

# Contested Land



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Ted Polet

*Translated from Dutch – original title: HET BETWISTE LAND*

Disclaimer:

Actions and quotes of former public personalities in this book are fictional.

Also note the explanation in my postscript.

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# 1 The incident

Suddenly it had gone quiet.

I didn't know how long the attack had lasted but it seemed an eternity. I didn't even realise it right away, I was lying down scared to death with my arms over my head, on the bridge deck next to the engine telegraph. The phone rang insistently - perhaps it had been ringing for much longer, but I hadn't been able to hear it because of the deafening noise of the bullets slamming into the bridge structure.

When I looked up cautiously, I saw the chaos in the wheelhouse. All the windows were broken and the early daylight penetrated through the bullet holes in the bulkhead underneath on pools of blood and glass splinters. I looked at a pair of shoes, which belonged to the Syrian pilot lying motionless flat on his face, less than two metres away from me. Further away was the first mate. He was gazing up motionless, a large hole in his head. Beyond him the Captain lay on his side moaning, moving weakly with a bullet through his shoulder. Mauricio, the Cape Verdean quartermaster, was on his back, with his legs drawn up.

I lifted my head, wondering if that was a good idea. If I showed myself they'd probably start firing again. The engine telegraph was pointing at 'stop', which was lucky, because otherwise down in the engine room they'd have kept the engine at full astern. I didn't remember who had stopped it, the pilot or I myself. I crawled to the telephone with my head down, after which I carefully prodded the handset from the hook. Miraculously the phone had been spared in the shooting. I sat on the deck against the bulkhead of the chartroom, which was pockmarked with ragged holes.

'Bridge, apprentice officer.'

'Nick, what happened?' The Chief shouted into the phone. 'We haven't heard anything for minutes, except a jolt and a lot of noise

from above. Why didn't you come to the phone?" In the background I heard the sound of the auxiliary engines and the ventilation in the engine room.

'We couldn't stop the ship anymore after the engine had started in forward gear, and we had a collision, sir. Then someone started shooting at us.' The chief engineer was always addressed as 'sir', and sometimes by the Captain or the first mate as 'Chief'. But you shouldn't try that as an apprentice.

'WHAT? Shot at? By whom then?'

'We hit a Russian warship and some idiot there opened fire on us with a machine gun. I think there are two dead and two seriously injured here, including the Captain. How things are on deck I don't know. I'm the only one here who's still capable of moving.' I looked at my arms, which were full of scratches and bleeding. In the back of my left hand a steel splinter was stuck that had apparently been knocked off a bulkhead.

'Godalmighty, Nick. I'm coming up. Stay where you are.' The phone fell silent.

Gritting my teeth I pulled the steel splinter out of my hand, then crawled to the broken windows of the wheelhouse to look gingerly over the edge towards the forecastle, where the third mate and 'chippy', the carpenter, should have been with their crew. I only saw dead and injured people lying about. Except for Leen Struiksma, the chippy, who scrambled under cover like a soldier to the stairs of the forecastle, and tumbled headlong to the main deck next to hatch number one. He rose halfway and ran aft keeping his head down, past the hatch coamings until he reached the superstructure and disappeared from sight.

The roar of the enraged crowd ashore had died down. I only heard a murmur, as if they were open-mouthedly watching the disaster that had taken place. Forward under the bows I saw the Russian ship,

severely listing and their stern apparently under water. We were stuck into her at an angle to the quay. Russian sailors ran back and forth in despair, and next to the machine gun behind their command bridge I saw someone down and bleeding surrounded by a group of men. One of them had a rifle in his hands, with the butt down, hitting the prostrate man.

Inside a few seconds I took it all in before kneeling next to the quartermaster, who lay on his back making horrible noises. I literally had my hands in my hair. What was I supposed to do with that man?

I looked up when the splintered door of the chartroom opened - it jammed and some pieces fell off. Henk Hoeben, the second mate, appeared in the doorway and looked around in shock. Apparently he had come running forward from the stern. 'Nick, what the hell is going on? We took cover back there for a while.'

'The Russians opened fire when we hit them, Second,' I said weakly. 'Mauricio is in a terrible state, and so is the Captain.'

The second mate glanced at Mauricio and took over from me. Meanwhile the spotless white boiler suit of the Chief appeared in the doorway, who looked just as shocked as the Second as he took in the slaughterhouse.

'The engine went ahead instead of astern,' the Chief said. 'The reversing mechanism locked up.' He literally pulled his hair in despair.

