

# HOME AGAIN AT LAST

A WORLD WAR II NOVEL

JERRY  
BORROWMAN

Covenant Communications, Inc.



*In Memoriam—N. Winn Allen  
1951–2005*

Beloved brother, uncle, and friend. My brother-in-law, Winn, filled our lives with joy and laughter by sharing his time and his good nature. We traveled much of the world together, learning from him how to celebrate other cultures and to relish and savor the time we have on earth. His untimely death from cancer at age 54 has left us bereft, but his memory lives forever in our hearts.

We love you, Winn, and we think of you every single day. Congratulations on a life well lived.

*Marcella, Jerry, Scott, Jeffrey, Steven, and Kelissa  
Hilary, Eden, and Maya*

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*Dedicated to Geneva Borrowman*

My mother has been a lifelong supporter who takes particular interest in my writing. She has read all my manuscripts before publication to correct the grammar and spelling. She is a person who finds great joy in service to others and has been a blessing in the lives of her family and friends. As a master school teacher for forty years she helped more than a thousand first and second graders to find their place in the world and to feel secure in her love. Even today, at age 90, she serves as her ward Scout Committee Chairman, working directly with the boys as she helps them qualify for advancement. Her vitality, curiosity, and energy are an inspiration, and we hope she'll live at least as long as her mother, who made it to age 105.

Chapter One

# PROTECTING AN AMERICAN

*Felixstowe on the English Channel—1943*

“Lieutenant Carlyle, please wait!”

Michael turned and smiled at the sound of Commander Prescott’s voice. With a crisp salute he asked, “Are you commanding today’s mission, sir?”

“I am. It’s been a long time, Michael. How have you been?”

Michael was thoughtful for a moment, even though it was a casual question. But he couldn’t help but think of his crew and all they’d been through together. “We’ve done all right, sir.” Michael had served under Prescott when he was new to the motor torpedo boats, and there was no one in the service he respected more. Under Commander Prescott’s tutelage, Michael had qualified for his own command in a different service area and they hadn’t been together since. “What about you?”

“I’m getting old. My body hurts, my brain hurts, and I find I have no patience for incompetent superiors.”

“Me too, sir.” Then realizing the implication of what he’d just said, he quickly added, “Present company excepted, of course.”

Prescott laughed. “Don’t count on it, Michael. Once we get out there today you may very well think I’ve gone ’round the bend—just another doddering old fool in command of the fellows who know what they’re doing.”

“I doubt that, sir. But speaking of which, what’s so special about today’s mission that they’ve brought in the number one

commander in the group to take us out in broad daylight on a Sunday afternoon? I'm not sure I know how to drive a boat in anything other than moonlight and the glow of oil fires."

"It is a little different, isn't it? Of course I think that you'll start to see an increasing number of daylight missions now that we have increasing air control over the Channel. As for today, there's a special courier coming in by corvette. My guess is that they're bringing in some kind of technology that needs to get to London from the States as soon as possible, but that it's too heavy for an aircraft. So, our job is to fend off the E-boats that we expect to attack."

"E-boats? They'd come out in daylight?" In the first three years of the war it seemed like Germany had an unlimited number of aircraft to throw against Britain, but with the Nazis now tied up in Russia and the Mediterranean the Royal Air Force finally had the means to send aircraft out to attack any German patrol boats that dared to venture out during daylight hours.

"From what I gather, there must be spies in New York that gave the Germans information about this particular courier, and they've been doing their best to attack it all the way across the Atlantic. Now that the corvette has made it to home waters, the E-boats and whatever aircraft fighters they can send out from Belgium are the Germans' only hope to sink it. Our intelligence indicates that they've decided to take the risk." Prescott scowled as the image of the corvette sinking within a few miles of London formed in his mind. "And wouldn't they love that—to put it down right here in our front yard."

Michael nodded thoughtfully, his brain quickly conjuring up the various ways the Germans could attack. Like the Allies, the Germans had both gunboats and torpedo boats. The German boats' German moniker was "Schnell Boot," meaning "fast boat," but the Allies knew them as E-boats. The British boats were called MTBs (Motor Torpedo Boat). At only seventy-two feet in length, the British boats generally had a crew of thirteen.

