

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Operation Napoleon

Arnaldur Indriðason

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2005

ALSO BY

ARNALDUR INDRIDASON
IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

TAINED BLOOD
(FIRST PUBLISHED WITH THE TITLE **JAR CITY**)
SILENCE OF THE GRAVE
VOICES
THE DRAINING LAKE
ARCTIC CHILL
HYPOTHERMIA



OPERATION NAPOLEON

TRANSLATED

FROM THE ICELANDIC

BY

Victoria Cribb

Arnaldur Indriðason



Harvill Secker

LONDON

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Epub ISBN: 9781407092492

Version 1.0

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Harvill Secker 2010

First published with the title *Napóleonsskjölin* by Vaka Helgafell, Reykjavík in 1999

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
HARVILL SECKER
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781846552854

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

1945

A blizzard raged on the glacier.

He could see nothing ahead, could barely make out the compass in his hand. He could not turn back even if he wanted to. There was nothing to go back to. The storm stung and lashed his face, hurling hard, cold flakes at him from every direction. Snow became encrusted in a thick layer on his clothes and with every step he sank to his knees. He had lost all sense of time and had no idea how long he had been walking. Still cloaked in the same impenetrable darkness as when he had begun his journey, he could not even tell whether it was day or night. All he knew was that he was on his last legs. He took a few steps at a time, rested, then carried on. A few steps. A rest. A few more steps. A rest. A step. Rest. Step.

He had escaped almost unscathed from the crash, though others had not been so lucky. In an eruption of noise, the plane had skimmed the surface of the glacier. One of its engines burst into flame, then vanished abruptly as the entire wing sheared off and whirled away into the snow-filled darkness. Almost immediately the other wing was torn away in a shower of sparks, and the wingless fuselage went careering across the ice like a torpedo.

He, the pilot and three others had been belted into their seats when the plane went down but two of the passengers had been gripped with hysteria at the first sign of trouble, leaping up and trying to break into the cockpit in their panic. The impact sent them ricocheting like bullets off the sides of the cabin. He had ducked, watching them slam into the ceiling and bounce off the walls, before being catapulted past him and landing at the back of the plane where their cries were silenced.

The wreckage ploughed across the glacier, sending up clouds of snow and ice until it gradually lost momentum and ground to a halt. Then there was no sound but the howling of the storm.

Alone of the passengers, he was determined to brave the blizzard and make for civilisation. The others recommended waiting, in the hope that the storm would blow itself out. They thought everyone should stick together, but he was not to be stopped. He did not want to suffer being trapped in the plane; could not endure it becoming his coffin. With their help he wrapped himself up as well as possible for the journey, but he had not walked far in the relentless conditions before he realised he would have been better off inside the plane with the others. Now it was too late.

He tried to head south-east. For a split second before the bomber crashed he had glimpsed lights, as if from houses, and now he headed off in what he believed to be the right direction. He was chilled through and his footsteps grew heavier and heavier. If anything, the storm seemed to be growing more intense. He battled on, his strength failing with every step.

His thoughts turned to the plight of the others who had remained behind in the aircraft. When he had left them the snow had already begun to drift over the wreckage, and the scar left by its progress across the ice was filling up fast. They had oil lamps but the oil would not last long, and the cold on the glacier was unimaginable. If they kept the door of the plane open, the cabin would fill with snow. They were probably already trapped inside. They knew they would freeze to death whether they stayed in the aircraft or ventured out on to the ice. They had discussed the limited options. He had told them he could not sit still and wait for death.

The chain rattled. The briefcase was weighing him down. It was handcuffed to his wrist. He no longer held the handle

but let the case drag on its chain. The handcuff chafed his wrist but he did not care. He was past caring.

They heard it long before it swooped over them, heading west. Heard it approaching through the screaming of the storm, but when they looked up there was nothing to be seen but winter darkness and stinging, wind-driven flakes. It was just before eleven at night. A plane, was their immediate thought. War had brought a fair amount of air traffic to the area as the British had a base in Hornafjörður, so they knew most of the British and American aircraft by the sound of their engines. But they had never heard anything like this before. And never before had the roar been so close, as if the plane were diving straight for their farm.

