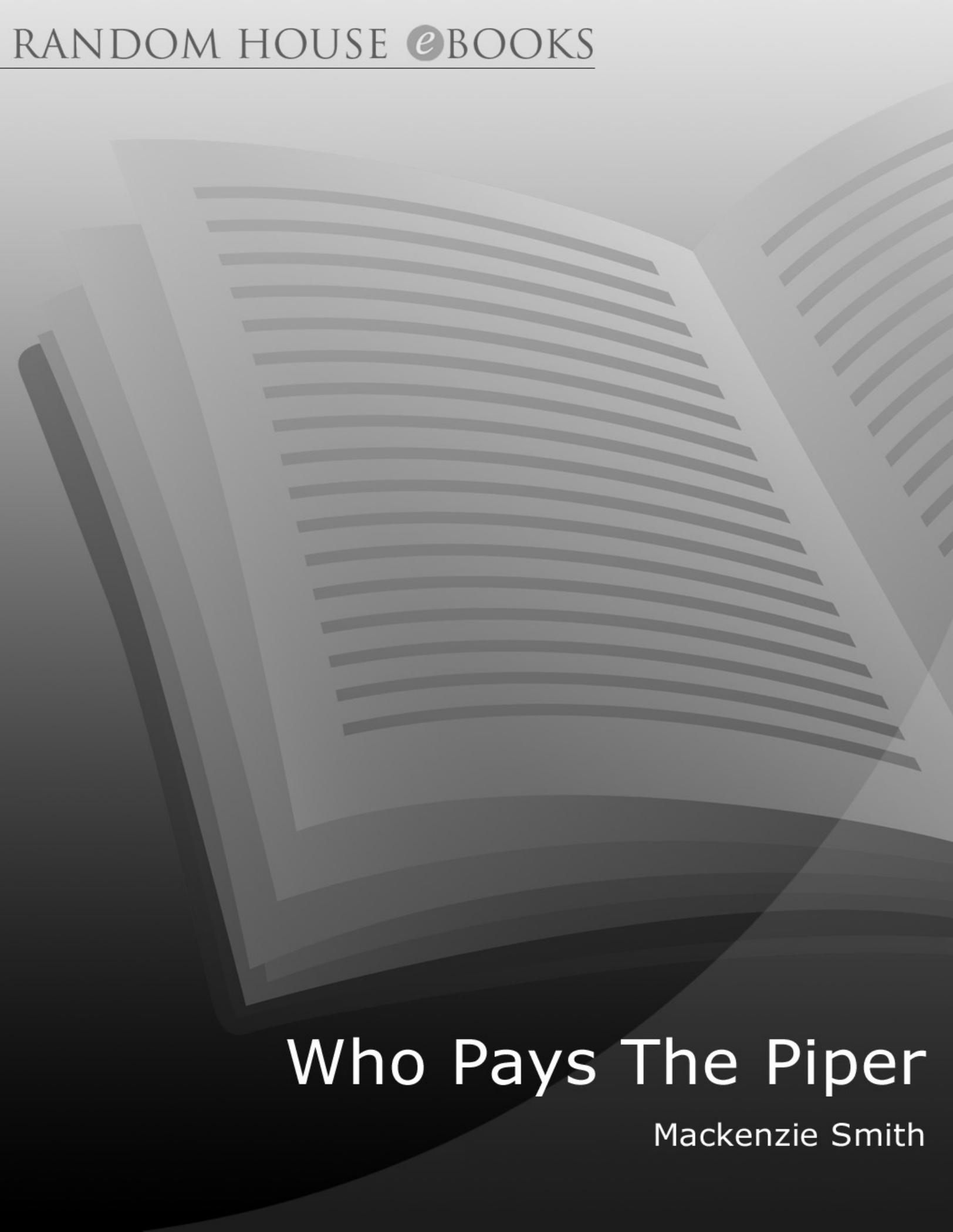


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Who Pays The Piper

Mackenzie Smith

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About the Book

It's 1999. The SAS have been sent to the jungle of Sierra Leone to rescue a group of British soldiers taken hostage by the notorious West Side Boys.