The German boats were almost twice as large and could match their speed, but were not as maneuverable. Most of the battles between the two fleets took place at night when aircraft were grounded, the most effective time to bring a convoy through the narrow English Channel. The goal of both fleets was to use their small size and rapid speed to close in on much larger enemy ships, like a troopship or supply ship, and put a torpedo in its side before the bigger ship could take evasive action. Then the small boats would zip out of range and attempt to disappear into the darkness.

But as English trade had increased under the convoy system, the battles had increasingly become the Germans attacking English-related shipping. Which meant that the British boats fighting off the Germans were kept busy.

Today's battle would be more complicated than usual since they'd not only have to engage the German Navy but also the German Air Force. That would make for a pretty dicey battle scene, which Michael would rather avoid.

Michael sighed. It didn't matter what he wanted, since this was going to be the German's show. In the end his crew was either up to the task or not. They'd been together long enough that he had full confidence in their abilities. Now it was up to chance whether they'd be hit by a random aerial bomb, surface fire from a gunboat, or well-aimed torpedo, but hopefully, none of those.

Michael and Prescott had been walking at a rather crisp pace and were now approaching the depot ship where the small boats were resupplied after their nightly missions into the Channel. There Prescott would brief Michael and the other boat captains under his command on the specifics of the mission.

"Well, whatever they're hauling on that corvette had better be important. I'm supposed to have dinner with Jules Ellington and my family tonight, and my mother will be extremely unhappy if I'm late."

Prescott cocked an eye. "Ellington? Our commando friend that did his best to get you killed in France?"

Michael nodded. "The very same."

"Then with any luck we'll all get torpedoed so you won't have to listen to him drone on and on. I'd just as soon shoot myself as sit through a dinner with him."

Michael laughed. He knew that many in the regular navy found Jules's bravado as a commando to be off-putting. But they'd been friends since prep school and Michael found his droll humor quite refreshing, particularly since Michael himself wasn't really that quick on his feet. "Well, my parents like him. And I need him tonight since he can always cheer them up when I have bad news to deliver."

"Bad news?"

"I assume you've heard about my transfer?"

"Ah. Yes. In fact, that's the main reason I requested you bring your boat 'round for today's mission. Maybe I'm getting sentimental at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, but I just wanted to have one last mission together before you go off to more temperate climates."

"I'm very glad you did, sir. I really don't know why I have to go, but I guess that's the way the service is. An officer does what he's told."

"You'll do great down there, Michael. Our loss is their gain."

"Thank you, sir." This was always the awkward moment when there really wasn't anything else to say. "Well, it looks like we're here. How many boats are going out?"

"Six. Apparently that's all the king's navy can afford today. Besides, we should be getting some fighter protection, but that's not really ever enough, so we'll have to be on our toes. Perhaps you could come through with one of those award-winning maneuvers of yours that has gained you such notoriety."

Michael blushed. Having earned the Distinguished Service Cross in earlier action, he'd been invited to Buckingham Palace

to receive the medal personally from the king, with the prime minister looking on. And then Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a friend of Michael's father, had requested a ride out on Michael's boat, which caused no small stir among the flotilla once it became known. It was all quite embarrassing to Michael.

"With all due respect, sir, we both know that you've earned more medals than I could ever hope to—you just haven't been recognized properly."

Prescott sighed. "I knew I shouldn't have said that to you. Sorry. Notoriety is more of a burden than a blessing, isn't it?"

"More than you'll ever know."

"Well, let's go onboard the tender and I'll give you and your peers our orders for the day. Should be exciting." Michael's countenance brightened immediately. The thrill of battle was addictive and he found himself relishing the thought of a fight in the daylight.

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The best part of any mission, naturally, was shutting the engines down after returning to port with all members of the crew safe and healthy. But the next best part for Michael was when he could give the order for *MTB-982* to go to full speed ahead. The only real protection a person had on a torpedo boat was its speed, since the chine wood hull was vulnerable to just about anything the enemy could throw at it. The metal shield around the bridge did offer some protection from machine gun fire if they had to engage the enemy up close, but it was useless against the enemy's deck guns.

"Full speed ahead," he said easily and thrilled as the three powerful, American-built Packard engines roared to their full potential with a great cloud of blue exhaust smoke billowing out from the stern of the boat. As the boat started hydroplaning, the bow lifted up and out of the water, creating the sharp bow wave that gave rise to the phrase, "a bone in the teeth."

