarists in Japan and were the prime instigators of the invasion of Manchuria and of the war against China, on top of using political assassinations in Japan itself to gain more power and intimidate the left-leaning politicians there. Those Japanese military leaders must not be allowed to survive this war, if we want to see the militarist fever in Japan disappear for good. There are moderate elements in the Japanese government and political system, but we should make sure that they no longer have to fear pressure and threats from militarists. In fact, I would advocate that we push for the complete and permanent demilitarization of Japan, the same way we forced Germany to demilitarize for good in 1915.”

"I think that you won't find many of my ministers contradicting you on this, Miss Pham." replied Gaston Doumergue. "The degree of cruelty and barbarism demonstrated by the Japanese Army in China has deeply shocked most French citizens. Few French people would be ready to plead moderation about how to treat Japanese soldiers."

"But, if our forces are now on a strictly defensive posture, how will we make sure that these Japanese militarists and their soldiers pay for their crimes?" asked Johanna Kruger, who had little knowledge about the military and geopolitics. It was Tasha who answered her question.

"Simple: by helping the Chinese and Soviet forces, which are not technically concerned by any armistice we could conclude separately with Japan, to continue pushing against the remaining Japanese units in China. The Chinese in particular, be they either nationalists or communists, have lots of good reasons to deeply hate the Japanese and we can expect that they will give no quarters to the Japanese soldiers they will overwhelm. Let's provide them with temporary motor transportation, which they presently lack, to help them move their troops faster, so that they could encircle the remaining pockets of Japanese soldiers, blockade them and finally eliminate them. After all, it is their country, not ours and certainly not Japan's anymore. Let the Chinese deal with the Japanese, while providing them some discreet logistical support."

"I like that!" exclaimed President Lebrun. "But why differentiate between nationalist and communist Chinese soldiers, Miss Lenoir? Aren't they both fighting against the Japanese?"

"They certainly do, Mister President. However, from what we know of history, the moment that the Japanese will no longer be a threat to China, then you will see a full blown civil war for the control of China start between the nationalist forces of Tchang Kai-Chek and the communist forces of Mao Zedong. There is little that we could do in my opinion to prevent such a civil war to happen: Tchang Kai-Chek's regime is simply too corrupt and too uncaring about the plight of Chinese farmers, who form the vast majority of the population, to be ready to share power with the communists of Mao Zedong. You can add to that the fact that most of the forces supposedly controlled by Tchang Kai-Chek are in reality controlled by warlords who don't give a damn about anything except their own bank accounts. If we tried to mellow the rule of Tchang Kai-Chek by giving him subsidies so that he could reform the Chinese agriculture and economy, then you can fully expect those funds to disappear in his own pockets and

those of his warlord generals. As for the communists, they may be much less corrupt, but they are very rigid in their dogmas and they will basically ban true democracy in China if and when they ever take power there.”

“My God!” exclaimed Gaston Doumergue, shaken by her assessment. “You are really pessimistic about the future of China, aren’t you, Tasha?”

“Yes, I am, but with good reasons. Name me a Chinese government in history that truly cared for the majority of its people. Be it either emperors, warlords or politicians in charge, Chinese farmers and fishermen always ended being exploited for the benefit of the very few. Unfortunately, I see very little that gives me hope for a better future for China. My advice is thus to help the Chinese to completely eliminate the Japanese presence in China, and then for France to withdraw from internal Chinese affairs. Any attempt at influencing the future political situation in China will be wasted efforts, in my opinion.”

“A rather brutal but realistic assessment in my opinion, Tasha.” said Albert Lebrun, pensive. “What if those communist Chinese ally themselves with the Soviet forces presently pushing the Japanese out of Manchuria?”

“Actually, I fully expect that to happen, Mister President. Don’t forget that the credo of the actual leader of the Soviet Union, Trotsky, is ‘World revolution’. He will be most happy to grab parts of China and control the rest through his local communist allies. Again, there is little France could do about that, unless you are ready to go to war with the Soviet Union, something that I strongly counsel against. This war against Japan already cost a pretty penny to the French treasury, although it also stimulated industrial production and further cut the effects in France of this worldwide economic depression.”