Captain Christian McKie leads an advanced four-man patrol into position ready to call in the main strike force at a moment's notice.

But all is not as it seems; betrayal and greed are deadly enemies. Christian is captured and held hostage, his will to survive only eclipsed by his desire for revenge.

About the Author

Mackenzie Smith is a serial adventurer: from training with the SAS, hunting buffalo in Botswana to flying fixed wing aircraft and taking on the Cresta run. He lives in Wiltshire with his wife and three young children.

WHO PAYS THE PIPER

MACKENZIE SMITH



arrow books

To Arabella

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Tony, Gryller, Major VS, Helen, Blofeld, Tim, NRC, Ben and the others within.

Prologue

Loud music was playing in the house above. Between tracks, he could hear familiar clicking noises that sounded like snooker balls.

He wondered what the rest of the Squadron were doing by now. They would have been flown out to the Destroyer lying off the coast and debriefed. Technically speaking, the operation would be deemed a success. As far as Christian knew, three men had been killed in return for twelve saved lives. Also, the WSBs had been neutered as a fighting force and a message sent to other groups not to grab British soldiers, or face a full kicking from the SAS.

Unofficially, it had been a mess. They had underestimated the WSBs, who had regrouped much more effectively than anticipated and had used mortars, which had not been foreseen. The river extraction was a fall-back plan and, for all he knew, could have been a disaster. Not much better than that time when the Americans left Vietnam from the roof of their embassy in Saigon.

His next thought was of his family getting the news of his death. He imagined his elderly parents receiving a telephone call and a visit from the Colonel the following morning. He could see them taking the news bravely and hearing an exaggerated account of his heroic death. He saw Sam offering sincere condolences at the funeral at the regimental church near Hereford. He could see friends turning up, his ex-girlfriend Kate shedding tears.

The others would have concocted a watertight story and there would be no reason to dispute them. The fury and frustration were unbearable and took over from the pain in his shoulder. He kicked out at the wire and felt tears rolling down his face. This was as bad as it could get. He thought of the pills. If he took the lot, he would be unconscious in twenty minutes and dead from liver failure in an hour. But then that bastard would have got away with it.

Sitting cross-legged in the darkness, Christian breathed deeply and vowed revenge. Somehow, he would get out, get home and get even. He would find a way to make him pay.

1

AN HOUR AFTER dark, on 29 August 1999, an RAF C-130 Hercules transport aircraft started a steep descent into Lungi airport just to the west of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. The landing lights had long since been stolen, forcing the pilots to work on instruments and improvised beacons placed at intervals on the crumbling tarmac. The usual ironic comments over the intercom from the co-pilot about putting seats in the upright position and fastening seat belts did not amuse the members of D Squadron 22 SAS, who were sitting or lying among crates and pallets of equipment.

Once the aircraft had landed safely and come to rest, the whine of the winch motor signalled the rear door was opening. Warm tropical air filled the belly of the aircraft as the first soldiers emerged, casually dressed, each shouldering a bergen and a kit bag. As the engines closed down, conversation broke out. The Squadron were assembling their kit on the tarmac when a familiar face appeared out of the darkness. Major Mark Day, a wiry Welshman, stopped in front of the men and waved his torch in the air.

‘Quiet please,’ he shouted. Then, lowering his voice a little, he continued, ‘The Irish Rangers, those that have not been temporarily detained’ – a snigger broke out among some of the men – ‘have set up some accommodation for us over there behind that hangar. There’s washing facilities,

so to speak, in the white, low-level building round there too. There will be scoff in the hangar at twenty-one hundred, and a short briefing afterwards.'

Last out of the Hercules was Captain Christian McKie. He was in his late twenties, tall, with a crisp and effective look about him. Knowing one of the RAF pilots, he had secured a seat in the cockpit, a useful move on the nine-hour flight from Brize Norton. A friendly jeer went up from the assembled soldiers, to a retort of, 'It's not what you know, folks!' Christian picked up his kit and continued to elaborate on the benefits of the flight deck to his mates as they made their way across the runway.

The tents were ancient army issue and smelt, but had been rigged up with electric lights. Each one could accommodate eight men but fortunately this time the allocation was for three.