“Care to take the wheel, sir?” Michael turned to his first officer, Joseph Carver, and shook his head. Everyone on the boat knew that Michael loved to control the helm, but today he would need his wits about him, and he didn’t need the added distraction of conning the wheel. Besides, they had a new helmsman who needed the experience.

“I don’t think so, Number One. I’m going to go down to my cabin for awhile. Call me when we approach the rendezvous or before if anything out of the ordinary comes up.”

“Yes, sir!” Carver said. “Should be about an hour to an hour and a half, depending on how the seas are running.”

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“Bad turn in the weather, isn’t it?” Carver said. In the time it had taken to traverse the sixty miles to reach the rendezvous point, a squall had set in so they had rain slickers on and the boat battened down.

Michael scanned the ocean for the enemy. “A very bad turn. All aircraft have been grounded and gray skies make for a gray ocean, which is the perfect hiding place for a gray E-boat. They’ll be upon us before we hardly even know they’re there.”

“But the corvette can outrun them, can’t it?”

“Yes, if it can get past them. But if they’re able to angle in on it from the east it could be a sitting duck. Apparently whatever the thing is that the Americans are carrying is quite fragile, so they don’t have a lot of latitude to maneuver or take evasive action.”

“Signal from the flag officer, sir. Corvette has been sighted.” The signalman then gave the coordinates.

“Thank you, Mr. Renton.” Instinctively both Carver and Michael turned their powerful binoculars to the spot and identified the sleek little corvette as it sliced through the water. A corvette was the next-largest ship in the navy from the torpedo boats. This one looked to be about 1,500 metric tons and

approximately 100 meters in length. American ships always had something of a different trim than their British counterparts, but it was still a beautiful little ship. Compared to a torpedo boat, which was about one-fourth the size, a corvette was made of metal, had fairly heavy deck armament, and was able to do a transatlantic crossing as part of a convoy screen, in concert with the larger frigates and destroyers. It was ideal for courier duty since it was so fast and agile. In enemy waters it could move close in to shore to avoid detection from the sea.

Michael gave the order to the helmsman to close the distance. Prescott's plan was to set up a screen with his six boats, putting the corvette between his boats and the English shore. That way the Germans would have to get past the small boats before they got a shot at the corvette.

At forty knots it didn't take long for them to take up their assigned position at the head of the screen. Prescott had put his own boat in the center so he could pivot to whatever danger presented itself. Even if an attack came up from behind, Michael was to stay on post at the front of the column, just in case the Germans intended to trap them in a pincer movement—an old trap. All the escort boats in a group would be drawn into a battle at the rear, leaving the corvette vulnerable to a second attack from the front, but Prescott was far too experienced to let that happen.

As they approached the Americans, Michael waved at the officers stationed on their bridge. He decided he liked protecting a ship this size since it was so much closer to their own in size. On the one occasion when he'd been involved in escorting a battleship through the Channel, it felt like he was an ant scurrying around a fat old cat. The men on the bridge of the battleship were hardly even visible, they were so far up in the sky.

"Sir! Possible enemy sighting!" In the months he'd worked with Renton, Michael had come to marvel at Renton's eyesight, as well as his ability to detect even the slightest aberration on the horizon.

Michael couldn't remember a single time he'd made a false sighting, which was an extraordinary accomplishment indeed.

"Range and position?"

Renton gave it to him. It was off to the southeast, just as Prescott had anticipated, and Michael quickly trained his glasses in that direction. All he could see was choppy black water, punctuated with whitecaps.

"I'm not seeing it, Renton."

His signalman, who doubled as a lookout when not sending signals, came over and angled Michael's shoulders slightly. Straining his eyes, Michael still didn't see anything.

"There! Did you see that?"

Michael wished that he had seen something, but he hadn't.

"There it is again!"

This time Michael did see. It was the Germans, all right.

"Battle stations!" Michael rocked the lever that sounded the Klaxon horn. He loved doing that. "Make a signal to Prescott and let him know what we've sighted."

"Yes, sir!" Renton replied.

"How many?"

Carver peered through his binoculars. "Five, six . . . make that seven."