They went out on to the front step and stood there for some time until the roar of the engines reached its height. With their hands over their ears they followed the sound towards the glacier. For a split second its dark body could be glimpsed overhead, then it vanished again into the blackness. Its nose up, it looked to be trying to gain height. The roar gradually receded in the direction of the glacier, before finally dying away. They both had the same thought. The plane was going to crash. It was too low. Visibility was zero in the appalling weather and the glacier would claim the plane in a matter of minutes. Even if it managed to gain a little height, it would be too late. The ice cap was too close.

They remained standing on the step for several minutes after the noise had died away, peering through the blizzard and straining to listen. Not a sound. They went back inside. They could not alert the authorities to the course of the plane as the telephone had been out of order since the lines came down in another storm. There had not been time to reconnect it. A familiar nuisance. Now a second blizzard had

blown up, twice as bad. As they got ready for bed, they discussed trying to get through to Höfn in Hornafjörður on horseback to report the plane once the weather had died down.

It was not until four days later that the conditions finally improved and they were able to set off for Höfn. The drifts were deep, making their progress slow. They were brothers and lived alone on the farm; their parents were dead and neither of them had married. They stopped to rest at a couple of farms on the way, spending the night at the second, where they related the story of the plane and their fear that it had almost certainly perished. None of the other farmers had heard anything.

When the brothers reached Höfn they reported the aircraft to the district official, who immediately contacted the Reykjavík authorities and informed them that a plane had been seen south of the Vatnajökull glacier and had almost certainly crashed on the ice. All flights over Iceland and the North Atlantic were monitored by air traffic control at the US army base in Reykjavík, but they had been unaware of any aircraft in the area at the time - the conditions had meant traffic had been at a minimum.

Later that day a telegram from the US military headquarters arrived at the office of the Höfn district official. The army would immediately take over investigation of the case and see to it that a rescue party was sent to the glacier. As far as the locals were concerned, the case was closed. Furthermore, the army banned all traffic on the glacier in the area where the plane was believed to have gone down. No explanations were offered.

Four days later, twelve military transport vehicles rumbled into Höfn with two hundred soldiers on board. They had not been able to use the airstrip in Hornafjörður, as it was closed during the darkest winter months, and Höfn was cut off from the capital to the west by the unbridged rivers of the Skeidará sands. The expedition force had had to

circumnavigate the country in six-wheeled vehicles equipped with snow-chains, driving first north, then south along the East Fjords to reach Höfn. The journey north had been arduous, as the main road was little more than a dirt track, and the expedition had been forced to dig their way through heavy drifts all the way across the eastern desert of Mödrudalsöraefi.

The troops were soldiers of the 10th Infantry Regiment and 46th Field Artillery Battalion under General Charles H. Bonesteel, commander of the US occupying force. Some of the men had taken part in the army's winter exercises on the Eiríksjökull glacier the previous year, but in practice few of them could even ski.

The expedition was led by one Colonel Miller. His men pitched camp just outside Höfn in barracks built by the British occupation force at the beginning of the war, from where they made their way to the glacier. By the time the soldiers arrived at the brothers' farm, almost ten days had elapsed since they had heard the plane, days in which it had snowed without respite. The soldiers set up their base at the farm and the brothers agreed to act as their guides on the ice cap. They spoke no English but with a combination of gestures and sign language were able to show Miller and his men the direction of the plane, warning that there was little chance of finding it on or near the glacier in the depths of winter.

'Vatnajökull is the biggest glacier in Europe,' they said, shaking their heads. 'It's like looking for a needle in a haystack.' It did not help that the snow would have obliterated all signs of a crash-landing.

Colonel Miller understood their gestures but ignored them. Despite the heavy going, there was a passable route to the glacier from the brothers' farm and in the circumstances the operation went smoothly. During the short winter days, when the sun was up only from eleven in the morning until half past five, there was little time for searching. Colonel

Miller kept his men well in order, though the brothers quickly discovered that most of them had never set foot on a glacier and had scant experience of winter expeditions. They guided the soldiers safely past crevasses and gullies, and the men set up camp in a depression at the edge of the glacier, about 1,100 metres above sea level.