Christian dumped his stuff next to a camp bed and was pleased to be sharing with his two close friends, Corporal Jamie Baxter and Trooper Tim Symonds. It would have been unusual for three different ranks to be so close in a regular army unit but in the small, unorthodox world of Special Forces, no one was too fussed about job titles.

'I bet you, after all this, it gets called off,' Jamie muttered under his breath, tipping the contents of his bergen onto the camp bed.

'Well, it usually does,' replied Tim.

They left the tent, making sure the mosquito netting was securely shut, and made their way over to the hangar that served as the operation's headquarters. Christian slid back a metal door and entered to find one end was set out with tables and catering facilities. The other end contained a number of Portakabins, housing hastily improvised offices. Most of the forty members of the Squadron were already either seated and eating or queuing for food at the canteen.

While some of the guys finished the last of their dinner, Colonel Nigel Deverall stood up at the front of the tables

and asked for quiet. He was a tall, dark-haired man, aged forty; three years earlier, he'd been one of the youngest men in the British Army to be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

'Right, everybody, listen up please. As you know, it's now four days since the Rangers were taken. There is also a Sierra Leonean corporal with them, making the group twelve in total. The Int. Boys have had a meeting of sorts with representatives of the West Side Boys and the Major. During the meeting, Major Moore managed to pass over a map showing the layout of the remote jungle camp where they are being held.

'We are still hoping for a peaceful conclusion, but our job is to prepare for a hostage extraction. There are about two hundred and fifty people living in the village, most of whom are fully signed-up West Side Boys; the rest are various women and other hangers-on. I don't need to remind you that these guys are truly savage. Their idea of fun is taking bets on the sex of an unborn child and then cutting open the mother to see what's what. There are a hundred thousand people in this country missing arms and legs. Need I say more?'

Deverall glanced around, before carrying on.

'Over the next twenty-four hours, we will be evaluating the best modus operandi for what has been code named Operation Barras. You will be kept informed and involved in the planning. You will collect weapons from the armoury after this briefing. Before you go, we have some photos of key people. You will get copies, so you can familiarise yourselves with their faces.'

The Colonel flicked a switch on a slide projector and an image of a soldier appeared on the screen behind him.

'This is Major Moore. He's a respected Royal Irish Ranger with an excellent record in Belfast. This next guy is the local corporal who was guiding them. We don't know for sure, but think he is being held separately in very poor

conditions. He's likely to be in a bad way and may not look quite like this if and when we end up going in.'

The hangar was silent. Deverall continued. 'This next guy is Udor Foday, the West Side Boys' chief. Be aware, it's an old shot.' A picture of a skinny Rastafarian in a grubby white vest appeared on the screen. He had a number of gold teeth, hair in a green, red and gold Rasta hat and carried a grenade launcher.

'He might look like more hat than cattle, but this guy can rustle up two thousand psychos whenever he wants. He controls most of the diamonds coming out of this part of Africa and has held onto his position for seven years - a record for round here. As I said, take these guys seriously.

'That's it for now, folks. Get your heads down and we'll see where we are in the morning.'

The men of D Squadron started to stand, and conversation broke out. They made their way to the sliding metal door and around the corner to another hangar containing dozens of pallets, laden with jungle-warfare equipment.

Sergeant Frank Norman, a small, stocky man with red cheeks and wild eyes, known as 'Armalite', the Squadron armourer, was waiting for them. A long-serving member of the Squadron, he had earned his nickname the hard way, in County Armagh, having lost half his hand dismantling a roadside bomb. Fortunately, only the detonator had gone off.

Each man picked up his own M16 A2 assault rifle and headed back to the tents, through the warm night air.

2

IT WAS LIGHT in the tent when Christian woke at 07.00. There was a chill in the air and a thin mist hung in the trees as he walked barefoot over to the building that contained the washing facilities. A row of grimy washbasins along the far wall gave him the feeling he was back at school. He pushed open the white wooden door into a shower cubicle and hoped for hot water. After a moment of disappointment, a nearby clanking sound heralded the ignition of a boiler; followed a few moments later by a single jet of hot water; the shower head had long gone no doubt.

