

CHAPTER 16

Mark's Night Adventure

"Dad. Can I have a word with you?"

"Yes, Son, of course." Mark indicated with his head and the two walked away from the fire.

"I want to go for a bit of a sail," he said after they had got out of hearing of the others.

"At this time of the night?"

"Yes. There's a reason. Come and I'll show you."

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Twenty minutes later Mark and Tom were down at the water's edge with *Sapphire*. Tom helped hoist the sails and they spoke quietly together.

"There is a light easterly blowing. With a bit of luck you will have a reach in both directions."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"Just remember no other boat will be able to see you. So keep well clear."

"I've got the torch to shine on the sails if it becomes critical. But nothing is stirring. I'll be surprised if I strike any other vessels."

"Distance is about three miles. The tricky bit will be finding the isthmus in the dark. The shore starts to turn to the north west just after it so that may help."

"I've got the map here. And there is a track straight up into the saddle?"

"That's what Dad says. He says it's a surprisingly easy walk; the track is sandy and wide and before you know it you're there. The climb is only twenty five feet or so."

"My Dad is a brick. Look. He has given me the 'hand-held' in case I get into strife." Mark indicated the small two way radio on the thwart. "He will talk to Father Hannan and get him to leave his

channel open on *Great Saint Joseph*.” There was a footstep behind them and the smell of pipe tobacco.

“What’s this? A little night sailing?” came a low voice.

“Goodnight Father,” said Tom in little more than a whisper. “Mark is off to have a bit of fun.”

“Not satisfied with sailing during the day. You want to try it in the pitch black too.”

“It’s a crucial clue, Father. We need it before the morning if we are to be a chance of beating these defence force fellows.”

“Well. I’ll be sitting over my radio with the sound turned way down. Let me know of anything untoward. Wish I was coming with you but it’s your adventure.”

“You had better get going, Mark,” said Tom. “I’m going to bed before I drop.” They eased the boat away from the shore and Mark stepped into it. Tom gave the boat a push.

“Good luck!” he whispered.

“Don’t take any risks, Mark.”

“Thanks, Father,” said Mark as he pulled in the mainsheet. “I’ll be in touch if anything happens.” The boat glided away as the sails picked up the light air. They watched him till he disappeared in the gloom, then headed back to the camping area.

“Thanks Father, for keeping the radio watch.”

“I can’t think when I’ve had a more eventful holiday. Off to bed now, Tom. See you in the morning. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, Father.” He headed for the tent.

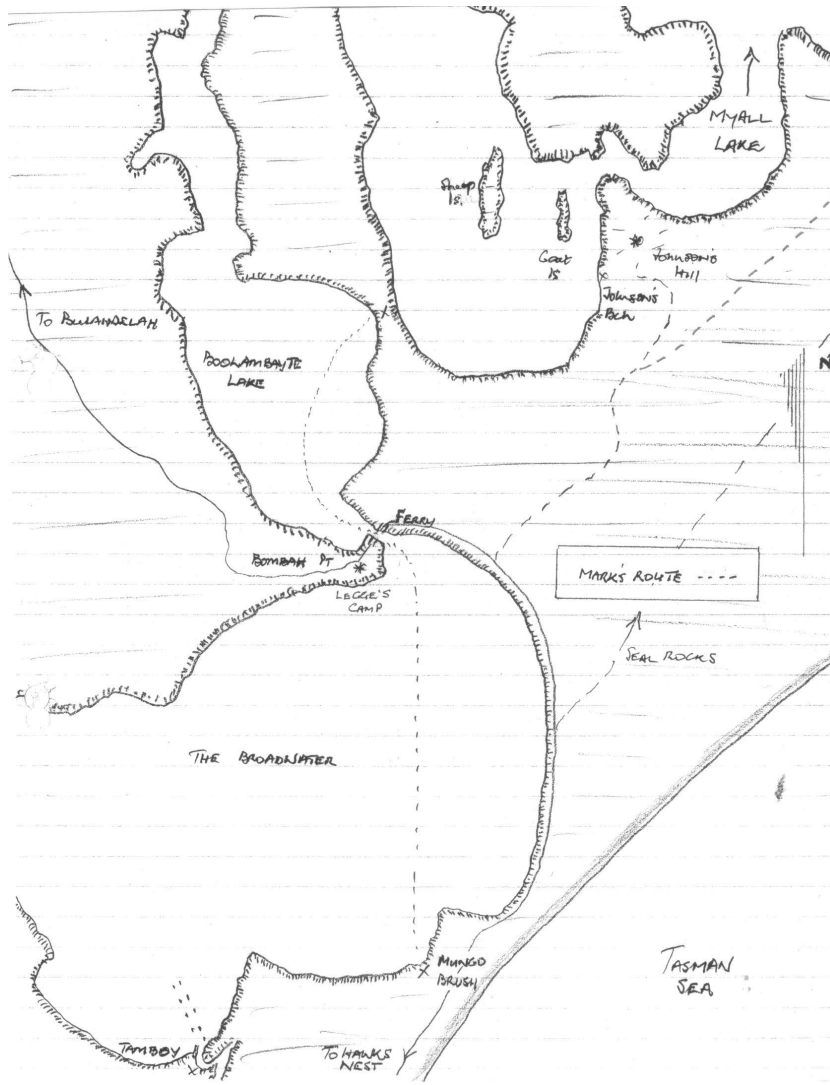
“Has he gone?” It was Cate whispering to him as he got to the tent.