'I saw it happen, sir. I set the telegraph to stop and then to astern again, but it was too late. I don't remember who stopped it after the collision, the pilot or me,' I muttered, pointing to the lifeless Syrian.

I stood up and peered through a broken window, pointing at the group of men around the machine gun on the Russian ship. 'I think someone has lost his mind there, sir. He's been knocked down by someone else now.'

Hoeben had meanwhile examined the seriously injured quartermaster, looked at us and shook his head - it didn't look good. 'Take care of Mauricio - I'm afraid we can't do much, put him on his side to ease his suffering, I have to deal with the Captain.' He took scissors from the chart table to cut away the uniform coat and the Old Man's shirt.

The quartermaster had a bloody froth on his mouth. He hiccupped and his eyes were bulging. I grabbed his shoulders and turned him on his side together with the Chief, as they had taught me in the First Aid classes. 'Easy, Mauricio, I'm here with you.'

I held the badly injured seaman from behind, as blood ran from his mouth, the Chief kneeling before him. He had been shot through by two machine gun bullets and was in great distress. The poor man rattled and twice breathed deeply, then a shiver ran through him and he went limp. I didn't understand till the Chief took my arm and pulled me up.

'Better get up boy, he is dead. We cannot do a thing for him.' The chief engineer grabbed my shoulders and asked me if I was all right.

Emotion took me by the throat, all the stress now came out. 'I never saw anyone die, sir.'

'I did. You did well, but now you have to let go, all right? You haven't let him die on his own. That's what matters.' He fetched the Captain's chair. 'Now sit down for a moment.'

My legs refused work and I sagged down on the tall chair where normally only the Old Man was allowed to sit, my head in my hands. Hoeben meanwhile was busy with the Captain, who apparently had regained some modicum of consciousness. Hoeben had taken a pressure pad from the first aid box in the chartroom to tie up the gaping shot hole in his shoulder. Meanwhile Struiksma, who was covered in blood, arrived on the bridge.

The Second mate looked over his shoulder. ‘How is it up forward, Struiksma?’ He actually used the word *struik*, a pun on his name meaning ‘bush’ in Dutch. We always called him that because he looked like a bush, with a rough mop of reddish hair pointing everywhere.

‘The Third and Felipe were killed, Second. Kobus is all right, but Jelle is downstairs, cursing with a bullet hole in his wing. I tied a tourniquet around his arm. It’s a bloodbath up forward.’

‘Sweet Jesus. You’re all right yourself?’ Hoeben looked at the blood on Struiksma’s overalls.

‘The blood is Jelle’s.’ He looked dazedly at the shambles around him.

Ashore sirens sounded, and I saw police cars, an army lorry and a run-down fire engine tear on to the quay. The crowd, or what was left of it, dispersed and made itself scarce among the warehouses. Shortly afterwards, there was shouting on deck. As I looked down from the Captain’s chair, I saw armed Russian seamen together with a number of Syrians running aft past holds two and three. The fire engine’s ladder pointed over the bulwarks - apparently that was how they had come on board.

‘Look out, they are aboard,’ I called, jumping off the chair, but inside there already was the noise of a crowd of men storming upstairs. The Second mate jerked a fire axe off the bulkhead and waited for them at the chartroom door. I wondered what he meant to accomplish - perhaps it was an instinctive reaction. A shot rang out, which fortunately missed him, so he dropped the axe from his hands. It clanged loudly on to the steel deck.

From the chartroom there were now at least three weapons pointing at us. A harsh Russian voice sounded: ‘*стой, стой, не стреляй* - *stoi, stoi, ne streljai!* - stop, stop, don’t shoot!’

The Russian machine pistols were lowered, and an officer in a great flat cap pushed through the group, looking amazedly round in what looked like a slaughterhouse. He addressed us in fair English: 'Who is responsible for ramming my ship?'

The Chief stepped forward. 'We had an engine malfunction - the engine started on ahead instead of astern. We were unable to stop the ship in time.'

'Who are you?'

'The chief engineer.'

The Russian was furious, and for a moment I thought he was going to hit the Chief, but he relented. 'You shall have to account for what happened.'

'As much as you shall have to account for shooting at my people,' the Captain said, having collected himself and weakly trying to sit up despite his gunshot wound. 'The last thing hasn't yet been said about that.'

'And you are?'

'The Captain of this ship.'

'I apologise, Captain. Regrettably one of my seamen lost his mind,' the Russian replied.

Before he could say anything else, the Russians were pushed aside by a few Syrians clad in black overalls, headed by a civilian in an anorak, who apparently held some authority. The man spoke a few words of Russian to the naval officer, who then ordered his men to pull back. Only the Syrians remained in the badly damaged wheelhouse.