He stood under the water and reflected on the past three days' preparation and travelling, during which he had hardly slept. He often wondered how soldiers felt on the eve of battle. Could this finally be the occasion when he would face the enemy for real, as opposed to endless counter-terrorism deployments when the enemy did his best to avoid you?

How would he cope under enemy fire? Almost half the Squadron could honestly say that they had been in a fire-fight of some description. Some had seen incoming rounds in Bosnia, two guys had even served in the Iraq War, and a good number had seen a few rough patches in Northern Ireland. Apart from that, D Squadron had had a fairly quiet time, working largely with the CIA in South America.

Christian knew full well that the toughest-looking guys, those who could carry the heaviest weight the longest

distances, were not always the guys who could handle the pressure of real-time fear. Everyone knew members of athletics clubs never passed Selection because they always got injured, and the more normal guys who came last, but never gave up, usually got in. But no one could tell how people would behave when the bullets started flying.

Back in the tent, Tim and Jamie were both stirring.

'Wake up, you guys,' Christian called as he sat down on his camp bed and looked across at them. 'I had no idea a tent could smell so bad.'

'Fuck off, you tart!' retorted Jamie, still under his blanket. 'It was you that lost the bog roll in Kenya and didn't wipe your arse for two weeks.'

Before the conversation got any further, the flap of the tent opened and Major Paul Cornwallis poked his head inside. He had served eighteen years in the British Army and, with his thick black moustache, very much looked the part.

Before he had had a chance to open his mouth, Tim interjected, 'Sir, would you say it smells in here?'

The Major looked at him in a matter-of-fact way. 'Well, if this airport needs an enema, I know where they'll stick the pipe.' Anyway, Christi, I want you dressed and in the hangar in ten minutes.'

Inside the hangar, Christian walked to the first Portakabin and knocked on the door he had seen Colonel Deverall emerge from the night before. Cornwallis opened the door and asked him in. There was a large table covered in maps and papers with chairs around it. There was also a camp bed covered in equipment, including a leather shotgun case. Colonel Deverall saw Christian's eyes were drawn to it.

'You know, this country does have some good points. There is excellent wild fowling to be had where the Rokel Creek flattens out into mangrove swamps and joins the sea. There are some amazing blue snipe, although no one has

ever managed to shoot there because you can't get in on foot.

'Christi, let me introduce Dan Miller and Steve Rayner. These guys are with Int. and have been on this job from the minute it started. I've asked you in here so Dan and Steve can tell you the latest, and bring you into our current thinking and how it may involve you.'

Colonel Deverall looked tired and scruffier than he had the night before. Christian had the impression that he may have had an all-nighter with the Int. guys. His breath stank of coffee as he leant forward and oriented the map towards Christian and Cornwallis.

Deverall continued: 'We are talking to these guys. We know, one, where the hostages are, and, two, that they are more or less OK except for the poor old corporal. He's been knocked about a bit and is being kept separately in a hole in the ground. It's touch and go whether we'll be in time for him. My fear is that if the talks go badly, they may separate our boys. If this happens, we don't stand a chance unless we know who's gone where and when, which brings me on to you, Christian. We need to get some eyes on the village and see what is really going on there.'

He pointed to a site on the map next to the river.

'This is Gheri Bana. To call it a shanty town would be flattering. It does, however, have a few concrete buildings, one of which contains our guys. As I mentioned last night, the Major managed to slip one of the negotiators a basic map showing what's what. This is an enlarged version.'

The Colonel pushed an A4 sheet towards Christian. 'It shows the house where they are held in relation to where the West Side Boys sleep and spend most of the day. It also shows where the Russian anti-aircraft piece is, and where they think the .50-cal from the Ranger's Land Rover is set up. This area is their football pitch, and this is the hole where the corporal spends most of his time. The other

large building is Udor Foday's HQ. It's only single storey, but is properly built and well guarded.'

He glanced across at Dan, a skinny man in his late forties who looked knackered too. His heavily receded forehead glistened with sweat.

