

Londonderry Farewell

Captain Tom McKeown
USN (Retired)

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Acknowledgements

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The Residents of Londonderry, Northern, Ireland

Sean McLaughlin (*The Derry Journal*)

To
The Family of Captain McKeown
&
Martha Frain
1920 - 2013

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Preface

Very little has been written about the “troubles” in Northern Ireland. Yes, we’ve seen headlines and articles in the press when incidents took place. But not much is told about the people and their feelings and the long-term effect on lives. This is a story about intrigue, fear and sadness brought about by closing one of the finest, oldest U.S. Naval bases in Europe during the “troubles” and the tearful farewell by sailors and their families to the town they loved so well.

The Irish are very proud people with a great sense of humor. It’s difficult for all of us to imagine the terror and brutality that permeated the land in those darkest days. Yet, the humor and laughter never went away. This story is long overdue. It is about a love affair that grew deeper every year, through thick and thin. And no matter what, that love still exists today.

The love developed from thirty-five years of living and working together on a navy base in Northern Ireland: through thick and thin; laughing, playing, crying and marrying. The love that still flourishes between these men and women and their many children and grandchildren.

Starting in 1943 and ending in 1977, American sailors spent their earned liberty and money throughout the town of Londonderry: in pubs, shops, homes, restaurants and churches; on golf courses, riding trails, fishing holes and dance halls. At least one sailor was always mingling amongst the locals.

Everything centered on the U.S. navy base in Londonderry disestablished on September 30, 1977. At the time of its closing, it was the oldest U.S. naval facility in Europe. No other U.S.

military service, neither the U.S. Army, nor the U.S. Marines, both of whom who left at the end of WWII, stayed in Londonderry longer than the U.S. Navy.

We must apologize to the city, it's people and the Derry sailors for taking so long to write this story. It's not a sudden impulse but a dream and a deep commitment from the time Captain McKeown left the town. Granted there were some happenings that were classified by the U.S. government especially as they related to the "troubles." But the underlying point of the story is to explain the long, unique and endearing relationship between the people of Londonderry and the U.S. Navy despite the religious and political conflict.

Always in the background of this story is the intrigue and emotional stress of closing the oldest Naval base in Europe and secretly turning it over to the British Army. The city of Londonderry itself is the real heroine of this story. We have tried to portray her courage, her music and her people. It is a legacy and love that still remains to this day between the city and the U.S. Navy.

* * *

In the spring of 1976, young Navy Captain Tom McKeown was called into the office of one of the top Admirals at the Pentagon and told his assignment was closing the U.S Naval Communications Station in Londonderry, Northern, Ireland and establishing a new Naval communications station in Thurso, Scotland. This a story of the year Captain McKeown spent in Londonderry with his family trying to carry out his assignment.

Originally, Captain McKeown had little more than memories and some memorabilia to

begin his reconstruction effort of events that happened 35 years ago. There were a few faded photographs, an old box of slides and a few pages of typed notes. It wasn't much.

But there was also the memory of the incredible, magic year he spent in Northern, Ireland and this kept him pushing forward in this memory project. As it turns out, Captain McKeown was not the only one who had a love affair with Londonderry and the Navy communications station. Over the years, there had developed a group called U.S. NAVCOMMSTA Londonderry Alumni Association who maintained an extensive website and sponsored annual alumni gatherings.

Captain McKeown reached out to members of the alumni association who were on the base during the time he was commanding officer. The response was tremendous and far greater than he could ever imagine it would be. In this way, something that began as the memoir of one man has become a collective memory of so many who loved a particular place and time.

The events in this story have been constructed from memory and records where available. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Creative license has been taken a number of places where it helps to tell the story better. The result is a hybrid mixture of various genres: history, myth, memoir, fiction and collective memory.

1. Beginnings 1943 - 1973

Winston Churchill once said that the only thing that frightened him during WWII was the Battle of the Atlantic. The reason was that it provided the supply line for American supplies to England and the other nations fighting Germany. Keeping the pipeline open was essential to defeating Germany.

The most important city in keeping the pipeline open was Londonderry, the furthest northern city in Ireland and strategically located on the River Foyle only four miles from the deep waters of the ocean. During the war, the city took on the mammoth task of supporting the naval ships and crews from over a dozen nations as they escorted the merchant ships and their valuable cargoes across the North Atlantic. These escorts consisted principally of destroyers and lesser craft of the United States, Canadian, and British navies.

It all started in April 1941 when arrangements were made with the British government to construct four naval bases in Northern Ireland and Scotland: at Londonderry and Lough Erne in Northern Ireland and Rosneath and Loch Ryan in Scotland. Funds for the construction of these bases were provided by both the British and the American governments in accordance with Lend-Lease agreements reached in March 1941. Londonderry and Rosneath provided repair and fueling facilities for destroyers and submarines, ammunition storage, hospitals, and barracks for shore-based personnel. Lough Erne and Loch Ryan were used principally as operations centers

for seaplane squadrons.

* * *

Londonderry became home to 20,000 Royal Navy personnel, 10,000 Canadians and Newfoundlanders and more than 6,000 Americans as well as men from many of the occupied nations and the soldiers and airmen defending the city and surrounding area. At any one time there were as many as 140 naval ships and over 30,000 sailors in the port.

With the advent of war, Londonderry immediately became a port of inestimable value as a base for North Atlantic convoy escorts. Its location on the northern coast of Ireland made it the most strategic port for the allocation of supplies to other projects.

The essential North Atlantic sea-lane had its terminus in ports bordering Northern Ireland. As the maintenance of this thin supply line through the ever-tightening German blockade was imperative to the continuance of British resistance, the top priority was given the project of establishing at Londonderry the first United States naval base in the United Kingdom.

* * *

U.S. Naval communications in Northern Ireland began out of necessity when the U.S. Naval Operating Base (NOB) at Londonderry became a center of military activity at the beginning of World War II. Allied communications centered around a radio facility that was established as an integral part of the Naval Operating Base (NOB) on 3 February 1942. In 1943

the U.S. Navy acquired use of the land upon which the Clooney and Rosstown compounds were later situated.

The U.S. Naval Radio Station (NAVRADSTA), Londonderry, was established as a separate activity from the U.S. Naval Operating Base (NOB) on 10 July 1944. Thus, this date is considered the actual commencement date of NAVCOMMSTA Londonderry. One month later, on 15 August 1944, the U.S. Naval Operating Base (NOB) was de-commissioned, leaving the NAVRADSTA, and its sailors, as the only remaining U.S. Navy activity in Londonderry.

On 7 November 1950 the NAVRADSTA at Londonderry was re-designated as a U.S. Naval Radio Facility (NAVRADFAC). It was later designated a U.S. Naval Communications Station (NAVCOMMSTA) on 10 July, 1961.

In the late 1960s, political problems in Northern Ireland began to heat up. On January 30, 1972, thirteen people were killed (seven teenagers) in Londonderry as a result of the battle between the Provisional IRA and the government of Northern Ireland. The event was known as “Bloody Sunday” and marked the beginning of the period of intense fighting between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland called the “troubles.” The U.S. Naval Communications Station was situated in the middle of the conflict.

Realizing the danger to American lives in Londonderry, there began a series of communications between the American Embassy in London and the U.S. State Department in Washington DC. The communications were classified for many years and were recently declassified.

2. Fear of Violence
Declassified Communications
1973 - 1975

DATE: June 1973

FROM: American Consulate Belfast

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC, American Embassy Dublin, US NAV COMM STA
Londonderry

SUBJECT: Londonderry Base May Become Provo Target

1. Paul Hastings-Caughey, a journalist, told Congen today that Londonderry Provos are in process of deciding that US NAV-COMM STA will be made legitimate target of their operation. Hastings Caughey presented credentials of "North Atlantic Press" and claims to have done work for the (London) Times and to be in N.I. to do story for the N.Y. Times on Gerald Brady case. H-C said his source was one Seamus Kelly and identified latter as Londonderry Provo leader on the run and living over border in Letterkenny. Congen wondered why Provos would contemplate such action and particularly if reason might be importance of base payroll to economy of community. H-C said that was it. Base commander has been informed of foregoing.
2. To Belfast's knowledge only person who has even half-way seriously mentioned attack on

Londonderry base was Mrs. Bernadette McAliskey (Devlin) as she insists now on being called. Her idea, explained in her "Price of My Soul" (p.77) was to cause diplomatic incident by blowing up base installations to bring "Northern Ireland to the attention of the world." She of course had said she supports officials (not Provos).

3. Comment: Attacks on Londonderry base would seem highly unlikely. They would be about surest way one could think of to dry up financial support in US for Provos. Hastings-Caughey not known to local London Times people.

* * *

DATE: March 1974

FROM: American Embassy London

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC, American Consulate Belfast, Secretary of Defense

SUBJECT: Raid on NAV COMM STA Londonderry

1. In response to embassy request for assessment, FCO told Emboff March 19 that investigation of unsuccessful raid on NAV COMM STA Armory March 17 was continuing. It is thought that a total of 7 people were involved. Police authorities in NI are holding 4 people (2 male, 2 female) on minor charges pending development of further evidence. All 4 are identified as Provisional IRA.

2. Preliminary British assessment is that raid was probably a freelance operation unauthorized by IRA command. They note that raid was very ineptly executed. Confidential British do not believe that raid suggests that IRA have changed previous policy of avoiding attacks on US installations.

* * *

DATE: April 1975

FROM: Secretary of State Washington DC

TO: American Embassy London

SUBJECT: Realignment of Naval Telecommunications System (NTS)

1. New communication technology offers the prospect of consolidation of communications functions at single sites with considerable financial savings. In consonance with these technical advances, the U.S. Navy is planning to realign the NTS in the UK. Preliminary planning envisions closure of the Naval Communications Station Londonderry and attendant NTS facilities in Northern Ireland, with management, support, and operations being relocated to another U.S. Navy communications oriented activity in the UK. Two sites currently under consideration are the Naval security group activity in Edzell, Scotland and the Naval Radio Station (Transmitter) at Thurso, Scotland.

2. In view of the strong Congressional interest in reducing the support manpower in Europe, emphasis being placed on realignment in that area, while it appears that additional land will not be required beyond that already available at Edzell and Thurso, it is anticipated that some construction, such as expansion of current facilities and antenna additions, will be required. The target date for completion is FY 1977.

3. Detailed information will be provided when the specific site has been selected in order that formal consultations can be undertaken with the British government. In the meantime, it is

desirable that we discuss this informally with the British government to preclude embarrassment should such planning come to their attention prematurely. It is requested that Department be notified when such discussions have been completed with any reaction.

* * *

DATE: April 1975

FROM: American Embassy London

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC

SUBJECT: Realignment of Naval Telecommunications System (NTS)

1. We raised subject of realignment of NTS with assistant head of FCO North America Department, Neil Smith and U.S. Desk Officer Graham Archer on April 8. We stressed that this was informal advice that U.S. is considering plan to realign NTS and that we would seek HMG approval when we have a detailed proposal.
2. Initial reaction of FCO officials was that plan is understandable in terms of technical parameters and in context of reduction of support manpower in Europe. They could foresee, however, that plan might cause problems for Northern Ireland office and Scottish office. Former would be troubled by fact that important source of employment in Northern Ireland would be removed with consequent economic problem for Londonderry area. Scottish office might well be troubled by any noticeable construction at Thurso or Edzell such as large antenna that might “further detract from the natural beauty of the area.” (Comment: Archer, who made above comment, has been closely associated with discussions of possible USN construction at Holy

Loch and has in mind the strong position taken by the Scottish office against activities that would injure beauty of rural areas of Scotland.

3. Specific questions asked were (A) how many more people will be stationed in Scotland and (B) what will be physical nature of construction at Scottish site. Even though U.S. plan is not complete, it would be useful if we could give an interim reply to above questions.

* * *

DATE: July 1975

FROM: Secretary of State Washington DC

TO: American Embassy London

SUBJECT: Realignment of Naval Telecommunications System (NTS)

1. Preliminary planning referenced in State 77246 now complete. Navy proposes to relocate all communications management, support, and operations from NAV COMM STA Londonderry to Naval Radio Station, Thurso, Scotland, which would then be known as NAV COMM STA UK. Target date for the activation of NAV COMM STA UK is July 1977.

2. The proposal is based on survey confirming that Thurso provides most economical site with most efficient management of existing buildings to accommodate relocated functions. The present Mess Hall can handle the planned expansion and some housing is available on base for married and unmarried personnel. This relocation plan offers significant advantages through collocation of communications stations functions with a transmitter site (FORSS) which is located in close proximity with receiver site (West Murkle). The following basic elements of the plan answer questions posed in Reftel A.

3. In Northern Ireland, manpower would be reduced from the present level of 18 officers, 280 enlisted and 107 local nationals to zero by December 1977. All land under the management of NAV COMM STA Londonderry would be returned to the host government. Closure would follow activation of NAV COMM STA UK by approximately three to six months.

4. New construction in Scotland would include a forty foot parabolic antenna protected by a dome and housing for associated satellite earth terminal equipment on the existing receiver site at West Murkle, some additional antennas at the existing antenna fields, and additional housing for personnel in the event that adequate private rental is not available. Manpower would be increased at Thurso by about 3 officers, 119 enlisted men and 4 local national civilians. The expected increase in demand for housing in the Thurso area would be approximately 76 units, including a mix of apartments, private rooms, and houses.

5. Request you obtain HMG approval for the proposed realignment of communications facilities. Even though the planned consolidation would not be completed until two years from now, such approval would permit timely notification of the civilian personnel affected and facilitate an orderly transition.

* * *

DATE: September 1975

FROM: American Embassy London

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC

SUBJECT: Realignment of Naval Telecommunications System (NTS)

1. Defense Department, FCO, has now replied in an 18 September letter to our 17 July letter

requesting HMG's approval "as soon as possible" for the Londonderry to Thurso relocation.

"You wrote to Teddy Jackson on 17 July about the transfer of U.S. Naval Communications facilities from Londonderry to Thurso in Scotland. "When we discussed this recently I said that we would be sending you a standard form of questionnaire which has to be completed whenever a proposal is made for the modification of communications facilities in the UK. I now enclose a copy of the questionnaire, and would be grateful if it could be completed and returned in due course. "We should also be grateful if, in order to enable us to consider all the implications of the move, you could let us know (A) what restrictions there are at present on the use of the surrounding land as a result of the existing installation at West Murkle and (B) what additional restrictions would be imposed as a result of the new development. For instance, will the U.S. Navy want to prohibit certain developments or activities within a given radius of the station? (With other communications stations it has sometimes been necessary to prohibit such processes as arc-welding within a certain radius and also to limit the use of other electrical equipment). We need this information in order to know to what extent additional land in an area which is keen to accept industrial development would be sterilized by the relocation of these facilities at Thurso."

2. We have passed to CINCUSNAVEUR the questionnaire and letter.

* * *

DATE: October 1975

FROM: American Embassy London

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC

SUBJECT: Expansion of Belfast/London HF Radio Network

1. AMCONSUL Belfast desires expand HF radio net to include Dublin and Londonderry. Radio located residence Consul General. Londonderry link would fit in with E & E plans which call for division of city for emergency planning purposes with residence being focal point in case of evacuation (See Belfast A-54 September 19, 1975, being pouched Stuttgart for clearance, then to the Department for distribution).

2. Radio contact between London and Belfast made on 4.470 MHZ with unsatisfactory results. Suspect problem caused by location of antenna within the residence attic. Congen proposes have antenna installed nearby trees. This would avoid pinpointing residence with located in housing area occupied by members of Ulster volunteer force and Ulster Defense Association.

3. Request advice.

* * *

DATE: November 1975

FROM: American Embassy London

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC

SUBJECT: Realignment of Naval Telecommunications System

1. We have received from Pellew, Defense Department, FCO, a letter stating that HMG does not anticipate any difficulties arising from the information we supplied them on October 16. They are hopeful that departmental comments on the information we supplied will be cleared by December 8.

2. On the matter of a public announcement, the FCO asks that we give some thought to one “in view of possible public misunderstanding arising from the closure at Londonderry and the expansion at Thurso.” It is the FCO’s view that such a statement should stress the technical reasons for the closure at Londonderry “thus minimizing any implications of loss of confidence in the security situation.” Also, any such statement should make clear that expansion at Thurso will “not disturb the environment or limit the prospects for industrial development in the area.” Pellew asks that USG draft a confidential statement and give HMG opportunity to comment on it.

3. We are passing to CINCUSNAVEUR a copy of the site clearance form which the British are circulating for clearance.

* * *

DATE: December 1975

FROM: American Embassy London

TO: Secretary of State Washington DC

SUBJECT: Realignment of Naval Telecommunications System

1. Ref (A)(Which we understand is available in OSD) contains CINCUSNAVEUR proposed text of public affairs response to inquiries about realignment of Naval Telecommunications Systems involving Londonderry and Thurso.

2. Embassy concurs in draft Press Release and questions and answers with exception of answer three. We suggest that second sentence be modified to say, “almost two years ago on 10 April 1974.” We concur that if asked U.S. should not withhold information on explosion at microwave

tower, but we think that this answer should emphasize how long ago it took place in order to demonstrate that this incident was not connected with the decision to confidentially realign Naval communications in the UK.

3. St. Patrick's Day March 76

On St. Patrick's Day in 1976, Prime Minister Cosgrave of Northern, Ireland visited the Whitehouse. It had a special symbolic significance in that President Ford, for the most part, had ignored the Northern Ireland issues during his term in office in his attempts to focus on domestic issues. As leading Irish scholar Joseph Thompson writes in *American Policy and Northern Ireland: A Saga of Peace Building*, Ford's "heroic efforts to bring the United States to domestic political normalcy allowed Kissinger and the State Department to continue to reject America's moral crusades."

However, as Thompson observes, the question still remained whether international outcries of human rights violations were a valid issue for the U.S. government policy of realpolitik. Members of Congress believed that a humanitarian foreign policy was preferable to realpolitik, and so they began to develop links with nationalist and republican leaders in Northern Ireland. But the moral vacuum in American government policy towards Northern Ireland would not be filled until the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

The White House dinner for Cosgrove in 1976 was lighthearted and celebratory of the close Irish-American friendship. President Ford told the Irish Prime Minister, "Betty and I had the luck of the Americans to have you with us tonight. On this St. Patrick's Day of the United States Bicentennial Year, all Americans know there is a bit of the green in the red, white and blue

of the United States. We honor the history of our Nation and the great contributions that all of you from Ireland have made to American independence, as well as growth. No country could be more welcome or entitled to join our Bicentennial celebration than Ireland.”

While the dinner was lighthearted and celebratory, private discussions between Ford and Cosgrove did discuss the violence in Northern Ireland. A summary of their meeting in the *American Presidency Project* entered on March 18, 1976 observed, “The President and the Prime Minister noted with regret the continued violence arising from the Northern Ireland situation. They deplored all support for organizations involved directly or indirectly in campaigns of violence and reiterated in particular their determination to continue and to intensify their cooperation in the prosecution of illegal activities. They appealed to the American and Irish people to refrain from supporting, with financial or other aid, this violence.”

* * *

A few hundred miles north of Washington, in New York City, Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter marched in the St. Patrick’s Day parade down 5th Avenue wearing a button that said “England get out of Ireland.”

During Carter’s election campaign of 1976, the former Governor of Georgia, had become involved in the ongoing issue of Northern Ireland. There is evidence from British documents of the time of British concern that the potential election of the first Democratic President since the onset of the Northern Ireland troubles would see the United States take a more active role under the direction of the influential Irish-American lobby. Reports emerged that Senator Daniel

Patrick Moynihan had even pressed for the inclusion of a section on Northern Ireland in the Democratic Party Platform although this never materialized. But a different American relationship to Northern Ireland was in the air.

4. Home At Last July 1976

A Little League baseball game is in progress at a park in Washington DC. It is a week after the huge bi-centennial 4th of July celebration of the American Revolution and the city is still cleaning up. Red, white and blue banners line the perimeter of the field but there are some volunteers on ladders beginning to take them down. Patriotic flyers are still being cleaned up from the streets. The event is over but the city is still filled with patriotic pride. Jimmy Carter has just won the Democratic Presidential nomination at the Democratic Convention in New York City.

It is the top of the ninth inning with two outs and the Springdale Dragons are tied 10-10 to the Columbia Heights Tigers. The coach of the Springdale Dragons is a man in his mid-40s named Tom McKeown who wears a “Spirit of 76” t-shirt and paces back and forth on the sidelines near third base, shouting instructions at his son Shawn who dances around third base with the winning run if he can make it to home plate at home plate just sixty feet away.

“Watch the pitcher Shawn,” Tom shouts. “Make your move when he’s committed and not before.”

Shawn looks at his father briefly and shakes his head. He has learned over the years that

he could take the advice of his father to the bank. His father was not a man who liked to lose at anything.

The fourteen year-old-boy with long blond hair closely watches the pitcher and makes his move right after the batter hits the ball. No time to see the results of the hit. Shawn takes off towards home plate. The ball is a grounder to the short stop on the opposing team who scoops it up and fires towards home plate just as Shawn slides over it.

“Safe,” says the referee and the game is over.

The Springdale Dragons surround Shawn who gets up from home plate shaking dust off his pants. Tom McKeown smiles. He is so proud of his son. It’s great to be home again he thinks to himself.

“Great coaching,” says one of the fathers to Tom. “How long you back for?”

“A long time,” says Tom. “I can feel it this time.”

“You ever consider coaching soccer in the fall?” the other father says to Tom.

“Why not,” says Tom. “My daughter Coleen loves soccer.”

On the ride back home Tom tells Shawn that he is proud of him.

“You watched the pitcher just like I told you to,” Tom says.

“I just wish you were around more,” Shawn says.

“I know,” Tom says. “This time it’s different. I’m back for a long time this time. I can feel it.”

“I’m glad,” Shawn says.

Half an hour later Tom and Shawn arrive at a small ranch-style home in Springfield, Virginia. It is on a street with a lot of other similar style ranch homes. Tom has just bought the

home for his family and a number of projects are in various stages of completion. There is the smell of fresh paint throughout the home. A large book of wallpaper samples sits on the kitchen table. Chips of painting colors are scotch-taped to the walls.

Tom's wife Mary is busy measuring various spaces in the home with a tape measure. She shows Tom a collection of carpet samples.

"I think this dark beige is great for the living room," she says pushing a sample in front of him.

"It looks great," Tom says. Over the years he has learned that there is not much to be gained by not agreeing with her. And besides, she seemed so happy. But their homes have always been such temporary affairs.

It is late afternoon and the eastern sun is sitting on the roof of the little ranch house. In the backyard of the little ranch home, the barbeque is going and Tom has some hamburgers grilling and his seven-year-old daughter Tara and ten-year-old daughter Colleen are begging for a hamburger.

Tara comes up to her father holding her Hobbit stuffed animal. Her first grade class has been reading about them and Tom bought her the stuffed animal when he came home. It has since become almost like another appendage to Tara as she is seldom without it.

"Can you get me a real Hobbit someday?" she asks.

"We'll see," he says. "But you know hobbits are very nasty and very difficult to catch."

The family eats around the new picnic table they have just purchased. Tara sits next to her father with her Hobbit sitting on the picnic bench. The kids are talkative telling their father about their school year that he has missed.

Mary extracts a brochure and hands it to Tom.

“What’s this?” he says.

“Hawaii,” Mary says. “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

Tom looks through the brochure as he eats his hamburger.

“I thought we could plan to spend this Christmas in Hawaii,” Mary says. “It’d be great to get out of the cold weather back here.”

“Not a bad idea,” Tom says. “Could visit the navy base over there.”

“Why don’t you ever get assigned to places like Hawaii?” Mary asks.

Tom laughs.

“That would be something,” he says.

“Are there Hobbits in Hawaii?” Tara asks.

“No,” Tom says. “Hobbits come from Middle Earth.”

“Where’s Middle Earth?”

“Places far away like England and Ireland,” he says.

“Can we go there and get one?”

Tom hugs her.

“Maybe someday,” he says.

“You’re not going away again,” Colleen asks. “I don’t want you to go away.”

“I’m not going away,” Tom says. “I’m here to stay.”

When the children have gone to bed, Tom and Mary sit in the backyard and Mary lifts a glass of wine.

“So good to have you back,” she says. “I hope it’s for good.”

“I do too,” says Tom as he clicks his wine glass against hers and kisses her cheek. “I do too.”

It was good being home with the family for the first time in a long while. Hearing the simple stories of his children’s lives. Coaching his boys’ sports teams. Getting to know his wife again. So far, his marriage had been a string of comings and goings.

5. Washington Meeting July 76

Captain Tom McKeown pulls files out of a box and puts them into a filing cabinet. Just like the new home he is moving into, he is also moving into his new office at the Pentagon. He has been away for a year as commander of a navy destroyer in the Atlantic and it is good to be home with the family, and great to think that this might be home for a while.

He walks around his new office and looks at the photos he has just put on his walls. Those early photos of the family when he was an ensign. The various bases they lived on. Then the photos of him alone on various navy missions around the world. His year as commanding officer of the base in The Republic of Vietnam and then command of a new LST out of Little Creek, Virginia and command of the USS Leary.

Since graduating from Seton Hall University getting a masters in communications from the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, California, he has been on the naval fast track, gaining his stripes much faster than most. Now, at forty-four he is a full four stripe Captain.

There is the wedding day photograph of he and Mary. God, did we know what the hell we were getting into he often thought. Maybe the look of so many young couples starting their life out in the military? A youthful hopefulness? A belief that belief itself is possible. The world so widely spread in front of them to all edges of the horizon.

Tom looks at other photos he has just put on the walls of his new office. A photo of his other son Jim winning Little League player of the year three years ago when he was home for a full season of baseball and able to coach Jim's developing pitching abilities. There were also photos of his other son Tom and Jim playing high school football. His son Tom was also an excellent golfer. It was such a good period for father and sons, these four months of summer baseball time. Is there a more important time in the world?

And there are the photos of his two daughters Tara and Colleen. It seemed to him that Tara was such an unchangeable pixie at heart. Always believing in magical animals like hobbits. There was a photograph of her on his wall holding her hobbit. Somehow she liked hobbits as much as other little girls liked dolls. There was that look of awe and wonder on her face like Alice about to fall down the rabbit hole. She was convinced her father knew all about the world at the bottom of the magic rabbit hole. It was made from those places far away where her father went, and she was constantly questioning her father about it when he returned from his tours of duty.

And there were the pictures of Colleen in her cheerleading uniform waving the symbols of cheerleading, wild, wands of strips of material, explosions of color. Colleen was more of a realist than Tara and never had much interest in magical creatures like hobbits. Her childhood was filled with a continuing succession of various projects and science experiments. And there were photos of Colleen playing soccer and basketball.

On another wall of his new office were photos from his navy career. The family photos were wonderful but there was something different, difficult to define, in the navy photos. What was it?

There he was as a young ensign on his first ship. The ship where his captain told him he was responsible for the first division of a large Navy amphibious cargo ship and to figure from his sailors what to do. He ended up calling several meetings of the crew working with them and listening to what they had to say. It was such an excellent leadership foundation. His Captain couldn't understand it. But it did make him one of the most effective ensigns aboard his first ship in the navy that year.

And, there were a few photographs of him on that destroyer, where he was the executive officer and second in command, that seemed to change it all. It was the ship where his Captain insisted that they sail into a typhoon on their way to Vietnam in order to meet schedules. Young Lt. Commander McKeown challenged him. This was deadly. He asked to be put on record in his challenge. The result was that the Captain placed a huge mark against young McKeown. But, the Captain did turn the ship around and into the path that McKeown suggested. The ship was saved. In the end, there were one hundred and fifty letters from crewmembers on that ship that McKeown saved everyone's life. He was a hero to his crew and the captain of the ship was removed or demoted or something like that. We'll have to check on this.

There were the photos of him at the naval base he commanded in Vietnam, a dangerous and lonely phase of his career. The kids were growing and he wished he could see them more often. But there was an inner happiness on his face. He has found a particular calling in life. Some men have a daily drudge of a similar job. But always, he had a mission rather than a job. It made all the difference to him. And somewhere, subconsciously, he wondered whether his family would win out over a career. Maybe it was this way with other men? Those that had to have a family and also go it alone. What a strange demographic.

When the files are all put into the filing cabinet, Captain McKeown sits down behind a huge desk. The image is such a contrast to all the photos on the walls. Looming over the space of the large grey metal desk, it seems like the command center rising over the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. He begins going through the stack of papers overflowing from his “In” box on his desk. He signs a few letters. He dictates some memos to his assistant and shuffles papers around on his desk and puts them into various baskets. There is a bored look on his face. It has been a long time since he was behind a desk all day.

His office door opens and a Marine Orderly comes into his office, clicks his heels and salutes the Captain and announces Admiral Schmidt wants to see him immediately. He waves the Marine away telling him he will be on his way in a few minutes. But the Marine insists he go with him immediately. He is perturbed at this order but goes with the Marine.