'Who are you?' The Captain, who remained sitting on the deck, addressed the man in the anorak.

For an answer, he received a kick to his side. 'Filthy Zionist bastard'.

The Old Man fell over with a cry of pain. The Syrian gestured to the men in black behind him, who roughly handcuffed us one by one and frog-marched us off, the Chief leading. He was thrown head first off the inside stairway and landed on his head below, where they hauled him up bleeding and took him away. At the top of the stairway I also received a kick to my back, but managed to stay upright as I stumbled down. They proceeded to haul me down the flights of stairs to the main deck.

When we came on deck, I saw the boatswain on the stern, busy bringing hawsers ashore together with his crew, held at gunpoint by several men. They were hauling the ship alongside the quay with the capstan, as forward some unknown men busied themselves with headropes and spring. Apparently they had pushed the dead bodies aside. Accompanied by a monstrous creaking the ship disentangled itself from the badly damaged Russian frigate, which immediately sank down, its stern completely underwater.

They pushed me roughly towards the crew accommodation in the stern, where I was locked up in a cabin, as I heard the groaning of the capstan motor as the crew worked above my head.

I was numb and terrified by the events of the past hour and lay down on one of the bunks, on my side because my hands were cuffed behind my back. After a while peace returned and nothing happened for an hour, until I heard people walking by in the corridor, followed by a scuffle, someone protesting and the sound of a man being beaten and screaming in pain, which only increased my fear. What on earth were they doing there? The noise died down and a moment later the door of the cabin opened, and two men dressed in black came in.

\* \* \*

A month earlier.

I walked on deck in a dirty boiler suit, as the mv *Oostkerk* swayed over the Indian Ocean with a low swell upon the quarter, on her way from Colombo to the Mozambique Strait. The tiny amount of wind there was also came from astern, there wasn't a breath of air on deck, so it was pretty hot in the sun. The sea was cobalt blue and tall clouds were towering around us. Not that it was so quiet now - next to me they were chipping the bulwarks rail with a pneumatic hammer. The thick steel upper edge of the bulwarks was already so badly pitted that you had to be careful not to go right through it with your chipping hammer.

The ship was twenty years old and worn out, in a year's time they'd sell her to Trikora Lloyd, the Indonesian sister company of Nedlloyd that had already taken over several outdated ships from us. I toiled as an extra sailor on deck because the tyrannical chief mate hated me and had sent me on deck with the crew to teach me manners. I had talked back to the arrogant bastard once too often, which they weren't used to in the former Nederland Line, which he came from... by now my right arm was twice as muscular as the other, due to weeks of chipping rust.

I took the steel wire brush to clean up the surface and then painted the area I had cleaned with red lead. It was almost half past eleven and I cleared away my gear in the boatswain's store before going to my cabin for a shower. They expected me on the bridge in my uniform for taking the noon sight, together with the second mate. In the afternoon I joined his watch for a few hours, to calculate the ship's position for my progress report, which at sea was referred to as the 'duty book'. Halfway into the trip, the school had complained to the ship's management that I hadn't sent in enough material, thanks to the first mate, following which he had reluctantly assigned me to the second mate's afternoon watch.

Hoeben, the Second, was a young man in his thirties. He was a touch cynical, but had a healthy dose of humour and taught me a great deal about watchkeeping and cargo planning, which was his specific role on board. His greatest wish was to study medicine, and he had brought a pile of medical textbooks with him to prepare for university admission. Like me he had a speech impediment, which perhaps created a certain bond. He didn't like the arrogant first mate at all, partly because the First came from the 'Nederland' and he from the Rotterdam Lloyd, where culture was rather different. Four years after their merger into Nedlloyd, these so-called 'blood types' were still inescapable.

'Just in time, Nick. We have five minutes left. Will you get your sextant?'

It was a quarter past twelve, and he had already estimated the time of noon passage using the almanac. We stood together on the bridge wing, our sextants slowly swinging to and fro, so the sun in the dark half of the image seemed to roll over the horizon in the other half. Slowly the sun's vertical movement, which I tracked with the adjusting screw on the sextant, stopped.

'Stop,' Hoeben said, about two seconds ahead of me.

'Stop,' I replied. We compared the measured angles and noted the time. There was a difference of one-tenth of an arc minute.

'Not bad. You're getting the hang of it pretty well.'

'Small wonder after months of practice.'

'Let's do the math then.'

We took the notepad, the logarithm table and the almanac, looked up some data and applied the corrections. A quick addition, which took me twice as long as the Second who had years of routine.

