



Chapter 2

It seemed to Smith that the Hudson had not really taken off at all: as soon as the aircraft had reached airspeed, the pilot had simply retracted the undercarriage. The fields of East Anglia were a blur. The sensation of speed was less pronounced over the North Sea but a pilot's sneeze would have ditched them. The navigator came back to yell in Smith's ear. 'We'll be making our run in along the Kohlfleet arm of the Elbe. It points directly towards Teufelsbrücke on the other side. The embankment reserve there is only about a hundred yards wide but it shouldn't be too hard to drop you onto it. Good luck.' As the aircraft approached the coast between Bremerhaven and Cuxhaven the despatcher indicated with dumb show that they would be going even lower to avoid the radar and the flak. A line of sand dunes momentarily appeared ahead and as quickly disappeared astern. The darkness below was Germany.

'The Pathfinders are passing overhead now', the despatcher bellowed in Smith's ear. As scheduled, the raiders were overtaking the slower Hudson. Half an hour passed. Ahead of the aircraft the horizon was occasionally illuminated by a momentary glow, as though dawn were making a succession of false starts. A red light came on in the cabin. The despatcher held up five fingers. Smith nodded and sat himself on the slide in front of the ventral hatch. The hatch opened and Smith involuntarily drew up his legs as a power pylon flashed by below, close enough, it appeared, to touch. The cabin tilted as the Hudson climbed to make minimum altitude for the drop. Acrid smoke stung his nostrils. 'Good', Smith muttered to himself, 'the Germans have their smoke generators working'. Then the red light gave way to green. 'Geronimo', said the despatcher, and pushed him into the void.

The slipstream caught Smith and spun him, twisting the parachute cords. For an agonizing second he thought that the canopy might not open. When it did, jerk and impact were almost simultaneous. He was winded and stunned, but could vaguely sense that he was sinking. He bent his knees, as he had been told, but continued to fall. It occurred to him that the earth might be swallowing him up, but then he tried to take breath. Water choked him. Half panicked, he fumbled for the inflation lever of his Mae West and was quickly carried to the surface. When he recovered himself, he tried to reorient. As far as he could judge, the nearest shore, a dark bank topped by cranes, was over a hundred yards distant.



To his left smoke generators were spreading a pall over the river. To his left? They should have been on his right. In that direction the raid was in full swing, convulsion following convulsion as each Halifax dropped a single huge concrete buster on the reinforced overhead of the Blohm and Voss U-boat pens. The searchlights and the light flak were making a brilliant display, and they were much closer than they should have been. 'It's the wrong bloody channel', he shouted aloud. Ahead, the long dark shape of a mole showed dimly along the far shore. He recognised it by its length. It was the fishermen's harbour, nearly three miles upstream of the designated drop zone. The Hudson had mistaken the Kohlbrand for the Kohlfleet. It was just as well that the drop had also been short, Smith reflected, or he would have been parachuting into the middle of the Altona district. Where he was, which seemed to be about abreast of the Howaltswerke yard, there was at least the cover of the smoke. Anyway, he was down safely and, so far as he could tell, unobserved. He was struggling to free himself from the parachute harness, and wondering if he could stand the cold long enough to drift down river to Teufelsbrücke, when he became aware of a muffled throbbing that rapidly grew in volume. Puzzled, he twisted in the water to find its source. He was totally unprepared for the immense black tower that reared above him. It was all he could do to thrash out of its path. A U-boat, escaping from the raid, was feeling its way down river. Smith suppressed a cough as the exhaust belched diesel fumes in his face, but then it was gone. Suddenly, he was dragged underwater again. His parachute had caught some projection on the submarine. For a second time he was on the edge of panic, but found that if he stayed on his back the Mae West was buoyant enough to keep his face out of the water.

Smith reassessed his situation. The U-boat was going his way. There was no-one on deck that he could see, and as long as it proceeded at dead slow there was only a limited risk of drowning. For the next ten minutes he devoted himself to ensuring that he could free himself from the parachute harness when he wished. Half an hour later, when he saw what he took to be the mouth of the Kohlfleet, Smith knew that it was time to get off. To his relief, the release buckle of the harness parted at a blow and none of the cords caught. His unwitting transport continued downstream, leaving him bobbing in its wake.



The north bank of the river was only about two hundred metres distant, but the chill of the water had taken hold. Near the end of his endurance by the time he gained his footing, he was dismayed to realize that there was no landmark he recognized. The voice that came from somewhere above and ahead seemed to sympathize. 'Good evening. You will find that your bombers have rearranged the landscape somewhat. The steps are to your left.'

The steps led up to a small quay. A dark figure sat on the topmost, forearms across knees. The flash of a distant bomb blast briefly disclosed two items. One was a death's head badge on a peaked cap. The other was a Beretta pistol, nonchalantly held. Smith raised his hands. 'No need for that', said the voice. 'Just throw your revolver away, very carefully.' Smith briefly debated with himself whether hiding his knowledge of German was worth taking the risk of being shot. 'I'm not armed', he said in German.

'We'll soon see. Get out of that wet clothing. What do you English say? You'll catch your death?' The figure motioned and another moved from the shadows to hand Smith a bundle of clothes. The uppermost item had a collar badge of two small lightning flashes. They're going to dress me in SS uniform and shoot me as a spy, thought Smith. Could he throw himself into the dark of the river before the Beretta got him? His face must have betrayed the thought, because the second figure spoke quickly, in English.

'It's all right, Flight Lieutenant', she said.