Miller's troops spent three weeks combing the slopes of the glacier and a five square kilometre area of the ice cap itself. For most of the time the soldiers were lucky with the weather and coordinated their searches well. They divided their efforts, one group searching in the foothills from a camp set up near the farm, while the other group camped on the glacier and scoured the ice for as long as daylight lasted. When darkness fell in the afternoon, the soldiers assembled back at the farm base camp where they ate, slept and sang songs familiar to the brothers from the radio. They slept in British-issue mountaineering tents, sewn from double layers of silk, and huddled for warmth around primuses and oil lamps. Their heavy leather coats reached below the knee and had fur-lined hoods. On their hands they wore thick, coarsely knitted gloves of Icelandic wool.

No sign of the aircraft was found on this first expedition apart from the rim of the nose wheel, of which Colonel Miller immediately took charge. It was the brothers who made the discovery, about two kilometres on to the ice cap. Beyond this fragment, the ice was smooth in every direction and there was no evidence that an aircraft had crashed or made a forced landing there. The brothers said that if the plane had gone down on that part of the ice cap, the snow had probably drifted over the wreckage already. The glacier had swallowed it up.

Colonel Miller was like a man possessed in his search for the plane. He appeared to feel no tiredness and won the admiration of the brothers, who treated him with a mixture of affection and respect and were eager to do anything for him. Miller consulted them a great deal for their local

knowledge and they came to be on friendly terms. But eventually, after the expedition had twice been hampered by severe weather on the ice, the colonel was forced to abandon his search. In the second storm, tents and other equipment were buried in snow and lost for good.

There were two aspects of the expedition that puzzled the brothers.

One day they came upon Miller alone in the stable block, which adjoined the barn and cowshed, taking him by surprise as he stood by one of the horses in its stall, stroking its head. The colonel, whose courage and authority over his men was striking, had to all appearances taken himself quietly to one side to weep. He cradled the horse's head and they saw how his shoulders shook. When one of them cleared his throat, Miller started and glanced their way. They saw the tracks of tears on his dirty cheeks, but the colonel was quick to recover, drying his face and pretending nothing had happened. The brothers had often discussed Miller. They never asked him how old he was but guessed he could be no more than twenty-five.

'This is a handsome animal,' Miller said in his own language. The brothers did not understand him. He's probably homesick, they thought. But the incident stayed in their minds.

The other matter which aroused the brothers' interest was the wheel itself. They had had time to examine it before Colonel Miller found them and confiscated it. The tyre had been wrenched off the wheel so only the naked rim hung from the broken landing gear. For a long time afterwards they wondered about the fact that the wheel rim was inscribed with lettering in a language they understood even less than English.

KRUPPSTAHL.

1999



**CONTROL ROOM, BUILDING 312, WASHINGTON DC,
WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY**

The building stood not far from the Capitol in Washington DC. Originally a warehouse, it had undergone an elaborate conversion to house one of the capital's many clandestine organisations. No cost had been spared in the conversion, either inside or out. Now, giant computers hummed day and night, receiving information relayed from space. Satellite photographs belonging to the US military intelligence service were collected in a database, and there the information was processed, analysed and catalogued, and the alert raised if anything irregular came to light.

In official documents the warehouse was known simply as Building 312, but the organisation it housed had played a fundamental role in the US army's defence programme during the Cold War. Established shortly after 1960 during the most intense period of mutual suspicion, its chief role had been to analyse spy photographs taken of the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, and any other nations classed as enemies of the United States. After the end of the Cold War, its role included monitoring terrorist bases in the Middle East and conflicts in the Balkans. The organisation controlled a total of eight satellites in orbits ranging from 800 to 1,500 kilometres above Earth.

The director of the organisation was General Vytautas Carr, who stood now in front of a monitor which filled an entire wall of the first-floor control room, staring intently at a batch of images that had been drawn to his attention. It was cool in the room on account of the fans for the twelve powerful computer units which hummed ceaselessly in a cordoned-off section. Two armed guards stood at the doors. The room was intersected by four long banks of flickering screens and control panels.

Carr was not far off his seventieth birthday and ought to have taken retirement but for a special dispensation by the organisation. He was almost six foot five, his back ramrod straight, unbowed with age. He had been a soldier all his life, had served in Korea, and directed and shaped the operations of the organisation as one of its most dynamic chiefs. He was dressed in civilian clothes, a double-breasted dark suit. The monitor on the wall in front of him was reflected in his glasses, behind which a pair of small, shrewd eyes were concentrating on the two screens at the top left.