Michael shook his head. "Seven to seven, if you count the corvette. The odds are against us." The odds were against them because it only took one German torpedo to win the battle, while the British had to successfully destroy, damage, or deflect all seven of the German ships. Since the British had six torpedo boats to the German's seven, they couldn't go one-on-one against the Germans. No matter what they did, there would be one boat open to make the strike on the corvette.

As he thought about it, Michael decided it was a little bit like soccer, with just one goalie facing down the other team's strikers. If even one opponent player gets past the defensive screen to get a shot off, the chance of a goal is relatively high.

“Particularly if the goalie has limited motion because he’s protecting something.”

“Pardon?”

“What?”

“I just thought I heard you say something, sir.”

Michael laughed. “Just thinking out loud, Joseph. Trying to get the battle scene clear in my head.” By this point they were streaking through the water at flank speed—he’d ordered his engineer to run the engines past the red line to get all possible speed. They couldn’t keep that up for long or it would overheat the engines, but right now the goal was to get the corvette out in front of the Germans since it had the speed to outpace them if the torpedo boats could foul the German’s line of attack in a stalling action.

“Of course it’s all for naught if there’s another attack force up ahead. In that case we’re driving the corvette right into them.” This time Carver didn’t bother to ask. He’d been in battle with Michael often enough to know that he was constantly evaluating the scene, looking for vulnerabilities, seeking out opportunities.

As they drew within six hundred yards, the German boats fanned out in an awesome display of seamanship. The goal was to draw the six British boats into chasing a particular target, leaving the corvette vulnerable to attack.

“Bear port twenty degrees,” Michael ordered calmly. At least it sounded calm. His heart was racing at this point. One of the German boats was trying to cross the bow of the corvette so it could get between the Americans and the shore, which would be disastrous since the Germans could then attack the corvette from two sides. Michael knew that taking this fellow out was his only concern right now. He’d have to leave it up to Prescott to figure out what to do with the other six German boats.

Speaking into the tube that went from the bridge to the engine room, Michael said, “We’re going to need to keep this speed for a while longer, chief. We’ve got a hotshot trying to cross the bow and we’ve got to get in its way.”

“We’re doing all right, sir. Another five minutes at least.”

Five minutes didn’t sound like a lot, but Michael knew that in battle it meant everything. The problem with this battle was that everything was being done in daylight. It would be very hard to get a torpedo off that the Germans couldn’t avoid. Since they only had four it would be easy to get themselves completely disarmed except for deck guns unless he was careful.

“Looks like our angle is good, sir. We should cross between the German and the corvette. What do you plan to do then?”

“They’ll start firing on us shortly—in fact I’m surprised they haven’t done so yet. They’re going to try to force us to veer off course, so I want to keep heading straight for them. If they turn, we turn; if they slow down, we don’t. I want to head straight for them no matter what they throw at us.”

Carver nodded grimly. “Your American game of ‘chicken’ again?”

Michael had been born in America and held dual citizenship. Even though the family moved to England when he was ten, he still had a lot of memories from America, which often proved a source of amusement to his fellows in the Royal Navy.

“Chicken it is. Assuming we don’t get blown out of the water by our predictable course, we’ll fire a torpedo spread once we get close enough so that he can’t turn his way out of it. It will be tricky.”

Michael observed Joseph licking his lips—his way of showing anxiety.

There was a flash of light on the bridge of the E-boat, followed rather quickly by a dull thud from across the water—the sound of the deck gun firing. “It’s taking our range.” A large waterspout popped up behind them on the starboard side.

“Starboard five,” Michael said quietly into the helmsman’s ear. At this point he was standing right next to the young man so he could communicate his desires instantly. The boat immediately shifted to the right. To Carver’s amazement it was just

what was needed to hold them true to the slight course change the German boat had taken as it sought to reposition its guns for the next salvo.

“Open fire with the deck guns!”

Carver gave the signal and the Oerlikons opened fire. While not heavy enough to sink a German E-boat, they were certainly powerful enough to knock a hole in the bridge or to destroy an enemy gun if they hit. At the very least it kept the enemy gunners off balance, which was crucial at a time like this when Michael was setting up a torpedo shot. The air was immediately shattered by the “pom pom” sound of the guns opening fire. By now they’d closed the range to the point that the German boat would either continue pounding them or it’d break away and try to get a new angle.