“Yes. Father is going to keep his radio going on *Great Saint Joseph* and Mark will contact him if anything happens.”

“You go to bed. Liz and I will stay up. I want to hear when he gets back.”

“See you in the morning, Cate.”

Sapphire slipped along effortlessly in the faint breeze. Mark sat on the weather sidedeck and hooked his legs under the thwart to support him. ‘For some reason boats always sail better at night,’ Father Hannan had told him. This wasn’t the first time he had sailed after dark but the first time he had tried anything so adventurous.



Mark looked back at Mungo Brush. The tree canopy above it marked his horizon now with the starry sky behind. The lights of the camp and the faint glow of the fire could still be seen. But already he was two hundred yards out. He looked automatically to the compass on the thwart but it was unlit. He did not want to light it with the torch as it would affect his night vision. He checked the set of the mainsail in the gloom, eased the mainsheet then pulled it on again, judging by the feel of the sheet and the attitude of the sail that it was drawing as efficiently as possible. He looked at the shore to his right to determine as best he could how far away it was. He knew it would curve away from him before it curved back to intersect with his course as he approached Bombah Point and the narrows across which the punt motored on demand. It was at once exhilarating and peaceful—his progress matched by its silence.

He recalled Mr Ryan retailing over dinner one night his sailing a night race on the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria years before, and having the wind blow steadily from the one direction for three hours. The significance of the story had not been lost on him. As a sailor he knew that the wind during the day is rarely steady in direction for as much as two minutes at a time. There were always slight changes in direction every thirty seconds or so. Now he seemed to be experiencing the same phenomenon. The wind was steady. A faint swell chased him from Mungo and the boat pitched slightly under its influence.

Ahead he could see the lights of the cabins and caravans in the holiday camp at Bombah Point. Faintly over the water came the quacking and squabble of ducks including a humorous quacking which picked up speed as it descended in pitch—*Quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack*. Tom would know what sort of ducks they were. Ten minutes passed and he was able to see the lights of the punt on the Bombah shore. There was no road traffic. He wondered about the time but did not want to check his watch with the torch. The eastern shore was nearing now as he approached the narrows, and the pressure of the breeze was somewhat less. He eased the boom out as the stream changed direction towards

the west and the wind came around towards the stern of the boat. He headed towards the gap between the shores which was only seventy yards or so wide. There was a man leaning on a post at the wharf where the punt was secured, smoking a cigarette.

“Good night!” he said.

“Fine evening,” Mark replied.

“Seems to be a bit of traffic on the water tonight.”

“How’s that?”

“Been two canoes past here in the last half hour. One going up and one down.”

“Soldiers?”

“Looked like it, yes.”

“There’s a competition on, apparently.”

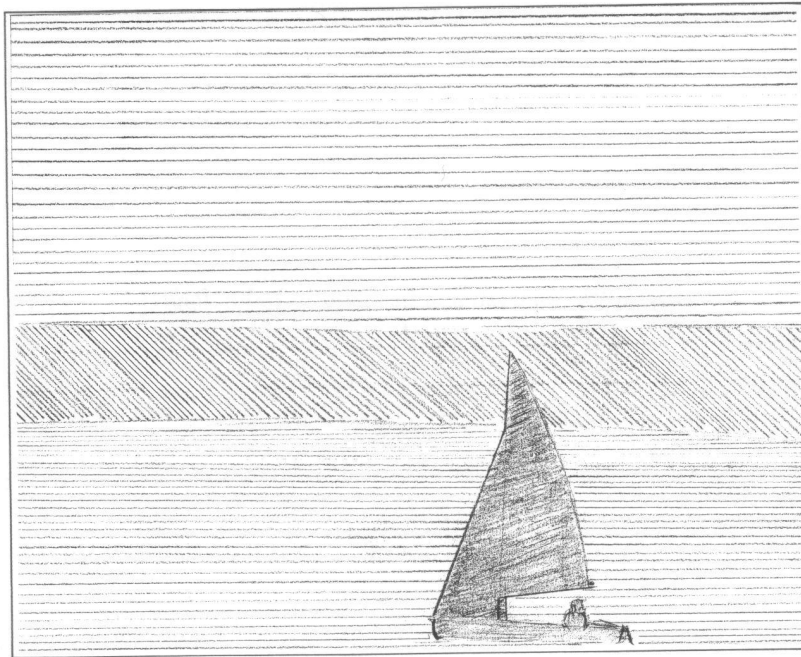
“Ah. That would explain it.”