They walk down the long, wide hall of the Pentagon past countless doors with names and military designations on them. He has had a few brief assignments at the Pentagon over his career but he has never liked the place. His real navy home has been those moving islands of steel in the middle of the ocean or the bases in distant lands.

* * *

Finally they arrive at Admiral Schmidt’s office and walk past desks of his assistants arraigned outside his private office like escort ships around a great battleship. The Marine Orderly opens the door and Captain McKeown walks into Admiral Schmidt’s office and salutes the admiral. There are a few men assembled in the office. Everyone is sitting around a long

mahogany conference table in the office. There are no smiles, just perturbed and grim-looking faces. Captain McKeown wondered what in the hell he had done wrong.

Admiral Schmidt is in his early fifties. He is a large man who played football for the Navy team back when they had some great teams. The admiral welcomes Captain McKeown and begins introducing the men around the table. There is Tony Spinelli from State Department. Ralph Douglas from the CIA. Peter Spencer from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Ian Radcliff from the British Embassy.

“Since the early 40s,” the Admiral began after the introductions, “We’ve had naval operations in Northern Ireland. As you might know, the facilities around Londonderry played a key role in the Battle of the Atlantic. After the war many of the operations in the area were closed down. Except for a communications station in Londonderry that has been in continuous operation for thirty-five years now.”

The Admiral pushes a notebook across the table to Captain McKeown.

“Tom, take a look,” he says. “Photos of the base through its history. Our oldest naval base in Europe.”

Captain McKeown looks at the photos in the notebook. There are black and white photos from the war days of WWII. Photos of young sailors lifting pints of Guinness in celebration of the end of the wars. Captain McKeown also looked through the photos of the rather mundane operations of the base after the wars through the late 1940s to the 1960s. There were photos of sailors in downtown Londonderry shopping, walking hand in hand with ladies and visiting pubs. Smiling faces. It looked like a carefree time and a wonderful tour for the sailors.

Then, the photos in the notebook began to change. There were photos of tanks and troops in the streets of Londonderry and heavy barbed wire fence around the navy base. There were photos of shootings and streets full of tanks machine guns in the hazy fog of tear gas.

“As you can see,” said Admiral Schmidt, “things began to change in Londonderry in the late 60s when religious and political matters in Northern Ireland began to explode. In 1972 there was an event known as ‘Bloody Sunday’ in Londonderry where a number of people were horribly killed. It marked the beginning of what’s known as the ‘troubles’ or on-going terrorism between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. It is only getting worse.”

The Admiral waived his arm towards Tony Spinelli from the State Department.

“The base still has strategic significance for our communications in the Baltic, North Atlantic and Mediterranean. But President Ford wants us out of there,” Spinelli says. “He is concerned there will be an attack on the base and the nation will be pulled into conflict over there. He is worried how this could jeopardize our relationship with the British and the Republic of Ireland.”

“The U.S. Naval Communications Station is situated right in the middle of the conflict in Northern Ireland,” says Peter Spencer from the Department of Defense. He pushes a few photos across the table towards Captain McKeown. The photos show a mass of tangled metal. “The microwave tower on the base,” Spencer says. “Bombed in ‘73 by the IRA. They were trying to blow up the supply building at the base but were not successful.”

“But we know they will keep trying,” says Ian Radcliff from the British Embassy in London. He pushes a folder labeled “Classified” across the table to Captain McKeown. “A few years of correspondence between our embassy in London and Washington,” he says. “We’ve

been lucky so far but intelligence tells us they'll keep trying.”

“Besides the danger of the base being there,” Admiral Schmidt adds, “it is costing far too much to operate the base. We can operate far more efficiently and economically if we close the base at Londonderry and expand the Navy Communications facility at Thurso, Scotland. We have never publically revealed the Londonderry base, nor have we kept it a secret. Its mission is to support the allied forces in the North Atlantic, especially the submarines. It is a very sensitive topic.”

The Admiral looked at Captain McKeown.

“You’re the man for this operation,” he says. “You know how to close things down. Did a good job at Cam Ranh Bay and turning over the USS Leary to Spain. We want you to take over from Captain Barker and see that the base is closed down without any violence. The President wants us out of Northern Ireland as quickly as possible without any incidents. You need to keep the base in operation until our new base in Thurso, Scotland is ready. Then, you’ll be in charge of this base also. We can’t just shut the Londonderry base down until the new communications station in Thurso is up and running.”

“It’s a very delicate operation,” says Ralph Douglas from the CIA. We are turning the base over to the British Army. However, our public story is that the base is going back to the Queen and she will decide what to do with it and the property. It’s critical we keep to this story. If the IRA ever finds out the ultimate fate of the base is to go the British Army we are sure they will prevent this at all costs by sabotaging the base. A lot of American sailors and their families and Irish could be killed.”

When Ralph Douglas was finished there was a moment of silence around the table. Now

Captain McKeown began to realize why all the faces around the table were grim and perturbed.

“What’s your thoughts on all of this Captain?” the Admiral asks.

“Admiral,” Captain McKeown says, “I’ve just recently come home after a long tour of duty at sea and I’m looking forward to spending time with my family.”

Admiral Schmidt nodded his head in agreement.

“I realize this,” he said. “We want to give you the opportunity to take your family with you although you have to realize there is an element of danger in all of this.”

Captain McKeown pondered this possibility. His wife Mary was Irish and they had talked a number of times about visiting Ireland. But never under these types of circumstances.

“Admiral, there is also the fact that I’m also Irish Catholic,” he said. “My ancestors in the Republic of Ireland would be turning over in their graves if they knew where I was doing.”

The Admiral smiled and nodded his head agreeing with this.

“The fact you’re Irish Catholic is significant,” he says. “That’s one of the reasons you’ve been selected for the job. Take a few days off to discuss all of this with your family. We need you there in a few weeks to take over from Captain Barker. Family or not.”

“Yes sir,” Captain McKeown said, standing up and saluting the Admiral.

The Admiral stood up and returned the salute and everyone around the table stood up.

The meeting was over and Captain McKeown left.

On his way out he catches a flash of orange from the morning sunlight falling on a piece of clothe on a table in a corner of the office. He wonders what it is. It looks to be a sash of some type.

“What do you think?” Admiral Schmidt says to the group when Captain McKeown was gone.

“He is an Irish Catholic,” says Tony Spinelli from the State Department.

“He’s more of a loyal navy man than a faithful Catholic,” Admiral Schmidt says.

“Maybe so,” says Spinelli. “But the base has always had a Protestant commanding officer. Thirty five years and no Catholic commanding officer.”

“With the troubles going on with the IRA it’s time for a Catholic to run the base,” says Admiral Schmidt.

* * *

Captain McKeown’s head is swirling as he walks back to his office down the wide hallway of the Pentagon. Mixed emotions bang against each other in his mind like bumper cars at an amusement park. In so many ways he longs to escape from his new prison behind the grey metal desk surrounded by photos from the past. But the Pentagon prison offers a home life. He had to weigh this home life against his need for more action in a career full of action.

He wants so much to be a husband and father again. He wants to see his children grow and coach more baseball games and soccer games. He has been away for so damned long. Back and forth. Coming in and out of the life of his family. Each time seeing a few more inches on the children.

Each time more of a look of weariness on Mary’s face.

But she seemed hopeful now for the first time in a long while that he would be home and that they might be able to gain back some of those lost years. That they might be able to become somewhat of a normal family. He could take Tara to the zoo hunting for hobbits. He could coach Shawn's baseball team in the summer and his soccer team in the fall. He could be the Guinea Pig for Colleen's science experiments. He will miss the older boys Tom and Jim as they go off to college. But then (he thinks) they will love visiting Ireland on the holidays.

Taking the family with him to Ireland was dangerous but it seemed that it was the only option to keep it together. He would talk to Mary about it and tell her they had a chance to visit the place of their ancestors they had talked about for so many years. He wouldn't tell her about the dangers involved. She would never go with him. The marriage would be over he was sure.

6. A Family Dilemma July 1976

Ocean City, Maryland is a popular resort town on the Atlantic Ocean a hundred and fifty miles southeast of Washington DC. The town is at the southern end of a long, narrow peninsula that is a summer playground for many Washingtonians.

It is early evening and the last light of the western sun makes a few final reflections in the Atlantic. Tom and Mary have driven over here for an evening together. The children have been farmed out to friends for the night. The two sit at a romantic restaurant at the beach. A candle in a jar between them dances about from the warm, mild breeze coming through the open windows of the restaurant. A few glasses of Chianti wine and a plate of cheese next to the candle. Over everything the background music of the popular song from Andy Gibb “I Just Want to be Your Everything.” It is hard to escape the song since the Captain has recently come back from his last, lonely tour at sea and it seems to follow the couple around like a faithful little dog.

“So what is this big surprise you’ve been telling me about?” she asks.

“You know how we’ve talked about going to Ireland,” Tom says.

“You’re taking us on a vacation to Ireland!” she says.

“Better than a vacation,” Tom says pulling out a small map of Northern Ireland and putting it on the table near the light of the candle. “There’s a base in Londonderry the navy is

closing down. The oldest navy base in Europe. They want me to be the commanding officer of the base to manage the base closure.”

“You told them no of course,” she says.

“It wasn’t my prerogative to say yes or no,” Tom said.

“I can’t believe it,” Mary says. “You’ve been home for two months. We just bought a new home. The kids are excited to have you home. For the first time I can see some stability in our life. And you’re leaving all this to go to Ireland.”

“I want the family to go with me,” Tom says. “You know you’ve always wanted to go to Ireland. We can both explore family roots.”

Mary fumbles with the map on the table for a few seconds without saying anything.

“The kids are getting settled in the new school system,” she says, “and I’ve made some new friends on our street.”

“It won’t be a long command,” Tom says. “Nine months. A year at the max. It’ll be a great experience for the children.”

Mary takes a sip of wine and looks absently out over the sand at the darkening Atlantic.

“Aren’t there some problems in Northern Ireland?” she asks. “I’ve heard about the IRA and bombings.”

“The problems over there are highly exaggerated,” Tom says. “Besides, they all love the Americans and what could be safer than a navy base.”

Mary doesn’t seem to hear what he says. He can see that her eyes are watery and he can see a tear slowly roll down her cheek.

“I was looking forward so much to our new life in Washington,” she said. “Your new position at the Pentagon. You being home. Us getting to know each other again.”

“We’ll just transfer it to Ireland for a little while,” he tells her.

She abruptly gets up from the table.

“I’m going back to the room,” she says. “I need to be alone right now.”

Tom watches her go and sits at the table watching the candle in the bottle dance around and finishing off the bottle of Chianti. He buys another bottle of Chianti and walks out over the wide beach of Ocean City and sits down with it in the sand not far from the waves rolling in over the wet sand.

Lights twinkle north up the shore like a long electric necklace. He sits in the sand and drinks from the bottle of wine and looks out over the Atlantic Ocean trying to see the future somewhere out there.

Then, he notices the running lights of a ship on the horizon and says to himself it’s not me out there thank God. Yes, I love the sea, but I love my family more.

7. Arrival July 76

Captain McKeown opened his eyes and pushed up the shade on the navy plane and looked out the window at the Atlantic Ocean. He looked at his watch. It was three in the afternoon and they had been in the air for eight hours and should be getting close to Ireland by now. He unbuckled his seatbelt and gently moved his wife Mary's head from his shoulder. She had been asleep for an hour or so. The rest of the family was asleep across the aisle. Tara had her hobbit next to her strapped into a seat. Colleen was wearing the green t-shirt with "Ireland" on it and Shawn was sleeping with his head against the window and wearing his trademark reverse New York Yankees baseball cap.

There were a few other navy personnel on the Air Force out of Dover, Maryland plane and they were also sleeping. He moved Mary's head onto a pillow and made his way up the aisle towards the pilots in the cockpit.

"How far out are we?" he asked leaning forward between the two pilots.

"Just half an hour from land Captain," said the pilot. "You can see the island coming up now."

Captain McKeown looked out the cockpit window and there it was. In the early afternoon sun from the west, the island glowed and waved with a supernatural color of green he had never seen before.

“It’s beautiful,” Captain McKeown said.

“Of course it is,” said the pilot. “It’s Ireland.”

There was a tap on Captain McKeown’s shoulder and he turned around to see Mary standing behind him.

“Just woke up,” she said. “How far are we?”

Captain McKeown pointed to the incredible sight in front of the plane as he moved aside for his wife to see out the cockpit window.

“Not far,” he said.

“Oh my god, it’s is so beautiful,” Mary said. “Forty shades of green,” she whispered. “Do you remember my dad telling us that?”

She squeezed his shoulder when she said this.

Half an hour later they were over the collage of green patchwork, each a different size and color bordered by stone and hedges. The plane began dropping altitude for their landing in Shannon, Ireland. The family was awake and everybody was looking out the window. The children were excited. And there was even a slight hint of excitement on Mary’s face. It had taken a lot of convincing to get her to come and she still had mixed emotions about the whole thing. But the family was with him.

* * *

They were met at the airport in Shannon by a grey navy van with “U.S. Navy” on the side of it in large block letter. The driver was an ensign from the base, a young lad from Texas who had been over here for a year and talked with a slow Texas drawl.

The van headed north from Shannon for the base a few hundred miles away almost at the tip of Northern Ireland. It was a mild summer afternoon in late July with patches of thick clouds scattered across the blue sky. Everyone had their faces pressed against the windows of the van. The green quilt-work of the Irish countryside moved past the windows. Dairy cows grazed on the thick, green grass. Small farms dotted the countryside. Every so often, the van had to stop for a farmer leading his sheep or cattle across the road. The children loved this. It was almost like being inside a postcard for Ireland. They passed through a number of small villages with houses painted bright hues. Every now and then there was a tall stone fortress or castle off in the distance.

“This looks like the land where hobbits live,” said Tara.

“I never knew there were so many colors of green,” said Mary. “My dad was so right.”

They continued north through the western part of Ireland as the sun dropped lower in the sky. The countryside changing from farms to more industry. The towns took on a greyer color. The bright colored buildings from the first part of their trip were not so inviting anymore. Even the weather began to change as the puffy white clouds turned dark grey and covered the sun.

When twilight was beginning to fall, the van slowed down and came to a stop.

“Border into Northern, Ireland,” said the driver of the van. “British troops. This’ll only take a minute Captain.”

A few, young, dour-looking British troops in green uniforms with weapons drawn peered into the van and politely asked for passports from everyone. Tara clutched her hobbit and Colleen glared back. Captain McKeown gave the driver all of their passports. The British soldiers looked at Captain McKeown and saluted. Then they raised the gate across the road and waived the van on.

The sudden stop and inspection put a damper on the light-hearted journey north from Shannon.

“What was that all about?” Mary asked.

“They’re checking for guns coming into Northern, Ireland,” said the van driver. “But they shouldn’t bother us anymore.”

“Guns?” Mary said.

“Guns for the IRA,” said the driver. “In their battle with the unionists.”

Mary looked at Tom.

“You never told me about a war going on,” she said.

Captain McKeown waived his hand in a dismissive manner.

“Not a war,” he said. “Just a minor skirmish.”

He whispered into her ear so that the driver could not hear and refute his claim. But he wondered how much longer he could keep the real danger of the situation from her.

Ever since Captain McKeown was given his assignment, he had to painfully manage a constant inner pressure to keep all the danger to himself. Every time he looked at his wife and children’s faces he had to take a deep breath and fight his emotions. It was gut wrenching not to

talk with them about his feelings. He wondered over and over if it was a smart idea to take them with him into a dangerous situation. Maybe he should have left them at home in Virginia?

But he hated being away from them and felt that if he went alone to Northern Ireland it might be the end of his marriage. There had been too many lonely times in his career. He couldn't face another one of them. Especially since the kids were growing up and needed their father near them. He resolved not to think about the dangers and keep those fears in check. But keeping these feelings to himself without being able to tell his family created a constant mental pressure cooker.

* * *

Crossing the border into Northern Ireland was like crossing into another world. The town of Strabane was right inside the border of Northern Ireland and it looked like a bombed-out city from WWII. British troops wearing berets patrolled the streets and tanks could be seen in a number of places. Many windows in the shops were broken and barbed wire blocked some of the street.

“What happened here?” asked Mary.

“Strabane's suffered extensive damage from the beginning of the Troubles in the early 1970s,” their driver said. “The Provisional IRA regularly attacks the town's British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary bases.”

The children were frightened. Tara pushed up against her father and Colleen against her mother.

Shawn was appalled by the destruction.

“Dad, how could people destroy the factories they need for their jobs?”

Mary glanced at her husband to see how he would answer this but he just shrugged. He didn't have an answer.

Outside of Strabane there was countryside dotted with the lights of farmhouses as the twilight moved into evening. Soon the road ran along a river.

“The River Foyle,” said the driver. “Almost at the base Captain.”

The van was stopped again by more soldiers at the checkpoint leading to the Derry bridge that crossed the River Foyle. The driver showed the soldiers the Captain's ID and passports and the soldiers snapped to a salute.

The van soon left the river and wound up a long hill and then leveled out to a large plateau on top of it. Down below the lights of Londonderry were twinkling on. The sounds of distant sirens could be heard from the city across the river.

The road went along it a long fence with plaques in the fence that said “U.S. Navy” on them. It came to a stop at a gate with a guardhouse and an older gentleman in a dark uniform and cap came out and looked in the van and then saluted.

“Welcome to NAVCOMMSTA Londonderry Captain,” the guard said.

Captain McKeown saluted back from inside the van.

“Thank you sir,” he said.

The van turned right and went by many homes and buildings that were no more than black shapes in the evening. Then it went a short distance down a street with a few ranch style homes on it and stopped in front of a one-story brick ranch home with a small yard in front.

“Your new home Captain,” the driver said.

They carried their luggage into the home and the children were quick to claim their rooms. It was smaller than their new home in Springfield, Virginia and the appliances were older and furniture worn. Tom noticed that Mary was not saying much as she surveyed their new home.

“We’ll fix it up,” he said squeezing her shoulders. “Some fresh paint and new carpet, you’ll see.”

But she was not so easily convinced.

There was a phone call and Captain McKeown answered it.

“This is Captain Barker,” the voice said. “Welcome to the base Captain. After your long trip I know the family must be very tired. We put some food for you in the refrigerator. Why don’t we meet in your new office tomorrow at ten? I’m sending Warrant Officer James Emberton to drive you there. He’ll be at your place a little before ten. I’ll show you around the office. We’ve planned a welcome barbeque for you and your family tomorrow evening at your place. We’ll do all the cooking and everything so no need for you guys to do anything. There’ll be a number of your senior officers there with their wives and children.”

“Thank you Captain Barker,” he said. “I look forward to meeting you tomorrow.”

8. The Office
July 1976

A little before ten the next morning there was a knock on the door. Captain McKeown was dressed in his Navy blue uniform and opened it to see a large young man with red hair and a playful smile on his face.

“Warrant Officer James Emberton,” he said straightening up and giving a salute.

The Captain saluted back.

“How long you been stationed here Jim?” Captain McKeown asked him on their short drive to the office.

“Nearly two years sir,” he said. “My orders were for a year but I asked for an extension. My wife’s from Scotland and we like to go over and visit once in a while.”

“Like it over here?” Captain McKeown asked.

“Hard not to like it Captain,” Emberton said. “The Irish love us Yanks. And the feeling is mutual.”

“Where you from Jimmy?”

“A little town in Tennessee sir,” he said.

“Over here must be a little different from your home,” Captain McKeown said.

“As different as it can get,” Emberton said. “But I love it.”

“Even with the Troubles going on?” Captain McKeown asks.

“No one likes the troubles Captain,” Jimmy Emberton said. “It just seems to be one of those things of life around here Captain. We all got to get use to it.”

Jimmy Emberton pulled into the office parking lot and Captain McKeown followed him into the office. It was not much to look at. Pretty standard like most of the offices Captain McKeown had worked in. Not much to look at. The typical U.S. Navy issue office. Probably put up thirty years ago by the Seabees with prefabricated materials. The same design used in hundreds of bases all around the world.

Inside, the office was buzzing with the sound of teletypes clicking and telephones ringing. Everyone immediately stood up and saluted when Captain McKeown walked in and he saluted back.

Captain Barker came over to Captain McKeown. He was a small, wiry man with a crew cut who Captain McKeown had heard ran the base like clockwork. He also had heard he was not much of a people person but preferred pushing paper around and writing reports to dealing with human faces and emotions.

“Welcome aboard Captain,” Captain Barker said.

He then introduced Captain McKeown to Moira McGuffy his new secretary. Moira was a strikingly beautiful redheaded woman with blue eyes somewhere in her late 30s.

“Moria was born and raised in Londonderry,” Captain Barker says. “Been on the base for ten years. Your success here depends on you getting on Moira’s good side.”

There is laughter in the room.

“I hope that won’t be too hard to do,” Captain McKeown said smiling at Moira.

“And next to Moira is Shannon Kelly,” said Captain Barker. “Shannon is Moira’s assistant and handles things when Moira gets bogged down. She’s studying to be an accountant.”

Shannon was somewhere in her late twenties with an infectious smile and pale white skin and the traditional black Irish hair.

Captain Barker then introduced Captain McKeown to a two-striped officer.

“Lieutenant Commander Bob McManus,” he said. “Bob is your Executive Officer.”

“Good to have you here Captain,” McManus said saluting Captain McKeown. “We’ve been looking forward to having you here.”

Captain Barker introduced Captain McKeown to a few other civilian employees in the office who had various administrative tasks assigned to them.

Then they went into Captain McKeown’s new office and closed the door. It was a corner office with large windows on both sides. One window faced east and a streak of morning sunshine slanted in through it and fell right on the center of a good-sized wooden office desk.

Captain Barker showed Captain McKeown around the office explaining the contents of the file cabinets and the intercom system.

He pointed to a stack of boxes in the corner of the office.

“Your files arrived yesterday,” he said. Then he handed Captain McKeown a chain with a key on it. “Key to the classified filing cabinet,” he said. “Good idea to always keep it locked these days with all the classified communications we’re getting from DC. Used to not be like this but the Troubles have changed a lot of things up here as I’m sure you’re already aware of.”

He sat down behind the desk and motioned Captain McKeown to sit down. He placed his hands on the desk and surveyed the room.

“I know you’ve been briefed by the Admiral on the situation here,” he said.

“Yes,” said Captain McKeown.

“Things keep intensifying,” Captain Barker says. “It’s impossible for outsiders to know how much this base is costing our government. Mr. Nelson is keeping track of this. It’s an appalling figure. And there is the fact that hatred for Americans is just outside the gates of the base.”

Captain Barker pulled out a notebook and opened it.

“We keep a record of the violence here in Northern Ireland,” he said as he began to read from the notebook. “July has seen an increasing amount of violence. On July 2, 6 civilians (5 Protestants and one Catholic) were killed near Antrim. On July 8, the Ulster Freedom Fighters killed a Catholic civilian. On July 9th, two Catholic citizens (a man and wife) were killed by the Ulster Freedom Fighters. On July 17, two IRA members were killed in Castlederg. On July 21 a British soldier was killed from a booby trapped-bomb on a nearby British Army base in Derry. On July 26, Christopher Ewart Biggs, the British Ambassador to Ireland, was killed in a landmine attack on his official car in Sandyford, Dublin. His secretary, Judith Cook was also killed in the explosion. On July 29, three Catholic civilians were killed as a result of a bomb attack on Whitefort Inn, Andersonstown Road, Belfast. And, on July 30, four Protestant civilians died as a result of a gun attack on the Stag Inn, Belvoir, Belfast.”

Captain Barker closed the notebook.

“And so it goes,” he says. “But I’m sure there’s much more I don’t know about.”

“Hard to believe the hatred between Catholics and Protestants,” Captain McKeown said.
“So different from the states.”

Captain Barker dismisses this waiving his hand.

“The Catholics and Protestants in the states haven’t been around for a thousand years like they have in Ireland,” he says.

Captain Barker then places his hand on a white telephone on the side of the desk.

“Just added this,” he said. “A phone directly to Admiral Perry’s office at the U.S. NAVCINCEUR in London. The Admiral insisted on it until the base is closed down. Wants you to let him know immediately about any incidents on the base. Also, Admiral Schmidt wants an update call every week. This whole place is a hot political football with the presidential election coming up and the State Department trying to figure out what the hell our stance towards Northern Ireland should be. Ford swept the whole thing under the rug more or less but that great humanitarian President Carter wants the British out of Northern Ireland. This is something we can’t have. It’s a delicate situation to say the least. The sooner the base can be handed over to the British the better.”

“I’ve been in delicate situations before,” Captain McKeown said.

“I know, I’ve seen your career records,” said Captain Barker. “But I don’t think you’ve been in any situation as delicate as this.”

“It all seems a rather straight forward assignment,” he said. “Closing down a communications station and turning it back to the British Army. I’ve had a lot tougher assignments in my career.”

Captain Barker shook his head in disagreement.

“Don’t get lulled into how peaceful everything seems to be on the base,” Captain Barker says. “The base is entangled with the city of Londonderry in ways you’ll see. Over its thirty-five

years here a third of the sailors have married local girls and there's almost an equal number of Catholics and Protestant civilians and military personnel on the base. Nothing behind the fences on the base is separated very much from the Troubles in Londonderry and Northern Ireland. Things are not always as they appear."

"I appreciate the information Captain," Tom says. "But still, I'm here to simply close a base down and turn it back to her Majesty the Queen."

"Those are challenges you have," Captain Barker says. "They're not insignificant ones. The fact is that hardly anyone wants to see the base closed down. It means too much to jobs in the area. It's become the livelihood for hundreds of families. Both Catholic and Protestant. But even more than this, the Catholics, and particularly the militant branch of Catholics called the IRA, do not want to see it closed down and then turned over to the British Army. The plan Admiral Schmidt briefed you on at the meeting in his office."

Captain Barker stands up and begins walking for the office door.

"The fact is that this old albatross of a base has become far too expensive to operate. And there is also the fact that it has become a hot political football to the Navy," he says. "Its glory days in the 40s when it played a critical part in communications and the Battle of the Atlantic. It's still an important communications line for submarines with its VIF transmissions. But with new satellite communications technology it is not as important as it used to be. Things can be done with half the personnel and cost of the past."

He waived his arm at the stack of boxes in the corner of the office.

"You've gotta' lot of things to go through," he said. "Talk to Moira if you need anything or have any questions. We've got a nice little welcome party planned for you and the family

tonight. Give you a chance to meet your senior officers and personnel. The mess crew is setting everything up and bringing everything. No need to do any work. Just get acquainted with the office. I'll see you at the party.”

When Captain Barker was gone Captain McKeown went over and took the seat behind his desk and just sat there awhile thinking about the things Barker had told him. He was surprised that Barker spoke so matter-of-factly about turning the base over to the British Army when so many people depended on the base for their livelihood. Scuttlebutt had it that Captain Barker was heading for a position ruffling papers at the Pentagon like Captain McKeown had been doing. Barker seemed to want the paper-pushing job as much as McKeown wanted out of it.

He got up and went over and looked out the window that faced north towards other buildings on the base. Like the main office, it had the look of other bases he had seen before. There was the large brown brick building that he was sure was the gymnasium where much of the social life of the base would be. There was the small, squat building he was sure was the officers club. There were the long buildings he recognized as barracks for the enlisted men and women. There were very nice housings on the base for the senior officers and families.

Here and there a jeep went past and somewhere nearby he could hear the sound of a baseball game in progress. Some navy wives chatted over a few baby strollers.

He began opening the boxes and putting his files away and organizing his desk. It was hard to believe all the danger Barker spoke about that lurked out there. And who was this Captain Barker anyway?

9. Welcome Party July 1976

That afternoon, after reading through a number of memos and filing his papers away, Captain McKeown walked home from his office. It was late afternoon and the sun had dropped behind some of the buildings on the western part of the base making long shadows fall from the tall antenna structures.

There was a flurry of activity at his home. A number of women were unrolling a long red, white and blue banner over the door that said "Welcome McKeown Family!" in big navy blue letters. Tom's children were playing with some other children in the street. Shawn was tossing a baseball back and forth with a few other kids. Inside, some personnel from the mess hall were busy putting out snacks on tables supervised by Mary. She looked much happier and less tentative than last night and he could see that she had a happy expression on her face. He kissed her and continued to survey the hectic scene. Outside a few large grills were being set-up and next to them a large man was setting up a bar.

"Carl Campbell Captain," the big man said extending a plump hand. "I'm the bartender at the Officers Club."

"Nice to meet you Carl," said Captain McKeown. "Sounds like you might be right in the center of a lot of the scuttlebutt on base."

The big man laughed.

“Twenty years of scuttlebutt,” says Carl. “Came here in the mid-50s right out of grade school.”

“I might have to call on you over the next few months,” Captain McKeown said smiling. “Keep me updated on what’s really going on at the base.”

“Absolutely Captain, anytime,” Carl says.