'What latitude do you come up with?'

‘Sixteen degrees twenty-point-two south.’

‘Correct.’

The sextants were replaced in their boxes under the chart table, and we plotted the noon latitude in the chart. We then construed the noon position, using compass and ruler, from the noon sight just made and the observation made that morning at nine o’clock.

‘Right on time for lunch. I’ll see you at one.’

I stepped out of the chartroom and went down the stairs. They were still drinking their last beer in the bar. I had to go on watch, so I had a glass of water with my lunch.

‘What’s on the menu?’ I asked.

‘Tomato soup with fire tubes and a tennis ball with spuds,’ said the grumpy fifth engineer, who didn’t particularly care for macaroni in his soup, followed by meatballs and boiled potatoes. Lunch passed in silence - they were usually not given to much conversation at my table. At five to one sharp, I took my leave from my table companions and fled to the bridge.

This is how every day at sea passed by, day in and day out, with little variation. After breakfast I read the temperatures in the holds from the thermometers suspended in the measuring tubes, then at nine I had to ‘shoot’ the morning sun with the third mate. Then, in overalls, I was expected to report to the boatswain, to chip away at the rusty bulwarks, next I did the noon sight, and after lunch I was on watch with the Second.

Six years earlier the Suez Canal had been blocked by ships sunk during the Six Day War, and the route home round the Cape now took us over a month longer than it used to previously. The round trip to the Persian Gulf, Sri Lanka, and India might have taken us three or four months in the past; now it was five.

Three days remained before we arrived at Durban, for bunkers, drinking water, and provisions.

After our stop in Durban we sailed with the majestic Agulhas Current, which flows around South Africa at four knots. We rounded the Cape of Good Hope, rolling on the Atlantic swell in sight of Table Mountain, and set course northwest, where we soon picked up the trade winds towards the equator.

*En route* we received the news bulletin by Scheveningen Radio about the new war that had broken out in the Middle East. Israel had been attacked simultaneously by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the Jewish holiday when the faithful confess their sins and make their peace with God.

The Israelis were completely surprised by the attack and retaliated with all their might, but barely held their ground. A large portion of the army had been sent on leave for the holiday and had to be recalled in a hurry. The Syrian and Egyptian fronts were on the verge of collapse, Golda Meir's cabinet was expecting defeat, and only after a week did Israel manage to turn the tide. Egypt and Syria were supported by the Russians, and Israel, as a matter of course, by the Americans, the British, and the Dutch. We were all rather pro-Israel.

After the watch, before dinner, we were sitting in the bar, speculating over a beer.

'I'm really looking forward to the Mediterranean, with the mess that's going on there,' said the third mate cynically. He was on board with his blonde wife. She was young and attractive, and often appeared in a summer frock. The only other woman on board was the quiet dark-skinned wife of one of the Cape Verdean sailors, who spoke no Dutch or English, only Portuguese. 'After Genoa we're going to Beirut, Latakia in Syria, and Tripoli in Libya. I hope it'll be

over before we have to go there.' We carried cargo for six ports in the Mediterranean.

'Maybe the cargo will go to Rotterdam if it's not over yet,' said the Second. 'They never let us sail into a war zone. The risk is too great, and then they'd have to pay us hazard money.'

We hardly thought beyond that. We had no idea what sailing in wartime would be like. Officially the war was over on October 25th, and after discharging at Barcelona, Marseille, and Genoa, where I celebrated my twenty-second birthday on November 4th, despite all doubts we set off for Beirut, still uncertain of our prospects. The women had disembarked in Genoa, just in case. Halfway between Crete and Cyprus we passed an American naval squadron. The third mate marked large restricted areas and minefields in the chart: only corridors were left open to Beirut, Tripoli, and Latakia. We swung the lifeboats outboard in their old-fashioned folding davits and closed the only watertight door, between the engine room and the propeller shaft tunnel. It was clear we were entering a war zone.

Early in the morning we approached Beirut. The pilot came aboard and we tied up at a quay far from the city, in a spring-like sunshine that bathed the warehouses and the French-style waterfront at the far side of the harbour in a cheerful light. While we were discharging, we saw Israeli fighter jets whizzing along low over the sea, far offshore, apparently on patrol. Even though the war was formally over, shots were still being exchanged on the Golan Heights. It was Thursday, November 8, 1973.