Dan cleared his throat. 'I was brought into this five days ago now and become less optimistic by the hour. These guys will not be able to resist butchering eleven British soldiers once they have had a few bargaining counters out of us, wouldn't you agree, Steve?'

Steve was smarter in appearance than Dan, more diplomat than spook. He nodded in a resigned way and added, 'Yup, I reckon so.'

Dan continued: 'It's essential to get a team in there to keep an eye on things. We need to insert a patrol and set up an observation post somewhere where we can see this building.' He tapped his finger on the hostage house.

'We have two problems. The first is going to be getting a team in there unseen and the second, finding somewhere to dig in that's close enough to see what's going on. The jungle is seriously thick, which means any OP has to be within 30 yards of the village to have any chance of being worthwhile.'

The discussion continued for the best part of an hour before they agreed to break for a few minutes. Christian began to register the heat and went back over to the canteen to get breakfast and a cup of water.

He loaded up a plastic plate with toast, bacon, eggs and baked beans. Clocking Jamie and Tim, he made his way to their table.

'So, are we on or not, mate?' Tim asked.

Christian knew he had to evade the question and replied, 'They don't know yet,' carefully using the word 'they' as opposed to 'we'. 'They have another meeting with the West Side Boys later and that should dictate the course of action.'

Christian ate his breakfast as quickly as possible, keeping an eye out for the others returning to Deverall's Portakabin. Fifteen minutes later, they reconvened and Major Cornwallis initiated the talk.

'I think we all agree getting an OP set up is an important step and we have been looking at the best way to insert. Walking in will take too long and the helicopter option is too noisy. It leaves us the river. We could get you within about twelve K of the village by boat if we were to drop you off here.'

He pointed to a bend in the river on the map. 'The area between this point and the village is largely jungle, with one or two patches of open scrub. It should not be too difficult to get over to the village in five hours, give or take. The idea would be to drop you around twenty-three hundred hours tonight, which would give you ample time to get in and set up by first light tomorrow. How's this all sounding, Christi?'

'Well, it's doable, if we get it right,' said Christian. 'Who else do you have in mind?'

Deverall interjected. 'It's your job to pick the team and I am not going to put forward anyone, but Sergeant Sam Carter has spent half his life in OPs and knows a lot about this part of the world.'

'Now, I know you get along with Baxter and Symonds, which will be important and they are as good as any for this sort of thing. I reckon that would work, but it's your call.'

Christian was trying to imagine the four-man patrol in the hot and cramped environment of an OP, which would be nothing more than a scrape in the ground, covered with a camouflage net. They would be within spitting distance of 250 heavily armed psychos and not able to sneeze without attracting attention. Getting the right guys was essential and, although he knew he could veto any of the Colonel's suggestions, it was clear he would need very good reason.

Also, he thought, going with the Colonel's suggestions would lead to fewer issues if things went wrong.

Christian nodded. 'I'm happy to go with that, sir, and we can't have any more than four.'

'Good decision,' said Deverall.

3

IT WAS AGREED that they would take rations for only seven days; otherwise they would be too laden. Their calorie burn, sitting in an OP, would be low, which meant they could hold out for the best part of three weeks if they had to.

They all signed out silenced side arms as well as several grenades. Christian was happy to take the M16 he had already collected. Jamie exchanged his for a belt-fed Minimi machine gun capable of putting down 1,000 rounds a minute. Tim kept his M16 but also signed out a long-range sniper's rifle with a collapsing stock, which would fit in his bergen. Sam, a big muscular guy with ultra-short black hair and Para Reg tattoos down both arms, chose an M16 that had a 203 grenade launcher attached below the barrel. This would be useful in the event of enemy fire from a fortified position. The most significant weight would be water. They would each need three litres a day in such a hot environment. They agreed to take two five-gallon jerry cans, which would last several days, and find further supplies of water once they were in theatre.

It was 06.00 hours when Cornwallis pushed open the door of the Portakabin.

'Right, folks, I need you ready in twenty minutes. The talks were a complete waste of time. It looks like we are on, so I want to run through your kit and get a radio check sorted before eighteen thirty. Then load up the van and get

back in the Colonel's office for a chat. Is everyone sure they've memorised the rendezvous points?'