“I imagine there’s a lot of things flying around these days with Captain Barker leaving and me coming aboard,” Captain McKeown says.

“You know sailors,” said Carl. “They like to speculate on things. That’s the way they are. You know all about that Captain.”

“What’s the big topic of speculation?” Captain McKeown asks Carl.

The big bartender glances around the yard. Apart from a few guys setting up the grills, they are alone in the yard.

“Oh you know,” says Carl Campbell. “About all types of things that are usually just talk.”

“Like what?” asks Captain McKeown.

“Like the fact that Captain Barker is a Protestant and you’re a Catholic. By God, an Irish Catholic at that!”

“Why is this so important?” Captain McKeown asks. “It means little where I come from.”

The big man poured a pint of Guinness and pushed it across the bar for Captain McKeown.

“It means everything over here Captain,” he says. “Especially with the Troubles and all that. Talk is that the navy brass feel more secure with an Irish Catholic like yourself running the base than a Protestant.”

“That’s ridiculous,” says Captain McKeown. Ever since hearing the Admiral tell him this he had a hard time believing there was any validity in the importance of having an Irish Catholic in charge of the base.

“Aye! It might sound ridiculous right now but wait till you’ve been here for awhile,” Carl says. “As I said, I hear all types of foolish talk in my job. Sometimes it’s just too many pints of Guinness talking Captain.”

Captain Barker came into the backyard followed by a number of other people. The grills were operating and hamburgers were sizzling on them and the familiar smell made him think for a moment that he was home back in the states. Children were scurrying about the backyard and already forming a line for the hamburgers. The sun had disappeared and now the lights from colorful lanterns that rimmed the perimeter of the backyard gave a festiveness to the evening. He could see Mary come out from the middle of a huddle of other wives. She was laughing and enjoying her new friends. Someone had even brought a record player and that pervasive song “I Just Want to be Your Everything” by Andy Gibb was playing again. It seemed impossible to escape the song and the disco music of the times.

“I see you’ve met Carl,” said Captain Barker. “You have to watch out for Carl. He has the ‘goods’ on everyone.”

A ripple of laughter went through the group around Captain Barker.

“You’ve already met your XO Bob MacManus,” said Captain Barker pushing the young Lieutenant Commander forward out of the group. “Bob knows how to get things done around here. Been indispensable to me.”

“I’m sure he’ll be a lot of help to me,” said Captain McKeown.

“Next to MacManus is George O’Donnell,” Captain Barker said. “George has been on the base longer than anyone. He was here when it started in 41. Some say he was born on the base. Knows more about things than anyone.”

There was a short ripple of laughter again.

“He even met the Queen,” said Captain Barker.

“Aye! You’re forgetting Bob Hope and Joey Heatherton!” said George.

“Of course,” says Captain Barker.

“It’s a pleasure to meet ye Captain,” George says extending his hand to Captain McKeown. “Just let me know anything you need. Any questions you might have. If I can’t answer them I’ll get someone who can.”

“Thanks George,” Captain McKeown says. “I’ll have a lot of questions I’m sure.”

“You’ve already met Warrant Officer Jimmy Emberton,” Captain Barker says. “Jimmy handles all the supplies on the base and is also our official tour guide and practical jokester from Tennessee.”

Captain McKeown smiled.

“Every base needs a practical joker,” he says.

“And last but certainly not least,” said Captain Barker is Liam Nelson. He heads up the finances of the base. Knows where all the money comes from and goes. Been on the base for ten years. Anything involving money goes through Mr. Nelson.”

Captain McKeown looked at Liam Nelson. He was a tall, slender man somewhere in his sixties with white hair and a large white handlebar mustache. He was meticulously dressed in a black suit with a white starched shirt and a garish looking tangerine-colored orange patterned tie

that was almost too bright to look at. Among the officers dressed tonight in colorful, casual clothing, he stood out like a black spider on a piece of angel food cake.

The unique looking man extended his hand.

“Welcome Captain,” he said. “You’ve got a challenge ahead of you.”

“Next, is probably the most important officer on the base,” said Captain Barker. “Lt. Tom Johnson. Tom is our Operations Officer. He is in charge of all the communications, radios, antennas, relay center, receiver and transmission sites.”

“Welcome aboard Captain,” Lt. Johnson says.

“Thank you,” Captain McKeown says. “I’ll be depending on you.”

“Well, that does it for the key people on the base,” said Captain Barker. “Everyone enjoy the evening.”

Music from the record player flowed over the backyard and the colored lights. Popular songs in the states at the time. Paul Simon’s “Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover,” and “Silly Love Songs” by Paul McCartney and Wings, “Sara Smile,” by Hall and Oates and again the song by Barry Gibb “I Just Want to be Your Everything.”

He walked around introducing himself to the people at the party. His secretary Moira was there with her husband. Shannon Kelly was also there by herself telling Captain McKeown that her husband Sean was home watching the kids.

“Should have brought them along,” he said to Shannon.

She looked at Captain McKeown and the hint of a smile came to her face but was quickly gone.

“Maybe,” she said. “It’s not that easy.”

Hamburgers and hot-dogs were being attacked by the kids at the party and Carl Campbell was a busy man pouring pints of Guinness at the bar. After awhile, speech became a little slurred and talk became looser. Captain Barker was one of the last to say goodnight.

“You and I have a lot of things to finish up with over here before I head back to the states,” he said. “Not the least is our Change of Command ceremony.”

“We sure do,” Tom said. “Good night Paul. See you tomorrow. Thanks for putting together this great welcome party.”

Captain McKeown stood by himself surveying the yard, the red, white and blue streamers on the grass, the dangling lanterns now swaying with the hint of an evening breeze.

* * *

Out of a dark corner of the yard a tall, dark shape approached and the shape morphed into the well-dressed figure of Liam Nelson.

“You have a tough, important job ahead of you Captain,” Liam Nelson said in a deliberate accent that was more British than Irish. “Closing the base will not be an easy task. But it’s necessary with all the money we’re losing. Thurso is much more efficient and the Navy needs efficiency as I’m sure you know.”

Captain McKeown was surprised and a little annoyed by these words at the festive welcoming event.

“Doing anything important is never easy,” he said to Liam Nelson.

“Important the base ends up in the right hands,” Liam Nelson says.

“The Queen will take good care of it I’m sure,” Captain McKeown says.

“What does the Queen know about Northern Ireland,” Liam Nelson says. “She deploys a bunch of troops over here and thinks that will do. Well it isn’t working.”

“You have a better idea?” Captain McKeown asks Liam Nelson.

“Not me,” Liam says. “Others have a better idea.”

“And what’s the better idea?” Captain McKeown asks Liam Nelson.

“It doesn’t involve turning the base over to the Queen,” Liam Nelson says.

As his enigmatic answer hangs in the night air, Liam Nelson disappears into the darkness of the night and Captain McKeown is left to ponder his comment. Did Liam Nelson have information about the turnover of the base to the British Army? He was a dangerous person if he did.

There was suddenly the loud roar of a car motor that cut into the night.

“Jimmy’s jalopy,” George O’Donnell says. “He’s had it for twenty years since he lived in Tennessee. Had it shipped over here. He’s usually good about the noise. Keeps the speed down pretty much. Except for special events like tonight when he’s had a few too many pints.”

“That Liam Nelson,” Captain McKeown says. “A strange fellow. Seems like he has a large chip on his shoulder.”

“Aye,” George says, “A strange one he is. Like a lot of fervent Protestants.”

“I don’t think he likes me very much,” Captain McKeown says.

“He knows yer an Irish Catholic,” George says. “That’s enough for him. You’re the first Irish Catholic to command the base in many years. He’s more than a little suspicious about ye.”

“And the dark suit he was wearing and the bright orange tie? What was that all about?”

Captain McKeown asks.

“An Orangeman,” says George. “He’s been a member of the organization for as long as I’ve known him.”

“What the hell is an Orangeman?” Captain McKeown asks.

“It’s a long story Captain and I’ll tell you sometime,” George says. “Basically they’re the radical Protestant version of the Catholic IRA. A nasty group of lads for sure. You always hear the violence up here is between the IRA and the British Army. Truth be told much of the violence is between IRA and Orangemen.”

Captain McKeown walked over to get a final pint from Carl who was closing up the bar.

“Let me buy you one more,” he said to George.

“Of course Captain,” George says. “I’m dying of thirst watching all the others pour it down.”

“Here’s to a new friend,” Captain McKeown said raising his pint towards George.

“And here’s to a fellow Irish Catholic taking command of the base gain,” George said with a twinkle in his eyes after revealing he was also Irish Catholic to the Captain.

When the lights were taken down and everyone was gone and the place cleaned up, Tom and Mary sat out in the yard in some aluminum chairs. Mary excitedly talked about all the new friends she had made. The wives had all types of clubs and were constantly busy with projects. And the kids had made some nice friends to play with.

Overhead in the sky was one of the most magnificent sights they had ever seen as the greenish yellow Northern Lights made the heavens seem like the inside of some great disco club. They had heard about the Northern Lights but had never witnessed them like tonight.

Mary took her husband's hand.

"I think all that is a sign of something new for us," she said. "A new life. A new family. A new marriage."

Captain McKeown ran his hand through Mary's golden blond hair.

"I think so too," he said.

And then he got up from his chair and walked to the edge of the new yard and looked out over his new kingdom like the captain of a ship looking out over the ocean. The buildings on the base were no more than dark shapes briefly illuminated by the rhythmic pulsations of the Northern Lights.

"I feel like I've got command of a ship again," he says to Mary.

"And it feels good?" she asks.

"Much better commanding a grey desk in the Pentagon," he says.

He walks over to her and kisses her.

"And it feels so good that you and the kids are on this particular ship with me this time," he says.

10. Tour
July 76

A week after the welcome party, Captain McKeown's daily routine began to materialize. There was the morning briefing from MacManus and a meeting with his secretary of departments on the base. There were phone calls to make, letters to dictate. There was much to learn and the days were busy but Captain McKeown loved this type of hands-on work more than pushing papers at the Pentagon. Now and then, Captain Barker would stop by the office to see how Captain McKeown was getting along but it was obvious his mind was on his new life in Captain McKeown's old job at the Pentagon. Another white suited gopher for the Admiral.

Captain McKeown's green Chevy Vega had not yet arrived from the states so Jimmy became a temporary chauffeur for the family taking Mary shopping for things in downtown Londonderry and chaperoning the children around the base. Shawn had already found a baseball team on the base and Colleen was busy with one of her science projects. Tara asked Jimmy if he had ever seen a real hobbit Jimmy told her yes, they were all over the place.

With the Change of Command ceremony only a few days away, Captain Barker asked Jimmy to give Captain McKeown a tour of the base as a quick way of getting him up to speed on things. One overcast afternoon the slow-talking Tennessean appeared in the parking lot driving the official base jeep wearing his usual grin.

They drove past the two-story brick buildings that were the housing quarters for married servicemen. They stopped at the large Samson Gym Building and went inside. There was much activity polishing the floors and putting the stage together and draping it in red, white and blue for the Change of Command ceremony. A small navy band was going through a few of the familiar songs they always played when there was a Change of Command.

“The base band is terrible,” said Jimmy. “They’re OK for ceremonies because that’s all they know. We usually have local groups here in the gym for dances and parties. Of course we play some indoor tennis and basketball. Base has a pretty good basketball team. We always beat the locals. They don’t know much about basketball. But the locals kill us in soccer which they call football.”

Next to the gym were the athletic fields and they walked over and watched the base soccer team practicing. They looked like good athletes but it was obvious they knew little about soccer.

“As I said, our base soccer team sucks,” Jimmy says. “Always getting our butts kicked by the teams in town. One of the real embarrassments of the base. The base has traditionally fielded a soccer team that represented the base locally and in surrounding towns like as Strabane, Dungiven, Buncrana and Maydown. Our base teams have never been competitive against local competition. It just isn’t our game. But they’re ready to learn more about soccer if anyone can show them. I can sense that change is in the air.”

“Change?” Captain McKeown asked.

“The guys are getting tired of getting their asses kicked all the time,” he said. “Some of the more experienced members of the squad have decided they wanted to ‘match up’ against teams from outside the base.”

“Anything be done about it?” Captain McKeown asked.

“There’s a great soccer coach available,” Jimmy says. “Cormac Harvey, a world class soccer coach in town. He’s just out of a job. Be a fantastic coach for the team.”

Captain McKeown filed this information away but did not say anything.

They got back in the jeep and drove down the road a few hundred yards and Jimmy waived his arm to the right.

“There’s the mess hall and exchange,” he said. “I’m in charge of those places. I’m also in charge of the Commissary, pay roll and purchasing. Liam Nelson reports to me on base expenses.”

“Tell me about Liam Nelson,” he asks Jimmy.

Jimmy pauses thoughtfully.

“Another other Captain,” he says. “I don’t want to take anything away from our tour.”

They rode down the street until it turned into a dirt road and then into a large 30-acre field with arrays of 100-foot tall antennas. Wires were strung from pole to pole in what looked like a gigantic spider web.

“The bread and butter of the base,” Jimmy said. “Very low frequency antennas that transmit and listen to our submerged North Atlantic fleet 24/7. They can hear a sub cough a thousand miles away and hundreds of feet under the surface of the ocean. As you know, the base is also a critical communications relay station for our fleet of ships and submarines, transmitting

messages for the Baltic Sea and Mediterranean Sea regions and around the world. We use High Frequency antennas for that mission.”

They got out of the jeep and walked around the field.

Off to the side of the field was a very long, squat grey windowless building and they walked towards it.

“Communications Center building,” Jimmy said as they went in. It was dim inside, lit with little more than some bare fluorescent light tubes. Tall grey banks of radio units extended in rows like book rows in a library. A number of base personnel sat in front of the big grey radio banks with headphones listening and entering information and perforated tapes into large computers and teletype machines.

In a few minutes they were back in the jeep heading across the field to a hill rising above the base. Jimmy stopped on top of the hill at a pile of tangled metal and scattered bricks and concrete.

“The old base microwave station,” he said. “IRA blew it up a few years ago. Just to keep us honest someone said.”

Captain McKeown stood looking at the pile of rubble for a few moments. It reminded him of Vietnam. He was within another war zone he thought to himself but no one calls it that.

“Any other attacks on the base since then?”

“No,” Jimmy said. “But there’s been a number of threats.”

Jimmy walked back to the jeep and got in.

“That’s really about it Captain,” said Jimmy. “There’s the transmitters out at Dungiven but that a good distance away and something for another day.”

They drove back to the office. George O'Donnell was just coming out of the office.

"I see that Jimmy's giving you the standard tour of the base," he said.

"He's a good tour guide," Captain McKeown said.

"If you have a little more time," George said, "I can extend the tour for you."

"Why not," Captain McKeown said.

With this, George O'Donnell got into the back seat of the jeep.

"Head downtown," George said to Jimmy.

In a few minutes they passed through the base gate and headed down the hill and then over the Derry Bridge across the River Foyle and into downtown Londonderry.

Jimmy pointed out a few practical things like shopping areas but mostly he gave a running commentary on his favorite pubs.

They ran along a large wall for a while.

"So how did you ever decide to come to Ireland from Tennessee," Captain McKeown asked Jimmy.

Jimmy laughed.

"The Irish Spring girl," he said.

"What do you mean Irish Spring girl?" Captain McKeown said.

"The one on the soap commercials," said Jimmy. "I fell in love with her and all I knew was that she came from Ireland."

"Just like hobbits come from Ireland," said Captain McKeown.

"Of course," said Jimmy.

In a minute or so, George told Jimmy to stop the jeep and when they were stopped he waived his hand across the landscape in front of them.

“Derry is the only remaining walled city in Ireland,” he said. “It’s one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in Ireland. The earliest historical references date to the 6th century when a monastery was founded here by St. Columba.”

George waived his hand at the huge building as they passed it.

The people of the town were going about their business. Some waived at the jeep. The American Navy was a familiar part of the town. But signs of the continuing Troubles were everywhere you looked. Side streets were blocked with great masses of barbed wire like great bushels of metal tumbleweed. Tanks and armored vehicles were stationed at corners and British soldiers wearing berets and helmets and holding guns passed by the people without any sign of emotion.

“You wanna make sure you talk up with your American accent down here in town,” George said. “Otherwise, they get real suspicious of you. Everybody’s suspicious of everybody these days.”

* * *

“Head on out to the bogside area,” George told Jimmy. They drove out of downtown and before long they were in a suburb with narrow little streets and rows of slim similar flats squeezed so close to each other it looked like one of them would pop out.

“The Bogside area,” George said. “Poor Irish Catholic slums. Where Bloody Sunday happened in 72. Really the place where the Troubles took a turn for the worse.”

George told Jimmy to stop the jeep in front of a long two-story brick building of flats, each with their chimney on the roof. George got out and motioned the others to follow him. They walked past the flats to the end of them and then Jimmy pointed up to the wall of the end flat. Written in large block letters on it was the phrase “You Are Now Entering Free Derry.”

“We’re really at the center of where the Troubles started,” George said.

Captain McKeown did not say anything but simply looked up at the bold writing on the wall. Only an Irishman, a Catholic Northern Irishman for that matter, could have any real understanding of what they really meant, made you feel as if you were Irish Catholic from Northern Ireland. He wasn’t from Northern Ireland, but then all his relatives were from Ireland. So coming to Ireland has had some strange effect on him that he could feel hovering over these first few days at this new base with his family with him. It was a funny, ubiquitous feeling that he could not quite define. In a strange way, he felt that he had finally arrived at a type of home after all of his travels. The first time in so many years. It didn’t seem too much more complicated than the realization that he had come home at last. Even if there was danger here. It was home.

As he stood there looking up at the wall on that summer day, his first week in Londonderry, there was a type of growing realization of this symbolic coming home so to speak. What was it though? He knew it was there. It seemed thick as an Irish bog at times. As heavy as the Irish fog in Londonderry. But always as some general presence simply hovering around him, like that crazy Andy Gibb song seemed to do. You knew something was there. But this was about all the evidence you were given. It was something that fought definition.

Perhaps the villain(s) in this story also fight definition? Perhaps it is part of a dual symbol battle of definition versus anti-definition? Perhaps the villain always within the fogs or bogs of Captain's McKeown's perceptions these days? Perhaps his Irish blood rumbling inside him?

As the three men stood there under the "Free Derry" sign that day, Captain McKeown in some shrine to his true homeland, there was the ringing of bells in the distance. Perhaps from the old monastery in town? And somewhere fading slowing in and out they could hear some band playing the song from the city "Derry Aire" commonly known as "Danny Boy." Just a fiddle and a bagpipe and a few other instruments. What was it that attracted all the life to it, the sounds of the city, two world wanders back home, the images blurred within one's mind remembering back now after all those years.

"Sometimes called the Bogside Massacre," said George. "A tragic incident on January 30, 1972. Just four years ago. An incident right here where we are in the bogside area of Derry. On this day 26 unarmed civil-rights soldiers of the British Army shot protesters and bystanders. Thirteen males, seven of who were teenagers, died immediately or soon after, while the death of another man four-and-a-half months later was attributed to the injuries he received on that day. Two protesters were also injured when army vehicles ran them down. Five of those wounded were shot in the back. The incident occurred during a Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association march; the soldiers involved were members of the First Battalion of the Parachute Regiment."

"Have there been any investigations about the event?" Captain McKeown asked.

George O'Donnell laughed at this question.

"Of course there's been investigations," he said. "But it is always a matter of who is doing the investigation. Like everything else in life. The Widgery Tribunal, held in the immediate

aftermath of the event, largely cleared the soldiers and British authorities of blame. Widgery described the soldiers shooting as ‘bordering on reckless’ but the whole thing was widely criticized as a whitewash.”

“What do you think happened that day?” Captain McKeown asked George.

“I don’t think what happened,” George said. “I know what happened. I was there. There needs to be criminal charges filed against the soldiers involved in the incident. All those shot were unarmed. The killings were unjustified. Innocent people were murdered. Innocent Irish Catholics. There needs to be criminal charges against the British soldiers and the British Prime Minister needs to make an apology on behalf of the United Kingdom.”

What terrible bitterness over religion Tom thought. How crazy is that. They both worship God. He wondered what God thought about this. Such a beautiful city. Maybe someday, he thought, they’ll come to their senses?

* * *

They drove back to base. At late afternoon most base personnel were at home for dinner. But there he was. Liam Nelson watching them go by in the jeep. This time wearing another orange tie and always dressed like a doorman at some fancy club.

Jimmy stopped in front of the base office building and Captain McKeown and George got out of the jeep. George said goodbye as he was late for dinner and the wonderful little “battle ax” as he lovingly called his wife did not like him being late for dinner.

“Thanks for the tour,” he said.

“Anytime Captain,” said Jimmy.

As Captain McKeown walked around the side of the jeep he noticed a golf bag tucked away in the back of the jeep.

“You play golf?” he asked Jimmy.

“Mount Juliet grade school champion in Tennessee,” Jimmy said. “Came close to having a college scholarship to but barely missed it because of Vietnam.”

Captain reached out his hand and shook Jimmy’s hand.

“Played on every base I’ve been on,” Captain McKeown says. “Even brought a three iron with me to Nam.”

“We’ve gotta play Portrush,” Jimmy says. “It’s only ten miles north from here on the coast. One of the great golf courses in Europe.”

“Yes, of course,” says Captain McKeown. “I’ve heard of it. Go ahead and plan something on a weekend a few weeks off.”

“Aye, aye sir,” Jimmy said with that big smile on his face.

* * *

It was late afternoon and the office was empty except for Willard McIver this large Irish guy a cleaning person who came in after hours. You could almost smell dank Guinness or Jameson's on his breath. He meant to ask Moira or Shannon about Willard but he kept forgetting.

He waived to Willard who seemed to be slow dancing an Irish jig with a large broom or mop off in one corner of the office. The big Irishman lifted his arm and waived and grunted something to the Captain.

Tom went into his office and opened the door to a closet that revealed a dark blue golf bag with the word "U.S. Navy" on the bag in golden letters. He pulls various clubs out of the bag and briefly examines them like troops getting ready to go into battle for another season. Then Captain McKeown pulls the putter out of the bag and some golf balls from one of the zippered pockets tossing a few balls onto the dirty dark green carpet of his office. More like rough than a true green. What would those greens at Portrush be like? Much better than the carpet in his office. He putted the ball towards a make-believe cup on the carpet from different positions.

All of the sudden, his phone rang. This seemed strange. Mary seldom called if he was late, as she had learned better over the years.

"Captain McKeown," says a voice with a thick Irish accent.

"Yes, this is Captain McKeown," he says.

There is a short pause on the phone.

"We want to welcome ye to Northern Ireland," the voice says.

"We?" Captain McKeown says.

"Just some fellow members of the Catholic religion you know," the voice says. Some fellow members that have problems with the damned Protestant Brits."

Captain McKeown considers this statement.

“The IRA?” he ventures.

There is a short burst of laughter.

“Aye, the IRA,” the voice says. “Just want a fellow Catholic to know he’s being watched by other fellow Catholics. Just so you don’t do anything foolish.”

The Captain responds, “Foolish?”

A short pause again. “Yes foolish,” the voice says. “Like turning the base over to the British Army. Now that would be a very dangerous and foolish move Captain. Do ye understand that?”

Captain McKeown is angry by the intimidation of the caller.

“That’s ridiculous,” he says. “The base is being turned over to the Queen of England not the British Army.”

There was a pause again on the phone.

“Goodnight Captain and welcome to Northern Ireland.”

After the call he sits and contemplates the threatening phone call. He thought of calling Admiral Schmidt in DC but decided not to. Yes, welcome to Northern Ireland he thought to himself. There was the official welcome at the party a few nights ago. But this was the real world welcome. The unofficial welcome so to speak. This other “welcome” created a fear he would be living and coping with the rest of his time on the base.

* * *

At home that night, Mary asked about the day.

“Fine,” he said. “A great tour of the base by Warrant Officer Emberton.”

He didn't mention the phone call or the trip downtown to the “Free Derry” wall. Not much different looking than that scary city they had passed a few weeks ago on their way into Ireland. The rest of Ireland seemed picture postcard worthy and spreading their arms open to the tourist trade.

But Northern Ireland seemed different. There was still a great battle going on up here between freedom and non-freedom. He knew he was placed in the middle of it for some reason. Or it was put into the middle of him. Whoever or whatever came first is no longer of any matter as the two blended stressfully so within him. The battle between freedom and non-freedom. Perhaps this was really the pervasive battle in his life. That battle between definition and non-definition.

Each offers such a powerful Hero.

A force for good.

But perhaps even a more powerful Villain.

A force for evil.

11. Change Of Command July 1976

Every Naval command has a traditional Change of Command ceremony. Some consider it some type of ritual on life's journey in the military. A time to say goodbye to the old and welcome the new to a base or ship. One of those lines that Joseph Conrad called "The Shadow Line."

Base and ship. Both territories under the command of one person. Both kingdoms of that person called captain or commander of the base or ship. It always seemed wonderful yet strange how this system operated. So dysfunctional in some ways and yet so perfect in so many other ways.

And what was so great about the future of the Derry navy base? Nothing really. The new Captain had come to seemingly preside over the final days of the great old navy base that had been part of the town of Derry for 35 years. This role became more and more clear to him. It was such a different role than Admiral Schmidt had ever hinted at during that meeting of a few weeks ago.

The base gym was decorated to the max with red, white and blue streamers and decorations almost giving the big brown brick building an element of personality. It was filled with the personnel and navy staff from the base with their wives and families. It is a ceremony

attended by all hands, spouses, dignitaries, and invited guests such as the mayor, councilmembers and media.

The gym was crowded.

Captain McKeown, Captain Barker sits on the stage platform that is wrapped in red, white and blue, next to Admiral Schmidt. The terrible base band is playing something traditional in the background. They are all in full dress uniforms as it is the protocol for officers and crew. It included the wearing of large, shiny medals and pristine white gloves. The tradition of the wearing of swords dates back to the era of white-winged clipper ships when combat was hand-to-hand as ships came alongside each other in battle. A navy honor guard was also present and in full regalia and well rehearsed for their role in the ceremony.

Both Captain Barker and McKeown proudly wear all their navy medals. The one most meaningful to McKeown is the Combat Meritorious Medal received after his stint in Vietnam for extraordinary leadership and bravery in operations against the enemy.

Being a three-striper commander in the navy following a predecessor having four stripes, he began to think the attendees might derive a clue that since the relieving officer was of lesser rank than the departing officer, the U.S. Navy did not place so much importance anymore on this base.

There is a brief speech by Captain Barker who said what an incredible place the base is. How much he has enjoyed his term as base commander.

There is tentativeness in his voice that is not hard to detect. For those who still try to listen for it these days. But what does it matter in the end?

He introduces Captain McKeown.

Captain McKeown looks out over those assembled and tells them how happy he is to be here for this process of the base's history. But inside he questioned how happy he was to be here in this dangerous time.

Then he introduces Admiral Schmidt who has flown to Ireland from Washington DC for the Change of Command ceremony. The Admiral talks of the historical importance of the Londonderry base in the winning the Battle of the Atlantic in WWII as well as its current valuable support function in providing communications to the fleet.

After the formal ceremony was over, and all the saluting and handshakes given out, the Admiral pulls Captain McKeown aside.

"Things really beginning to stir up in Washington," the Admiral says.

"In what way?" asks Captain McKeown.

"There's a good chance that Carter might beat Ford," the Admiral says. "Could change a lot of things."

"It always seemed to me we've never had much of a forward position towards Northern Ireland under Ford," Captain McKeown says to the Admiral.

"That's right," the Admiral says. "With Carter as President things will be different. I can assure you things will be different."

"Carter wants the British out of Northern Ireland?" Captain McKeown asks the Admiral.

"Yes, if he stands by his campaign promises," the Admiral says. "This is what he wants. The first American President who might really take a stance towards the Troubles. This stance would be very dangerous for people at this base. Closing the base would become more critical

obviously. I can see a political vacuum if America gets behind the idea of getting the British out of Northern Ireland.”

”Based on my initial review of things Admiral,” Captain McKeown says, “I don’t see too much of a problem of shutting down the base in nine to twelve months and having Thurso up and running.”

Captain McKeown looks briefly around to make sure they were alone.

“However,” he said, “there will be great resentment and anger, even violence if they find out the base is being turned over to the British Army.”

“You’re right about the potential for violence if this leaks out,” says the Admiral. “It has to be kept secret at all costs.”

The officer’s club on the base was packed half an hour after the formal ceremony at the base gymnasium. Carl Campbell was busy pouring drinks and making up his famous Irish concoctions. There was a bar legend that Leprechauns drank his brews which had been perfected over a twenty-year career as chief bartender at the navy base.

It wasn’t a minor achievement for sure that Carl was held in high regard around the base as a man you could trust with secrets. How many could you even imagine to trust these days?