We cautiously went ashore to look around. Beirut was on edge - we'd been advised not to take photos or venture into the city centre alone. So we walked along the waterfront to the almost deserted yacht club for a beer, and from there we looked out over the harbour: a few sailboats basking in the sun on the water below us, the orange masts of the mv *Oostkerk* across the water, and a large

concrete grain silo beyond. It wasn't much, but the tension in Beirut was palpable and we didn't want to be in the newspapers as victims of yet another bombing.

According to the radio bulletin there had been an uproar in the Netherlands, because Henk Vredeling, the Defence Minister, had appeared on NOS television and shot his mouth off. He had supplied military equipment to the Israeli army without informing his Prime Minister, Joop den Uyl. The Arab world was furious. The existing OPEC oil boycott against the United States was extended to the Netherlands, ambassadors were summoned, and Saudi Oil Minister Yamani issued threatening remarks against us.

On Sunday afternoon the *Oostkerk* put to sea from Beirut, at first steaming far out through the corridor, then a short distance north, returning east another twenty miles to the Syrian port. Early the next morning we arrived off Latakia. As usual, I was at my station at the engine telegraph. The pilot came aboard from the agency's motorboat, and unsuspectingly, we slowly crept inside. We turned to starboard into the harbour and prepared to use tugs to swing the ship round to port, so our bows would point to sea before we'd come alongside. Tied up to the quay, ahead of our berth, lay a grey Russian naval vessel, a small frigate, its red flag with hammer and sickle flying aft.

Everything seemed to be all right, until in the grey morning light a crowd poured onto the quay. Someone jumped on a crate to give a speech, haranguing the crowd and shaking his fist in our direction. The crowd began to roar and surged to the edge of the quay. The boatswain, with an extra man on deck, unrolled fire hoses and connected them to the hydrants on deck, ready to squirt any unwanted visitors from the gangway.

The pilot seemed to panic and started shouting into the VHF handset. The tugs had cast off halfway through the manoeuvre, and we were drifting in the harbour, out of control and heading straight

for the Russian. Then everything happened very quickly. The Old Man pushed the pilot aside and looked at me. 'Slow astern, Nick.'

'Slow astern.' I pulled the telegraph lever to astern and checked the rev counter above the centre window of the wheelhouse to ensure the command was being executed correctly. Through the open wheelhouse door beside me, I heard the blasts of compressed air from the funnel, as the engine started.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The engine started in forward gear.

I was astonished by my quick reaction. I yelled, 'It's starting in forward!' pushed the lever to stop, and then pulled it back to astern.

The Captain saw it happen, jumped at the telegraph, and set it to full astern. The engine started, now in astern, and down below, they applied full power, 95 revolutions. The deck vibrated. The first mate's radio on the starboard bridge wing crackled, and he shouted inside, 'We won't make it!'

The Old Man gave a 'double ring' on the telegraph, pulling it back briefly and then setting it to full astern again. This was the signal for the engine room to give everything they had. The revolution counter rose to 100, 110, 120, and the deck beneath our feet began to shake. Everything rattled and jumped.

Aboard the Russian ship people began to run. A gas turbine was started to try and get away, a jet of black smoke spurting from the funnel, but it was too late. There was a gentle, almost innocent nudge. The Russian vessel was pushed aside and disappeared beneath our bows. From above I saw water pouring on to his stern deck as one of their men ran to a machine gun, aimed it at us, and pulled the trigger.

From that moment on I can only recall fragments of my memory. The windows shattered and heavy ammunition flew through the wheelhouse.

The last thing I consciously did was stop the telegraph, then I dropped to the deck with my hands over my head as bullets shattered the entire wheelhouse. The echo sounder, the navigation light switchboard, the smoke detector, and the wooden bulkhead of the radar room vanished in a shower of splinters.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the first mate go down, then the pilot and the Captain. The Cape Verdean quartermaster screamed and fell back, his hands folded across his chest.

The shooting seemed to last forever.

\* \* \*

## 2 Escape

The men in black hauled me up from the bunk and frog-marched me out of the cabin. At the end of the corridor another door was ajar. Two men were in there, chain-smoking, an ashtray full of cigarette stubs and a pistol on the table. The one on the left was the fellow in civilian clothing who had come on to the bridge that morning and sent the Russians away.

‘Sit down.’ The other man, clad in black like the ones who had fetched me, a scar on his face and a pitiless look in his eyes, pointed at the chair next to the door, which closed behind me. I saw traces of blood on the bulkhead next to it - fresh blood and a tuft of hair.

I sat down on the chair, almost soiling myself with fear.

‘You can now tell me why you rammed the Russian ship, you Zionist swine. Orders from the Americans? Or from The Hague?’

The civilian barked his questions at me. I looked back uncomprehendingly.