On one of the screens were images called up from the organisation's archives; these held tens of millions of satellite photographs taken over the last four decades. The other showed new pictures. The images Vytautas Carr was scrutinising were of a small section of south-east Iceland's Vatnajökull glacier, one taken about a year ago, the other earlier that day. The older image revealed nothing remarkable, just the pristine white expanse of the ice cap interrupted by the odd belt of crevasses, but in the new picture, down in the left-hand corner, a small mark was visible. The images were coarse and grainy but once touched up they would be sharp and clear. Carr requested a blow-up of the detail and the image magnified, then resolved itself until the black mark filled the entire screen.

'Who do we have in Keflavík?' Carr asked the man at the control panel as he enlarged the images.

'We don't have anyone in Keflavík, sir,' he replied.

Carr considered this.

'Get Ratoff for me,' he said, adding: 'This had better not be another false alarm.'

'We have better satellite equipment these days, sir,' the other man said, holding the phone.

'We've never gotten such a clear picture of the glacier before. How many people know about the new images?'

'Only the rest of the eight watch, that's three people. Then you and me, of course.'

'Do they know the situation?'

'No, sir. They didn't show any interest in the pictures.'

'Keep it that way,' said Carr and left the room. He stalked down the long corridor to his office and shut the door behind him. A light was flashing on his telephone.

'Ratoff on line two,' said a disembodied voice. Carr frowned and punched the button.

'How long will it take for you to get to Keflavík?' Carr asked without preamble.

'What's Keflavík, sir?' queried the voice on the phone.

'Our base in Iceland,' answered Carr.

'Iceland? I could be there tomorrow evening. Why, what's going on?'

'We've received a clear image of the biggest glacier in the country. It seems to be returning an object to us which we lost there many years ago and we need a man in Keflavík to direct the operation. You will take two special forces squadrons and choose your own equipment. Call it a routine exercise. Direct the locals to the defense secretary if they're uncooperative. I'll talk to him. I'll also call a meeting with the Icelandic government to offer an explanation. The military base is a sensitive issue in Iceland. Immanuel Wesson will take over our embassy in Reykjavík and act as spokesman. You'll receive more detailed instructions on the way.'

'I presume this is a covert operation, sir?'

'I wouldn't have called you otherwise.'

'Keflavík. I remember now. Wasn't there some wild goose chase there in '67?'

'We have better satellites these days.'

'Are the coordinates the same?'

'No. This is a new location. That damn glacier keeps moving,' said Carr and cut short the conversation without saying goodbye. He did not like Ratoff. He stood up, walked over to a large glass cabinet and opened the door, taking out two small keys which he turned over in his palm. One was slightly larger than the other but both were finely scaled, clearly designed for small keyholes. He put them back in the cabinet.

It was many years since Carr had examined the wheel. He took it out now and weighed it in his hands. He reread the inscription: Kruppstahl. It, alone, had confirmed the crash-landing. Its make correlated with the type and size of the plane, its year of manufacture and capacity. This wheel was proof that it was up there on the glacier. After all these years it had at last been found.



**FOREIGN MINISTRY, REYKJAVÍK,
THURSDAY 28 JANUARY, AFTERNOON**

Kristín closed her eyes. She felt the headache throbbing in her forehead. This was the third time the man had come to her office and launched into a diatribe against the ministry, blaming them for the fact that he had been cheated. On the first two occasions he had attempted to browbeat her, threatening that if he did not receive compensation for what he regarded as the ministry's mistake he would take the matter to court. Twice now she had listened to his tirade and twice struggled to keep herself under control, answering him clearly and objectively, but he did not seem to hear a word she said. Now he was sitting in her office once again, embarking on the same cycle of recriminations.

She guessed he was around forty, ten years or so older than her, and this age difference apparently licensed him to throw his weight about in her office, making threats and referring to her as 'a girl like you'. He made no attempt to hide his contempt for her, though whether for the sin of being a woman or a lawyer she could not tell. His name was Runólfur Zóphaníasson. He had a carefully cultivated three-day beard and thick, black hair, slicked back with gel. He wore a dark suit with a waistcoat, and a small silver chain attached to a watch. This he extracted from his waistcoat pocket every now and then with long, thin fingers, flicking it

open self-importantly as if he did not have time to waste on 'this crap' - as he put it himself.