He fills the third pint of beer for Captain McKeown who lifts a toast towards Captain Barker who stands next to him in the Officers Club. It is obvious Barker hasn’t spent much time in the club over the past year he has been commanding officer on the base. And there is that song of Andy Gibb that follows him everywhere playing over the jukebox.

Captain Barker stands up and proposes a toast to the new CO on the great challenge he is about to take on.

After his toast, Captain Barker pulls Captain McKeown over into a private corner of the club away from all the celebrations.

“Tom, there are some notches in your career to be gained for you in Londonderry,” Captain Barker says. “It’s not going to be a place just to tread water until Scotland. The base is a political hot potato and a lurking time bomb. Your biggest challenge will be getting our people out of Derry without getting anyone killed.”

“And closing down a long-time institution in the city that’s part of the lives of so many and putting a lot of people out of work. It’s amazing the love affair between the city and the base I’ve seen in the short time I’ve been here. So many marriages and families resulting from the base. It’s become another Derry suburb almost. I’ve seen this everywhere this past week I’ve been on the base.”

“The Navy has made a major contribution to the economy of the city,” says Captain Barker. “But the troubles threaten everything now and have been a drain on the city. When the Americans leave things will become even worse.”

He gets up to leave.

“I’m gonna’ get some of my files back at the old office,” he says. “Leaving tomorrow for DC.”

Captain Barker looks at Captain McKeown.

“Let me be straight with you,” he says, pointing a heavy finger in the direction of Captain McKeown. It was not too hard to figure out Captain Barker should not have more than a few pints of beer at one time. But what the heck. It was time for celebration as he was finally getting out of this hellish situation.

“From the outside this looks like a job to just ‘tread water’ until the turnover. But looks can be deceiving. Just watch yourself. You’re probably not going anywhere of importance from this base. But you wanna’ make sure that you’re around next year to go somewhere that’s not important.”

When Captain Barker is gone George and Jimmy wander over to give him a toast on his new position.

“Captain Barker says this is a place to tread water until handing things over to the Queen,” he tells them.

George O’Donnell smiles and shakes his head in disagreement.

“Treading water can be dangerous when you’re in a sea of sharks,” he says. “Besides, you’re here to do more than tread water. You’re here to bring this ‘ship’ peacefully into dock. And you know that docking a ship is probably the most dangerous time for a captain.”

“Even though I’m Irish Catholic,” Captain McKeown says, “it’s hard as hell for me to understand the hatred between the Catholics and Protestants up here.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to unless you’ve lived here all your life,” George says. “But it’s not all that complicated. Northern Ireland has drifted a long way from what it truly is. And, as Orwell once said, the further a society drifts from the truth the more it hates those who speak it.”

Captain McKeown ponders what George just said for a few seconds and then excuses himself.

“Want to say a final goodbye to Captain Barker before he leaves,” he says.

* * *

Captain McKeown shakes a few more hands and gets a few more toasts as he leaves the officer's club and walks to his office. Back at the office building, Barker is putting papers into filling boxes. It is an unusually warm summer evening and the window of McKeown's office is open. McKeown walks into the office.

Outside the office, Shannon Kelly is making her way to her car to drive home but she hears the conversation coming from Captain McKeown's office and moves to a position under the open window and listens.

"I got a threatening call the other day," he tells Barker. "I think it was from the IRA."

Barker shakes his head with a slight smile.

"I got a few when the base closing was first announced a few months ago," he says.

"There's a lot of bad feeling. But there is nothing to worry about as long as they don't know what our real plan is."

"I'll keep it from them," Captain McKeown says.

"It'll get harder and harder to do," Barker said. "There is a growing suspicion all over the place. It is a delicate time."

"I'll keep the secret," Captain McKeown says.

"It is not an easy secret to keep," Barker says. "We outwardly proclaim we're turning the base over to the Queen when we plan on turning it over to the British Army."

These words were all that Shannon Kelly needed to hear. She moved slowly and quietly along the walls of the office building until she was free of the building and then running towards

her tiny little blue car that coughed up a storm but somehow delivered somewhat dependable transportation.

“The story needs to be continually put forward,” says Barker. “The Catholics are not in love with the Queen but they have a certain forced acceptance of her. They have none for the British Army. They must never know it is going to the British Army. There will be violence for sure and you’ll no longer be treading water over here but swimming for your life.”

Captain Barker gathers up a full file box and moves towards the door to leave.

“Good luck Tom, “ he says. “Watch yourself. This is a place where it is sometimes hard to distinguish friends from enemies, allies from adversaries. Even on the base.”

“Sounds like the Pentagon,” says Captain McKeown.

“I heard you never liked it there,” says Captain Barker.

“Just a bunch of paper pushers as far as I could see,” said Captain McKeown.

“I think you have the wrong perspective on it,” says Captain Barker. “I’m looking forward to my assignment there.”

Captain Barker walks toward the office door with the box of files in his hand. Before he goes out the door he turns to Captain McKeown.

“This place has had its glory days,” Barker says. “They were during WWII in the 40s when it played a strategic role in American naval history of the time occupying a unique position for *supply lines* in the war. But with the modern American Navy and huge floating cities like the recently commissioned super carrier the USS Nimitz these old Naval bases are worthless to the navy.”

Captain McKeown didn't agree with this reasoning but didn't say anything to Barker. He had commanded ships in the Northern Atlantic and he knew that he had relied on the Navy communications station in Londonderry. It was something a Navy man like Barker who had a career behind desks rather than on ships could never understand.

Captain Barker had even gone on record with reasons for the closing of the base. It certainly was not all related to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In an article from the a few months earlier in the *Derry Journal* of 2/27/1976 a reporter interviews Barker about the base. "He tells the reporter that the basic reason for the closure is that modern technology permitted consolidation and upgrading of communications and for reasons of money." In effect, it was Captain Barker's opinion that the new Navy of the 70s could do things better and cheaper than the old navy could do them. The new navy was tied around the base in Thurso, Scotland and it could operate much more efficiently than Londonderry. According to him, it wasn't much more complicated than that.

12. The Hatchet Man July 76

The base seemed to be happy that Captain Barker was gone. He always seemed like a fish hopelessly out of water. It is the anniversary of their first month in Ireland and Tom and Mary have left the kids behind for a weekend by themselves to explore the surrounding countryside and work on building up the marriage. The first month seems to be a small triumph for Captain McKeown in winning over his wife to the idea that she might actually like a few things about living in Londonderry for a year.

They drove northwest from Londonderry and crossed the border out of Northern Ireland and into Donegal where they spent a good part of the day in the little fishing village of Donegal on the western ocean side of the Republic of Ireland. They acted like the traditional newlywed couple. Visiting shops. Having lunch next to the ocean. Buying some oysters from a fisherman.

Before they drove back they stopped at a pub in town. Captain McKeown is in his civilian clothes. A blue polo shirt and jeans. They look like American tourists. Tom ordered two pints of Guinness. The bartender picks up their American accent and looks at Tom up and down.

“Aye, aye Captain McKeown,” he says.

Tom McKeown is startled to be recognized by a bartender in a village fifty miles from the base.

“How do you know I’m Captain McKeown?” he asks.

“Everybody knows this Captain,” he says. “You’re the ‘hatchet’ man.”

This is an astounding realization to McKeown as he never seen himself in this way. But it is an apt description for his unpopular job in Derry. He was there to close a base that had a substantial connection to the economy and the people of a city it had been a neighbor to for 35 years.

They drove back to Londonderry without saying much.

“You’re well known,” was the only comment that Mary would make on the event. But it was obvious that it was upsetting to her that her husband had a reputation as the ‘hatchet’ man.”

In Londonderry Captain McKeown searched for the Bogside area of town. He remembered a few things like the monastery and the wall and the long narrow streets of the suburb. He found the row of flats that had the words “Free Derry” painted on the end of them. He stopped the car and told Mary about the place but not in the way that Jimmy told him about the place.

* * *

A little girl about the age of Tara pushes the window curtain back watching girls play games on the street in front of her flat and then moving her gaze left down the street to see a man and a woman looking up at the Free Derry sign. Probably Americans she thinks to herself.

Megan Kelly pulls her wheelchair away from the window and listens to the voices of her parents in the kitchen. It is the same type of screaming she has heard so many times growing up.

A kitchen in a dark, dingy little flat in the Bogside. A small slant of late afternoon sunlight comes under the shade of the window that is pulled down most of the way. A dark, cave-like place. Dreary.

Shannon Kelly stands doing the dishes in the small sink in her tiny kitchen. Her husband Sean Kelly paces back and forth in an angry, anxious manner. A number of empty Guinness beers lay around the room.

“Phone calls have little effect,” he says. “It’s just as we suspected all along. We need to take action. Words are not enough.”

He picks up the phone and makes a call. There are no names used in the call.

“The base is being turned over to the British Army,” he says. “We heard the two captains discussing this. There is no doubt about it. We’ll have the British Army all over the place.”

There is a pause on the phone.

“Yes,” Sean says. “Right, we’ll get right on it. It’s about time we rock the yanks world. I can’t believe they would do such a thinkg. That McKeown guy is an Irishman by heritage. An Irish Catholic! He has no idea what we’re going through!”

13. Explosive Warning July 76

With Captain Barker gone, all types of rumors were beginning to circulate around the base. The nickname of Captain McKeown as the “hatchet” man spread after someone found out he had closed a number of navy bases in the past. Under Captain Barker’s command, everything had seemed to float rather aimlessly like a marooned ship at sea. Like someone dog-paddling in water, just staying afloat but not making any progress towards any particular destination. Nothing seemed to be going anywhere but it did seem that things would not change and that the base would stay open. Treading water and not going anywhere but at least still going. Now, with Captain McKeown in command, they no longer seemed to be drifting but slowly heading for a final port. And there was a new anxiety and tension in the air.

The anxiety on the base about the closing was not something discussed every day. But it was a hot topic in the evenings at the Officers Club. Carl Cameron got an earful of all the talk. Captain McKeown’s Executive Officer Bob McManus told Captain McKeown he was hearing more and more scuttlebutt around the base. And George O’Donnell stopped by the office one day shaking his head.

“Things haven’t been this tense on the base since the war,” he said. “And things were tense as hell then.”

Captain McKeown called a meeting of his senior officers to discuss the situation. He set out his personal policies on leadership and explained upcoming changes in base operations. It had been barely a month since his arrival at the base and things were moving fast.

“I think you need to call a meeting of everyone on base, navy personnel and civilians,” Bob McManus said. “Things need to be addressed and put out in the open.”

Captain McKeown agreed and a general meeting was scheduled for the gymnasium.

A few days later, Captain McKeown stood behind a podium on the little makeshift stage in the gym and looked out over a crowd of a few hundred people. Some of the civilian employees were related to crewmembers as spouses and other dependents. But most were indigenous Northern Ireland citizens. His top officers sat on the stage behind him. A week ago the stage had been wrapped in red, white and blue streamers and there was a spirit of celebration and smiling faces and lively, optimistic speeches about the future. But now the red, white and blue streamers were gone and there was a dark, dim atmosphere in the gym.

“Welcome everyone to our first town hall meeting,” he said. “You may have heard about my earlier command assignments, two war ships and a base in country at Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam. At the end of my destroyer command I transferred the ship to Spain and at the end of my command in Vietnam, I closed the base and turned it over to the South Vietnamese. Prior to arriving here I was informed by my superiors that the President of the United States personally ordered this base to be closed down for the protection of American personnel and their families.”

There was some shuffling around in the crowd in front of him. Captain McKeown could sense the tension. No one had heard before how much a priority was given to the base closing.

“I am not happy about this mission,” he continued. “The past two weeks I have begun to understand your concerns and anxiety about the base closing and what could be expected after that. The United States Navy will do everything possible to help you civilian employees find new jobs as we begin to close down and I will do anything I can do to help you make this transition. It’s a beautiful place here in Londonderry. Our base has a great history of outstanding support to the fleet. Now, please ask your questions and I’ll respond as best I can.”

Liam Nelson stood up. He was again dressed in a black suit wearing a white shirt and an orange tie.

“Captain, I understand that when the base closes you are going to turn it over to the British Army,” Liam Nelson says. “Isn’t that correct?”

“I have no idea where you got this information Mr. Nelson,” McKeown answered. “We have no intention of turning the base over to the British Army. The property and certain facilities will be returned to her Majesty the Queen. It will be her decision as to the disposition of the base. It may return to the city of Derry where of course the housing, gymnasium and playing fields would be very useful. And, the antenna fields could be valuable for growing crops. But may I emphasize one more time. The United States Navy’s mission is to close the base and return it to the Queen.”

Liam Nelson only smiled at hearing this, shaking his head in obvious disagreement as he sits down.

There were a number of touching stories from civilian employees who had worked on the base most of their lives. Captain McKeown learned quickly that the base was much more than just another navy base to many employees. It was really a second home for them. There had been

so many marriages of American sailors with local girls from Londonderry. There were mixed Irish-American families now. It was a livelihood for fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. It was so much more than just another navy base.

The stories went on for perhaps ten minutes and Captain McKeown tried to ensure the base civilians that he would do everything he could to find them new jobs. But he came to realize that it was more than just finding new jobs for many of them. He was putting an end to an old friend. In effect, killing it, taking something important away from them.

* * *

Suddenly, there was an explosion. The gym shook and windows shattered. The air felt as if it was vacuum sucked out of his chest. Fluorescent lights fell from the ceiling and dangled on connections while everyone tried to take cover on the floor.

“Oh, my God, what’s happening?” were shouts.

“It’s a bomb! A bomb!”

People kept screaming. Some shouted out in terror. Quickly glancing around the building it seemed to Captain McKeown the structure was still intact without serious damage. It was pandemonium and chaos in an instant. McKeown thought that it was like being back in Nam. What crazy idiot had set this thing off?

Captain McKeown’s mind was racing over a number of things. It was not the first time he had been in situations like this and he had an internal checklist he went through. His overall concern was safety of his personnel.

His overall thoughts focused on security. What the hell has happened to our base security he wondered. We're really in a combat zone. Bombs and automatic weapons fire had been going on constantly outside the base since he arrived.

People were running for doors to get out of the gym. There was the sound of sirens outside. Soon, base guards were in the gym conducting a search for any more bombs. British troops also came as well as the Gardia. McKeown wondered how the hell did the troops get on the base? With the crisis of the moment, it was something he would have to worry about later.

Bob MacManus came up to him.

"Looks like no one was seriously hurt," McManus said.

"Thank God," Captain McKeown said. "But I don't think it was the intention to hurt anyone."

"A warning?" MacManus said.

"Yes," Captain McKeown said. "A warning."

"From who?" MacManus asked.

"I've got my ideas," Captain McKeown said.

"IRA?" MacManus asked.

"It makes sense," Captain McKeown said. "I'll try to find out. I thought they liked us around here. We need to get help."

Captain McKeown and McManus hurried back to the office surrounded by a few armed guards. Captain McKeown was worried about the safety of his family and immediately called Mary.

"Oh my God," she said. "I heard the explosion. Are you OK?"

“Yes, fine,” He told her. “The kids OK?”

“Yes, but everyone is worried.”

“Stay inside,” he told Mary. “I’m sending over a guard.

Moira and Shannon Kelly were already in the office and the telephone was constantly ringing.

“What kind of security do we have on the base?” he asked Bob McManus.

“Not much Captain,” MacManus said. “Four M1s. Three M16s. Ten pistols. Some 45s.”

“Ridiculous,” said Captain McKeown. “We need more weapons and Marines.”

“I know,” said MacManus. “We’ve tried to get them but our requests have always been turned down.”

“I need to talk to CINCNAVEUR and Admiral Schick about this,” Captain McKeown said.

Captain McKeown went into his office and closed the door and tried to put pieces together. There was the threatening call he received a few days ago and he was pretty sure that the caller’s henchmen had made good on this threat. There were the cryptic comments from Liam Nelson at the welcoming party a month ago. What did Nelson mean that “others” knew the plans for the base?

He picked up the white phone on his desk that had a direct link to Admiral Schmidt’s office at the Pentagon.

“Admiral, we’ve just had an explosion on the base outside the gymnasium,” McKeown told him. “All indications are that it was a bomb blast. Thank God, no one was seriously injured. I’m preparing an OPSEVENT report as we speak. I don’t know all the details yet, but I need

Marines up here as soon as possible to evaluate the security status of this base and provide necessary support personnel.”

“We’ve already heard about it,” said Admiral Schmidt. “Tom, this isn’t the first incident we’ve had at Londonderry. The Provisional IRA blew up the microwave tower close to the armory a few years ago. But the guy ran off the base without any incident. Now, Tom, that’s the main issue here. We don’t want this to be labeled an ‘incident.’ The President doesn’t want an incident. No one wants an incident.”

“What do you mean sir,” Captain McKeown said in disbelief. “Of course it was an incident.”

“No Captain,” the Admiral corrected. “It was an event. A minor event at that.”

“What the hell is going on Admiral,” Captain McKeown almost screamed into the phone. “It was a major incident. A bomb went off right on a U.S. Navy base.”

“I don’t think it’s in the IRA’s interest to cause harm to an American base or its people,” Admiral Schmidt said. “After all, much funding for the Catholic insurgents comes from the States. A few years ago they were after weapons from the armory. In my opinion, this recent bombing was to put you in your place, to let you know they can get inside the base and cause serious damage.”

“I think the Catholic insurgents are warning us about turning the base over to the British Army,” Captain McKeown said. “Our plan to do this sounds more and more dangerous each day.”

“That may be so,” said Admiral Schmidt, “but this doesn’t change your mission.”

There was a few seconds of silence.

“Be careful how you word your report,” Admiral Schmidt said. “We’ll send someone to evaluate your security. Maybe get a few more arms on the base.”

“A few more arms?” Captain McKeown said in disbelief.

“That’s all Captain McKeown,” said Admiral Schmidt and the phone went dead.

Captain McKeown was breathing heavily like someone who had just run a race. His heart was beating and there was sweat rolling down his face.

Captain McKeown spent the rest of the day assessing the damage and trying to figure out what happened and why. A few hours after the blast, Bob McManus came in and said the bomb had come in on a bicycle that was parked near the gym.

“It looks like it was a plastic bomb left next to the gymnasium,” said McManus. “Hidden in the basket of a bicycle. I’ve got some navy witnesses who saw a civilian riding a bike near the gym about twenty-minutes before the explosion.”

“But the guards at the front gate never saw the bike?” Captain McKeown asked.

“No,” said Bob McManus. “No one is sure how it got on the base. We’re continuing to investigate the incident and are interviewing a number of people. There were no injuries and the damage to the gym was mainly a few blown out windows and some scars on the outside of the building but no structural damage.”

“Call a meeting with all my senior staff tomorrow morning,” Captain McKeown said.
“Nine o’clock.”

“Will do Captain,” Lt. MacManus said.

Captain McKeown spent the rest of the afternoon writing up his report of the “event” on the base. He knew it was futile to tell the truth of the event. That it would only be covered up and

that he would be dismissed for insubordination. Around six, Moira poked her head into the office and told him she was going home if he didn't need her. No, he was fine he said.

It was early evening and he was the only one in the office. He stood at the window of his office that looked east down the hill and towards Londonderry a few miles in the distance. Patches of clouds hung over the town but here-and-there parts of Londonderry are highlighted from streaks of sunlight coming through the clouds. The top spire of St. Columb's Cathedral is gold from the light of the afternoon sun and behind the cathedral, in the distance, the bogside area of town is bathed in afternoon sunlight as almost like a benediction at the end of this difficult day.

He turned off the light in the office and got ready to go home when the phone rang. After the emotional stress from the day, the jangle of his desk telephone startled him. Thinking it was one of his officers, he grabbed it quickly.

"Captain McKeown," a deep raspy, Irish voice growled in almost a murmur.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"Me name doesn't matter much these days," the voice said. "Just let it be said that we wanted to give ye a small bit of a taste of what might be happening to the entire navy base should ye get the notion to turn it over to the stinkin' Army."

McKeown listened with disbelief.

"Now I know yer gonna tell me it's the bloody queen's decision, but ta hell with her," the voice said. "We'll crush and burn yer base ta ashes and all in it, including yer family if it looks like the British Army will take o'er the base. Now is that clear enough ta ye, captain?"

No discussion was possible with this voice. This somehow seemed obvious at the time to McKeown.

“I heard you,” he said.

There was no answer on the phone but only a click. After the call, Captain McKeown sat in his office with the lights off trying to figure out what to do.

He seemed caught in a no-win game. He was moved by the stories he heard from civilian employees today. Yes, the bartender in the Donegal pub got it right. He was a little more than a “hatchet” man here to do the navy’s dirty work of closing down beloved institution and putting a lot of families out on the streets. After giving it to the British Army. As a Navy man he was never much fond of the Army anyway. British or American. This was crazy he thought.

At the same time he was a loyal officer in the U.S. Navy with a mission ordered by the President himself.

But things were becoming more complicated and it was getting difficult to separate the heroes from the villains in this crazy affair and even more difficult to determine which side he wanted to be on in the first place. In all of his missions before, religion never played much of a role in things. It was always there, in the background, but it never was like some flag to rally behind in a war. Now, though, it seemed such an essential piece of the whole puzzle. He couldn’t forget the feeling he had last week when he saw the “Free Derry” sign for the first time. The emotions it brought forth that still swirled about inside him like some homeless spirits.

The phone rang again and made him jump.

He moved towards it, wondering what message it would bring this time. He slowly picked it up.

“We’re worried about you,” said Mary. “When are you coming home?”

“On my way,” he said.

14. Homefront
July 1976

Darkness had fallen when Captain McKeown walked home from his office. He wondered how Mary would be with the news of the bombing. A guard stood in front of his home and saluted the Captain as he walked past him and opened the front door of his home.

The children came running for him and embraced him. Tara was clutching her hobbit.

“Daddy there’s a man in front of our house,” she said.

“Yes, I know,” said her father. “He is there to make sure everything is OK.”

“Are you OK dad?” Shawn asked. “We heard the explosion.”

“I’m fine,” he said. “No one was seriously injured.”

“A couple guys told me it was the IRA,” Shawn said. “Is that so?”

“We don’t know yet. We’re still trying to find out.” He knew that he could not tell them about his strange call and his suspicion that the IRA was behind the bombing.

“Everyone off to bed,” said Mary approaching out of the kitchen holding two glasses of wine. “Your father and I need to talk.”

The children wanted to stay up and hear about the bomb but Mary was adamant that they go to bed. They hugged their father and were gone. Tara told her father that she asked the hobbit to put a special magic protection over their home and the hobbit said he would.

When the children were gone to bed Tom opened an expensive bottle of wine they had been saving for a special occasion and they went out into the backyard and sat in the green aluminum chairs.

It was a dark night with thick clouds overhead that hid the moonlight. The lights of Londonderry twinkled a few miles away but they seemed dimmer tonight than they had in the past, little more than a congregation of dying lightning bugs that had fallen out of the sky.

Mary looked up at the clouds.

“No Northern Lights tonight,” she said.

“They’re still there,” Tom said. “You just can’t see them.”

“Maybe,” Mary said. “But maybe they’re gone.”

“They’re not going anywhere,” Tom said. “They’ve been here for a million years and they’ll be here for another million years.”

“Things seem so different now than a month ago when we first got here,” Mary said.

“Things change,” Tom said.

“I wish they didn’t change,” Mary said.

“It’s an impossible wish,” he said.

“I thought things were changing for us,” she said.

“They are changing,” he said.

“It’s nice to have you home,” she said. “But you said there was little or no danger in coming over here. You knew it was much more dangerous than you told us. You were willing to put your family in danger for your own selfish interests.”

“Is it selfish to want my family with me?” he shot back.

“Yes it is if it’s in the middle of a war,” Mary said.

“It’s not our war,” Tom said.

“It’s still a war and we’re in the middle of it,” Mary said.

“The Irish love us Americans,” he said.

“Tell that to me after something happens to one of the children,” Mary says.

“Nothing is going to happen to the children,” Tom says pouring another glass of wine.

“Besides, Tara’s hobbit is protecting us.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mary says.

“Maybe you just have to believe in things a little more,” he says. “After all we’re in the land of hobbits and magic.”

“Maybe I’ve believed in something too long,” Mary said.

They sat in silence in the backyard for a few moments.

“You know I love you,” she said. “But I’m scared.”

She kissed him on his hand and then she went back into the house.

He sat in the aluminum chair and poured another glass of wine and thought of going inside the house and telling Mary the real fate of the base and making her a confidant to the secret plan. God knew he needed a confidant these days. But he decided against it. Telling her this would only make her more worried. It was like telling someone on board a ship they were headed into a group of icebergs and there was nothing to do to stop the ship.

15. Base Operations August 1976

The office conference room was packed with senior staff members the next morning at nine. Captain McKeown stood at the end of the table and could see uneasiness and fright in the eyes of his officers. Stress was evident in their faces and postures. He guessed they were wondering what in the world was going on with their new commanding officer coming aboard. Certainly everyone was now more concerned about their safety.

“Good morning,” Captain McKeown said. “Of all the navy commands I’ve been fortunate to be given, I’ve never received such an ‘explosively’ warm greeting. Even in Vietnam it took at least a month before someone tried to shoot me.”

His attempt at humor fell on blast-deafened ears although a few in the room managed some weak smiles.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he continued, “yesterday the Guardia, British Army and our naval officers pretty much concluded that the bombing event was a warning to us by the Provisional IRA not to turn this base over to the British Army. Fortunately, none of our people were seriously injured. Cuts and bruises yes. And scared. But most of us came back to work today. Even though the U.S. Navy loves this base and needs this base to support the fleet, we’ve been given orders to close it because of the surrounding danger to our personnel.”

A noticeable stir, with shifting about in chairs, and mumbling swept over the gathering.

“The President and the Secretary of Defense do not want any of our military, their families or civilian employees to be harmed,” he continued. “Other than the attempted robbery of the armory and the destruction of the microwave towers, yesterday’s event was the first time anyone was injured. Although there were a few minor injuries, we believe it was not their intention to hurt anyone. Just to frighten us. And that they did.”

He paused and tried to make eye contact with as many as possible in a few seconds.

“Are there any questions?” McKeown asked.

Chief Warrant Officer Jim Emberson stood up.

“Captain, do you think they’ll do it again?” he asked.

Sucking in his breath McKeown responded, “I don’t think so. I think it was meant as a warning. I’m the new guy on the block. I’m the hatchet man, the closer. I must make one point clear to all of you. We are *not* giving this base to the British Army no matter what you may hear. We are returning the property to the queen, to the United Kingdom.”

Trying to manage a hopeful, enthusiastic looking smile, he added, “And at the same time, and this is new to you, we are going to expand the mission of the Naval Communications Station in Thurso, Scotland, to include several operational functions which will shut down at this base.”

“Soon we will receive orders as to the disposition of functions and property,” he told them. “Until then, I want to remind you of a few critical security matters. First, I’ve asked for Marines to come to our base and give us some security recommendations. Next, remember they love Americans. So, whenever you or anyone in your family enters a store or a pub in this town always say and do whatever it takes to make it obvious that you are an American. If you have an

accent use it early on as you enter the premises, loud and clear. Wear clothes that look American. Communicate this to the sailors under your command.”

Glancing over the audience, he could see that there was great attention to what he had just told them. Certainly it was important they understood what was being said.

“I want to emphasize again that no one on either side of the ‘Troubles’ wants to hurt an American,” he told them. “And why is that? Because neither side wants to jeopardize the monetary support, weapons and political support which are coming from America. Finally, we are also doubling up the guards around the perimeter of the base, making sure the gate guards are more careful as to who enters the base, and most important of all we are having our school buses escorted to the off-base schools.”

* * *

The next month on the base came and went without incident but now fear was added to the anxiety of the base closing. There was a new caution in everyday life. A suspicion of people. A number of sailors were reassigned to guard duty and more arms were somehow squeezed out of the Pentagon for the base. Vehicles coming and going from the base were searched more thoroughly than ever before.

Gradually, things returned to a certain degree of normalcy. There was still important work to do, hundreds of ships out on the sea to communicate with. Until the base in Thurso, Scotland was up and running, Londonderry was still the main communications station for the U.S. Navy in the North Atlantic.

The primary function of the base was communications reception and transmission and the associated equipment was operated by Radiomen and maintained by Electronics Technicians. The remaining base departments were more for support, including Administration, Medical, Supply, Disbursing and Public Works. Numerous jobs were performed by civilians, including security, secretarial, spiritual, telephone operators, exchange store, commissary and clubs, galley cooks, grounds, building, and antenna maintenance and public works. All serving an important function to help keep the system running in order to fulfill the base mission of communication.

The heart of communications operations was on the main base at the Communications Center. A Receivers Site was located in an open field full of big antennas. Twenty miles away in Dungiven was the transmitter site. All of them were in operation twenty-four hours a day. The communications center would receive messages from ships and relay those messages back to the states, bases throughout Europe or to other ships. Typically ships would switch communications from state side over to Londonderry once they were about half way across the Atlantic. In the Communications Center there were teletype machines dedicated to American submarines in the North Atlantic and Baltic Sea. There were always cat-and-mouse games being played with the Russians.