‘Yes, we know everything about your alliance with the imperialists. Your government delivered arms to the damned Zionists. But apparently you had to perpetrate an act of war as well. You were on the bridge when you rammed the Russian vessel. Your Captain already admitted that it was done on purpose.’

‘On purpose? Nonsense, there was a failure in the engine room. I myself set the engine telegraph to astern, but something locked up in the main engine. I saw it happen and telegraphed for ‘stop’ before repeating the ord...’

I suddenly received a blow to my head from the other chap’s fist, the one with the scar. My vision popped and I saw stars before my eyes. I tasted blood in my mouth.

‘Do not lie to us! We have other means to make you talk if you lie again.’

I became furious. ‘It isn’t a lie. I know exactly what happened. We took immediate action and tried to stop the ship, but it was too late.’

Scarface took his pistol, pulled the slide to put a round in the chamber, and held it to my head. ‘Do not lie to us!’ he yelled once more.

I began hyperventilating.

The other man now interfered - he fired off a string of staccato Arabic to the other, who took the weapon from my head and laid it on the table. And to me, almost conversationally: ‘we’ll make you talk, even if it takes till next year.’

He did as he promised. I received a terrible beating till the blood ran from my nose. In the end I crouched into a ball to protect myself. Next he went to the door, and beckoned the pair of thugs who had fetched me from the cabin, to take me back. My handcuffs were released and they threw me into the cabin. The door closed behind me.

\* \* \*

I had been held aboard for three days, in a crew cabin in the stern. Three times a day Gonzales, the Spanish messman, brought me a plate of food. Behind him was one of the Syrian thugs, armed to the teeth, and Gonzales indicated he wasn’t allowed to speak with me. But it seemed the galley was still functioning normally, and the engine room as well because I felt the ship tremble due to the auxiliary engines working. The ventilation also worked, although it was cold in the cabin. Apparently they hadn’t turned on the heating.

Every day I was taken from the cabin by the men in black for another brutal interrogation. If my replies weren’t to their liking, I received another beating, and after three such sessions I was black

and blue all over. Part of me was scared to death, and part was furious about the way I had been treated. Following the last interrogation I wasn't returned to the cabin where they had held me. I was handcuffed again before they took me on deck and pushed me roughly down the gangway towards the quay. There waited a military lorry, in the back of which I had to climb. I received a blow with the butt of a rifle, which made me tumble inside.

The Captain and the Chief were already sitting on the floor, their backs against the sides. The Old Man was badly mauled and bled profusely, and the Chief sat numbly in a corner. His head was damaged, he had two black eyes and traces of blood in his hair. The second mate seemed relatively untouched apart from a bruise in his face. He sat on the floor next to the Captain, trying to stem the bleeding with a rag, which wasn't a great success due to his handcuffs. The first and third mates were dead, the chief engineer was with us, but I didn't know about the other engineers. I expected they were needed to keep the engine room going.

‘How are you feeling, Nick?’ Hoeben inspected my bruises.

‘Like having been hit by a double decker bus, Second. They beat me to pulp, day after day. In the end I crouched on the floor to take the worst of the blows.’

‘Their normal interviewing method, I suppose. They beat us all the same way. I’m not sure who they were, but they didn’t seem ordinary police to me. I think they are Assad’s security men.’

‘Assad?’

‘Hafez al-Assad, the military dictator of this shit country. A regular piece of work, and the best of friends with the Soviets. I hope they allow someone from the Embassy to visit us, but I have little hope.’

Three armed soldiers climbed in the back, the engine was started and the lorry jolted into motion. Out of the open canvas cover I saw us drive off the harbour yard, leaving the poor old *Oostkerk* behind.

Only now could we see the extent of the damage. The entire front of the midships accommodation looked like a pepper pot and all the porthole windows had gone. The bows were badly damaged - the hull plating was crumpled and here and there the buckled frames were visible through the rents. The Russian vessel hung listing against the quay, her stern out of sight. There was a pontoon alongside her and they were busy with an acetylene torch.

We passed out of the yard gate and bumped over potholes and over railway tracks. To either side were plain brown and yellow buildings with barred ground floor windows. We passed an occasional car and once or twice a cart on rubber tyres, hauled by a donkey. Further on there was war damage, a block of buildings had been blasted into rubble. We turned into a main road where traffic increased, and soon entered the city. The lorry braked and turned into a driveway, stopping at a checkpoint. High on a building across the road a large portrait of a man in a general's uniform leered at us.

‘Assad,’ the Second whispered to me, pointing out of the back at the portrait.