He's right about the crap, she thought. He sold mobile freezing plants to Russia, and both the ministry and the Icelandic Trade Council had assisted him in making business contacts. He had sent four units to Murmansk and Kamchatka, but had not received so much as a rouble in return and now claimed that the ministry's lawyer, who no longer worked there, had suggested he dispatch the units and charge for them later, in order to smooth the way for further contracts. He had done so, with the result that goods belonging to him to the tune of more than thirty million *krónur* had disappeared in Russia. He had tried in vain to trace them, and now looked to the Trade Council and trade department of the Foreign Ministry for support and compensation, if nothing else. 'What kind of idiot consultants does this ministry employ?' he asked repeatedly at his meetings with Kristín. She had contacted the lawyer who could not remember giving him any advice but warned her that the man had once threatened him.

'You must have realised that doing business with Russia these days is very risky,' she had said to him at their first meeting, and pointed out that although the ministry endeavoured to help Icelandic companies set up deals, the risk always lay with the companies themselves. The ministry regretted what had happened and would happily help him make contact with Russian buyers through the embassy in Moscow, but if he could not extract payment, there was little the ministry could do. She had repeated this message in different words at their next meeting and for a third time, now, as he sat before her with an expression of petulance and ill temper and that pretentious silver chain in his waistcoat pocket. The meeting was dragging on. It was late and she wanted to go home.

'You won't get off so easily,' he said. 'You trick people into doing business with the Russian mafia. You probably even

take backhanders from them. What do I know? One hears things. I want my money back and if I don't get it . . .'

She knew his diatribe off by heart and decided to cut it short. She did not have time for this.

'We're sorry, naturally, that you've lost money in your dealings with Russia but it's not our problem,' she said coolly. 'We don't make decisions for people. It's up to them to evaluate the situation for themselves. If you're so stupid as to export goods worth tens of millions without any securities, you're even more of a fool than you look. I'm now asking you, please, to leave my office and not to bother me in future with any more rubbish about what you imagine to be the ministry's responsibilities.'

He gawped at her, the words 'stupid' and 'fool' echoing in his head. He opened his mouth to say something but she got in first.

'Out, now, if you please.'

She saw his face swell with rage.

He stood up slowly without taking his eyes off her, then suddenly seemed to lose control. Picking up the chair he had been sitting on, he hurled it at the wall behind him.

'This isn't finished!' he yelled. 'We'll meet again and then we'll see which of us is the fool. It's a conspiracy. A conspiracy, I tell you! And you'll suffer for it.'

'Yes, yes, dear, off you go now,' she said as if to a six-year-old. She knew she was goading him but could not resist it.

'You watch yourself! Don't think you can talk to me like that and get away with it!' he shouted and swept to the door, slamming it behind him so the walls shook.

Ministry employees had collected outside her office, drawn by the sound of the chair hitting the wall and the man shouting. They saw him emerge, purple in the face, and storm away. Kristín appeared in the doorway.

'It's all right,' she told her colleagues calmly, adding: 'he's got problems,' then shut the door carefully. Sitting down at her desk, she began to tremble and sat quietly until she had

regained her composure. They did not teach you how to deal with this at law school.

Kristín was petite and dark, with short, black hair, strong features in a thin face and sharp brown eyes that shone with decisiveness and self-confidence. She had a reputation for firmness and obstinacy, and was known within the ministry for not suffering fools gladly.

The phone rang. It was her brother. He immediately felt her tension.

‘Is everything okay?’ he asked.

‘Oh, it’s nothing. There was a man in here just now. I thought he was going to throw a chair at me. Apart from that, everything’s fine.’

‘Throw a chair! What sort of lunatics are you dealing with?’

‘The Russian mafia, or so I’m told. It’s some kind of conspiracy, apparently. How are things with you?’

‘Everything’s great. I just bought this phone. Do I sound clear?’

‘No different from usual.’

‘No different from usual!’ he mimicked. ‘Do you know where I am?’

‘No. Where?’

‘Just outside Akureyri. The team’s on its way to Vatnajökull.’

‘Vatnajökull? In the middle of winter?’

‘It’s a winter exercise. I’ve already told you. We reach the glacier tomorrow and I’ll call you again then. But you must tell me how the phone sounds. It’s clear, isn’t it?’ he repeated.