Work was in three shifts: 8AM to 3PM, 3PM to Midnight and Midnight to 8AM. Because of the Latitude of Londonderry during the summer it wouldn't get dark until late in the night around from midnight and during the winter it would get dark around 3PM. Depending on their shift, the sailors might not see the sun or the moon for a couple of days.

The Communications Center and the Receivers site were forbidding buildings without any windows. The day crew always had the most people, perhaps twenty to thirty with about half that number during the nights.

The teletypes used to send and receive messages was in one area of the Communications Center. It was called the Relay Center and messages came in on long tickertape with holes punched in different configurations that would represent the alphabet. These tapes were hand-carried to outgoing teletype machines for relay. There was a roll of yellowish paper that stayed on Navy broadcast machines and would continuously roll in front of the operator as he watched for messages that pertained to the base at Londonderry. There were also radiomen with headphones sending and receiving Morse Code to ships or submarines.

The receivers and the transmitters site was boring to most of the guys who worked there. They were small cinder block buildings surrounded by large wire fences topped off with barbed wire. The job at these sites was mainly keeping an eye on the equipment and making sure everything was up and running. The most dreaded part was working the “graveyard” shift. The most important job was changing a complicated encryption system., It involved putting together these gray square blocks that had 100 wires labeled with letters and numbers. Every night guys on the night shift got the newest secret codes for the blocks to set up for the next day: 100 wires and 100 holes and they had to match perfectly every time or the communication equipment wouldn’t work. It was the method at the time to encrypt the base messages before transmitting them.

There was not much excitement in the Communications Center. American was not at war and there were no more German submarines prowling the North Atlantic. But every now and

then there was a special incident that broke the monotony and sometimes added humor to the day.

One day the Chief made his rounds and made everyone aware that the U.S.S. Nimitz was on her way on her maiden voyage. She was the biggest and newest nuclear aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy. Once she got half way across the Atlantic she shifted her communications from Norfolk to Londonderry. A young RM sailor who had just arrived on base a few months before was the lucky one to bring up the Nimitz on his console.

The Communications Center had different levels of priority messages. A flash message was the highest priority that they had and if anyone received a flash message they had 40 seconds to relay that message to its destination. Whenever someone would receive a flash message, a flashing red light mounted to the top of their teletype machine would go off and a loud buzzer would start buzzing.

When the young RM pulled up the Nimitz, the very first message he received was a flash message. He immediately let the chief know that it was from the Nimitz and the Chief came over and stood behind him. Five minutes later he got another flash message and then another.

The Chief saw the new RM was little jittery over this and took over. Apparently a Russian Bear (Tupolev Tu-95/142) was flying over the bow of the Nimitz taking pictures of her. Every time the Bear would fly over, Londonderry would get the flash message to relay to the Pentagon and other fleet components.

The event was talked about for weeks and the young RM sailor told the story over and over after a few pints of Guinness until it morphed into an altogether different story.

* * *

One of the things Captain McKeown felt important was sports as a way of boosting the morale on the base. Captain McKeown made sure that there were sufficient athletic events for the sailors and families on the base. He boosted the program of bringing local athletic clubs from Londonderry to the base to play various sports or taking base teams off the base to play local Irish teams.

The base basketball team was decent, usually holding it's own against most of the other teams in Northern Ireland. And the baseball team always excelled since the locals were mostly new to the game. But the glaring problem was the base soccer team in the sport that defined everyone in Northern Ireland like football defined things in America. As Jimmy told Captain McKeown, the base soccer team sucked.

Captain McKeown had made a note of the world-class soccer coach Cormac Harvey Jimmy mentioned on the tour of the base he gave him. Captain McKeown called Harvey and met with him and worked out an agreement for Cormac to coach the base soccer (football) team. He had been a star for Derry and a professional coach for Colraine, a member of the Irish League of Northern Ireland but resigned from his coaching job with Colraine over a disagreement with management. Captain McKeown hit it off immediately with the young Irish Catholic coach and the two had a few pints after their meeting at the EM Club and an agreement was worked out whereas Cormac Harvey became the new coach for the base soccer team.

One afternoon Captain McKeown walked out onto the soccer field during practice and introduced the team to their new coach. Everyone was startled. The name Cormac Harvey was a

household name in Londonderry and the base soccer team had spent much time watching the conquests of the legendary Londonderry soccer team on television. It was hard to believe that he was going to be their new coach.

* * *

Besides sports, Captain McKeown did a number of other things to help boost morale on the base during these difficult times. He revitalized the Social Committee on the base and brought some top local rock bands onto the base for a number of events at Sampson Hall. He activated a number of base clubs and began publishing the old base newsletter “The Foghorn” again.

George O’Donnell was his advisor in much of his efforts to restore morale on the base. He had heard stories from George of how the base used to be – their championship sports teams, their great social functions, the community they had back in the 40s and 50s – and he did not try to implement new programs but simply bring back old ones that had begun to shut down with knowledge of the base closing in everyone’s minds.

It was impossible to find hot dogs or bologna anywhere in Northern Ireland or in the Republic. Consequently, a smuggling operation developed on the base during this time. It involved Mother’s Pride bread that was like gold in London. Some of the guys in the kitchen traded cases of bread for cases of bologna until their London “source” was transferred back to the states. They tried their best to get balogna for their desperate cravings but had no luck until someone happened to remember a brother who was a butcher and had a recipe for bologna. They

had this sacred recipe transferred to a butcher in Londonderry and he kept them happy with make-shift bologna and hot dogs until the IRA blew up his shop.

The EM Club began to be frequented more often now and the sailors got back to their old pranks. One night at the EM club a number of them were drinking, celebrating one of them getting married. The subject of blackening came up. Blackening was a strange Scottish tradition of stripping the groom to the waist and covering his torso with some black substance, like shoe polish.

So they decided to carry on that bit of tradition right then and there and striped the shirt off the new groom. But they didn't stop with just a bare chest and decided it would be better if he were totally naked and striped off all his clothes. Then, they threw him into the Chief's club where there was a formal event underway. After this they ran his clothing up the base flagpole where Captain McKeown saw them on his way to the office the next morning. The Captain wasn't happy about this and he called the base Master Chief and let him know. However, he did call the prospective groom into his office and congratulate him.

* * *

Things were difficult with his wife Mary and it was impossible for him to read his wife's mind as to whether she was going to leave with the children or stay. The explosion had almost been a final straw for her. Almost. Gradually, she got involved with some of the wives groups like the bowling league and the book club and the meals and wheels program. She and the children began to establish friendships and the days started to pass faster and faster. As there was

no equivalent American high school for Shawn to attend in Londonderry, he was sent to room and board at the Department of Defense High School in High Wycombe, England. His parents hated to see him leave but at his age they knew it was the best thing for him. Not only for his education but to keep him safe from the violence in Northern Ireland. They would see every few months and on holidays.

At first the women's bowling club was just enlisted wives and the language was free and easy. The bowling alley was on the second floor of Sampson Hall and the women would call the EM Club which was right next-door for drinks and one of the bartenders would bring them over. When the skipper's wife Mary joined there was a feeling of doom and gloom as they would have to be on their best behavior all the time. There was tension the first time Mary showed up to bowl with the group. But when she threw a gutter ball she exclaimed "Oh shit!" and this broke the ice and the happy, relaxed atmosphere returned and she became a popular member of the club.

Captain McKeown watched this slow transformation with his wife. Perhaps their marriage might make it after all and she would not leave him and go back to the states. Perhaps that old fire of so many years ago might be rekindled. Things were looking up with Mary but it was still too early to tell.

He wanted to confide in her about the real ending of the base. Holding all of this inside was one of the most difficult things he had ever done. He thought of telling her a number of times. But he sensed it was a bad idea. She had enough on her mind trying to cope with the new surroundings and being the captain's wife and helping the new wives and mothers she was getting to know.

16. The Town of Derry September 1976

Things settled down on the base after the explosion but the violence continued in Londonderry and Northern Ireland with sectarian shootings, IRA and UVA/UVF bombings, checkpoints, armored vehicles, helicopter patrols and soldiers with machine guns everywhere. Even Captain McKeown's Irish relatives in Sligo and County Mayo refused to come and visit him because they refused to cross the border into Northern Ireland.

On September 4, 1976 there was a Peace People's rally in Derry that was attended by approximately 2,500 people. And during the following weeks there were a number of rallies all over Ireland and Britain. There was a bomb scare at the train station across the street from the Waterside school in Londonderry and the base children were then sent out to Maydown near the DuPont plant. Captain McKeown provided a Navy bus but the parents had to provide the drivers so a number of them made the effort to get qualified to drive a school bus. Two guard jeeps – one in front of the school bus and one behind it – were ordered by Captain McKeown to escort the bus.

From the base, you could hear bombs going off at all hours of the day. Across Clooney Road from the base was a place called the Broomhill Hotel. Those on the base used to call it

the Boomhill, because it seemed to attract the attention of the IRA. Those who lived on the side of the base nearest the hotel would often get a call from someone to open their windows and take things off the walls whenever there was a bomb threat at the Boomhill. Opening the windows would save one from getting injuries from flying glass and it would also save Public Works from having to come out and replace them.

Things were extremely tense in downtown Londonderry. A few wives went downtown one day and had to stop at a checkpoint. As the British soldiers looked through one of the women's purses, they two were ordered up against a wall with guns pointed at them. One of the women's children had put his cap pistol in his mother's purse and it looked like a real gun at first glance.

* * *

One day, a guard at the gatehouse of the base knocked on the door at the Captain's house and Mary answered the door.

It was Willy McGafferty who was somewhere in his seventies and ready to retire after being a guard for thirty years.

"Just wondering when Shawn will be back from school in England," he said.

Shawn had developed a friendship with the old man who took him around the base and showed him secret places like ponds and creeks and hidden caves and this old abandoned tree house in the corner of the base.

"He'll be home in a month for the holidays," Mary said. "I'm sure he wants to see you."

“We’ve got a little gift for him,” the old man said.

“That’s wonderful,” said Mary. “So thoughtful of you.”

Mary could see that there was something else on the old man’s mind/

“Care to come in for a spot of tea?” she asked.

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Elmer.

He followed her into the kitchen and she put on a pot of tea and offered him some cookies. He took a few and said thank you. As she poured him a cup of tea she noticed he was staring at the bottle of Jameson Irish whiskey on the shelf of the kitchen. A streak of morning sunlight was coming through the kitchen window illuminating in gold a bottle of Jameson whiskey so that it almost looked like a religious object. Mary could see that Willy was staring at the bottle.

“Perhaps you’d like me to freshen up the tea?” she said reaching for the bottle of Jameson.

At first he said he shouldn’t but then he said that one small dab of Jameson was good for the soul. Mary poured the Jameson into his tea and the old man drank it down in one quick gulp.

“Awfully nice of you Mrs. McKeown,” the large Irishman said as he got up to leave.

Right before he went out the door he turned to Mary McKeown.

“Be wise to stay away from Austin’s tomorrow,” Elmer said. The department store in downtown Londonderry was the world’s oldest independent department store and a lot of people on the base shopped there for all sorts of things.

“Why is that?” Mary asked.

“Just wise to avoid it tomorrow,” Elmer said. “If ye know what I mean.”

Then he was gone back to his duty at the gatehouse.

The next day, there was the sound of an explosion in downtown Londonderry in the afternoon. A bomb went off at Austin's and luckily no one was injured.

That evening, Mary told Tom about the warning of Elmer and the explosion.

"I think Elmer might be connected to the IRA," she said.

Captain McKeown was not surprised.

"Everyone up here is connected to the IRA or the Protestants in some way," he said. "Just keep him coming over for the Jamesons. His information is valuable no matter where it comes from."

So Mary made a point to let Elmer know that he was always welcome to stop over at the house for a short nip of Jamesons and should he have any worthwhile information it would be appreciated.

The old guard began to trudge over to the Captain's home on a regular basis and Mary became a type of early warning system for bombings in Londonderry. When he told her to avoid a particular area she would immediately call her husband and the message would quickly be circulated around the base and this especially included the exposed "Boomhill" side of the base. Almost all the times Elmer said there was going to be an incident something happened and it got to the point where people would call Mary before going downtown.

* * *

There were checkpoints all over the town where you were stopped and checked by British troops. Often, you were searched before going into any stores or pubs in town.

One day Jimmy headed downtown in his old jalopy wearing his Tennessee ball cap and cowboy boots with elaborate designs in the leather. He was driving across the bridge into town. The Brits had a checkpoint in the middle of the bridge. As he stopped at the checkpoint, two British soldiers asked him if they could see inside his “boot.”

Jimmy said sure and opened the door, spun around in his seat, and I proceeded to pull off one of his boots. The demeanor of the British soldier changed instantly.

“Quit being a smart ass Yank,” he said. “Back there,” he said motioning with his head towards the back of the car.

Jimmy was somewhat confused and thought they wanted him to show them the label inside his boot behind the car. So he went to the back of his car and leaned on the trunk and started to bend over to take off his boots.

At this time they realized he didn't know the English meaning of “boot” was the trunk of a car and not a shoe. The two British troops had a good laugh at this and waived him through the checkpoint. And Jimmy learned a new English word.

A few new Electronic Technicians on the base told the story at the EM Club one night about walking in downtown Londonderry on one side of the street as a British squad was walking single file on the other side. The squad came to a halt and the last soldier walking backwards spotted the ET guys and pointed his gun at them. A few seconds later the squad started to advance and the soldier put his rifle down and they proceeded down the street. A sailor who had been on the base for a year told them that they must have looked suspicious and that the

British soldier was using the scope on his rifle to get a close-up look at their faces.

“The Brits can usually tell the Americans by what they wear,” the experienced sailor told them. “Blue jeans and white tennis shoes are good things to wear downtown. It’s also a good thing to speak up using your native accent when you enter the pubs so they know you’re a Yank.”

* * *

Captain McKeown got to be good friends with George O’Donnell and Warrant Officer Jimmy Emberton. George was somewhat of a mentor to him as his thirty years on the base allowed him to provide a larger perspective on things. And Jimmy became the Captain’s sidekick and golfing buddy during a number of weekend golf outings to the famous Portrush golf course on the northwest coast.

One evening when the Northern Lights were putting on a spectacular display over the base, the three of them drove into town to have a few pints at the Clarendon pub on Strand Road in downtown Derry. The red and black building near the River Foyle was one of their favorites and was a good place to wind down from a day on the base. It was getting late and the place was thinning out. There were a few guys at the bar and a dart game was in progress. Talk turned to the danger to the base from the IRA. Despite the ongoing violence around the base, there had been no more incidents on the base.

“I doubt if the IRA would ever attack the base,” Jimmy said. “They love the Americans too much.”

George O’Donnell smiled and shook his head in disagreement.

“That’s where your wrong lad,” he said. “They might love you Americans but they don’t love you as much as they hate the British.”

Captain McKeown pondered the simple, logical wisdom of the native civilian who had been on the base longer than anyone else.

“You really think the IRA will attack the base again?” Captain McKeown asks George.

The old Irishman looks into his Guinness and swirls it around like it was a liquid black crystal ball.

“Of course they will if they think the base will be handed over to the British Army,” he said.

“It’s a good thing we’re turning the base over to the Queen,” Jimmy said.

Jimmy’s words hung in the thick smoky air of the pub without comment. Some Irish tune made background music over the boisterous sound of the dart game and a few old guys telling stories at the bar.

Captain McKeown didn’t say anything. He suspected George somehow knew about the plan to turn the base over to the British Army. Why wouldn’t he know? He knew everything else going on at the base. It was not too much to suspect he also knew this. In the darkness of the pub Captain McKeown thought he could detect a quick wink from George O’Donnell but it was difficult to know for sure.

George raised his pint of Guinness at Jimmy.

“Yes Jimmy,” George said. “A good thing indeed.”

On the drive back to the base, the town of Derry looked ominous and forbidding to Captain McKeown. A few people on the street morphed into potential terrorists. He was sure that

the car behind was following them. The short backfires of a passing motorcycle seemed like gunshots and made him jerk.

And overhead, the Northern Lights had lost their beauty and now seemed like the threatening explosions of some advancing force of the IRA moving towards the base, ready to create havoc and preventing the base from being turned over to the British Army.

Yes, Captain McKeown thought about George's comment, like so many things in life, it all comes down to the matter of love and hate. Love was a powerful emotion with such a long history between the Americans and the town of Londonderry. But hate was an even more powerful emotion with a much longer history than love.

In Londonderry, the love between the Americans and the citizens of Derry was 35 years old. But the hate between the Catholics and British went on for centuries. As old as the Irish legends. As perpetual as the Northern Lights. A perpetual, legendary hate.

17. Thurso
October 76

The summer slowly moved into the past and autumn came to Northern Ireland bringing afternoon darkness and more rain and cooler days. But bringing no change in the bombings and violence throughout the city. The base being so near the downtown area of Londonderry there was the constant sound of explosions and gunfire and this became a steady background musak to life on the base as persistent as the hum of communications from the big antennas on the base.

Captain McKeown worked to keep everything on a steady course towards closing the base down but the transition program continued to move slowly in Thurso, Scotland. There were delays in getting permits and delays in getting materials. Captain McKeown decided to fly to Scotland and meet with people over there to see if the base could be opened sooner and communications transferred over to it. Until Thurso was ready there was no way the Londonderry base could shut down. It was critical for navy communications.

He asked Jimmy to go with him. And be sure to take his golf clubs. They were going to the birthplace of golf and he had plans to play the famous St. Andrews course over there if time would allow.

* * *

Captain McKeown didn't say much about the trip and speculation about its purpose became a hot topic at the EM Club and the Officer's Club. It particularly concerned George O'Donnell who called a meeting at the bogside flat of Sean and Shannon Kelly to discuss things.

Late one evening, a group of IRA leaders in Londonderry sat around the kitchen table in the small flat over bottles of Guinness. Willy McGafferty was one of the people at the table nursing a tall glass of Jameson.

Shannon Kelly said it was impossible to know the purpose of Captain McKeown's trip to Scotland other than to meet with some people on the base and play golf. As Moira's assistant to Captain McKeown in the base office, she had the best perspective to know what was going on. But she couldn't make out what the trip to Scotland meant.

"The plans to turn the base over to the British Army haven't changed," George O'Donnell said. "This I'm sure of. The only question is when."

"Maybe the purpose of the captain's trip to Scotland is to speed things up," Sean Kelly offered.

"Perhaps," said George O'Donnell.

"If that's so, we need to operate quickly," Sean said.

"Aye," George O'Donnell said. "Ye could be right."

"When will we know?" asked Sean Kelly.

"We might never know," said George. "We might have to just take action before the base closes down."

"We're ready for your orders," Sean said to George.

"Let's wait a little longer," George said. "For the first time we've got an Irish Catholic

running things on the base. I have a modicum of faith that something might happen to change things.”

“Aye, you have more faith than I do,” says Sean Kelly.

“I know the captain better than you do,” says George.

“So we’ll give it a little more time?” another person asks.

“That’s right,” George says. “A little more time.”

Before the meeting was over, George O’Donnell gave Willy McGafferty a sheet of paper.

“See these dates and places get to Mary McKeown,” George says. “We have no desire to have anyone harmed on the base.”

* * *

Thurso, Scotland is a small town of a few thousand people on the northeastern tip of Scotland, the most northern town in all of the United Kingdom. Jimmy drove down to St. Andrews to make arrangements to play the famous old course. One had to put their names on what was called a lottery to play the course. Captain McKeown spent a day on the base in Thurso meeting with senior staff on the base.

In his meetings he heard of numerous problems they were having expanding the base. There were many permit problems with endless Scottish regulations to be observed and problems getting new equipment on the base. He sensed something was not right but couldn’t put his finger on it.

Right before he left, Lieutenant Erick Roberts Executive Officer on the base came up to

him and asked him if he wanted to grab a pint.

“Of course,” Captain McKeown said.

Erick Roberts was a two-striper who had been shifted to Thurso from some operations jobs at various navy bases. His last assignment was at the big navy base in San Diego. He was a blond California kid in his late twenties and was as far from San Diego as you could go.

After a few pints the Lt. Roberts loosened up a little. He quickly glanced around the pub and then leaned across the table towards Captain McKeown.

“I might not know much about Scotland Captain,” he said, “but I know a little about base operations. Things just don’t add up.”

“How so?” asked Captain McKeown.

“The base is costing a lot more money than anyone anticipated,” Roberts said. “We’ve already gone way over budget and we’re still months away from opening.”

“The navy has been known to under-estimate things before,” Captain McKeown said. “I can tell you this first hand.”

“But this is the first time I’ve been ordered not to report all the operating expenses.”

“Ordered by who?” Captain McKeown asked.

“By the American Embassy in London,” he says.

“Who at the embassy?” McKeown asked.

“Some senior staff member for the Ambassador,” Lt. Roberts says.

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Lt. Roberts says. “He is given a code name and you know how hard it is to get behind code names.”

Captain McKeown didn't say anything but just looked into his pint of Guinness.

"Orders are coming from someone working for the Ambassador to cover up expenses of opening Thurso," Roberts says, "But it's impossible to find out who it is. I don't want to rock the boat. You know how these things go sir."

Captain McKeown well knew how the chain of command worked. It sounded like a cover up to him.

"I shouldn't be telling you this sir," Roberts said. "But since I'm going to be working for you in a few months I ..."

"Have you told this to anyone else?" Captain McKeown interrupted.

"Who could I tell sir?"

"You've got documentation of the true operating costs of the base?" Captain McKeown asked.

"My own figures," said Roberts. "I started tracking them myself when I started seeing things that didn't make any sense. They're back at the office."

"I need a copy of what you have," Captain McKeown says.

"Captain, I can get in some deep ..."

"That's an order Lieutenant," Captain McKeown says.

They drive back to his office on the new base and Lt. Roberts unlocks a file and pulls out two notebooks.

"The real operating figures are in this book, and mine are in this book," he said handing the notebooks to Captain McKeown.

"The figures from the Ambassador's office and my own figures for Thurso expenses."

“I need copies of these notebooks,” Captain McKeown says.

Lt. Roberts makes copies of the contents of both notebooks and punches holes in the copies and puts them into two new notebooks and hands them to Captain McKeown.

“What’s all this mean Captain?” Lt. Roberts asks.

“Hard to tell,” Captain McKeown says.

“What should I do?” Lt. Roberts asks.

“Nothing right now,” Captain McKeown says. “Just continue doing what you’ve been ordered to do from London.”

“None of this makes sense,” Roberts says. “I’ve been told all along one of the major purposes of Thurso is to cut-costs from Londonderry. We might not be cutting costs with Thurso but increasing them.”

Captain McKeown thought about what Lt. Roberts told him on his drive back to his hotel in downtown Thurso. He stopped in the pub for one final pint before going to bed. Jimmy had arrived back in Thurso after his trip down to St. Andrews and was sitting in the pub.

“Wait till you see the course!” Jimmy says excitedly. “We’ve got a tee-time for noon tomorrow. Hope you don’t have any more business on the base Captain.”

“No, everything’s finished on the base,” he tells Jimmy.

But he knew that nothing was finished with the Thurso base and that it was only the beginning of something he would have to look into when he got back to Londonderry. It was another piece of information to be tucked away somewhere. Something that didn’t fit into the story from the navy. There were beginning to be a lot of things that didn’t fit into the story.

* * *

The next day Jimmy and Captain McKeown drove to the famous St. Andrews golf club. They arrived early for their tee-time. The course was everything both of them had heard about it. Austere, beautiful, magnificent. Along the Firth of Clyde.

They parked the navy car, put their golf shoes on and walked to the small round starters shack.

“Can I help ye gentlemen?” said a bifocaled elderly man in his rapid Scottish accent. “On the lottery are ye?”

“Of course,” Jimmy replied. “This is here is my United States Navy Captain.”

The elderly man was not impressed.

“What’s the name?” he asked. “It doesn’t matter if he is a captain.

After finding their names, the old Scotsman summoned two caddies who followed Jimmy to the car where the clubs were picked up by the caddies and the four were off to the first tee.

“We don’t have a golf cart?” Captain McKeown asked.

Both of the caddies smiled at each other with toothy grins.

“No buggies at this course sir,” one of them said. “We’re all yer gonna get on this course.”

“All right,” Jimmy said. “Let’s get going on this here course.”

Captain McKeown had played many golf courses in his life but this one was special and the type of golf course one plays once in a lifetime if one is luck enough.

“By the way,” Jimmy said to the caddies after a few holes, “have you boys ever had a nip

of American Jack Daniels”

Both the caddies looked smiled and shook their heads.

“Now that ye ask sir,” one of them said, “that’s a pleasure we haven’t tasted.”

“Well,” Jimmy said, “you are all welcome anytime to this here bottle in my golf bag. Just let me know.”

Jimmy took the bottle of Jack Daniels from his golf bag.

“Might use a nip right now,” one of the caddies said.

Jimmy passed the bottle to him and he took a long drink and smiled approvingly and then passed it to the other caddy who also took a long drink and smiled.

“Ye have a mighty fine whiskey,” one of the caddies said.

The golf game was the most fun and thrilling game they ever experienced. The two old caddies continued to take “nips” at the bottle of Jack Daniels during the round and never stopped talking and giving advice on how to play the holes and telling stories of the many famous professionals they had worked for. As they went down the 18th fairway, they finished off the bottle of Jack Daniels and Jimmy and the Captain had to help the old boys carry the golf bags.

After the game, Captain McKeown wondered to Jimmy if they could go inside the old clubhouse. This was something that was strictly forbidden unless you were some type of Scottish Royalty. Jimmy led Captain McKeown to the front door of the famous old club. Jimmy pounded on it with his big heavy hands. A man dressed in a high-collared white uniform came to the door.

“Yes gentleman, what is your business?” said the stiff-lipped doorman.

“This here is my U.S. Navy Captain,” Jimmy replied. “He wants a tour of this place.”

The doorman lifted his nose into the air.

“No one has a tour of the club sir,” he said.

“What does it take to get a tour?” Jimmy insisted.

“Only the Secretary himself can approve a tour,” the old man at the door said.

“Well, go get the Secretary,” Jimmy said.

The man closed the door on the two of them. As they were about to leave, another man appeared at the door.

“I’m the Secretary,” he said. “Can I help you?”

“This here is Captain McKeown who is the new commander of the base in Thurso,” Jimmy said. “We’re here for look around this place.”

The Secretary smiled.

“Of course Captain,” the Secretary said. “Come in.”

With that the two followed the Secretary inside the famous old clubhouse and were taken on a wonderful personal tour. They finished with tour with a glass of ancient, proprietary St. Andrews scotch. As he walked them to the door, the Secretary invited them back after they got situated in Thurso.

“Absolutely,” said Captain McKeown. “And of course I hope you will be my guest at the base.”

They flew back to Ireland that evening. Jimmy talked excitedly about the incredible St. Andrews course and the clubhouse with all the hickory clubs and feathered golf balls. Captain McKeown smiled as he listened to Jimmy recap their incredible day. It was one of the best days in his life.

But his talk at the pub with Lt. Roberts was on his mind. He looked out the airplane

window into the darkness wondering what his next move should be. Something was not right with the way things were going at Thurso. The notebook with all the figures Roberts gave him was in his briefcase. He would have to go through it when he got back to the base.

* * *

When he got back to Londonderry, Captain McKeown called the Ambassador's office in London and asked to speak to the Ambassador. He got a promise that the Ambassador would get back to him when he got back from a vacation he was on. He needed to get to the bottom of the two sets of figures for Thurso. A week passed and he called the Ambassador's office back when he didn't hear from him. But he was told the Ambassador was still away but would call him when he arrived back in the office. Captain McKeown thought about calling Admiral Schmidt in Washington on the matter but he felt it best to talk to the Ambassador first before accusing anyone of something. There might be some explanation for the whole thing that Lt. Roberts was not privy to. Something classified. He was not about to call the Admiral until he talked to the Ambassador.

Another week passed and the question of Thurso expenses became lost in all of the hundreds of daily things of running the Londonderry base.

* * *

October brought a number of parades and festivities in Londonderry. The IRA paraded

through town wearing masks over their faces like they always did. It was not a good idea for people to know who members of the IRA were. There was another parade of the Protestant Orangemen through town wearing their black suits and bowler hats and their orange sashes across their shoulders. When they marched through the Catholic sections of town, little children tossed stones at their bowler hats trying to knock them off their heads. It was a game that had been played for many years.

Liam Nelson watched the marchers go by from the crowded sidewalk and took off his black bowler hat as the Orange Order flag passed. He would be marching with them but it was not wise to advertise he was an Orangeman with his position on the navy base.

* * *

Shawn McKeown got a week off from school and flew back to Ireland from his school in England. His mother told him that Willy McGafferty had a special gift for him and Shawn excitedly ran over to the guard gate to see what it was.