A gate opened and the lorry moved inside before stopping in an enclosed yard. The rear gate of the vehicle was opened, the soldiers got up and hauled us to the rear, where we received a blow to our backs toppling us to the ground below. Others hauled us up like so much garbage and dragged us inside. I just managed to see it was a three-story building with a radio mast on the roof. They frog-marched us into a corridor, past offices and an open space with handcuffs attached to chains hanging from the ceiling, continuing to a series of steel doors, each with bars on a spy window. Our handcuffs were taken off and each of us was thrown into a separate cell, following which the door banged shut behind us.

There were three more men in my cell, which was exceedingly dirty and about six by nine feet, with a bare bunk against one wall and a filthy toilet bucket in a corner. It smelt of piss and shit. High in a

wall was a ventilation hole, again with bars. On the floor were blood stains. It didn't look very promising.

I sat on the bunk, next to a filthy Syrian man, shivering from stress, my stomach upset and my head in my hands. I couldn't understand my cellmates, which didn't matter as no one was much inclined to talk. My ribs were bruised and one side of my face was swollen due to all the beatings I had received. I thought of my shipmates and of the third mate, the cheerful young man who had been on the fo'c'sle when the Russians had opened fire. He hadn't survived the attack - I remembered the bleeding dead bodies I had seen lying there from the wheelhouse. How many had been killed?

I didn't want to imagine what they'd think at home when they heard of the shooting. They must be scared to death. My mother would be out of her mind with worry, and knowing my father, he'd be on the telephone to try and get information from his old friends in the Navy. If they knew anything at all. I was lucky not having a girlfriend - that had been over before I went to Nautical College.

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Later, the cell door opened, and someone came in without a word, setting down plastic beakers of water and an enamel plate with a few flat loaves. The door closed and my cellmates divided the bread in four equal parts. I tried eating my portion, which troubled me a little as one of my molars was loose due to the last beating I had received. And I didn't really fancy bread tasting of cardboard and the tepid water from the beaker. I had to force myself to eat and drink something.

That evening they came for me again, for another interrogation. I was dragged out of the cell by two tough wardens who frog-marched me into a room, pointing at a wooden chair at a table. This time a uniformed man sat opposite me, who expressionlessly observed me. At the door a second man stood guard with a machine pistol. Fear hit me once more.

To my surprise the man behind the table didn't seem unreasonable. He spoke fair English and offered me a pack of cigarettes, which I refused, being a non-smoker, and a cup of Turkish coffee, which revived me a little. He introduced himself as captain Hammadi, and asked me my personal data and my function aboard the ship. He said he was of the police and ordered to investigate the collision we had been involved in.

'My passport and seaman's book were on board the ship. You should have my personal information.'

'I never saw them. This is for our own record.'

I gave my name, my function aboard and my home address, which troubled him a little due to the Dutch spelling.

'Can't you inform the Dutch embassy?' I thought it was time for them to allow us consular assistance.

'That might take a while. Your Ambassador was recalled in protest over the shooting, and we deported half the embassy personnel after your military assistance to the Zionists became known.'

'We couldn't help that, could we? We are common sailors - we don't know a thing about politics.'

'Your arrest was ordered at the highest level. It wasn't of my doing.'

'What is going to happen to us?'

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. 'I cannot say. The first thing I want to know is what exactly happened three days ago.'

I told him about it, as far as I could remember in detail. The crowd on the quay threatening us, the tugs suddenly casting off, the command to put the engine astern and the mechanical failure making it start ahead instead. My stopping the engine and asking for

astern the second time to prevent a collision, and us crashing into the Russian vessel.

‘It was an accident?’

‘No more than that. It is an old ship and we had engine failures more often. The chief engineer can tell you.’

Hammadi noted it on his pad. ‘What happened after the collision?’

‘The Russians opened fire upon us. I set the engine telegraph to ‘stop’ and went flat on my face to avoid being hit. I never experienced anything like it.’

‘We have lived in a war zone for years due to the Zionists at our borders, so to us it is nothing new. Maybe to you - you have become weak because you always have peace.’ He looked me in the face, without expression.

I thought on it for a while. Maybe he was right. ‘I have seen enough of war. I was the only one left on the bridge without serious injuries - just a few splinters in my hands and arms.’ I pointed at my hand still oozing blood and muck where I had pulled out the steel splinter, and the scratches on my arms. ‘The Syrian pilot, the first mate and the quartermaster are dead, the Captain is badly injured and on deck we had more fatalities.’

‘The Captain was taken to hospital for treatment. What happened after the shooting had stopped?’

