



Chapter 18

Reichstrasse 107 crossed the main Berlin-Hamburg railway line. Smith took the Arado high enough to spy the land ahead. The scene that began to unfold tempted him higher and higher. It was a corner of Dancer's chessboard, but in disarray. The fields that formed the squares did not fit neatly against each other, as if someone was trying to rejig the board. From Wittenberge, almost beneath them, north to Wismar on the Baltic, a hundred kilometres away, the countryside was alive with traffic, military and civilian. Every road ahead of them to the west was choked, with the overflow spilling across the fields on either side. There was no individuality. The pieces merged into an undifferentiated ant-like mass. 'Not really people at all', Rani said, 'This must be how their leaders see them.'

'It's how our bomber crews see them too', added Smith. 'They don't like to think too much about what happens to women and children when they level a city block.'

Here and there a pocket of smoke suggested a Russian air attack, and an artillery duel seemed to be developing around Gustrow. The town was probably being defended by a German rearguard. Further west, towards Hamburg there was also a large amount of traffic on the move, apparently northward, but no evidence of fighting, at least not from that height. 'I'd say it's all but over,' Smith told Rani. 'What's left of Army Group Vistula is sandwiched in this corridor. It's maybe thirty kilometres wide. They're not resisting in the west, and even here they're just trying to slow the Russian advance so that as many of them as possible can surrender to the British and Americans.'

There was an edge to Rani's voice. 'Would Hamburg have been taken?' Smith was tempted to lie, but had no confidence that he could deceive her, exhausted though Rani was. 'More than likely.'

'And Neuengamme?'

'We'll know soon enough. Barring interceptors and accidents, it's less than an hour away.'

What he did not tell her was that interceptors were a distinct probability, and that the Arado itself was an accident looking for somewhere to happen. He had little faith in the rudder but at altitude there was plenty of room to bank and he could do leisurely aileron turns. Landing would be something else, but sufficient unto the hour would be the evil thereof. No, his immediate concern was oil pressure, which had slowly been falling



ever since takeoff. It was not yet critical, but that was only a matter of time. He opted to follow the railway on the grounds that it was unlikely to be carrying traffic across the combat zone, and gradually lost height to reduce the strain on the engine.

West of Wittenberge, which appeared to be in American hands, Smith took the Arado down to the deck to take advantage of the cover afforded by the railway cuttings. The Arado was not a fast aircraft but to Rani the sides of the cuttings seemed to be going past at a dizzying speed. 'Are there any tunnels along here?', she asked.

'I hope not', was the less than satisfactory reply, 'but we're OK if they're more than eleven metres wide.'

'That's not funny.'

Near Domitz the line began swinging towards the river.

'I think we should cross with it', said Smith. 'It'll take us into the American rear area where they won't be quite as much on the lookout for enemy air.'

The curve of the line got tighter as it approached the river and Smith had to rely more on the rudder than he would have liked. Then Domitz sprang out at them and it became clear that the gunners at the bridge had heard them coming. Smith was prepared for fire, but not for the hail that rose to meet them from both sides of the river. Fearful for the rudder, he fought the instinct to break away. It was straight ahead, or nothing. The bridge had been blown and its central span was missing, but at both ends the track and its overhead were intact. 'The first bit's hard enough', thought Smith, 'but at the other side it'll be like threading a needle through a hangover'. He held the Arado steady along the track and the gunners briefly lost him as the plane was swallowed in the framework of the bridge. They resumed with a vengeance when it reappeared in the gap where the central span had been, but it was too late; the Arado was already vanishing into the tunnel formed by track and overhead on the other side. The fuss subsided behind them. Rani was frightened but exhilarated. 'That was amazing!'

Smith was shaking: he was sure that most railway bridges weren't eleven metres wide.

His prediction about the air defences west of the Elbe was sound. They flew at tree top height past anti-aircraft batteries that could not be manned, much less fired, in the time that they took to pass over. 'They'll be signalling ahead of us', Smith told Rani, 'but if there are no fighters



airborne nearby we'll be at Neuengamme before they find us.' There was a major junction ahead at Luneberg, and Smith decided that to follow the railway line through it would make the job of fighter control altogether too easy. He flew the Arado in a half circuit around the outskirts of the city. To his surprise, where there should have been open fields there was a large camp with a well-dispersed collection of communications vehicles. It was the field headquarters of a large military formation, armed for serious self-defence against air attack. Worse, every gun emplacement was fully manned. Smith shied away from it like a startled colt, but not a single weapon fired. He found that more unsettling than if they had, and was still puzzling over it two minutes later when they overflew, to the alarm of its occupants, a convoy of vehicles driving towards them along the main road from Hamburg. They were open German staff cars, full of figures in grey, and all flying white flags from their radio aerials. The one in front was different. Its principal occupant was wearing dark blue. 'An admiral, I'll bet,' said Smith. 'Doenitz won't even allow the army to negotiate its own surrender. Well that's it, I'd say. *La guerre est fini.*'

The Elbe was in sight again. 'Look for where a tributary runs into the main river from the other side,' said Rani. 'It leads straight to the camp.' The little stream was slightly to their right. Smith gently touched the rudder pedal. There was a sudden release of tension, the Arado wavered and the pedal became lifeless. 'I must have overdone it back at Luneberg,' Smith explained. 'Can you land?', Rani wanted to know. 'If there's somewhere to put it down, no crosswind, and the engine holds up, piece of cake.' For by now the oil pressure was close to zero and the engine was sounding very rough. Neuengamme was in sight, a straggling line of buildings on either side of the stream with the regular grid of the camp beyond. The engine was on the verge of seizing. Rather than risk it tearing itself from the mountings in spectacular failure, Smith feathered the prop and switched off. Rani was looking anxious. 'Two out of three, then,' Smith said, in the eerie quiet that succeeded the engine's demise.