“I’m out for a bit of a sail. Might see you on the way back.”

“Good night.”

Sapphire was travelling well now with the wind behind her and in ten minutes he had cleared the narrows and was well into Lake Boolambayte. He masked the face of the torch with his hand and switched it on to show the map. He had thought to keep on to the north west before turning again to the north east so as to avoid the wind shadow caused by the land. He checked his position. He could turn north now. The bearing to the isthmus was from a point to a point and a half east of north; say fifteen degrees True. What was the magnetic bearing? The variation, he knew, was about ten degrees. He repeated to himself the mnemonic Tom had taught him—*Magnetic to Grid add; Grid to Magnetic subtract*. Grid was the same as True. So it was fifteen degrees True—or Grid—minus ten degrees to give the magnetic reading. He checked the compass, swung the boat around until it lined up at about five degrees east of due north then extinguished the torch. The thing now was to find something on the horizon to use as a marker so he would keep roughly this bearing. He looked around but it took a little time for his night vision to return. Then he saw that there was a hill on the peninsula dead ahead which he could use. Immediately after, he saw something else. A light on the shore below it. The light was moving, obviously a torch. Maybe

its owner was one of the men from the canoe the chap on the wharf had mentioned seeing travelling upstream. He kept his eye on the torch. It came down to the water. 'Drat it', he thought, 'I haven't checked the time'. He wouldn't do it now. Whoever was on the shore might see him.



The boat was reaching again now with the wind over the starboard beam not so steady in direction with the land nearby. He kept his eyes on the torch on the shore. He was less than a thousand yards away now—or a kilometre, as Bill would say. The torch reflected off the water. Then it started slowly to move away from the shore and up a hill. The light was now turned away from him. It seemed its owner was carrying something and from the motion of the torch it was something heavy. He watched the progress of the reflected light as it mounted the hill. A few minutes later it suddenly shone brightly on something orange. Then it flashed on the shrubbery for a few moments and was gone. He could see nothing more. The shore was

now approaching and the wind was less. He ghosted towards the shore wary of striking an obstacle. But there was nothing. A sandy beach appeared faintly and he heard the lap of wavelets on the shore. He loosened the rudder blade so it would kick up on striking the bottom and eased the centreboard in its case so it too would kick up on contact with the sand. He dragged a foot over the side and stepped into the shallows just as the bow neared the beach. He had arrived.

“End of part one,” he said to himself.

He lifted the bow and hauled the boat up the shore till half of it was out of the water. He did not want the boat to sail away while he was searching up the hill. The wind was blanketed by the trees here and he did not think it necessary to lower the mainsail. There was no sign of life. He took the torch from the seat in the boat and shone it on the beach. There were footmarks in the sand and the marks of a small boat or canoe. What had that fellow been doing? What had he been carrying? He shone the torch up and down the beach. Where was his boat? He shone the torch away from the beach. There was the track, wide and sandy as Mr Ryan had said. He started up the hill. The footmarks were going this way. There were wet patches as if whatever they had been carrying was leaking. Suddenly the solution occurred to him. There had been two of them and they had been carrying a canoe. ‘Of course, you idiot,’ he berated himself, ‘they were carrying it across the isthmus to avoid paddling around it.’ Mentally he pictured the map. The distance around the peninsula was three miles or so. By hauling the canoe over land here they could save themselves the best part of an hour’s hard work. And the next station was on Sheep Island just across the water in Lake Boolambayte. He headed quickly now up the sandy track but kept the light of the torch hooded by his hand.

The faint skyline showed him the approaching saddle and he extinguished the torch as he reached the crest. The ground ahead of him was flat and he could see through the trees a mile or so across the water on the eastern side of isthmus the faint outline of some hills. He listened intently and heard below him the murmur of voices. They seemed to be moving away. Then he saw the flash of a torch and

knew that the soldiers were in their canoe and paddling away from the shore to the north.

Now, here in the saddle, somewhere near, was another marker. He shone the torch around with abandon and at once picked up the marker just to the north of the saddle in a tree. It was orange. This was obviously what he had seen reflected in the light of the soldier's torch from the boat. He walked over and looked beneath it. There was the now familiar small cement block and engraved in it was the letter H. Cate had been right. *Johnson's Hill* it was. Somewhere over there a mile or so away to the north was the object of all their efforts. At last he remembered to check his watch. It was 10 55 pm.