I told of the chief engineer and the second mate who had come running to the wheelhouse, and next the boarding crew led by the Russian commander. And the men in black, who had beaten us halfway to death.

‘They were the *mukhabarat*, the secret police. They have less scruples than us.’

‘*Less scruples?* They beat us black and blue,’ I said indignantly. ‘And what happened to the crew of our ship? There are several more dead and injured.’

‘I do not have information about them. I only know of the people who are in custody here: you, the chief engineer and the second mate. I expect that the crew is still on board. I don’t know where they took the dead, and the injured must have been treated - we’re not such barbarians as you in the West think.’

Following the interview they took me to another cell: a slightly larger space with two rough wooden bunks, one above the other, smutty mattresses and blankets, where I was alone. The ‘sanitary arrangements’ were a hole in the floor. The cell stank like a cesspit and it was cold. The light couldn’t be switched off, so I lay down under a blanket in the shadow on the lower bunk and tried to sleep a little, which didn’t come easily. But eventually exhaustion took over and I nodded off.

The next morning a man came in with a first aid kit, who cleaned up the cut in my hand which still bled on and off, and put in a few stitches. The following days time crept by painfully slowly. I was subjected to more interrogations - they asked me the same questions *ad nauseam*, each time it was a different policeman, and no one replied to my questions what would happen to us.

Not every interviewer was as considerate as captain Hammadi who had spoken with me on the first evening. There were those who hardly managed to conceal their hatred of ‘Zionists and Imperialists’ and one of them used to kick me around the interview room every time he saw me. In the end I was almost crippled by a kick he had given me against my shins.

When I complained the first time I saw Hammadi again, he shrugged it off. ‘That must have been Jamal. You should realise his brother became a martyr last month - he was shot by the Zionists on

the Golan Heights, so he hates everyone who could be linked to Israel.'

'I don't even know what a Zionist is, I'm just a student at the nautical college who happened to be on board that ship. I don't have anything to do with your war.'

'Nothing to do with the war? You support the Zionists in Israel. They have robbed the Palestinians of their land and waged war four times against anyone who supports the Palestinians. Last month we, together with our Egyptian brothers, almost succeeded in prevailing over Israel, until unaccountably the fight turned against us and we were forced to agree to a treaty. You Dutchmen have sent weapons to Israel, together with the American and British imperialists. That causes the hatred against you. Indirectly you are guilty as well.'

And indeed there was a strong pro-Israel sentiment in Holland, and personally I had little use for Palestinians following all the bombings and aeroplane hijackings. But I really didn't know enough about it to have an opinion, and probably it wouldn't have been a good idea to bring anything against what Hammadi had said. The hatred sat too deep, and he was the only one I could connect with.

Meanwhile I had been locked up for a week without any change. There was little water to wash, my uniform was filthy and torn, and I had become so dirty that I stank to high heaven. The stress of the daily interrogation and the continuing violence gave me nightmares and made me sleep badly. Each sound in the corridor made me jump, and worse was the screaming of people who apparently were tortured in another wing of the building. Thank God that had been spared me, but all the same it scared me, and I felt everything there was aimed at dehumanising me.

One day I was taken out of the cell under supervision of captain Hammadi. I was put in an interview room with a guard at the door. Soon a neatly dressed gentleman came in.

‘Good morning,’ he said in Dutch. ‘I am Henri de Maesschalck, honorary consul for the Netherlands and Belgium in Latakia. How are you, and are you being treated well?’

*‘Please speak English,’ Hammadi interjected.*

I replied in English. ‘The secret police beat me up. Even since I am here, I am being beaten.’ I showed my bruises. ‘I’d like to have a shower every few days. I don’t have clean underwear and the food is terrible.’

De Maesschalck inspected my contusions and abrasions, and my torn and filthy clothing, and looked Hammadi in the eye. ‘I expect you to make changes. My client hasn’t been charged with anything, so his treatment must improve.’

Hammadi wasn’t pleased, but promised to make amends.

‘Is there any news from Holland about the situation, and how are the people of my ship? How many casualties have there been?’ I asked the Belgian.

‘As far as I know there are five people killed and three injured, including the Captain. The second mate and the chief engineer are held here as well, I have just spoken with them. There are negotiations ongoing to have ship, crew and cargo released, but it is complicated due to Russian interference. Effectively you are a hostage, and subject to a political game.’

‘Can you have word sent to my family that I am all right and they mustn’t worry? Please don’t mention the beatings.’

‘Naturally. I will send word to the shipping company through the embassy. They have your address. Take care here, I will visit you again within three days and see how things are.’

De Maesschalck rose and left the room.