“Stand by tubes one and two!” Michael watched as the men prepped the torpedo tubes. “Joseph, would you go down there and personally supervise? Hanson is still new and these shots have got to be precise.”

Carver immediately left the bridge to go down to the forward deck.

There were three or four flashes on the enemy’s deck and Michael instinctively braced for the expected blow. The Germans didn’t disappoint him. This time two columns of water shot up at the stern, but a third hit so close to the port side that it lifted the hind quarter of the boat up and out of the water. A great spray of water cascaded down on the deck, drenching everyone as they picked themselves up from the fall precipitated by this unexpected distraction.

“Damage report?” Michael called down to the gunners on the aft deck.

The two men looked up with astonished eyes and raised their hands to indicate that it didn’t look like there was anything. For the terrific concussion it had made, the shot had apparently fallen into the water without hitting the boat.

“Make ready to fire!” Michael shouted while simultaneously ringing down to the engine room to slow the engines to two-thirds. He hadn’t forgotten the five-minute warning from the engineer and it had all been used up now. Slowing the boat would also give them a steadier platform from which to fire.

The Germans realized that they’d failed to cut the corvette’s bow because of Michael’s interference and were now fully cognizant of the risk they’d accepted in trying to make it. The two boats were close enough to each other that Michael’s crew could hear the alarm bells sounding on the German ship, which indicated that there was going to be a very sharp, high-speed turn, and that every German onboard had better be grabbing hold of something to steady himself if he hoped to avoid being thrown overboard.

“Which way is it going to turn?” Michael said through clenched teeth. The Germans still had a chance to turn away from Michael’s boat and attempt to get seaward of the British again to make another run at the corvette. Or they could turn directly toward Michael to force him out of the way, maybe even with the thought of ramming the smaller boat. Michael watched carefully for any indication of the Germans’ intention, but there was nothing. Then he saw the slightest movement at the stern of the ship—so slight that most people would never have noticed.

“All slow!” he roared. “It’s coming towards us. Set up a narrow spread, Mr. Carver. Fire now!”

“Fire one! Fire two!” Carver said with authority, even though he was probably every bit as scared as Michael. By this point the German boat still hadn’t revealed its intention, and if Michael was wrong the two torpedoes would be wasted. If he was right, they were set to explode at such a close range that if they hit the German boat, the 982 ran the risk of being showered with debris and perhaps even crashing into pieces of the wreckage.

After giving the order to fire Michael subconsciously braced himself and was rewarded for doing so when, upon releasing the

compressed air that fired the torpedoes from the deck, the ship recoiled from its launch. Just as he felt the second torpedo leave the boat, Michael ordered, "Full speed, hard aport!" Now it was his turn to get the heck out of there.

"It turned towards us!"

Even though Michael had looked away momentarily he was pleased to hear Carver's voice. He was grateful to have made the best choice. Of course the German still had a chance to avoid getting hit if it was able to complete the turn before the torpedoes reached it, since the profile of a ship heading straight forward made for a very slender target. But in his mind Michael knew the German boat wouldn't make it. As fast as an E-boat was, it wasn't as fast as a compressed-air torpedo. Michael estimated that at least one of the torpedoes would hit the German about two-thirds of the way through its turn.

"Brace for impact!"

It was a good thing he gave that order—not because of their torpedoes, but rather because the German gunners somehow managed to get a shot off, even in the act of the ship turning. It may have been a desperation play, but the gunners' shell tore directly across the bow of the 982 as though the shot had been perfectly planned. Michael looked on in horror as the shell tore one of the deck guns right off its mounting. There was a sickening ripping sound as the decking was torn up, mingled with the cursing of the men who were thrown off their feet as the boat lurched from the force of the impact. Michael's first fear was that the gunner had been killed along with his gun, but then he saw that the young man was thrown back on his haunches a few feet away. Apparently he'd been moving away from the gun to get some more ammunition. This young fellow would have a great story to tell when he got back to port.

In the next moment there was a tremendous explosion as the first torpedo found its mark. By now the 982 had completed its turn and was on a new heading that was taking them closer to

the corvette, so to look at the German boat, Michael had to physically turn and look over the stern to see the cataclysmic results of the British torpedo on the shattered hulk of the E-boat. The torpedo had caught the Germans at midship, which happened to be where the ammunition bunker was situated, and the explosion of the torpedo had been quite subdued in comparison to the magazine blowing up. The German ship was torn apart by the two explosions, and the ocean's surface was already littered with debris and bodies. Michael hated that sight more than anything in the world.