The fields of Neuengamme were reclaimed marshland, as flat as any aerodrome but gridded with drainage ditches. 'Wheels are out, I'm afraid. We'll have to belly in. Hold on.' The sheets hanging listlessly from the village windows indicated that there was almost no wind, but by the same token Smith could not be sure of its direction. The little aircraft began to swing slightly side on to its line of approach. A touch on the ailerons



compensated in part but Smith quickly had to level again as the ground rushed up to meet them. The Arado touched lightly enough, nose up, but lumps of propeller and mud flew past the cockpit. The slight deviation from the line of landing developed into a vicious slew and skid. The bouncing did not end until the Arado was nearly pointing back the way it had come, with mud bulldozed up to the cockpit window. Smith turned to apologise.

Rani was already clambering from the aircraft. She jumped to the ground and began running towards the distant wire and towers of the camp. In vain Smith called to her to wait for him. He pulled himself from the seat but the flight, not to mention the landing, had stiffened him up again and he arrived at the camp gate some minutes behind her. It was not as he had expected. The gates were open and there were no guards. Smoke rose from behind some of the huts but there were no other signs of life. He cautiously approached the nearest hut, a stable-like structure. The stench that assailed him when he opened the door was so overpowering that he involuntarily stepped back. Inside, as his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see the remains of what had once been human beings, all filthy, some naked, piled like broken-limbed dolls in the tiers of sleeping spaces that lined the walls. Appalled, he held a sleeve to his face and turned back to the door. He brushed a protruding arm which, to his horror, took hold of his trouser leg. The rest of the body was buried under a jumble of limbs, but from deep within the pile came a thin, scarcely audible voice. 'Water...' At the sound, several of the other skeletons stirred. Smith had always distrusted the power of his imagination and justifiably so, for now it betrayed him utterly. It seemed to him that the whole ghastly gallery began to rise, shaking emaciated limbs at him in the reproof of the dead. Panic flooded his mind, washing away compassion, humanity, even common decency. He ran from the building in terror.

Minds that go temporarily adrift often return to moorings of their own accord, but sometimes they require a prompt; Smith's was the standpipe. He turned the corner of the building and almost ran into it. From its tap it held a bucket towards him in silent reproach. Chastened, he filled it and returned to the hut.

He disentangled the owner of the hand from his dead fellows and poured a little water onto cracked lips. As soon as the man was able to drink himself, Smith went looking for other living dead. They were pitifully



few, but as he pulled them out his first survivor began crawling after him with the water. 'Where are the guards?', Smith asked.

'Gone. They took all the prisoners that could walk and left the rest of us to rot, with these they had already starved or shot. Do you have any food?'

'I'm alone, but if you can hang on for a few more hours I'm sure the Red Cross will be here.'

The man tried to laugh. 'They were here earlier, but only to take out the foreign prisoners. It must have been some political deal.'

'All the *prominenten* are gone?'

'As far as I know.'

Smith had to find Rani before she found out.

He located the administration building, but it was empty. Behind it were some huts more substantially built than the chamber of horrors he had just left. Rani was standing in the doorway of one of them. She was holding a child's coat. Defeat and despair were etched into her face. 'She's not here.'

'I know, but the Red Cross have probably got her.' There was more conviction in the statement than Smith felt, but it made no difference; Rani was beyond hope.

'I will not see her again.'

The voice that came from the other end of the hut was gently chiding. 'I wouldn't say that.'

They turned in alarm. A man was standing in the opposite doorway, casually dressed in a sports jacket and tie. In the crook of his left arm sat a little girl, long black hair curling up from her shoulders, quizzical green eyes taking in the scene. She was dressed in a smock of striped prison grey, but it was clean, covered by an apron of the same material. In her arms she held a very raggedy doll. It was a charmingly informal picture, spoilt only by the Beretta held nonchalantly across the man's chest, its muzzle pointing vaguely in the direction of the child. That damned Beretta again, thought Smith.

'Sophie!', Rani cried. Smith held her back.

'No heroics, please, Flight Lieutenant. You know the drill. Take off the belt and holster.'

'The gun's empty.'

'That's what they all say.'

Smith undid his belt. Walther continued. 'I must congratulate you on getting this far. I hardly dared to hope so much. You have something I need. Put the Himmler safe conduct on the table and step back.'



Smith took the paper from his pocket. Walther turned it open with the barrel of his pistol. 'Excellent! And now, I'm afraid, I must cover my tracks. Thank you for all your help.' He tried to swing the muzzle of the Beretta towards Smith but it was caught. He looked down to see two small hands clasped around the barrel. The serene face of the child was inches from his own. For a long, long moment her eyes were fixed on his. 'How green they are,' he said absent-mindedly, 'how deep. A person could drown in those eyes.' He lowered her to the ground, puzzlement on his face, and let go of the pistol. Sophie ran to her mother with hands still clutching the barrel. Rani swept the child up and held her at arms' length, staring into her eyes. 'I used to say that grandmother died on the day that you were born', she said, 'but it is not true! You were born on the day that she died.'

Smith took the pistol from his daughter's hands and carefully lowered the hammer. 'I'd like some answers,' he said to Walther. 'Me too,' said Walther.