The patrol signalled their agreement, continuing to stuff their bergens with kit. There was the usual problem of weight, but the walk in was not too long. However, they still needed a hand to stand up, once strapped into their bergens.

'Right everyone,' said Sam, 'let's dump this lot in the van and get some grub into us.'

'Good plan,' agreed Jamie, as they lifted their gear across the floor of the hangar towards an ancient-looking van. The canteen staff had laid on steak and chips. They sat together at one of the tables, without saying much. The next step was to consume as much fresh fruit as possible, in the knowledge that this would be the last non-vacuum-packed or freeze-dried food for a while.

Christian was wondering if he could face one more banana when Colonel Deverall approached. He looked frustrated. 'Guys, as Cornwallis has told you, the talks have come to nothing. We are going to arrange for ten minutes' airtime for them on the BBC World Service. This is being scheduled for the day after tomorrow, which probably means they won't try anything too clever between now and then. They also want some guns and vehicles that we have said we will consider.

'The bottom line is we have bought some time to get you in and work out the details of the extraction. Once you've finished your chimpanzees' tea party, I will come down to the port with you and the SBS boys will fill you in on the drop-off. They are just going to dump you on the bank of the Rokel Creek but they want to explain it all in SBS talk.'

The hangar was filling up with members of the Squadron, all of whom knew exactly what was going on and had turned up early for dinner with the express purpose of mobbing up the members of the patrol and wishing them good luck.

'Have fun; but if you fuckers start without us, there'll be trouble. You do know that, don't you?' bellowed Trooper Grant MacDonald, nicknamed 'The Beast' for being the biggest and ugliest man in the regiment.

Christian started to feel the butterflies in his stomach as the moment of departure drew closer.

Cornwallis and Deverall sat in the front of the van, MP5 machine guns across their laps. Sam was last into the back. 'Cheers, boys, see you later.'

The engine started and immediately the back of the van filled with diesel fumes. They passed through the main gate and turned left towards the port.

'What the fuck is the twenty-four-hour RV again?' said Sam, quietly making sure only the members of the patrol could hear him.

'It's nineteen twelve forty-one,' whispered Jamie.

'No, it's fucking not,' chipped in Tim, as Jamie started to chuckle.

'It's eighteen twelve forty, or is that the twelve-hour RV?' whispered Christian, giving the first three digits of the twelve-hour RV and the third three of the seven-day RV.

'I don't give a shit anyway,' said Sam. 'If we have to evacuate the OP, I'm not waiting around at any of the RVs for you lot to turn up, or not. We should just leg it back here. I reckon it would only take about twenty-four hours at a push, forty-eight if you did it according to the book.'

'You're right, Sam,' said Christian, feeling it would do no harm to exert his authority at this point, 'but we would be better off doing it together, so we'll all stick to the RVs - OK, everyone?'

'Of course, of course, if you insist,' said Sam, rolling his eyes as the others nodded agreement.

The van bumped on down quiet suburban streets in what looked like any African city. There were kids playing and some market stalls still open. Life was going on as usual despite the threat of the West Side Boys. After a few

minutes, the van took a sharp turn and stopped. They were parked behind a warehouse in a disused part of Freetown port. Two SBS troopers sat on the roof of a low concrete building, keeping watch. A slipway led down to the dirty brown water of the port. Moored at the bottom was a 22-foot rigid inflatable boat - a RIB - painted in light green and black, with two large outboard engines. There were another two SBS soldiers on board looking relaxed and ready to go.

Christian could smell the sea salt in the air, and for a fleeting second it reminded him of being on holiday. He could see a large tanker a few miles out to sea and knew that somewhere beyond that was a British Destroyer lying in support. He began dragging the equipment out of the back of the van. They were already sweating, despite wearing lightweight jungle kit.

The two soldiers from the boat walked up and introduced themselves as Simon and Don. They helped drag the remaining kit down the slipway and strapped down what they could towards the front of the RIB.