"Nice work!" he shouted to his crew and was gratified by their cheer. "Damage report?"

Joseph came bounding up the steps. "We've got some serious hull damage where the gun was torn loose. But nothing below the waterline."

"The engines?"

"The chief tells me that they've got some sunlight down there, but the engines are fine. You still have full power if you need it."

Michael looked up and mouthed a silent prayer of thanks. "Well, we lived through that one. Let's take a shot at someone else. Can you identify a new target?"

"Yes, sir . . ." Joseph replied, "looking."

The scene in front of them was really quite unique. The storm had picked up so that everyone was being rained on. The corvette was bounding through the water at top speed, its bow lifting up and out of the water with each collision with the growing waves. But it was holding steady on its course, which meant that for the moment they hadn't spotted any torpedo trails. He could see the other British boats in the group engaging the enemy.

"Where's the striker?" He was worried about the one extra German boat that would not have an MTB on its tail.

"There it is!" Carver shouted excitedly. "Standing off to the side, waiting for an opening it can get through."

Michael quickly turned his glasses to port and, sure enough, there was an E-boat just sort of lying out there, still ahead of the corvette and not engaged with any British boat. That was Prescott's work. Somehow he'd managed to simultaneously engage a German boat while keeping himself between the extra German and the corvette.

But the striker was picking up speed—it must have thought it'd found a way through. It was obvious that the German would have to make its move quickly or let the corvette get past it. Working out the math in his head as quickly as he could, Michael gave the order to go back to flank speed while simultaneously giving a new heading to the helmsman. The young man was proving himself very adept in his handling of the ship and Michael made a mental note to compliment him when it was all over.

By this point the corvette had gotten involved and Michael watched in fascination as its deck guns came to life. The first target was the E-boat that Commander Prescott was engaging. From the look of Prescott's boat, as well as the German, they were both struggling. The first two shots from the corvette missed, but the third managed to hit the E-boat on the aft deck. A great shower of splinters erupted into the air, and Michael knew immediately that that boat would pose no more threat. Prescott also knew it because he immediately turned his attention to the same boat that Michael was pursuing. The E-boat commander now had to worry about two torpedo boats converging on him, which reduced his range of operation significantly. Fortunately, the other four German boats were now astern of the corvette so that the British simply had to run blocking maneuvers to keep them off the corvette's tail. If Michael and Prescott played their cards right they could end the battle very quickly.

Prescott didn't waste any time. Apparently he was disgusted with the Germans because he didn't wait for a good firing situation. Instead, he sent two torpedoes into the water in a fairly wide

pattern, which forced the German to turn directly toward Michael in an attempt to get out of the way.

“Tubes three and four, prepare to fire!” Michael shouted excitedly. “Let’s send out just one, just to keep our German friend in the lane for Prescott’s torpedo.” Michael called down the coordinates and gave the command to fire. There was the whooshing sound, followed by the splash of the torpedo as it hit the water, and then the trail of bubbles that showed its progress as it started on its path of destruction.

“He’s got nowhere to go,” Michael explained to the helmsman. “Can you see that if he takes action to avoid our torpedo he goes right back into the path of Commander Prescott’s? If he tries to avoid Prescott’s, then he’s going to get clobbered by ours.”

“How did they allow themselves to get in such a pickle?” the young man asked. Michael was amused by his use of the word *pickle*.

“Through bravery. With the other ships astern of the corvette, it was the only one left to get a shot off at the corvette. In spite of the risk, they decided to make a run for it. Now they’re going to pay with their lives.” The victory was thrilling, but the thought of brave men dying was still sobering.

“Look, it’s launched a torpedo at us.”

Michael turned quickly. “Two of them. But they’re in a fairly wide spread.” Michael felt his hands trembling as he tried to decide what to do. If he veered in either direction he ran the risk of getting hit. If he stayed where he was, the German would be right on top of them when their own torpedoes hit, and there could be collateral damage.

“Mr. Carver?”

“I say we stay right here.”

Michael smiled. Carver’s judgment had improved considerably with his experience in the war. “I agree. All ahead slow.” The ship dropped speed immediately, the bow dropping back into the water.