‘Great. You stick with the others. You hear me? Don’t attempt anything by yourself.’

‘Sure. It cost seventy thousand *krónur*, you know.’

‘What did?’

‘The phone. It’s got NMT’s long-distance communication system.’

‘NMT? What are you on about? Over and out.’

‘You don’t need to say over . . .’

She put down the receiver. Her brother Elías was ten years younger than her, forever immersed in one new hobby or another, mostly outdoor activities which involved travelling in the uninhabited interior. One year it had been hunting, when he filled her freezer with goose and reindeer meat. Another year it was skydiving, and he pestered her to jump with him, without success. The third year it was river rafting in rubber dinghies, then jeep trips across the highlands, glacier trips, skiing trips, snowmobiling – you name it. He was a member of the Reykjavík Air Ground Rescue Team. And it was just like him to buy a mobile phone for seventy thousand *krónur*. He was a technology junkie. His jeep looked like the flight deck of an aircraft.

In this respect brother and sister could not be more different. When winter arrived, her instinct was to crawl into hibernation and not emerge until spring. She never ventured into the highlands, and avoided travelling in Iceland altogether during winter. If she went for a summer holiday, she kept to the country’s ring road and stayed at hotels. But generally she went abroad; to the US, where she had studied, or London, where she had friends. Sometimes, during the darkest period of the Icelandic winter, she would book a week’s escape somewhere hot. She hated the cold and dark and had a tendency to suffer from depression during the blackest months when the sun rose at eleven and crawled along the horizon, to set after only five meagre hours of twilight. At this time of year she was overwhelmed by the realisation that she was trapped on a small island in the far north of the Atlantic, in cold, dark isolation.

But regardless of their differences, brother and sister got on very well. They were their parents’ only children, and despite the ten-year age gap, or perhaps because of it, had always been extremely close. He worked for a large garage in Reykjavík, converting jeeps into customised off-roaders; she was a lawyer with a degree in international law from the

University of California, had been working at the ministry for two years and was very happy to be doing a job which made use of her education. Fortunately, encounters like today's were the exception.

As long as he takes care up on the glacier, thought Kristín as she made her way home. The memory of her meeting with Runólfur would not go away. As she walked down Laugavegur shopping street, through the centre of Reykjavík and home to Tómasarhagi in the west of town, she had a prickling sensation of being watched. She had never experienced this before and told herself it was because she was still on edge. Looking around, she saw nothing to be concerned about and mocked herself for being so neurotic. But the feeling persisted. Come to think of it, she had never been accused of accepting bribes from the Russian mafia before either.



**KEFLAVÍK AIRPORT, ICELAND,
THURSDAY 28 JANUARY, 2000 GMT**

The giant C-17 US army transport plane landed at Keflavík Airport at around 8 p.m., local time. It was cold, several degrees below zero, but the forecast was for rising temperatures and snow. The massive bulk of the jet taxied through the winter darkness to the end of runway seven, which was reserved for the exclusive use of the NATO base on Midnesheidi moor. It was a remote, bleak location amidst the lava fields on the westernmost tip of the Reykjanes peninsula, lashed by constant gale-force winds, devoid of vegetation, barely fit for human habitation. Hangars large and small dotted the landscape, along with barracks, shops, a cinema and administration blocks. The naval air station had been a centre for reconnaissance flights at the height of the Cold War but these days the base's activities had been greatly curtailed.

Once the aircraft had come to a standstill, the aft door opened, releasing a stream of personnel who immediately began the task of unloading: powerful snowmobiles, tracked vehicles, skiing equipment, all the gear necessary for tackling the glacier. Fifteen minutes after the plane had touched down, the first transporter departed from Keflavík Airport with its cargo, bound for the Reykjanes highway and the south Iceland route to Vatnajökull.

The transporter was a German model, a Mercedes-Benz, its only marking Icelandic licence plates. It was no different from any other truck and trailer combo that plied the country's roads and as such drew no attention. In all, four trucks of varying models had pulled up to the C-17 when it came to a stop at the end of the runway. They departed from Keflavík Airport at half-hour intervals, mingling seamlessly with the civilian traffic.