"Time to return." He headed back down the sandy path to the beach.

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Liz and Cate sat with Father Hannan in the cockpit of *Great Saint Joseph* moored just off the shore. There was a faint breeze. The only light showing was a red button on Father's two-way radio. The two girls were talking in low voices and the priest was smoking and listening to their pleasant chatter. There was some static from the radio then a voice spoke faintly "VK2 Alpha Echo Juliet, VK2 Alpha Echo Juliet; VK2 Tango Tango Charlie portable calling. Do you copy, Father?"

"Alpha Echo Juliet?" said Liz to Cate in a half whisper.

"Yes. That's my call sign," said Father Hannan as he picked up the radio. "VK2 Alpha Echo, Juliet VK2AEJ. Receiving you clearly Mark. What's the news? Over."

"All is well here. I'm about ten minutes past Bombah Point and on my way home. Tell the girls 'Tally Ho. Letter H', repeat H for Hotel is the letter in the saddle on Lake Boolambayte."

"Roger. Message received and transmitted. How long before you are back with us?"

"Twenty minutes or so. Wind is light but constant."

"Good. We'll look forward to seeing you shortly."

"Roger. This is VK2TTC going clear."

“Hurrah! H for hill,” Cate said to Liz. “Now we know it’s Johnson’s Hill for sure. Why did you ask Father about the call sign?”

“It was something I thought I dreamt when we were camped on Corrie Island,” she replied. “I heard a voice in the middle of the night say ‘Alpha Echo Juliet, Do you copy?’ I couldn’t work it out. Thank you Father. It’s been on my mind ever since.” Father Hannan chuckled.

“I had rowed down the river against the tide to check that you were all safe and sound. I called up your father to let him know. Look’s like I was a bit too close. My voice must have carried over the water.”

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Mark’s return to Mungo had been almost as uneventful as the trip out, save for one thing. The wind continued to blow lightly from the east. At Mark’s request the girls had kept a lamp lit on the shore low down near the water line and once he had cleared Bombah Point it had been a matter of steering for this as soon as it became visible. It was surprising, as he told them later, how much curvature of the earth there was even over two miles of water for it had been quite fifteen minutes after clearing the narrows before he spied it burning.

He was half way across the Broadwater when the silence of the night was interrupted by a sudden roar from the south west as a pair of Hercules transport aircraft from the nearby Air Force base came rocketing across the lake at less than five hundred feet, their identification lights blazing, and passed just to the north of Mungo hill out over the Tasman Sea.

“I’ll bet that disturbs a few campers,” Mark said to himself. “These Air Force wallahs are a blasted nuisance.”

Some fifteen minutes later he pulled into the shore to find the two girls waiting.

“Did you hear the planes?”

“Are you kidding? There’s not a camper on the lakes who didn’t,” Cate replied. The girls helped him lower the sails and secure the boat then they climbed quietly up the grass to the boys’ tent.

“So it’s Johnson’s Hill.” Tom’s eyes were blurry with sleep and he struggled into wakefulness. Cate had been insistent that he be woken. Bill too, reluctantly, had woken from a deep sleep.

“Assuming that three of the last four stations are I, L and L,” said Liz.

“They could hardly be anything else,” said Cate.

“What about the last one?” asked Tom blearily.

“Well we must be able to guess it. It can’t be absolutely critical.”

“Look there at the map,” said Cate indicating. “There’s the road leading to the hill.”

“Say four and a half miles.”

“More like five.”

“We can hardly do it in the dark.”

“Well. We’re not going to do it now.”

“Mother would never talk to me again.”

“Not even if you came back with a gold key?”

“No.”

“Well, what about first thing in the morning?”

“Before breakfast?” said Bill, not at all happy to have been woken.

“We’ll have something before we go. Or we can take a pack with provisions.”

“The Navy are pressing,” said Mark. “Remember what we heard them say when we were in the sand dunes. I agree with Cate. We should aim to get there at first light.”

“What time’s sunrise?”

“Just after six.”

“Let’s get there about a quarter to.”

“How long will it take us to do five miles?”

“If we’re really fast, an hour.

“Give it an hour and a quarter.”

“So what time do we start?”

“Half past four.”

“Half past four? And no breakfast!”

“I told you we’ll take some.”

“We’ll never wake. No one has brought an alarm clock.”

“Yes we will,” said Cate.

“How?”

“Guardian Angel. It’s quite simple I just say a quick prayer—*Oh Angel of God my guardian dear, to whom God’s love commits me here, be ever this night at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. And please wake me at twenty past four.*”

“It won’t work, I tell you.”

“It will!”