4

AS THE RIB made its way up the first section of the Rokel Creek, Freetown lay to their right. There were no streetlamps, but lights twinkled from the windows of some houses. A few small fishing boats still trawled their nets as the RIB passed them by. Christian was relieved they were finally on their way, and that there was now a specific sense of purpose. They cleared Freetown and saw cultivated farm land. It was not possible to distinguish the crops but it was clear that this part of Sierra Leone had not been abandoned, as the land to the north had been.

By 22.30 the evening had long given way to darkness. The river had narrowed and was overhung by dark-looking trees and dense vegetation. The moonlight, reflected on the water, allowed them to navigate down the centre of the river. They had reduced their speed from almost flat out on the first section of river to around 10 knots to reduce noise and disturbance.

‘ETA ten minutes.’

Christian raised his hands, fingers outstretched, in the direction of the others and mouthed the word ‘ten’. They vacated the comfort of the jockey seats and lay among the equipment at the front to disguise the number of men. Each one now had his weapon in his hands and Sam surveyed the river bank through his night-vision scope. The temperature had dropped and dew formed on the metallic handrail along the edge of the boat.

Simon tilted forward and his face reflected the pale yellow light of the GPS screen. He switched it off quickly and raised his outspread hand to indicate five minutes to arrival. He moved the RIB out from the middle of the river, cut the speed to walking pace and continued forward, the boat now hugging the right bank.

It was just about possible to hear noises from the jungle and the sound of the water gently washing down the side of the RIB. Christian felt increasingly alert as the right-hand bend in the river loomed towards them through the darkness. This was the drop-off point. He made eye contact with Simon who was carefully guiding the RIB forward to a sand bar in the slow-moving water on the inside of the bend. Don stood on the front of the RIB, a bow line in his hand. He had his M16 looped over his shoulder and his ops vest on, in case he became separated from them.

He dropped carefully into the water in front of the bow as the RIB came to rest on the bar. The water was just below his waist as he pulled forward on the line to secure the RIB against the current. Sam held his bergen on his arm and followed behind Don, doing his best to keep his kit dry. Simon kept the engines running slightly to keep the bow as close to the bar as possible while the other members of the patrol followed Sam, lugging their bergens, rifles and the jerry cans.

Don looked at Christian and whispered, 'OK?', to which Christian gave a thumbs-up and patted him on the back. He then signalled to Simon, who nodded and slipped the engines into neutral as Don swung himself back aboard.

The current took hold of the RIB, swinging it round and moving it gently back in the direction it had come. The patrol watched it glide silently away as they grew accustomed to the quiet chatter of jungle noises. The priority was to get into a secure position on the bank as quickly as possible, to lie low for a few minutes and make

sure they had not been spotted. The bank was some thirty feet away across a shallow stream.

Christian signalled to Tim to go first. He waded into three feet of muddy water and made it across with no problem. He climbed the bank and took up a position looking into the jungle while the others crossed, doing their best to minimise any tracks in the mud. They squatted down at the base of a tall tree and listened.

They waited for ten minutes and let their senses acclimatise to the jungle, each covering an arc of fire. The mosquitoes wasted no time, so the men rolled down their sleeves and buttoned up their combat smocks to reduce exposure. Christian broke the silence by tapping Jamie on the back and telling him to lead on the first bearing. This was a 4 km line slightly uphill, which would lead to an intersection with a disused track.

After an hour pushing through rough jungle vegetation, they reached the track. Christian told Sam to lead and they swapped around the two jerry cans that were a serious weight in addition to their bergens and weapons.

Christian was happy with their progress but eager to reach the village soon to give themselves time to dig in and set up a proper OP. He regularly glanced at his watch and counted the paces to keep an idea of distance covered. They completed the second leg without any hitch and stopped for a break where the jungle gave way to an area of open ground. They squatted down, covering their arcs, and slipped out of their bergens. They listened for a minute before feeling safe to talk quietly.

'Fucking mozzies,' started Tim. 'It's always the same on these things. I'd love it if it weren't for the bloody mozzies!'

'If someone could invent a mozzie spray that actually worked, they should be knighted in my book,' whispered Jamie.

'If someone could invent a jerry can that wasn't so heavy, they should be made king,' said Sam.

'So what do we do for the guy that tarmacs this whole jungle?' added Christian.