Ratoff, the director of the operation, rode in the final vehicle. He had been met at the airport by the commander of the US military base on Midnesheidi, an admiral by rank, who had been forewarned of Ratoff's arrival and ordered to provide him with transport vehicles, no questions asked. The admiral, who had been exiled to this unpopular outpost after a scandal involving the large-scale embezzlement of supplies from a Florida base, had the good sense not to press for details, though he struggled to keep his curiosity in check. He had heard rumours about the commotion in the late sixties, and judging from the equipment being arranged in front of him, history was repeating itself: another glacier trip was planned.

'Don't you want our helicopters?' the admiral asked as he stood beside Ratoff, watching the cargo being unloaded. 'We have four new Pave Hawks in our fleet. They can move mountains.'

Ratoff was fiftyish, greying at the temples; a short, lean figure with Slavonic features and small, almost black eyes, clad in thick white cold-weather overalls and mountaineering boots. He did not so much as glance at the admiral.

'Just provide what we need and keep your distance,' he said curtly and walked off.

In the two days that had passed since the mark appeared on the satellite images, Carr had not been idle. The C-17 aircraft was scheduled to wait on standby at Keflavík Airport until the mission was accomplished, its huge bulk protected

day and night by eight armed guards. Its passengers had included General Immanuel Wesson and a ten-man team of Delta Force operators under his command, who were deployed to Reykjavík with orders to assume control of the embassy. The ambassador and his immediate staff were sent on leave without explanation or delay.

Snow had begun to fall in heavy, wet flakes, settling in a thick blanket over the south and east of the country, and overwhelming the trucks' windscreen wipers. There was a fair amount of traffic between Reykjavík and the small towns of Hveragerdi and Selfoss, but after that the road east was clear. The vehicles maintained a steady distance from one another as they drove through the impenetrable murk and falling snow, past the villages of Hella and Hvolsvöllur in their flat farmlands, to Vík í Mýrdal, huddled at the foot of its glacier, and on east past the settlement of Kirkjubaejarklaustur and over the bridges of the Skeidará sands, a vast outwash plain crossed by glacial rivers that were subject at times to devastating flash floods caused by eruptions under the inland ice cap. To their left, hidden by darkness, were mountains, glaciers and the barren interior; to their right, beyond the sands, lay the harbourless coastline of the Atlantic.

Nobody noticed them. Freight transport was common in the countryside where, in the absence of railways, goods of all kinds were transported by road: agricultural machinery, food supplies and fuel bound for Iceland's remote farms and villages.

Ratoff's briefing had included a detailed account of the military operation in 1967, the second major expedition mounted to search for the plane on Vatnajökull. Forced to circumnavigate the country on rough dirt roads, heading first north, then approaching the ice cap from the east, it had been difficult, then as now, to avoid attention. In the end they had been obliged to resort to drastic measures.

Ratoff's men travelled on under cover of darkness. In spite of the snow the roads were perfectly passable now that they had been asphalted. One by one they drove past the popular tourist destination of Skaftafell, making for Hornafjörður in the east. They passed through the lowland corridor of ðraefi, Sudursveit and Mýrar, between glacier and sea, then just before the town of Höfn turned left off the ring road, drove up into the farmlands at the foot of the glacier and stopped at the brothers' farm. By the time Ratoff's truck arrived, the soldiers were busy unloading the other transporters and the first snowmobiles were already on their way up to the ice cap.

The farmer stood at his door, watching the troops at work. He had seen it all before and though he did not know Ratoff, who now came walking towards him through the thickly falling snow, he had met others of his type. The farmer's name was Jón. He had lived alone on the farm since his brother's death several years earlier.

'Having another crack at the glacier?' he asked in Icelandic, shaking Ratoff's hand. Jón knew a smattering of English - he understood it better than he could speak it - but they still had need of the interpreter supplied by the base, a man who had been stationed in Iceland for several years.

Ratoff smiled at Jón. They kicked off the snow, went inside the warm, tidy house and sat down in the sitting room, Ratoff in his white overalls, the interpreter bundled up in a down jacket, and the farmer in a red-checked shirt, worn jeans and woollen socks. He was nearly eighty, his cranium completely bald, his face a mass of wrinkles, but he was still spry and straight-backed, still mentally and physically robust. Once the men had taken their seats he offered them strong black coffee and a pinch of snuff taken from the back of his wrist. Unsure what it was, Ratoff and the interpreter shook their heads.