“Oh, I certainly have no appetite for another war, Tasha. Once the situation in Asia is fully stabilized, we will withdraw our expeditionary forces and return them to France, where their losses will be replaced and supply stocks, especially in ammunition, bombs and missiles, will be topped off. You can thus expect for a few more months to continue getting sizeable royalties from the government for the production of Metallex.” Tasha made a sour smile at those last words.

“Believe me, Mister President: I will never advocate for a war just to make more money from it. The Lenoir Industries Consortium may be good at producing top notch military equipment, but I would rather see it produce things that will help Humanity as a whole to advance towards a better, peaceful future.”

“In that I have no doubts, my dear friend.” Replied Lebrun soberly.

18:07 (Paris Time)

Saturday, March 4, 1933

Main lounge of the Château du Haut-Buc

Buc, southwestern suburbs of Paris

France

Tasha felt both hope and satisfaction as she watched on the six o'clock televised news program a replay of the swearing-in ceremony of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the 32nd President of the United States. That bungling, misguided Herbert Hoover was finally out of the way, with someone with about as progressive-thinking a mentality as she could hope for now being at the helm of the U.S.A.. More importantly, that new President was someone ready and willing to listen to her opinions and suggestions, someone she also could call a friend. Tasha's programs of investments and of scientific and technological knowledge transfer had done a lot to negate the calamities of the Great Depression within the State of New York, as well as within the New England States, and F.D.R. had fully given her the proper dues for those achievements. As soon as he had been elected, Roosevelt had sent Harry Hopkins, one of his most trusted aides and a man that Tasha liked a lot for both his altruism and immense competence, to pay a visit to Buc. There, Tasha had given him a tour of her industrial empire and had shown to him the various social actions and initiatives she had taken in the last twenty years in order to improve the lot of the average French citizen from the middle and lower classes. Hopkins had subsequently returned to the United States with a long list of points and suggestions, to be presented to his President-elect. Now, Tasha's biggest worry was about the American Congress, where many pro-segregation politicians hated her guts and had accused Roosevelt during the past months of letting a foreign woman 'dictate' to him his policies. For those politicians, she was now widely called by them 'that nigger-loving French woman'. However, that didn't bother her one bit: those politicians' states, mostly in the South and the Midwest, were suffering heavily from the Great Depression, having refused to imitate her initiatives in the northeastern states and with those same politicians losing more and more influence every day that showed the pertinence and success of the measures applied around New York State and the New England region. Unfortunately, the general level of bigotry, ignorance and racism around the United States was still way too high to Tasha's taste. She fully realized that it

was going to probably take many more decades, or even a century, to change that state of affair, but it still frustrated her to no small end. Hopefully, she, Terry, Johanna and Hien were going to be still around long enough to see such changes happen in the United States and in other places around the World. The overseas colonies of France in Africa, Asia and the Pacific were however much more fertile and promising grounds for her efforts at improvements and reforms, especially with the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister being good friends and allies of her and of her three friends from the future. As for Japan, an international commission that included high-level representatives from each country that had suffered the loss of civilian citizens at the hands of the Japanese Army in China had sat last month to decide on the terms of a peace. The conclusions of that commission had been very harsh indeed, as the level of atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers had warranted. With the Japanese Army in China having been exterminated to the last man, the commission had decided to effect the complete and permanent demilitarization of Japan. That goal was then realized by a number of strict measures, to be enforced by military means if necessary. First was the disarming of the Japanese garrisons occupying the Korean Peninsula since 1910 and the shipping back of those disarmed Japanese soldiers to Japan, where they were to be demobilized. Second was a unanimous decision to ban all sale or importation to Japan of both oil and weapons of any kind. From now on, the only fuel to be allowed to be brought to Japan would be coal. Without sources of oil distillates available to Japan and with no oil fields of its own, rebuilding a modern Japanese army and navy would be impossible. That measure was also going to throw Japan back to the Age of Steam, something that didn't bother Tasha one bit: while much less efficient than burning liquid fuels, coal could still be sufficient to provide heating and electricity production to the Japanese civilian population. That horses and steam locomotives were now going to replace cars and trucks in Japan was a fair price to pay for the sins of Japan. Finally, all air and sea links between the signatory countries of the commission and Japan were now cut, basically putting Japan in a strict international quarantine. Sighing to herself, Tasha then used her remote control unit to shut down her television set, then got up from her sofa to go upstairs to her private study: there was still much for her to do and to plan for in the years to come.

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