He returned home half an hour later riding bareback on an old grey horse that looked like it was on it's last leg.

“Look what Elmer gave me,” he excitedly told his mother. “Meet Fog.”

Mary was startled to see Shawn on the horse.

“What are ever going to do with Fog,” she said.

“Elmer says I can keep Fog up in the antenna field if it's OK with dad,” Shawn said. “Be a good place for him.”

Captain McKeown was surprised to see the horse when he got home but told Shawn that it would be OK to keep Fog in the antenna field if he was properly fed and tied up. Shawn agreed to this and he went off to discuss the logistics of all of this with Elmer.

* * *

The base soccer team continued to improve under coach Harvey. They made a giant leap forward when the team joined the Saturday Morning D & D League comprised of teams far more advanced than they were. The competitiveness and enthusiasm dramatically increased and the team got better and actually won a match and then another. People started gathering to watch them play and there were some write-ups about them in the local paper. Cormac Harvey was offered his old job back with the Colraine team but he told team management to stuff it, that he preferred to stay with the Americans.

* * *

Shawn rode Fog bareback all around the base wearing an Indian outfit his parents had given him. The base guards helped him take food up to the antenna field for Fog and made sure he was securely tied to one of the radio towers.

But when Shawn went back to school in England, there was less supervision of Fog and one day the old grey horse chewed his way through the ropes tied to the radio tower and ran off the base and down the hill and over the bridge and through the streets of Londonderry. Jimmy and a number of people from the base came into town to try and catch him and even some British

soldiers got into the chase which took everyone past the St. Columb Cathedral and all the way into the bogside area of town where he was finally caught not too far from the “Free Derry” wall.

18. Endearment November 76

On October 22, 1976, President Cearbhall O. Dalaigh of Ireland resigned to be succeeded on November 9th by Patrick J. Hillery. Six days before the American presidential election, Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter met formally with over 50 representatives of the Irish National Caucus (INC) in Pittsburgh. Father Sean McManus made the opening statement on behalf of the INC and began the litany of wrongs committed by British security forces. He highlighted the human rights violations made public by Amnesty International and the European Court of Human Rights.

Jimmy Carter voiced his concerns about civil rights in Northern Ireland and the need for a reunification of Ireland, and the promise of American economic assistance if peace came to Northern Ireland. The speech provided a type of “green” ribbon of hope tied around the tree of “troubles” in Northern Ireland. The ribbon was symbolic of American support for the Irish nationalist community and for the promise of economic assistance when peace would come to Northern Ireland.

The desire of Carter for a new stance towards Northern Ireland was embodied in the Democratic platform stating, “The voice of the United States should be heard in Northern Ireland against violence and terror, against the discrimination, repression and deprivation which brought

about that civil strife, and for the efforts of the parties toward a peaceful resolution of the future of Northern Ireland.” On November 5, Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States.

* * *

The religious conflicts continued in Northern Ireland and especially Londonderry. A few weeks after Carter’s election, on November 27,1976, the Irish Republican Army killed two Catholic civilians in separate booby-trap bomb attacks in Lurgan, County Armagh and in the Bogside area of Derry. The bombs were intended for the security forces. The Peace People hold a rally in London attended by 30,000 people. Republican sympathizers hold a small counter demonstration chanting “Troops out!”

On December 8, Willy McGafferty came over to the McKeown home for his cup of Jameson and to give Mary a warning to stay out of Derry on December 9. The next day, the IRA set-off a series of firebombs in shops in Londonderry causing an estimated £1 million in damages.

* * *

In the middle of the political problems, the city of Londonderry sensed economic problems ahead if the base closed and embarked on an extensive marketing campaign to influence the U.S. Navy to keep the base in Londonderry. There was good reason to keep the base open. Apart from its contribution to the economy of the city, it had become part of the personality of the city much more like another suburb than an isolated military base.

Captain Mckeown became the key person in the area to be wined and dined and influenced in any way to keep the navy base in Londonderry. The city had some events in the late autumn and invited Captain McKeown and his staff to attend these events. A local choir put on concerts for them and always sang *God Bless America*.

Shortly after Captain McKeown arrived, it became public knowledge that the base would probably be closing. This caused a jolt of mixed feelings that penetrated the base population and the city. Fraught with anxiety and depression, the civilian employees knew that their jobs would soon become redundant, and their families would lose a long-standing and reliable source of income. For many, Navy employment had been a financial staple for several years, a generational family tradition. Like so many others Captain McKeown met, the employees could not agree with any of the Navy's brilliantly expounded reasoning. And the military did not understand or agree either. In this scenario, Captain McKeown experienced dysfunction and lack of enthusiasm from all the crew. There was little doubt that he was really (as the bartender in the little fishing village had said) the "hatchet man."

The town of Londonderry and its elected officials took a different point of view and decided to fight for their livelihood by showing how much they loved the Americans, how much they needed them. It was important for them to do so for the city's financial welfare, especially with the financially draining "troubles" going on.

The strategy of the town was to execute a continuous display of acts of endearment to the Americans. They wanted to show the Americans how much they respected them, how important they were to Derry and let them know that no one would ever hurt an American.

* * *

In this atmosphere of endearment by the town, hardly a week would go by that Captain McKeown, his wife and officers would not receive an invitation to some party or official event. And, as if it were planned, the famous hymn “God Bless America” would always be sung at the beginning, at the end or in the middle of almost any occasion.

In the middle of December, there was an elaborate lunch held by the Mayor of Londonderry and his key city officials where Captain McKeown and his top officers were special guests. The lunch was at one of those buildings in downtown Londonderry that was built sometime in the Dark Ages.

The lunch featured roasted lamb with all the Irish trimmings of mushrooms and mashed potatoes and Kale with a tasty pudding desert at the end and plenty of Guinness. At the end of the meal, the waiters filled a shot glass of Jamison for everyone at the table. When all the glasses were filled, the Mayor clinked his glass and stood up and exclaimed, “Let us have a toast.”

Everyone stood up and raised their glasses. “To the United States of America. To the marvelous Navy base and its people that we enjoy so much. May it never leave us. Here, here!”

Then, with great gusto, the Mayor began to sing “God Bless America” and everyone joined in.

Captain McKeown decided that a toast to the city was the proper thing to follow this with.

But before he could get a word out, the Mayor cut in.

“Just a minute Captain,” the Mayor said, “it’s time to sing. Remember, we are a musical city. I will sing a song and then we will go around the table and each of ye will get a chance to have at it.”

The Mayor then began singing the famous “Derry Air” (“Danny Boy”) with a deep, impressive baritone voice. When he finished everyone applauded long and loud. He then explained that it was the lyrics for “Danny Boy” but the locals called it “Derry Air.”

“Next,” the Mayor looked at Captain McKeown. “Captain will you give us a little ditty?”

Captain McKeown knew he was going to have to sing from the minute the Mayor started this part of lunch. He came up with “East Side, West Side.” After his rendition of the song, the singing moved around the U-shaped table and Captain McKeown was pleasantly surprised that his Yankee officers did so well.

But things were getting close to Ensign Jimmy Emberton and he could see Jimmy collapsing under the pressure.

“Do you have a song Ensign Emberton?” Captain McKeown asked. “It’s your turn.”

Jimmy turned a bright color of red.

“Yes sir,” he said as he began singing “Jingle Bells” in perhaps the most off-key version anyone had ever heard.

The invitations to concerts, family dinners, and church festivals kept coming. Captain McKeown and his officers were overwhelmed with the hospitality.

However, in the midst of all of this endearment from the city, Captain McKeown still had a downtrodden crew of civilians and military knowing that the base was going to close.

* * *

By November, the soccer team had improved so much that they considered entering the U.K. Military Championship playoffs in England. Coach Harvey talked to Captain McKeown about this and he gave them an enthusiastic go ahead allowing time-off for the team members to play in the championships.

It would take work and money to attend the championships. Each team member had a share of special services funds that they could contribute. But more money was needed and the base held a number of fundraising events like car washes, booze raffles, barbecues, Mexican dinners, boxing smokers with food and beer.

For a few weeks in November, these events were everywhere around the base. They never quit and finally reached their goals and a bit more. A few wives were instrumental in providing hands-on assistance during these fund raising activities as well as becoming the team's cheerleaders. Captain McKeown sponsored a party at the Officers Club to raise money for the team. He is considered a hero to the team and many players stop and thank him for financing the new soccer coach. Coach Harvey sits next to Captain McKeown. Pints of Guinness are flowing.

In late November, the team flew to Mildenhall for the playoffs. The competition was tough. The best teams from all the military bases in Europe. But they won three matches in a row making them Champions of the Military Leagues in the U.K.

When the team came home, there was a parade for them across the base with floats and convertible cars and large banners. The base band marched in front of the parade playing another song off-key marching tune. Members of the team waived out at the crowd were all gathered on

a float made by wives of the players. Base personnel crowded the main street of the base. Carl Campbell has set up an outside bar under a large brown umbrella with the yellowish Guinness logo on it and distributes free pints of Guinness (by Captain McKeown's orders) in celebration of the event.

After the parade the beer continues to flow and fuels a tug-o-war on the soccer field and an impromptu soccer scrimmage. After awhile, someone got the idea to continue the parade in Derry so the team got back on the float pulled by Jimmy driving the base jeep with Captain McKeown sitting next to him. In ten minutes they were approaching a checkpoint on the bridge into town. But the British soldiers did not stop them but waived them on, cheering at them as they passed.

19. The Christmas Party December 1976

It was the last Christmas before the Londonderry base was scheduled to close down and there was talk of doing something very special this Christmas. Mary and Shannon Kelly and a number of other wives held some meetings in early December and it was decided that they would have a big Christmas party in the gym and invite children of both the Protestant and Catholic civilian employees on the base. There was close to an even number between both groups.

On the Saturday afternoon of the big party the inside of Sampson Gym is busy with wives and mothers decorating for the party. Tables of food are laid out and there is a huge pile of gifts collected in a pile by a large Christmas tree that Jimmy and a few others had found not too far out of Londonderry.

In a dressing room off to the side of the gym, Jimmy is dressed up as an Elf and helping Captain McKeown into a Santa Claus suit he rented from a costume store in downtown Londonderry. It is a few hours before the children will arrive but already Captain McKeown and Jimmy are sipping on a bottle of Jameson. Captain McKeown is not all that happy with being the designated Santa Claus.

“George O’Donnell would make a lot better Santa Claus,” he says to Jimmy. “Or Carl Campbell. Or even you.”

“Santa needs an elf,” Jimmy says. “And besides, there is only one appropriate Santa Claus for the base.”

Every so often Mary pops her head inside the dressing room and reminds him to watch himself as he has a long night in front of him.

It is dark at six o’clock when two school buses leave the parking lot of the gym and head out to pick up the children. The buses are painted navy blue with the insignia of the base on their sides, a three-leaf clover with bolts of lightning across the clover. Jimmy the Elf drives one of the buses and George O’Donnell drives the other bus. George is also dressed like an elf. There is a soft rain that falls off and on.

The two buses head down the hill and over the bridge into the town. A few days before Christmas everything is quiet in Londonderry and there have been no incidents for a few days. Colored lights are strung around many of the pubs and they are reflected in the streets wet with the soft rain. Bells from a number of the churches clang through the night air almost like they are announcing some temporary truce of sorts. Somehow, there are no checkpoints set-up on the roads tonight.

Jimmy stops in front of one of the large Protestant churches in town where a group of children are gathered with their parents. The children are quiet as Jimmy comes out and helps the parents direct the children onto the school bus. They are more than a little scarred about the whole thing. They are not used to being put on a bus and driven somewhere. Especially with all the problems with the troubles of the city. A number of parents get on the bus with them and soon they are heading back to the base.

Half-a-mile away, George O'Donnell stops his bus at a Catholic church in the poor bogside area of Londonderry not far from the flat of Shannon and Sean Kelly. There is another group of children gathered in front of the church and George ushers them onto the bus with a number of parents. Like the Protestant children on Jimmy's bus, the Catholic children are quiet and do not seem very eager to get onto the bus not knowing what is in store for them. Their small, short lives have been so full of bombs and gunfire it is difficult for them to feel something other than this is in store for them even around Christmas.

The buses arrive around the same time back in the parking lot next to the base gym and the children slowly get off of the buses and go into the gym. Mary and a number of officer's wives meet the children at the entrance to the gym and each child is given a name tag, a stocking with some toys and a navy blue and gold wool cap. The toys bring some excitement to the children but many still cling tightly to their parents. No one seems all that excited to be here. Irish and Catholics just don't mix in Northern Ireland.

The two groups gather in separate areas of the gym, quietly standing and watching the other group. Christmas songs blare out of the PA system in the gym and a disco light hung in the center of the gym throws sparkling stars around the room and over the children.

Mary goes up to a microphone and welcomes everyone to the party. She points out that there is plenty of food on the tables and that a special visitor is arriving.

There is the sound of sleigh bells over the PA system and then a side door of the gym swings open and the elves Jimmy and George come out followed by Santa Claus carrying a large bag of toys over his back and saying "Ho, ho, ho" over and over again. Santa walks in front of

the two groups of children waiving his arm and saying “Ho, ho, ho” and then goes to a large chair up on stage. He is somewhat unsteady and sways back and forth as he walks.

“I hope he hasn’t had too much to drink,” Mary says to another wife watching her husband weave around the room.

Elf Jimmy goes over to the group of Protestant children and leads them in a line to see Santa Claus and tell him what they want for Christmas. And Elf George does the same with the Catholic children. The children stand in two lines right next to each other but don’t say anything to each other.

Soon, children are sitting on Santa’s lap and telling him what they want for Christmas. The officer’s wives have found some special gifts for the children like new soccer balls and dolls and shiny toy cars and art sets and the gifts begin to spark the children as they open them and begin playing with them. Santa has a small cup of coffee on the table next to him and Jimmy makes sure it has a good amount of Jameson in it at all times. The two groups of children are beginning to mingle and the children beginning to laugh and have a good time.

Carl Campbell is busy at the bar set up in one corner of the gym pouring Guinness and Jameson. Parents from the two groups are mingling with each other and there are even toasts given between Catholics and Protestants.

The Christmas carols over the PA system soon give way to disco music and there is dancing on the gym floor as the children run around the gym playing with their new toys.

Sometime during the party a large side door swings open and Shawn McKeown comes in dressed as an elf and riding Fog who has some makeshift antlers over his ears so that he looks like an old grey, oversized reindeer. Fog pulls a sleigh filled with more toys and candy and Mary

and the wives toss toys at the children. The children love the big reindeer and follow Shawn and Fog as they go around the gym.

There are still a few children who have not got to talk to Santa and Shannon Kelly pushes her 5-year-old son Conor Kelly towards Santa. When Conor is sitting on Santa's lap Santa asks him what he wants for Christmas.

"I wish my sister could be here tonight," Conor says.

"Where is your sister?" asks Santa Claus.

"She's home," says Conor.

Santa gives Conor a gift and another one for his sister.

"You give this to your sister," he tells Conor.

Shannon Kelly smiles as she gets her son from Santa's lap.

"That's nice of you to think of Megan," Shannon says.

"Why can't Megan be here?" Santa asks.

"She's at home in her wheelchair," says Shannon. "The cold night air is not good for her."

Santa makes a note of what Shannon has just said and motions George over to him.

"Find out where Shannon Kelly lives," he tells him. "But don't ask her. Find out from someone else."

"No problem," says George. "I know exactly where she lives. Not far from me in fact."

The party continued on after all the children had sat on Santa's lap and got their present and told him what they wanted for Christmas. Shawn McKeown and Fog were one of the great hits of the party and Shawn ended up giving rides on Fog around the gym. The two groups that were so separate at the beginning of the party were now mixed in one big mass and it was

impossible to tell Catholic children from Protestant children and impossible to really be concerned about the two groups.

* * *

Two hours after the planned end of the party, the children and parents began to file out of the gym and back into the buses.

Santa goes over to his wife Mary.

“Have any more of those hobbit dolls that Tara told us to buy?”

Mary looks at her husband.

“Are you OK?” she says. “I think it’s time to go home.”

“Just get me a hobbit doll,” he says.

Mary goes away and comes back with a red package with a large green ribbon on it.

“Last one,” she says.

He takes the package and then is gone out the door of the gym and gets on board George’s bus as the children cheer. He has had a few more cups of Jameson and is not feeling much pain tonight.

“Really Captain,” George says. “I think it might be time to drive the old sleigh into the garage.”

Captain McKeown does not say anything but simply helps the children onto the bus. Shannon Kelly comes on the bus with Conor and is surprised to see her boss on the bus.

Soon they are off back down the hill and over the bridge across the River Foyle and through Londonderry. The soft rain is still falling and the streets are black mirrors reflecting the colored lights strung on the buildings and pubs along the streets. Bells from churches are still clanging and British troops are nowhere to be seen tonight.

The bus stops at the Catholic Church in the bogside area of Londonderry and the children file off. They are laughing and screaming and talking about their toys and the giant grey reindeer they saw tonight. If one didn't know it, they would swear that there was a completely different group of children on the bus going back then the group on this bus a few hours ago.

The parents thank Santa as he stands in the soft rain saying goodbye and "Merry Christmas" to them.

"God bless you Captain," many parents say to him.

As Shannon and Conor begin to get off the bus he stops them and pushes them back on the bus.

Shannon is perplexed.

"What's this all about Captain?" she asks.

"You'll see," says Santa.

When the bus door closes and George starts up the engine he tells him "We're taking Shannon and Conor home."

George is somewhat startled by this.

"Not sure if that is a good idea Captain," he says. "There are safer areas in town."

"Drive," Captain McKeown says to George.

In a few minutes the big navy bus is stopped on a narrow cobbled street in the bogside area of Londonderry.

“Turn the engine off George,” he says. “Santa has one more child to see tonight.”

Shannon seems nervous.

“I’m not sure that it’s a real good idea Captain,” she says.

There is no telling what state her husband Sean is in tonight and who knew if any of his IRA associates were at the house tonight and whether they were sober or not. She looked at George for guidance and George simply winked and nodded his head that it was OK for the Captain to go up and see Megan.

The four of them went through the little black door and up the narrow steps to the flat on the second floor. Shannon asked them to wait in the hall for a minute while she went in and got Megan ready to see Santa Claus.

Sean Kelly was sitting in the kitchen in a dirty white t-shirt and watching a soccer game on their little black and white television set. There were a few empty bottles of Guinness on the table.

Conor ran for his father.

“Santa is outside,” he said. “He’s come to see Megan!”

After he said this he ran into the other room to get his sister.

“Captain McKeown and George O’Donnell are outside,” Shannon said.

“What?” said Sean Kelly.

“I couldn’t stop him,” she said. “The Captain is Santa Claus this year and he asked Conor what he wished for Christmas and Conor said he wished that Megan was at the event tonight.”

“So he came to visit Megan?” Sean said.

“He’s outside the door,” said Shannon.

Sean Kelly opened another Guinness and took half the bottle down with one long swig.

“Jesus Christ,” he says.

As he said this the door to Megan’s room opened and Conor came out pushing his sister in her wheelchair. There was a startled look on Megan’s face. She was not sure what is happening.

Shannon smiles at Megan and kisses her.

“Are you ready to meet Santa Claus?” she says.

With this she opens the door and Santa’s elf and Santa walk into the little kitchen of the flat. George winks at Sean realizing that all of this is hard to believe.

“Santa,” Shannon says, “this is my husband Sean Kelly.”

“Glad to meet you Mr. Kelly,” Santa says.

“You too, Santa,” Sean Kelly says.

“And this must be Megan,” Santa says looking at Megan.

The little girl slowly shakes her head but she cannot believe that Santa has come to pay a special visit to her.

Santa pulls up a chair and sits down next to Megan.

“I missed you at the party tonight and wanted to make sure that I visited you,” he said.

The little girl slowly shakes her head.

“Thank you Santa,” she says. “That’s nice of you.”

“I need to know if you have been a good girl,” Santa says to Megan.

“I think so,” says Megan.

“Good,” he says.

“And what do you want for Christmas?” he asks Megan.

The little girl looks at her mother.

“I want something magic,” she says.

“Ah,” Santa says. “Something magic indeed.”

He gives the big red package to Megan and Megan opens the package and pulls out the large hobbit doll.

“A hobbit!” she excitedly exclaims.

“Something magic,” Shannon Kelly says smiling and pulling a small camera from a cupboard. “We have to get a picture of this.”

The little girl puts her arms around Santa’s neck and Shannon snapped a picture.

“Thank you Santa,” she says. “Thank you very much.”

“I think Santa needs to get back to the North Pole,” Shannon says. “And little girls need to go to bed.”

Conor wheels his sister back into her room.

“Glad to meet you Captain McKeown,” Sean Kelly says. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Shannon.”

“Shannon is a great employee,” he says.

Sean opens a few Guinness and hands one to George and the Captain.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Sean says.

“Oh but I did,” he says.

“You gave her a magic Christmas,” Sean says.

“What’s wrong with Megan?” Captain McKeown asks.

“The troubles,” Sean says. “Megan was struck by a bullet from a Protestant protestor a few years ago,” he says. “I saw the whole thing. She’ll never walk again.”

Captain McKeown shakes his head.

“We need more magic in all of Northern Ireland,” he says.

20. Approaching Storm April 1977

However, magic was tough to come by in Northern Ireland after the Christmas season. On January 1st of the New Year, a 15-month-old baby boy was killed in a car bomb explosion at Harmin Park, Glengormley, near Belfast. The car bomb had been planted by the Irish Republican Army and an inadequate warning given. On February 2, Jeffrey Agate, the Managing Director of the American Du Pont factory in Derry was shot dead by members of the Irish Republican Army outside his home in the Talbot Park area of Derry. The killing marked the beginning of a series of attacks on businessmen in Derry with further killings on 2 March 2 and March 14. On February 3, Joseph Morrissey, a Catholic civilian, was found stabbed and with his throat cut on the Glencairn Road, Belfast. Members of the Ulster Volunteer Force gang known as the “Shankill Butchers” were responsible for the killing. On April 8, 1977 two Royal Ulster Constabulary officers were shot dead by the Irish Republican Army near Moneymore, County Derry.

But in the midst of the surrounding violence, the feelings between Catholics and Protestants generated by the Christmas party did not recede into a fading memory but continued to ferment into a new collective feeling. George O’Donnell had never seen anything like it in all his years on the base.

Captain McKeown sensed a new spirit come over the base. He saw it everywhere: in the EM Club, the athletic fields, the social functions. Mary was caught up in the new spirit like most other mothers on the base. Seeing the two groups of children together and visiting Megan Kelly had given her a new feeling about the base. No longer did it seem some temporary stop. Rather it was beginning to feel like that home she had longed for all these years.

The only one who seemed upset by the new communal spirit on the base was Liam Nelson. Captain McKeown sensed his disappointment at the unity brought about by the Christmas party and his determination to push Captain McKeown to close the base down.

* * *

Each week there was an operations meeting with Liam Nelson where Nelson showed Captain McKeown all the money the base was losing from current operations. But the figures that Liam Nelson presented seemed far too high compared to expenses on the other bases Captain McKeown had commanded.

He remembered the two notebooks that Lt. Roberts had given him when he visited the base being prepared to move to in Thurso. He remembered how he had tried and tried to contact the Ambassador in London to look into the matter but that he was never able to get in touch with him. Was there a connection between the expense reports for the two bases? Might the expenses for Londonderry be grossly overstated by Liam Nelson and those for Thurso grossly understated on directive of the Ambassador to move along the closure of the Londonderry base? Certainly

one of the major reasons for closing Londonderry was that it was costing so much to operate.

What if this was not true?

He decided to ask Shannon Kelly to undertake an independent audit of base expenses.

“Give you a chance to put some of your accounting skills to use,” Captain McKeown told her. “Get you some overtime pay.”

“I can use the extra money,” Shannon says. “Things have been tough since Sean lost his job at the Dupont plant.”

Shannon was diligent in her assignment and often worked late into the night checking the figures that Liam Nelson provided Captain McKeown with each week.

One morning a week later she walked into Captain McKeown’s office holding a notebook with a perplexed look on her face.

She put the notebook on Captain McKeown’s desk.

“The figures of Mr. Nelson are way off,” she told Captain McKeown as she opened the notebook and showed him a number of spreadsheets. “I find total base operations costing a fourth of what he says they are.”

Captain McKeown studied the spreadsheets with Shannon.

“How long has this been going on?” he asked.

“About two years,” Shannon says. “The figures before a few years ago match what I’ve come up with.”

Shannon goes through the notebook with Captain McKeown explaining how she arrived at her figures. She has checked and double-checked her figures and is sure of them.

“Thanks Shannon,” he says when they finish reviewing the notebook.

“What does it mean Captain?” she asks.

“A good question,” he says.

When Shannon is gone he gets up and looks at the list of former commanders of the base in a framed chart on the wall of the office and notes that Captain Barker took command of the base right around two years ago.

He walks over to his filing cabinet and pulls out a key and unlocks it and takes out the notebook he got from Lt. Roberts in Thurso. He takes it over to his desk and places it next to the notebook that Shannon had just given him and compares the figures.

The operating costs for the Londonderry base Shannon came up with were only a third of the true costs for operating the Thurso base that Lt. Johnson gave him. He checked and rechecked the figures.

He left his office and walked around the base. Things were not perfect but then they never were. Overall, though, it was the best base he had ever taken command of. The housing was decent. The operational facilities in good working order. There were plenty of recreational facilities and surrounding all of this there was a city that loved and needed the base.

To his way of thinking, it made a hell of a lot more sense to keep the base open than to close it. The current base operations were nowhere near the disaster report that Captain Barker had put into the official records. Much of the technology was still advanced although not state-of-the-art. And there was that increasingly important human factor to Captain McKeown, something that couldn't be weighed or measured on traditional scales but something so present. Many people could be put out of work for operating an efficient operation. This made little sense to him.

* * *

He began to think that it was a logical and natural thing for the base to stay open rather than close down. After all, the real danger was not in keeping the base open but really in closing it and turning it over to the British Army. The IRA had made themselves more than clear on this matter.

Captain McKeown did not tell anyone about his change of attitude. Not his wife. Not even his good friend Jimmy. He continued to proceed ahead as planned to turn the base over to the British Army. He felt more than ever the lie he was perpetuating and the effect of this lie on hundreds of people. It was wearing at him. He knew something had to be done but he wasn't sure what it was.

The work in Thurso, Scotland was not only over cost but also behind schedule a few months and there was little choice but to continue operations in Londonderry. There were a number of phone calls with Lt. Roberts at Thurso. He continued to have trouble with regulations and contractors and materials were slow in being delivered as costs continued to skyrocket. And Lt. Roberts told him that the costs of opening the base continued to be hidden on the directive of the secret person who worked for the Ambassador at the American Embassy in London.

* * *

For Easter of 1977, the wives organized an Easter egg hunt on the base. Jimmy got the idea to have Captain McKeown and Mary dress up in Easter bunny suits with Mary in the blue suit and her husband in the pink suit. The Captain's first response was to offer up Jimmy to "walk" the plank. But the Derry wives were adamant that Captain McKeown dress-up as the pink Easter bunny. With his wife Mary leading the charge they were an impossible group to deal with.

On Easter morning Captain McKeown was squirming into a large pink Easter bunny suit that Jimmy had rented from this costume store in Derry. There was a considerable amount of cuss words coming out of Captain McKeown's mouth as Jimmy helped him make the transformation from commanding officer to commanding bunny. The remnants of a bottle of Jameson helped ease the transformation but only made Jimmy laugh all the harder at the large floppy eared pink Easter bunny.

Soon, Mr. and Mrs. Easter Bunny were walking around the grounds outside the gym dispensing Easter eggs and little gifts from their baskets. The base children were screaming loudly and loved the event and even more so to see two giant Easter bunnies. But the laughter from his sailors at seeing their skipper in the pink suit was even greater than the excited screams of the children.

Half an hour later, on the gym floor in a stupid looking oversized chair, the big pink Easter bunny was receiving children on his lap and scaring the crap out of most of them. Many needed to be pushed towards the big bunny by anxious parents or timid grandparents. Jimmy kept the Easter egg cup on the table next to the big Easter bunny full of Jamesons and Mr. Bunny increasingly slurred his little talks with the children making his speech more difficult to understand.

One little boy could not be forced onto his lap that made the big bunny get up and run after the little boy and chase him out of the gym and across the parking lot.

Jimmy was laughing hysterically when he came back into the gym and the remaining mothers began shuffling their children towards the door and out of the gym.

“We’re cutting you off,” Mary said when he finally stumbled back to his big chair in the gym.

* * *

It was early morning in April a few weeks after Easter and Londonderry was smothered under a thick fog that hung over the town like a wet gray blanket. Captain McKeown had his shorts and hiking shoes on. The sun was just coming up in the East and the famous Irish green had a golden, burnished color to it like the beginning of weathered green copper. It was early in the morning and his family and base were still asleep with only Doherty the gate guard on duty.