'Well, send him to Staff College, surely,' replied Jamie, taking a swig out of his water bottle. 'So, when are we going to be there, Dad?' he continued.

'It shouldn't be too bad from here,' Christian replied. 'We cross this bit of higher ground, follow the line of the river and then shimmy on in from there. It's two thirty now and I reckon we should all be tucked up in OP hell by fourish. That's assuming we don't bump into Udor Foday and his band of merry men on their way back from a hard, all-night lock-in at the AK and Machete.'

'And what if we do?' whispered Jamie, starting to chuckle. 'Do we tell them we are local chaps on our way back from an SAS fancy dress party and do they know where we can get a cab?'

'Well, either that or we slot the lot of them and then ask them,' contributed Sam.

'No, no, I expect we'll get right in there, dig in the OP and then get a call from Dev to say there's been a big misunderstanding and the Rangers were released yesterday,' whispered Tim.

'And have been holed up in the AK and Machete ever since celebrating their release,' added Christian.

The moon appeared, illuminating the area of open ground in front of them. The sudden increase in light came as a reminder that dawn was only a few hours away and there were still 7 km to go. They helped each other up, under the weight of their bergens, and Sam continued to lead. The going was easier than in the jungle as the ground was firmer underfoot and they were not pushed off their bearing by clumps of trees and thickets. The downside was that they were more conspicuous and could be seen from some distance. With the greater feeling of vulnerability, the pace quickened. Within forty minutes, they had crossed the higher ground and were descending a gentle gradient, back

into thicker vegetation. The river was now a couple of hundred metres to their left and would act almost as a handrail, guiding them to their destination.

Christian stopped the patrol. They each dropped to one knee and covered an arc of fire. He pushed his global-positioning device as close to the ground as possible, to avoid the light giving them away, and checked their position. He was sure he knew where they were but needed certainty. He indicated to the others that they were 3 km from the village.

The atmosphere was now noticeably more serious. Christian swung the jerry can he had been carrying back to Sam and moved forward to lead the patrol. He knew that this leg of the approach was the most dangerous, as they could walk onto an enemy position at any moment and his night-vision goggles were no good in such thick vegetation. They progressed slowly, looking and listening, weapons at the ready. They were entering the lair of the most barbarous group of killers in the world and, if it came to a fight, would be outnumbered to the tune of fifty or sixty to one.

Christian expected to reach the top of a small ridge that ran along the south side of the village. They would make their final approach from this point. They continued to move silently but would all stop simultaneously at the slightest sound. To Christian's relief, the ground started to rise. He would feel better once he could see the village, because there were only a couple of hours of darkness left. Within a few minutes the ground levelled out and they reached a clearing on the crest of the ridge. Below them, some 500 yards away, it was possible to make out the outlines of houses and a large open area that had to be the football pitch. Christian felt a rush of excitement knowing that the West Side Boys would be carrying on as usual, unaware they would soon be observed through the rifle sights of the cream of the British Army.

5

IT WAS APPROACHING 04.00 hours. They had an hour, perhaps an hour and a half, to find a suitable site for the OP, get it dug in and camouflaged.

They came across a track in the jungle down which they could see the outline of a single-storey building that marked the edge of Gheri Bana. Crossing one by one, they soon dropped back into the cover of the vegetation. Christian signalled to the others to stop. He eased off his bergen, slung his rifle over his back and drew out his silenced pistol. He pulled his night-vision goggles out of his combat smock and moved gently forward through the vegetation in the direction of the village.

His adrenalin rising with every step, he was soon trembling with nerves and needed to pause to get a grip of himself. The final approach was ultra risky, but he had to check he was in the right place. He moved forward on all fours. Finally he came to a point where the jungle thinned out and he could see buildings 30 yards away, close enough to make out the outline of the corrugated iron roofs. He could see clothing hung out to dry on a line and the silhouette of a pick-up truck with a machine gun mounted in the rear. He smelt wood smoke. He raised his night-vision goggles and surveyed the village. Nothing stirred.

There was a track leading down the centre of the village with simple mud and concrete houses built along it. He imagined snoring WSB soldiers inside, sleeping off last