“Aye skipper,” Willy McGafferty said winking at the Captain as he walked by. “Ye make a fine Easter bunny if I do say so meself.”

Captain McKeown grunted and waived his hand at Willy’s remark as he passed him going outside the base. He headed down the dirt road that went along the fence on the perimeter of the base and then walked up the small hill that rose with little more drama than a bruise bump over the landscape.

On top of the hill you could almost see the entire base rimmed inside the chain link fence. The collection of the brick housing quarters. The gym where so many social events had taken

place since he arrived. The officer's club where George O'Donnell presided over the bar with the authority of a ship captain. The athletic fields where so many sporting events had taken place, where the base soccer team practiced and took themselves from a hopeless bunch of laughable yanks to the top soccer team for all the service bases in the UK. And in the distance the antennae array in the field where Shawn kept his old grey horse Fog. And near the field, the squat, plain brick building housing the Communications Center where red lights might be flashing at any time. And off in the distance, the old walled town of Derry on the west bank of the River Foyle that meandered through the landscape like a sparkling silver snake in the early morning sun.

He sat on the top of the hill for a while watching the colors of the city and base change with the rising sun of a new day. Thoughts came and went like they were flashes from a display of Northern Lights, illuminating some things hidden for many years briefly enough for him to sense their existence but not long enough for him to investigate the details of their architecture.

Then he walked down the hill and back through the gate and onto the base. As he passed Willy McGafferty, he stopped and surveyed the large, overweight Irishman for a second.

"I think you'll make a good Easter bunny next year Willy," he said as he passed the gatehouse.

* * *

An hour later he arrived at his office. It was still early in the morning and his staff had not arrived. He went into his office and closed the door and sat at his desk looking out his window at the morning sun spread its light over the athletic grounds and beyond them the array of antennae

in the field beyond. It was not like him to ponder things like this as decisions usually came quick and decisive for him. But this was different somehow and his thoughts went back almost twenty years.

The office window seemed the porthole of the first ship he was on after he joined the Navy. He was a young commander fresh out of training and it was his first tour of duty. He had disagreed with his captain then and now he seemed to be going to Washington DC to disagree with another of his commanding officers.

His first ship was in the Pacific, twisting and turning about like laundry in a washing machine, heading into what looked to be a developing super storm. The young commander McKeown had studied their navigational charts and talked to the radar people and knew they must immediately turn around, away from the storm. He took this information to the Captain but the Captain refused to turn the ship around. The young commander confronted the Captain and told him that he was recording this event in the ship log. This infuriated the Captain and he told the young officer his career was ended.

But the infuriated Captain followed his young commander's advice and turned the ship around and this act very well may have save the ship and all the lives on it. The storm turned out to be every bite as severe as McKeown had predicted it to be. Later, the Captain was removed. It was only later that McKeown found out that the crewmembers had written a stack of letters supporting the decision of the young McKeown.

In many ways, the Londonderry base was like another ship heading into a great storm. He was now the captain of this particular ship but he was still being commanded by his superiors in

Washington DC. In many ways, they were collectively like that first Captain of his, commanding him to head on into the face of the great storm.

The weather during the months he had been on the base had been mild and calm with the Irish rains falling gently over the Derry and the base in the winter months but now in the brilliant blue Irish sky of spring capped the supernatural emerald green of the landscape. But even in the midst of the beautiful weather, he sensed some great storm ahead his current “ship” was heading directly towards. The thunder of the storm could be heard almost every day and late into the nights with explosions in nearby Londonderry marking the Troubles. And the lightning of the approaching storm seemed to be the magnificent flashes of the Northern Lights across the sky in the evenings.

In all of this, Catholics and Protestants continued to die in the violence. Many children and innocent civilians. The threatening calls continued to come that the base would be blown to bits if Captain McKeown carried out his true mission and turned over to the British Army. But what if it was simply kept open and not turned over to the British Army?

Captain McKeown also knew there was a silent storm heading towards them in the havoc the base closing would cause to the town of Londonderry which had such a long relationship with it since it was first established in the early 40s. It was a strange relationship, he thought, this island of Yanks in the middle of the battling Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland. It was crazy, illogical in many ways. But it had worked so beautifully for so many years. All these American sailors coming so far away from one home and finding another home. So many of them had married Irish women and now had families and relatives and were entangled with the

town and Ireland as much as the old Irish myths were entangled with the Ireland. In a similar way that America too was so entangled with Ireland whether she America knew it or not.

* * *

Captain McKeown saw this entanglement each day on the base and everywhere he went. It was as if the Americans had planted a tree when they first came to Derry and now this tree had grown into a great tree with many branches and gnarly roots that scattered all over the landscape. He saw connections to the roots of this great tree at the social functions in the base gym with all the red-haired Irish wives showing their American husbands special Irish dances. He saw the connections in the little apartments in Londonderry where many of his sailor's families lived off the base. He saw these roots in the camaraderie at the pubs in Derry between the Yanks and the Irish. The Irish saw so much of what they longed to become in the Yanks. And the Yanks saw so much of what they once were in the Irish.

The great approaching storm that moved towards his new "ship" was both similar and different from the one that moved towards that first ship he was an ensign on so many years ago. Once, he knew that they must turn around and run from the approaching storm to avoid disaster. Now he knew that he must not turn around but head into the storm to avoid disaster.

Two American Presidents and all of his commanding officers had ordered him to get away from the storm of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland by escaping to the new base in Scotland. But he somehow knew that the base would always be safe even in the middle of all the

bombings and that the relationships between the Irish and Americans must be allowed to continue to grow like they had grown for so many years.

Violence would come not from keeping the base open but from closing it and turning it over to the British Army. Yes, there was a strange but real love of the Irish for the American Yanks who had been a part of their town for thirty-five years. But even more than this love, there was a deeper, darker hatred for the British. In the end, when it came to their love for the Americans and their hatred for the British, their desire to be free of them, in many ways similar to the Americans desire to be free of them, it was this hatred that would win over.

Captain McKeown knew this, could feel it in his Irish Catholic blood. He knew that violence was ahead if he carried out his secret orders of turning the base over to the British Army rather than the Queen. This was the real storm he knew was approaching.

He picked up the white telephone on his desk and in a few minutes the Admiral's voice came on.

"Tom, good to hear your voice," said the gravel-filled voice of the Admiral. "We've been following things in Northern Ireland. Things aren't getting any better as you know with Carter getting in. A new American policy is close at hand. It's good we're getting out soon."

"I need to talk to you Admiral," Captain McKeown said.

"Talk," said the Admiral.

"It's something too important over the phone," Captain McKeown said.

"You know our phone lines are secure," the Admiral said.

"Yes, I know," said Captain McKeown. "But it's something I need to meet with you about in person."

“I don’t want you away from the base with everything happening,” the Admiral said.

“I can fly to Washington for just a day or so,” Captain McKeown said. “It’s very important I see you.”

There was a moment of silence on the phone.

“This Friday,” the Admiral said. “Fifteen hundred hours.”

“I’ll be there,” Captain McKeown said.

When the call ended he pushed the buzzer on his phone and told Shannon to make travel arrangements for his trip to Washington DC.

That evening he sat out in his backyard with Mary watching the great rippling green sheets of the Northern Lights.

“I’ve gotta go to DC for a few days,” he says. “Talk to Admiral Schmidt.”

“Base closing stuff?” Mary asked.

“Yeah,” Captain McKeown says. “Just some housekeeping stuff.”

“I’m getting to like it here,” Mary says.

“Yeah,” he says. “I am too.”

21. Washington
May 1977

A few days later Captain McKeown watched Ireland sink into the Atlantic Ocean from the window of the navy plane he was on heading to Washington DC on for his meeting with Admiral Schmidt at the Pentagon. Years had passed since his first time at sea and his confrontation with his first captain on his way to the south Pacific. But in some strange way it seemed like he was on his first old ship again, ready to go up to his captain and tell him that they had to keep their course by heading into what looked like the approaching storm rather than turning away from it.

Events and people on the base and from the city of Derry had have changed Captain McKeown's mind that the base needs to be closed down. He remembers the mingling of the Catholic and Protestant children at the Christmas party. He remembers dressing up as the Fairy for Halloween and the Easter Bunny for Easter. He remembers the funny songs everyone sang at the Mayor's meeting. He remembers the base soccer team and all of the celebrations they have had. He remembers Mary and their trips into the surrounding countryside of Ireland. He remembers Tara and how much she fell in love with the area around Galway. He remembers the antics of Shawn's grey horse Fog.

Yes, there was danger living in Northern Ireland but he had become convinced that the people of Derry had a true affection for the Yanks and that the base played a key role in the local economy and that many would lose their jobs if the base closed down. It was a different feeling than the one he had arrived with nine months before. And it went in the face of his direct orders to close the base down.

His career had focused much on closing down bases. He was good at this. But now, for the first time in his life, he was faced with a base he did not want to close down. He felt he had to make an attempt to keep the base open. He was on his way to a meeting with Admiral Schmidt in Washington DC. The course had to somehow be changed.

* * *

The Orange Hall in Belfast was a dreary three-story stone building with the British flag on the left side of the flat roof and the Orange Flag on the right side. A metal wire cage rims the front of the building to protect the building from bombs. Between them on top of the building, is a large black statute of Dutch Prince William of Orange on a horse with a raised sword. The prince would become King William III of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Inside the building a meeting is in place in a room on the third floor. A number of men sit around a table. There are flags around the room and symbolic objects all about. It has the look of a Masonic Lodge.

One of the men around the table is Liam Nelson.

“It’s difficult to know the purpose of Captain McKeown’s trip to Washington,” Liam Nelson says. “But there’s little question he’s softened on closing the base over the last few months. Especially since he’s discovered the figures they had me cook up on operating expenses.”

“Maybe we have to put some fire under him like the IRA did,” says one of the men.

“Let’s wait and see what happens in Washington,” says Liam Nelson. “It’s doubtful he’ll be able to change the Admiral’s mind on the current plan to turn the base over to the British army.”

“You need to make that call to Barker now,” one of the men says to Liam Nelson pushing the telephone across the table to Liam Nelson.

* * *

Captain Barker walks around his office in the Pentagon holding a telephone to his ear. The office looks strikingly familiar to the old office of Captain McKeown. In fact it just might be Captain McKeown’s old office.

“That’s some disturbing information,” Captain Barker says into the telephone. “Are you sure?”

“He’s been suspicious of a lot of things in the past few months,” Liam Nelson says. “He had Shannon Kelly investigate the operating expenses of the base.”

“Bright girl,” Captain Barker says.

“Too bright,” says Liam Nelson. “Knows where all the skeletons are buried.”

“So he’s bringing over some new information for the old man to hear,” Captain Barker says.

“Looks that way,” Liam Nelson says.

“Stay close to the phone,” Captain Barker tells Liam Nelson. “I’ll be in touch.”

Captain Barker looks worried. The plan to close the Londonderry base down was running on schedule so well until McKeown arrived. Everyone thought McKeown would be the best way to speed the closing along. But it was turning out just the opposite way for them. He had told him it was just a matter of dog paddling for awhile, just baby-sitting things until the British Army took over and the Protestants could establish a strong foothold in Northern Ireland. Why couldn’t McKeown buy this simple prospect and let things take their course? The plan was to put a Catholic in charge of the base in this dangerous period when violence from the IRA was beginning to run rampant in Northern Ireland. But the plan seemed to have backfired.

Captain Barker looked out the window from his office in the Pentagon. He liked his new view and feeling of being in the center of power. Captain McKeown had told him he hated his job at the Pentagon. This was something that was impossible for Captain Barker to understand. A job at the Pentagon seemed to be the final feather in one’s career. A calling home to the center of power and prestige after all those years in all those far away places of the world.

He glances at his watch. The meeting in the Admiral’s office with Captain McKeown was in thirty minutes. He got up and walked down the wide hallway of the Pentagon towards Admiral Schmidt’s office wondering what Captain McKeown had in store for the Admiral.

* * *

He arrived at the Admiral's office fifteen minutes before the meeting as the Admiral had told him to do.

"What the hell do you think this all about?" Admiral Schmidt asked Captain Barker.

"I think there's been a change of heart in Captain McKeown," said Captain Barker. "I think he wants to keep the base open."

"He's going against orders," the Admiral said. "All this when we've got a damned humanitarian as President who wants the Brits out of Northern Ireland."

"It does complicate things," says Captain Barker.

"Complicate things," yelled the Admiral. "It can screw up our whole strategy in Northern Ireland. Especially with a new President who's ready to side with the IRA."

"We need to see what he has," Captain Barker says.

"It better not be much," Admiral Schmidt says.

After he said this Admiral Schmidt's phone buzzed.

"He's here," Admiral Schmidt said slamming his phone down so hard that a dull ring echoed for a few seconds.

The door opened and Captain McKeown entered the big office of Admiral Schmidt and saluted.

"Our man in Northern Ireland," the Admiral said returning his salute.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he said looking at Captain Barker.

"This is where I work these days," Captain Barker said.

“With his background on the base I wanted Captain Barker to sit in on the meeting,” Admiral Schmidt said.

Captain McKeown looked at Captain Barker.

The neat, efficient little man sat next to the Admiral in a large leather chair and wore an expression of a type of guard dog for the Admiral. But Captain McKeown considered him little more than a lap dog.

“It’s good to have Captain Barker here,” Captain McKeown said.

“So, what’s so important that needs you to fly half way around the world to see me?” the Admiral asks.

Captain McKeown opened his briefcase and took out the notebook Shannon Kelly had compiled on base operating expenses and placed it on the Admiral’s desk.

“As Captain Barker knows,” he said, “Liam Nelson has been head of base finances for almost twenty years.”

“A good man,” Captain Barker says.

“A suspicious man,” Captain McKeown says. “A suspicious man and not very good with figures.”

“What do you mean?” the Admiral asks.

Captain McKeown opens the notebook to a particular page and pushes it across the Admiral’s desk.

“Two sets of operating costs for the base,” Captain McKeown says. “The costs in the left column are from Liam Nelson and the ones in the right column the ones that my assistant Shannon Kelly arrived at.”

Captain Barker gets out of his chair and hovers over the Admiral's shoulder like a small storm cloud as the Admiral looks at the two sets of figures.

“As you can see, there's a huge difference in the figures,” Captain McKeown says. “Mr. Nelson's figures show base operating expenses four times greater than what my assistant comes up with.”

“How can you be so sure Shannon Kelly's figures are correct?” Captain Barker asks.

“She's almost a CPA,” Captain McKeown says. “More than I can say for Liam Nelson.”

Captain McKeown then took out the notebook on the real operating expenses for Thurso that Lt. Johnson gave him.

“While Londonderry is inflating expenses, Thurso is hiding expenses,” he says opening the notebook and laying it alongside the one already on the Admiral's desk.

Captain McKeown points out the two sets of Thurso figures to the Admiral and Captain Barker.

“I flew to Scotland a few months ago and met with Lt. Roberts,” Captain McKeown says. “He showed me the two sets of figures and told me he was being ordered to hide the real costs of opening the base.”

“Ordered by who?” asks the Admiral.

“Our embassy in London,” Captain McKeown says. “That's all Lt. Roberts knows. It's impossible for him to know who is giving the orders as the name is coded. You know the system. I tried over and over to contact our Ambassador for weeks but was always given the runaround. I didn't want to say anything to you until I talked with him but I never did.”

Admiral Schmidt closes the notebooks and pushes them back across his desk towards Captain McKeown.

“This needs to be looked into immediately,” the Admiral says to Captain Barker.

“Yes,” Barker says. “Immediately.”

“Are there other things you want to discuss Captain?” the Admiral says.

Captain McKeown opened his briefcase and pulled out a scrapbook of photos he had created during his year in Londonderry and explained the photos as Admiral Schmidt and Captain Barker looked through it. There were photos of the Christmas party with all the Protestant and Catholic children mixed together. There were photos at the funny lunch with the Mayor of Londonderry where Jimmy sung “Jingle Bells.” There was the photo of Shawn riding his horse Fog. There were photos of Captain McKeown and his senior staff with all types of officials from Londonderry. There were photos of a lot of the American sailors and their Irish wives. There were photos of the championship soccer team right after they won the big championship game. There was the photo of Santa and Megan Kelly holding up her new hobbit doll.

“The base is such a part of the Londonderry community,” Captain McKeown tells them.

“An important social, cultural and economic part of the community. Many jobs in town depend on the base. Closing the base will put hundreds out of work. Many have been working on the base most of their life. George O’Donnell has been on the base for thirty-five years. Families have been built around the base. And besides, there is a new spirit on the base. I can see it growing everyday. Something I’ve never seen on any base I’ve been on.”

“I realize this,” Captain Barker says. “But the base is in a dangerous area. You don’t have to be told this.”

“There’s only been one incident on the base since I arrive,” Captain McKeown says.

“And it was a good thing no one was killed in the explosion,” says the Admiral.

“No one was meant to be killed,” says Captain McKeown. “It was only meant to be a warning.”

“A warning to get out of Londonderry,” says Captain Barker.

“No,” Captain McKeown says. “A warning not to get out of Londonderry, not to close the base and turn it over to the British Army. Operating the base is not dangerous. It’s closing the base and turning it over to the British Army that’s dangerous.”

“So what are you suggesting Captain?” the Admiral asks.

“I’m suggesting we continue operations in Londonderry,” Captain McKeown says. “My figures show that the base is operating very efficiently.”

“And Thurso?” Admiral Schmidt asks.

“Thurso needs to be investigated,” Captain McKeown says. “Lt. Roberts is a good man following orders he doesn’t agree with but following orders like a good officer.”

“And who will run Londonderry?” the Admiral asks.

“I would like to continue as commander of the base,” Captain McKeown says.

The Admiral looked at Captain McKeown for a few seconds without saying anything.

“Can you give me assurance of one thing?” the Admiral asked.

“If I can,” said Captain McKeown.

“Can you assure me that no American will be killed in Londonderry?” asked the Admiral.

Captain McKeown shook his head.

“I can’t give you this assurance,” he said.

“That’s all Captain,” the Admiral said.

Captain McKeown salutes and leaves the office.

* * *

When Captain McKeown was gone the Admiral got up and paced around the long conference table below the photograph of a smiling, toothy Jimmy Carter.

“How the hell did McKeown get all those figures?” he said.

Captain Barker shook his head.

“They’ve been there for anyone who wanted to investigate,” Captain Barker said. “No one has until McKeown came along. And everyone thought he was so good at closing bases rather than keeping them open.”

“Thurso too?” Admiral Schmidt says.

“That’s different,” Captain Barker says, “With our new satellite communications systems going in over there, you know we’ve been hedging costs. We’ve tried to cover the tracks of our guy at the Ambassador’s office and we’ve done a pretty good job so far.”

“So far,” the Admiral says, “But it’s now going to be hard to use any economic argument to close the Londonderry base and open the Thurso base.”

“We’ve got more than enough political reasons to close Londonderry and open Thurso,” Captain Barker says.

Admiral Schmidt looks at Captain Barker.

“See what you can do,” he says. “We can’t change our plans now,” the Admiral says.

“You know as well as me that we’ve gotta’ establish a stronghold in Northern Ireland before our new President tries to kick us and the British Army out of the place. The British Army is our only hope as you know. Certainly not the Queen. There might be a great local love for the base. I can even understand this. But local love does not amount to international strategy. Once we forget we’re involved with international strategy, once the military (especially the navy) forgets this international perspective, we’re doomed. Gone. Of no use to their nation anymore. Local love has little weight against international strategy. If you think it does, you don’t belong in the navy. You don’t belong running a base. You might begin a little work to soon replace Captain McKeown. He is becoming a dangerous man to have on our team.”

“I can tell you that he is incredibly popular with the base personnel and the people in the town. Very close to many key personnel on the base. Except for Liam Nelson.”

The Admiral shakes his head and laughs.

“Old Liam,” the Admiral says. “Our crazy old Protestant Orangeman infiltrated into the ranks of Irish Catholics.”

“We never had that much trouble when Protestant Captains were in charge of the base,” Captain Barker said.

“The entire history of the Londonderry base,” Admiral Schmidt says.

“Yes,” says Captain Barker. “It’s entire thirty-five year history. All the way from the start of the base in WWII until today. Never an Irish Catholic Captain of the base in it’s entire history.”

Captain McKeown is the first Irish Catholic to be running the Londonderry base. We feel he will help us in one way. But it turns out that he fights against us to keep a base open than to close it.”

“We can’t jeopardize our plan to close the base and get out of Northern Ireland and let our close allies the British Army do our bidding for us in Northern Ireland,” the Admiral said. “It’s the best international strategy one can have.”

“I’ll see what I can do regarding replacing McKeown but I don’t think its worth getting involved with. I stay in close contact with Liam and he tells me that he has become some miniature celebrity in the town of Londonderry during the nine months he has been there. Wined and dined by the Mayor. A commander who brought his base soccer team from the bottom of the lineup to the top of it. A commander who went to Scotland with Jimmy and played St. Andrews Golf Course together. Tangling with him I think is somewhat like tangling with Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*. We need to treat this whole situation over there with a delicate hand.”

“Keep your eyes on the whole thing for me,” says the Admiral. “You’ve got your contacts on the base.”

“I’m on it Admiral,” Captain Barker says.

“Jesus,” the Admiral says. “How can someone change so much in a few months.”

“It happens,” says Captain Barker.

“He was such a loyal navy man,” Admiral Schmidt says. “Now,” says Captain Barker, “I think he’s more of a loyal Catholic. Just like us Admiral.”

“And loyal Protestants” Admiral Schmidt says.

Then the Admiral says, "All alleys with the British Army. An important part of our international strategy."

Captain Barker leaves the Admiral's office and walks down the long hallway of the Pentagon back to his office.

He picks up the phone and dials a number.

Half way around the world, the phone rings in the Orange Hall in Belfast and Liam Nelson picks it up.

"It's on," Captain Barker says. "Project Orange Bomb."

* * *

Captain McKeown's flight back to Ireland left the next day and he had the afternoon free. He decided to drive out to see his home in Springdale, Virginia and stop by the little league baseball field to see if there was a game going on.

The home was rented to another navy guy and looked like it. There were the navy plates on the car in the driveway. The play structure on the front lawn in the shape of an aircraft carrier. A woman working on the flowerbed who looked surprisingly like Mary. He thought of stopping and saying hello but he decided not to and drove to the baseball field a few blocks away.

He stopped his car and got out and watched the game behind the chain-link fence behind third base. The Springdale Dragons were playing the Fairfax Tigers and kicking the heck out of them. One of the fathers he knew was coaching and he recognized a number of Shawn's friends on the team.

When the game was over he thought of going over and saying hello to a few of his friends but it seemed enough to just watch the game and go back to his hotel.

Maybe the family would be back here soon and Shawn would be back on the baseball team and Mary busy with carpools and PTA meetings again. And maybe he wanted all of this to happen in some way. Maybe Mary wanted it to happen. It was difficult to know what he wanted, what she wanted. Especially since the base and Londonderry had become such a home for them.

22. The Orange Bomb
May 1977

Back on the base in Londonderry there was speculation about the Captain's trip to Washington.

"Just some administrative stuff," he told everyone.

No one knew the real purpose of his trip.

Except Liam Nelson.

The strange blond guy now seemed more suspicious than ever about Captain McKeown.

But the Captain continued their weekly briefings on base operations and the Captain continued to review Liam's operating figures although he knew they were bogus.

He immediately hired Shannon Kelly when he got back to put together the real expenses of the base. She needed the overtime work with her husband out of work and all the medial expenses for Megan. The first night she started she was working late at the office to get the weekly expense report ready for Captain McKeown.

Shannon left the office around ten and walked towards her car in the parking lot. Maybe a hundred yards away she saw a figure walking across the base carrying something towards the Samson Hall gym building. She ducked behind her car so she would not be seen. The figure stopped next to the gym building and put down something next to the gym. Then the figure

walked down the road towards the parking lot. As he passed Shannon recognized it was Liam Nelson. It was a dark night but his white hair was unmistakable. He walked past her car and then disappeared into the darkness.

* * *

At seven the next morning, the entire base was rocked by a huge explosion that rattled windows and sent debris raining down all over the base. The explosion came close to leveling Samson Hall the center of social activities on the base.

Shannon Kelly even heard the explosion from her little flat in the bogside area of Londonderry. When she got to the base and saw all the fire-trucks around the spot where the gym used to be she knew what had happened.

She thought of going to the Captain with the information but another type of justice needed to be handed out at this time. She turned her car around and headed back to her flat.

Sean was watching a news report on television about the bombing.

“Hear what happened?” he said.

“I just came from the base,” Shannon said.

“No IRA involvement,” Sean says. “You know this.”

“Orangemen,” Shannon said.

“What?”

“I saw Liam Nelson put a parcel next to the gym last night,” Shannon said. “I thought it was strange but I never imagined he would do something like this.”

“Something has to be done with him,” Sean says.

“Yes,” Shannon says.

* * *

The Admiral was on the phone to Captain McKeown a few hours after the explosion.

“There’s nothing to discuss after this incident,” he said. “The base needs to be shut down immediately. Things need to be accelerated.”

Captain McKeown was still in shock after the explosion. Everything had seemed to be moving along so well in the past few months.

“Get most of your people off the base,” the Admiral said. “Operate with a skeleton crew until the hand over.”

“Yes sir,” was the only response Captain McKeown had for the Admiral. The economics of the base, the community spirit, the long connection of the base to Londonderry. All of this paled next to the big explosion.

* * *

The next day the Londonderry police got a call to go to Liam Nelson’s flat in downtown Londonderry. They rang the doorbell but there was no answer. They decided to knock the door down.

It was a small flat full of practical things. There were few photos on the wall of a few marches of the Orangemen through the streets of Londonderry and a photo of Orange Hall in

Belfast.

The only unusual thing about the flat was that Liam Nelson was swinging from a rafter that ran across the roof of the flat. Swinging slowly in the morning breeze the open door brought in. A garish bright orange tie, a noose around his neck.

23. Disestablishment Ceremony July 1977

The death of Liam Nelson was ruled a suicide by the police but the Orangemen and other Protestant groups knew it was murder and the work of the IRA. It all led to another round of shootings and bombings in Londonderry.

Even the Queen was not safe. On August 9 and 10, she began a two-day visit to Northern Ireland. It was the first visit by the Queen for 11 years. The Irish Republican Army planted a small bomb in a garden on the campus of the New University of Ulster that was visited by the Queen as part of her jubilee celebrations that exploded after she left.

Although the bomb caused no injuries, members of the Social Democratic and Labor Party refused to attend a reception in her honor.

The destruction of Samson Hall was a final straw in sealing the fate of the base. The economic argument for keeping the base open that Captain McKeown had argued for in Washington meant little compared to the danger to base personnel evidenced by the destruction of the Samson Hall gym building. As Admiral Schmidt said in his call to Captain McKeown, there was nothing left to discuss.

Captain McKeown called a meeting of his top officers and personnel and then began cutting personnel from the base, making every effort he could to find jobs for them. With Liam

Nelson gone he promoted Shannon Kelly to head of base finances. She knew the expenses of running the base better than anyone else.

He worked closely with his Executive Officer Bob McManus to salvage items on the base under directions of U.S. Navy logistics. The transmitter towers had much copper in them and he was able to sell the copper for a good price and make the Navy made some money here. Since Lt. McManus, was the EO he knew exactly what was left at the base, and as Navy Directives required, he prepared a complete inventory of all existing buildings, equipment and all surplus material such as furniture and perishable items.

Captain McKeown called Lt. Roberts at Thurso a number of times to check up on the progress of getting the base up and operational. Lt. Roberts had already gotten a call from the Admiral and was working around the clock to get the base up and running.

Civilians were leaving the base in big numbers a few weeks after the bomb incident. When someone was leaving the base there would be a party at night in the tearoom in the middle of the housing area. Captain McKeown often stopped by and joined everyone in singing. There were few dry eyes at the party.

* * *

There was a large parade in downtown Londonderry to commemorate the closing of the base. The participants included the local police band, the British Army Troops, all the base sailors and local church organizations. Shawn rode his notorious grey horse Fog in the parade. And the 6th Fleet Band came up from the Mediterranean. Admiral Schmidt flew over and

observed the parade between Captain McKeown and the Mayor of Derry. There was a mixture of Irish and American songs.

Captain McKeown gave a speech and quoted the last verse of a popular song at the time called “The Town I Loved So Much” by Irish singer Phil Coulter. It’s words captured the way he and many of his base personnel felt at the time.

Now the music's gone but they carry on
For their spirits been bruised, never broken
They will not forget but their hearts are set
On tomorrow and peace once again
For what’s done is done and what’s won is won
And what’s lost is lost and gone for ever
I can only pray for a bright, brand new day
In the town I love so well

The parade served as a type of formal closing of the base and after the parade there was a mass departure of civilian employees. As Admiral Schmidt had ordered, Captain McKeown moved the base towards operating with a skeleton crew of essential sailors to keep the communications operations going and little more than this.

* * *

The toughest thing for Captain McKeown was saying goodbye to Mary and his family and putting them on the ferry in Belfast for Thurso.

Mary was saddened to leave the group of navy wives and mothers she had become good friends with but was relieved to hear that some of them would be going to Thurso. More than anything, though, she wanted to return back to their home in Springdale. She wanted Tom to coach little league baseball again. She wanted to have Tom build that deck off the back of the house he had planned to do. She wanted to go home.

The marriage had gone through a number of ups and downs in Londonderry and seemed stuck together with tape and glue and a lingering hope that someday they would have a real home and real marriage. But the hope came and went like those Northern Lights. Sometimes it was powerful and made things bearable but other times it seemed gone altogether.

It was a cloudy day in Belfast at the dock when he put them on the ferry for Thurso. Another one of those familiar farewell moments for the family. They all knew them well. There had been so many of them through his career.

He told them he would be coming in a few weeks as soon as he closed the base. Shawn asked if his horse Fog could go to Thurso and he told Shawn he would check into this. Colleen was excited that a number of her friends were going to Thurso. Tara held her hobbit in one arm and put her other arm around her father's neck.

He kissed Mary and held her for a while.

"This is the last stop, the last time," he said to her. "I promise."

Mary gave him a weak, forced smile. She had heard this so many times before.

"I mean it," he said.

But this didn't do much to convince her.

When the ferry pulled away from the dock and was off across the North Sea, he thought to himself how much he also wanted to go home. But he knew he could not take a life back at the Pentagon pushing papers like Captain Barker behind a desk. There had to be some other alternative.

* * *

With all military dependents, mostly women, children and elderly safely off the base, either transferred to Thurso, Scotland or onto another Navy assignment, the base population declined to a mix of 30 white hats and 2 young lieutenants and guards to watch critical areas of communications equipment, security material and maintain access control at the gate. Although the base was practically empty and vacant, it was still his responsibility to protect the property until the UK government decided on its disposition.

The base and all its facilities were especially vulnerable at this time. The IRA had made their intentions perfectly clear. Captain McKeown assigned his remaining crew to specific areas. Patrols of the perimeter fencing, the Communications Center, the main gate and the barracks. The two officers carried 45 caliber side arms and the patrolling teams had M16s.

Captain McKeown set-up a small office at the Receiver site in Roscommon. The office included a couple of cots where Captain McKeown and Jimmy stayed with their suitcases and a jeep. They were ready to roll as soon as the powers to be gave them instructions. He had worked

out an assignment for Jimmy at a base in Tennessee so that he could return home when the base was closed down. Jimmy told him he was ready to go home.

He offered to take George to over to Thurso with him but George declined the offer.

“My home is here,” George said. “And besides, there is much unfinished business to attend to.”

He offered to take Shannon Kelly and her family to Thurso with him and make her head of operations on the new base. But like George, she declined the offer to go. Through a number of phone calls to the Mayor, he was able to get Shannon an interview and eventually a position as an auditor with the city of Londonderry.

* * *

The secret about the British army taking over the base was able to be maintained through all of this. No one was ever thinking that the British Army would take over the base and that it was probably going back to the city and the city would be able to use it for housing, warehouses and fields for public events, parks and agriculture.

But the IRA was not fooled and knew the secret plan was always turning the base over to the Brits. One night, a meeting of key Londonderry IRA leaders took place in the backroom of a pub in the bogside area of Londonderry.

George O'Donnell smiled and shook his head and raised his pint of Guinness.

“Here’s a toast to that son-of-a-bitch Orangeman Liam Nelson,” he said. “He knew better than anyone that a bomb ensured the base be closed down and turned over to the Protestant Brits.”

“A real stronghold for them in Derry,” said Sean Kelly.

“What’s to do?” asked someone in the room.

“Nothing’s gonna stop the Brit tanks from rolling onto the base,” says George. “But when they roll onto the base they might just roll over the rubble of bombed buildings.”

“I’ll get the boys together,” Sean Kelly says.

“Be ready to go soon,” George says. “Things are moving fast.”

After the meeting, George and Sean walked back to their flats. Both lived a few blocks from the pub. It was a warm evening and children were still outside playing in the narrow cobblestone street.

“I have mixed emotions about this whole thing,” George says. “Captain McKeown is a good man, a good friend. The base represents his command.”

“I know what you mean,” says Sean Kelly. “It was special for him to visit Megan at Christmas and help Shannon’s career.”

“He’s a good man,” says George. “I think he’s becoming a good Catholic.”

“Maybe so,” says Sean. “But right now he’s more of a good soldier than a good Catholic. A good soldier following orders that’ll result in something terrible to our cause.”

“I think he tried to stop things with his trip to Washington,” George says. “I know he got a lot of information from your wife that he took to Washington with him. I think he pleaded the case to keep the base open to the Admiral. Maybe he pleaded a good case. But the bomb last

month was the final straw. The Protestants force the base closing and the Protestants take over the base.”

“Maybe he tried to stop things,” said Sean. “And maybe he pleaded a good case to the Admiral. “But I don’t think there was any possibility of changing the original plans to turn the base over to the Brits. Things were set in stone from the very beginning and there was nothing he could do to change things.”

The two men stopped in front of Sean Kelly’s flat.

“Still,” said George, “I have mixed emotions about blowing up the base. It puts a bad footnote to one of the best years on the base that I can remember. Captain McKeown’s men heavily guard the base. There could be bloodshed.”

“There’s no other way,” said Sean Kelly. “The bad footnote of the whole thing are the Brits taking over the base.”

24. Final Days August 77

On August 30, 1977 Jimmy Carter became the first President to speak on the issue of Northern Ireland. The statement of U.S. policy in Northern Ireland was worded carefully and was more significant for its existence than for what it said.

The speech was printed in all the newspapers in Northern Ireland and discussed over pints in pubs. As Carter said, “Throughout our history, Americans have rightly recalled the contributions men and women from many countries have made to the development of the United States. Among the greatest contributions have been those of the British and Irish people, Protestant and Catholic alike. We have close ties of friendship with both parts of Ireland and with Great Britain.”

Carter observed that Americans “are deeply concerned about the continuing conflict and violence in Northern Ireland” and know “the overwhelming majority of the people there reject the bomb and the bullet.” He said the United States “wholeheartedly supports peaceful means for finding a just solution that involves both parts of the community of Northern Ireland and protects human rights and guarantees freedom from discrimination”

The speech went on for a few more pages but didn’t say much more than this. Carter hoped that those engaged in violence would “renounce this course and commit themselves to peaceful pursuit of legitimate goals” but he offered no real policy towards the problems.

Few in Northern Ireland were able to make heads or tails of Carter's speech or what would be the new policy of the United States towards Northern Ireland. Encased in a hazy, humanitarian view of the world – so different from the realpolitik of Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford - Jimmy Carter also didn't seem to know what the new policy towards Northern Ireland should be.

George told Captain McKeown, "If the Americans really understood the situation, they would understand that the Catholics of Northern Ireland are just like the American colonies. Both wanted freedom from England."

Captain McKeown found himself in agreement with George O'Donnell. It was becoming easier to understand and feel the position of Catholics in Northern Ireland. The moment in front of the Free Derry wall was something he could not forget. A little girl named Megan in a wheel chair an image he could not get out of his mind.

* * *

Admiral Schmidt called one day in early September and told Captain McKeown that British General Rafferty would be in charge of the hand over of the base to the British Army. The General was in charge of the British Army in Northern Ireland.

"You'll soon be receiving classified orders," said admiral Schmidt, "from the office of the Secretary of Defense and the Chief of Naval Operations to contact the British General in command of the British Army in Northern Ireland. At the same time, the British Defense

Ministry will order the General to contact you to set a date and time for the transfer of all U.S. Naval facilities at Londonderry to the British Army.”

“We’re ready,” said Captain McKeown.

“No need to wait for all the official stuff,” the Admiral said. “I’ve known Harold Rafferty for years. Just give him a call and arrange to get together to set a time for the hand over.”

Captain McKeown called General Rafferty. The General was also golfer like the Captain. The General suggested they set-up a golf game at the famous Portrush Golf Club on the north coast of Northern Ireland fifty miles from the Londonderry. Captain McKeown enthusiastically agreed. He had heard of the course for many years and had dreamed of playing it.

A few days later, Captain McKeown dug out a hunter green shirt and some khaki pants from one of the boxes he was living out at in the office at Roscommon and drove the 30 miles northeast from Londonderry to the little seaside resort town of Portrush. The town was known for its sandy beaches and the starkly, beautiful golf club was located on one of these beaches.

The club was the closest version of St. Andrews in Ireland and the first club outside mainland UK to host the Open Championship in 1951 (won by Max Faulkner with a total score of 285). It was a true links course overlooking the dark blue sparkling waters of the North Atlantic. A slight breeze was in the air and you could smell the sweet odor of turf mixed with the smell of a salty sea breeze from the ocean. The dark green rolling hills of the club were spectacular against the backdrop of blue sky and ocean.

General Rafferty was a portly man somewhere in his seventies. He was wearing his orange-plus-fours with a scotch plaid flat hat and waiting at the starter shack with two caddies and ready to hit the links.

The course was one of the most beautiful Captain McKeown had ever played. In every way as beautiful and challenging as St. Andrews.

The General made small talk during their game.

“You know my troops and I are not the most popular folks in Londonderry,” he said.

Captain McKeown smiled. It was the understatement of the year.

“There’s not much going on at the base,” Captain McKeown said. “Worked things down to a skeleton crew. I’m living at Roscommon and I have one phone line there and one at the base.”

The General was a decent golfer and it was an even match until the 18th when Captain McKeown sunk his ball from the sand trap and won the match by two strokes.

After the round of golf, they went into the clubhouse that required sports jackets to get in. Neither of them had brought sports jackets and they had to borrow a few that didn’t fit them. The General looked funny wearing a jacket with the club logo on it he was busting out of with sleeves ending four inches from his wrists. He put down a glass of Bushmills Irish whiskey and ordered another.

“My boys are ready to move onto the base,” General Rafferty said.

“We’re ready for you,” Captain McKeown said. “We need to move fast. The IRA is planning something soon.”

“Three days from today,” General Haggerty said. “Full moon out. We move in at three in the morning.”

“Good,” said Captain McKeown. “I’ll make sure we’re ready.”

“I’m a few miles out of town staying at the Beech Hill Country House,” General Rafferty said.

“Good,” Captain McKeown said. “I know where it is.”

25. The IRA Plan
September 77

A dark green van drove around Londonderry a day after the meeting of Captain McKeown and General Rafferty. Sean Kelly drove the van. Next to him in the front seat of the van were two other members of the IRA. The van made stops at various shops and flats around town loading boxes into it and then going on to another location. And another.

After a few hours the back of the van was full of boxes with things like “Vinegar” and “Potatoes” written on the outside of them disguising the sticks of dynamite they were filled with.

In the early evening, the green van stopped at the little pub in the bogside area of Londonderry that served as one of the meeting places for the IRA. The boxes were unloaded from the van and carried into a room in the rear of the pub where a large group of IRA members were assembled. They wore black outfits and had heavy belts of ammunition thrown over their shoulders. M16s and all sorts of pistols were everywhere.

George O’Donnell was the only one in the room not dressed in combat gear. The old man was too old for this kind of thing.

For the next hour everyone worked stringing the sticks of dynamite together and working out their plan of attack. A large map of the base was spread out on a table in the middle of the room under a bare light bulb.

Sean Kelly was always the master strategist for big operations like this one. He picked various men in the room and assigned them to groups. He told everyone to coordinate their watches. Timing was critical.

“This is not going to be a walk in the park lads,” he said. “The Yanks aren’t trained combat veterans but they’re armed sure as hell with orders to protect the base at all costs.”

“So everything is all set,” George O’Donnell says.

“We move out from here at eleven-thirty,” says Sean Kelly. “The other vehicles will be here at eleven. Need everyone back here at ten tonight. We then drive from here to the Broomhill Hotel across from the base and meet there at quarter to midnight. We take the explosives onto the base at midnight.”

* * *

Not long after the meeting in bogside, Captain McKeown and Jimmy walked across the base. Perhaps for the last time. The security was tight and he could see his men stationed with their M16s all along the perimeter fencing of the base.

They stopped for a few moments and looked at the cleared area that used to be Sampson Hall. The bomb had almost completely leveled the place. There was a sadness looking at the spot where the gym used to stand. It symbolized so much of the life on the base this past year for

Captain McKeown. The dances they had. The commissioning ceremony. The Christmas party. More than anything else, it seemed to be a symbol of the new spirit and community of the base that had grown so much in the months after the Christmas party. More than anything, it seemed to represent the promise, the hope he had for the base. Now it was gone. No more than a patch of dirt with a scattering of the final wreckage of the gym and a few bulldozers nearby ready take all of this away.

The office was closed and its windows were boarded up. All of the files were emptied and transferred to the base in Thurso. Most of the furniture inside had been sold to various businesses in Londonderry. The Mayor had helped by offering businesses that might want to buy it.

The EO Club and the Officer's Club were dark. He heard that Carl Campbell got a job as a bartender at a pub in town where his stories of the base would live on evenings over Guinness and Jamesons.

That mess hall was dark and most of its cooking implements shipped to Thurso a week ago. A few lights were on in the barracks as the skeleton crew was sleeping there until the base closure.

They walked the few blocks over to the Captain's home and Captain McKeown stood in front of it with Jimmy like he stood where Sampson Hall used to be. Just looking at it and thinking and not saying anything. It had been a good year for the family. One of the best for them. Could it be duplicated in Thurso? Would the marriage last much longer?

Around nine, they walked up to the Communications Center. It was the only place that was still in operation. Thurso was not fully operational yet and Londonderry still the major communications center for naval communications in the North Atlantic. He walked into the

Communications Center and observed his boys with their headphones on, listening for all of those ships far out on the sea, the submarines under the sea. Maybe even the Nimitz. As he passed a few of the guys he gave them a pat on the shoulder. They had done such a good job of keeping up the long tradition of the base as the key communications base for the navy in Europe all these years.

When they left the Communications Center, they walked up to the field where the big radio receivers were located. A slight breeze pushed over the field riffling the grass and making a strange sound as it went through the big radio towers that sounded like the transmissions they were receiving. A large moon sat on top of one of the towers throwing a pale silver effervescence over the base and almost giving it transcendence like it was briefly taken out of time.

* * *

George O'Donnell was worried. He had driven to the office in Roscommon to warn Captain McKeown of the IRA attack. His conscience had gotten the best of him and he had made the decision that Captain McKeown had to be warned of the impending attack.

When he didn't find Captain McKeown at the office in Roscommon he hurriedly drove back to Londonderry. The only place he could think the Captain might be was at the base and he drove up to the base and drove around looking for Captain McKeown. There was not much time left now. His IRA associates beginning to gather soon at the pub in Bogside.

Things were quiet, almost like a ghost town. There were dark figures patrolling the base gates in the distance but no one else in sight.

* * *

At ten o'clock in the evening, a number of vehicles began arriving at the IRA pub in bogside. Everyone had pulled the traditional black ski masks over their faces. Londonderry was still a small town and it was wise that no one knew who were IRA members. Inside the sticks of dynamite were parceled out to various groups. Sean Kelly directed the activities as he usually did. Pints of Guinness were brought into the room and good luck toasts made amongst the group.

* * *

George could not find Captain McKeown and was ready to leave the base when he saw two figures walking down the road that led up to the big receiver towers. He drove towards the two figures and in his headlights saw that it was Captain McKeown and Jimmy. He quickly jumped out of his car and ran up to Captain McKeown.

“There’s not much time,” he said. “They’re coming tonight!”

“Coming?” Captain McKeown asked.

“The IRA,” George said. “To blow the base sky high.”

“Jesus,” said Captain McKeown. “How the hell do you know this?”

“Just trust me,” George says. “I have it on excellent authority. My sources are never wrong.”

Captain McKeown was rubbing his forehead trying to decide a course of action.

He pushed Jimmy into George's car.

"Beech Hill Country House," he told George. "The general's staying there."

The Beech Hill Country House was a few miles from the base in the country just southeast of Londonderry. The hotel dated from 1729 and was full of antiques and marble fireplaces with bedrooms full of four-poster beds with frilly floral covers.

George's car pulled up the long driveway to the elegant old white hotel and Captain McKeown jumped out and ran into the hotel.

"I'm Captain McKeown from the American navy base in Londonderry," said to a dour looking man at the front desk of the hotel. "I need to talk to General Rafferty immediately."

The deskman could not be hurried for anything. He examined Captain McKeown and then slowly went to a phone and dialed a number.

"General Rafferty is not in his room," he said. "Would you like to leave a message for him?"

"Is there somewhere else in the hotel he might be?"

The man at the front desk motioned to the side.

"You might try the Ardmore restaurant at the hotel."

Captain McKeown ran towards the restaurant. A few people were finishing dinner in the dim light of the old room but he could not see General Rafferty. He walked around the room looking for the general but he was not to be found.

He was ready to leave the restaurant when he heard the familiar British accent of General Rafferty coming from a table in a dark corner of the restaurant. He ran over to the general who was surprised to see Captain McKeown.

“It’s on for tonight,” he told General Rafferty. “The IRA is moving onto the base and they’ve got enough dynamite to level everything.”

General Rafferty got up with the big white, starched napkin of the Ardmore Restaurant still around his neck.

“I need to get to a telephone,” he said.

General Rafferty grabbed the phone away from the dour-looking guy at the front desk of the hotel.

“This is General Rafferty,” he yelled into it. “I need to speak with Colonel Montgomery immediately.”

* * *

It was eleven thirty at night and Sean Kelly’s green van led a group of vehicles from the pub in the bogside through the streets of Derry and over the bridge towards the Broomhill Hotel up the hill next to the base.

* * *

The British Command Center was a scattering of tents and tanks set up at a park in downtown Londonderry for the exclusive purpose of carrying out the mission of the base turnover to the British.

Colonel Montgomery listened to General Rafferty on the phone inside one of the tents with increasing concern in his face. When the call was over Colonel Montgomery sounded the alarm at the command center and troops came running from all directions.

“Get the tanks up and running,” he yelled. “We’re off to the base. The turnover is happening tonight.”

In a few minutes there was the sound of the tanks big engines and within five minutes they were rolling out of the park and down the streets of Londonderry and over the bridge and up the hill to the base.

The British rolled onto the base twenty minutes before midnight. Captain McKeown and General Rafferty were waiting for them at the gatehouse of the base and the General waived the tanks onto the base. Jimmy was busy running around to tell the security forces on the edge of the base what was going on. George has disappeared into the night.

* * *

Sean Kelly stood in front of the collection of vehicles assembled next to the Broomhill Hotel and watched the big British tanks roll past the hotel and onto the base.

He had a look of disbelief on his face. The timing was too close to everything. They had been tipped off somehow. There was a traitor in their ranks.

26. Ferry to Scotland
September 77

The next morning there was a ceremony on the base amongst a wide circle of British tanks and armored vehicles and British troops.

Captain McKeown walked up to the flagpole and stood at attention saluting it while Bob McManus lowered the flag. General Rafferty stood at attention off to the side. It would have been a time for the base band to play an off-key rendition of the Star Spangled Banner but the band had been shipped off to Thurso so there was no music for the occasion.

So the flags were lowered and raised with the distant disco music rising above the silence of the early morning. A few of Captain McKeown's sailors carefully folded the American flag and gave it to Captain McKeown with snappy salutes. Then Captain McKeown and General Rafferty faced each other exchanging salutes. A few British troops walked forward carrying the British Union Jack flag and it was raised up the flagpole as the British troops sang "God Save the Queen."

* * *

The day after the handover, Captain McKeown packed his suitcase at the office in Roscommon in preparation for his trip in the afternoon on the ferry from Belfast to Scotland. General Rafferty had asked him to play another round of golf up at Portrush in celebration of the handover of the base but Captain McKeown declined the offer. There didn't seem to be anything worth celebrating.

Jimmy drove the navy grey van, the same van that took Captain McKeown and his family from Shannon to Londonderry a little more than a year ago. It seemed like another age, another world altogether.

He asked Jimmy to drive by the base so that he could see it for the last time. They drove to it and stopped a little before the front gate. The attitude of the new "tenants" was very evident. British troops patrolled the base fence with M16s and tanks stood inside with their big guns pointed ominously at the world outside the base. Across the entrance that so many visitors had passed through so freely over the last thirty years there appeared the British Army trademark: barbed wire, rolls and rolls of it.

It was a pleasant day in late September with a cool briskness to it that made you know a new season was approaching. They went through little towns with names like Dungiven, Maghera, Casteldawson and Toombridge.

Belfast is eighty miles southeast of Londonderry at the bottom of a bay that takes a big gash into the Irish coast. In Belfast on the way to the ferry docks, they pass a strange forbidding building on one of the streets.

"I wonder what the hell that is," Captain McKeown says.

"Orange Hall," Jimmy answers. "Headquarters for the Orangemen in Belfast."

“Liam Nelson’s friends,” Captain McKeown says. “It doesn’t surprise me.”

Jimmy drops Captain McKeown off at the ferry dock and gives the captain a hug. There were tears in both of their eyes.

“You’ll do well back in the states Jimmy,” Captain McKeown says. “There’s a big career waiting for you in the navy.”

He watches the van disappear back into the city of Belfast and then gathers his bags and walks towards the ferry dock. There is a little time before the ferry leaves and he sits on a bench on the pier and looks out over the bay in much the way he had looked out at the ocean in Ocean City a year ago. Looking out to the sea. A familiar thing in the navy. Looking out to the sea and wondering what the world holds for you. It was the kind of thing that made navy men.

Suddenly, there is a tap on his shoulder from behind. He looks around to see George O’Donnell standing there with a big smile on his face.

“Didn’t want to let you get away before saying goodbye,” George says.

“I looked for you to say goodbye,” Captain McKeown says. “You disappeared.”

“Captain, I couldn’t be seen with you and the British. No offense to you sir. Just the way it is,” George says.

Then George rolls up his sleeve and reveals a small symbol tattooed on his forearm. It a green flame encompassing a white lily with an orange stalk.

“What’s that?” Captain McKeown asks.

“The Easter Lily,” says George. “A symbol of remembrance for those who died in the Easter Rising of 1916.”

“The IRA?” Captain McKeown asks.

George just smiles but does not say anything.

“That’s why you knew about the planned attack,” Captain McKeown says.

There was a whistle from the ferry.

“She’s boarding up now Captain,” says George.

“Thank you George,” Captain McKeown says hugging the big man.

“God bless you Captain,” George says. “Such a terrible sight to see the British Jack over the base.”

“Yes,” Captain McKeown says. “A terrible sight.”

Before he left, George pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and gave it to Captain McKeown.

“Reading for your trip to Scotland,” he said. “A poem by Joseph Plunkett who planned the Easter Rising. I think the real father of our IRA. One of my favorite poems. Something to take with you to Scotland.”

Captain McKeown took the piece of paper and put it in his pocket and then walked onto the ferry and went up to the top deck and found a seat near the stern next to the railing. He could see George standing on the dock waving to him as the ferry pulled away and headed towards Scotland.

In half an hour, the ferry was out of the big bay and into the open sea. Ahead, to the east, the outline of Scottish coast shimmered like a mirage in the afternoon sun. And behind, the coast of Ireland sunk into the sea.

He reached in his pocket and took out the folded sheet of paper that George had given him and unfolded it and read the poem of Joseph Plunkett.

I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower,
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice – and carven by his power
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross is every tree.

Captain McKeown looked at the sheet for a few moments and then folded it and put it back in his jacket. Somewhere down below on the ferry someone had a radio on and he could hear that song again that seemed to dominate the Officers Club on the base. Andy Gibb's "I Just Want to Be Your Everything." It was a time of disco music back in the states. Of wide, white bell-bottom pants. A time of celebration in America after the bitter war years of Vietnam. Protestants and Catholics all dancing together.

He wondered whether someday the people in Northern Ireland might find a common god and move towards the vision of Joseph Plunkett. And George O'Donnell.

He wondered whether this was a real possibility or was it just a bunch of fairytale pabulum from America's new humanitarian President Jimmy Carter. Was it possible to find a peaceful means and just solution that involved both parts of the community of Northern Ireland? Was it possible to find a solution that protected human rights and guaranteed freedom from discrimination? Of course the people of Northern Ireland were cynical about this and it was almost impossible for them to ever envision this happening.

But Captain McKeown was still young enough and ideal enough to still have idealism and hope inside and for a brief moment envisions a new world of peace. When he thought about this, tears ran down his face and mixed with the salty spray of the sea.

An hour later the ferry came into the Loch Ryan Bay on the northern tip of Scotland and made it's way down to dock in the town of Stranraer. As the ferry pulled into the dock he could see his family standing on the dock and waiving to him. Mary, Colleen and Shawn. Tara waiving her hobbit at him.

As he walked off the ferry he wondered what he could tell Mary. That he was leaving the navy and that they were going back to their little home in Springdale, Virginia? Or, to some totally new place in the world? He wasn't sure what it was but he could feel a new life was in front for them.

Mary gave him a hug when he walked off the ferry and the children tugged at his pants and waist.

She gave him a telegram sent to him this morning from Admiral Schmidt.

He opened it and read the big square words to his family.

“Congratulations on a job well done! No casualties and a perfect turnover to the British Army. It went very smoothly thanks in large part to your efforts. Our plan is to have you simply spend a month or so getting the base in Thurso going. Your leadership skills in this area are unmatched. After a few months in Thurso, you’re being transferred to Honolulu to be the commander of our new naval station over there. State of-the-art equipment and a relatively simple job inside the territory of just the good old United States. Protestants and Catholics going to different churches on Sundays but not shooting each other on the other days.”

He could see that Mary was so happy a tear ran down her face. He put his arms around her and pulled her close to him.

“We finally get that Hawaii vacation you wanted,” he says.

Author Biographies

Thomas McKeown
USN (Ret), CAPT

Captain McKeown has a BS in Mathematics from Seton Hall and an MS in Telecommunications Engineering from the U.S. Naval Post Graduate School. He has also done graduate work at the Harvard Business School in Corporate Strategic Planning and Advanced Marketing Management. He has had a distinguished career in the military as well as civilian life. He is a highly decorated Navy officer whose career has included two Meritorious Service Medals, one during combat duty as CO of Naval telecommunications Base in Vietnam. His Naval service included four Telecommunications Commands as well as command of two surface Warfare Ships. His civilian career has included work for a number of well-known corporations as well as work for the government and educational institutions including work in strategic planning for the U.S. Treasury Department, strategic planning for W. Paul Stillman School of Business at Seton Hall University and Executive Program Director for Gartner Research Corporation. His most recent strategic planning project was for the city of Washington DC. He lives in Rancho Mirage, California.

John Fraim

John has a BA from UCLA and a JD from Loyola Law School. He is President of GreatHouse Marketing Strategy, a marketing consulting firm and GreatHouse Stories in Palm Desert, California that assists clients in writing biographies, histories and memoirs. John has been a writer all his life with numerous published works and three published books. One of his books is the award-winning *Spirit Catcher* that earned Best Biography Award from the Small Press Association. He is involved in a number of community activities and a member of the Palm Springs Writers Guild Board of Directors. A recognized expert on symbolism, he is the author of *Battle of Symbols* and served as a consultant on the film *The Da Vinci Code*. He writes a regular column for *Script Magazine*, the largest publication for screenwriters. He is currently at work on a history of Palm Desert as well as a biography of a world-renowned paleontologist.

Appendix A

“The Town I Loved So Well”
Phil Coulter

In my memory, I will always see
The town that I have loved so well
Where our school played ball by the gas yard wall
And they laughed through the smoke and the smell
Going home in the rain, running up the dark lane
Past the jail, and down behind the Fountain
Those were happy days in so many, many ways
In the town I loved so well

In the early morning the shirt factory horn
Called women from Creggan, the moor, and the bog
While the men on the dole played a mother's role
Fed the children and then walked the dog
And when times got tough there was just about enough
And they saw it through without complaining
For deep inside was a burning pride
In the town I loved so well

There was music there in the Derry air
Like a language that we all could understand
I remember the day that I earned my first pay
When I played in a small pick-up band
There I spent my youth, and to tell you the truth
I was sad to leave it all behind me
For I learned about life, and I found a wife
In the town I loved so well

But when I returned, how my eyes have burned
To see how a town could be brought to it's knees
By the armoured cars and the bombed-out bars
And the gas that hangs on to every breeze
Now the army's installed by that old gas yard wall
And the damned barbed wire gets higher and higher
With their tanks and their guns, oh my god, what have they done
To the town I loved so well

Now the music's gone but they carry on
For their spirits been bruised, never broken
They will not forget but their hearts are set
On tomorrow and peace once again
For what's done is done and what's won is won
And what's lost is lost and gone for ever
I can only pray for a bright, brand new day
In the town I love so well

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