

gentlemen, your verdict

Michael Bruce

A submarine lies helpless at the bottom of the sea. Inside are twenty men—trapped.

Rescue will not arrive for seven days. There is enough oxygen to last twenty men *less than three days* . . .

But the same oxygen will keep five men alive for the seven days until rescue . . .

You are the captain. What is your decision?

"Next Witness."

"Call Torpedoman Preece."

Lieutenant Paull bowed his head and covered his face with his hands. Though the courtroom was tense and silent around him, all he could see was the long compartment with fifteen men lying dead on the floor and five men staring in stricken silence. Though the proverbial pin could have been heard drop in the courtroom, he could still hear the ghastly sound as fifteen men died and their cups fell with a clatter at their feet.

"Tell the court what happened, in your own words, please."

"Well, sirs, it was like this. We was on this trial cruise, and was running at about ten fathoms off Steins Point, when the mine got us . . ."

Lieutenant Paull tried to shut out the voice with his fingers in his ears. He had told that story first. Then Engineer Nordin had given his version. Speer had told his story next, followed by Jenvey. Now Preece was repeating it. Each story was the same yet a little different, and each sentence struck the lieutenant like the lash of a whip.

They had been running at ten fathoms at half speed when the explosion came. Probably it had been a drifted acoustic or magnetic mine which should have rusted long before, for a contact one would have finished everything and everyone at once.

It had been just 1430 hours when the submarine shuddered to a blow that felt like the impact of Thor's hammer. Her tail rose, she rolled half



"Yes, sir, must have been a mine. Our steering gear is wrecked, propellers have gone, and she dived into the sands off Steins Point. The stern tanks are flooded, and she won't move at all. None of our hatches, even the escape ones, can be opened. Torpedoman Kimmel is dead, but the rest are all right . . . We're about thirty fathoms down. We can be reached fairly easily and we've enough air for almost two days."

The earphones rattled faintly for a few seconds . . . Lieutenant-Commander Oram's face paled.

"How soon can our second one be ready, sir?" he asked. There was a pause and the earphones rattled again. "How about planes then, sir?" There was a longer pause and the earphones sounded again for nearly half a minute. "I see, sir," he said, almost in a whisper. Then he laid the instrument down and for nearly a minute sat staring blindly in front of him.

"What's wrong, sir?" Lieutenant Paull asked at length.

Lieutenant-Commander Oram faced him: "As you heard, our tender got some of the blast. It jammed her steering gear for a minute. This trip was to test the new stabilizers in a storm, like the one top-side. That storm just drifted our tender onto those rocks—remember them?—and she is burning like a torch . . . The next nearest one is in dry dock, four hundred miles away, with half her plates off. She can't possibly get here for a week . . . Planes are grounded until the storm ends, and then they can't bring all the equipment they'll need to get us out. The shore station is doing all it can to find another ship."

Lieutenant Paull shuddered as he recalled his feelings. Their own tender wrecked and no other ship near meant rescue was impossible for five days, more like a week, and they had air for *less than two days*. Then Oram roused himself.

"Have a drink served out all round, please, Mr. Paull," he said. "And send four bottles forward to me. When they have had their drink, send the five married men to me."

In some bewilderment Lieutenant Paull obeyed.

"We was glad to get that drink, sirs," came Preece's voice. "An' when we'd downed it, we five reported to the Old Man—beg pardon, sirs—Cap'n Oram. He told us he had special duty for four of us, what could only be done by married men with families, and as far as he knew, there wasn't nothing to choose between us. Would we draw lots? We did, an' Nordin, Speer, Jenvey and me got the marked ones . . ."

over and started down in a steep, swift dive. Men fell or were flung in scrambling heaps. Lieutenant Paull, half stunned, found himself under four heavy men.

Almost instantly, it seemed, Lieutenant-Commander Oram's voice rang over the uproar: "Stop engines. Blow one and two. Blow four and six."

The engines had been racing above top speed, and every man knew the reason. The blast had blown the propellers off. Now it was impossible to reverse and unless she were checked soon, the submarine's steel bow would crumple like tin as she ramméd the bottom of the sea.

The noise of the engines died, and the bow began to rise as she rolled back to a level keel. But she still slid forward, deeper and deeper, from the initial impetus of the dive.

"Blow seven and eight. Hard arise with the bow planes. Hard aport," came Oram's voice again.

"Steering gears jammed, sir," reported the coxswain.

At that moment the submarine struck. Except for those who were holding something, the whole crew went down again, this time sliding to the forward end of each compartment. But the speed of her downward rush had been checked, she was almost on an even keel, and the bottom was the tip of the sandbank that extended from Steins Point, not the rocky ocean floor.

" . . . and he orders: Report your instruments." Preece's voice broke through the lieutenant's fog of memory.

They had reported. Bow planes immovable, apparently buried in sand. The radio was still usable, though damaged. The bow tanks could be neither blown nor flooded, their vents clogged with sand. At the stern the propellers were gone, the steering gear wrecked and the stern tanks flooded. All the hatches were hopelessly jammed. But by some miracle there was no leak in the ship itself.

The crew had come through fairly well. One man, thought stunned, was found to be dead, and two men had broken ribs. All had bruises and scrapes.

"Call the shore station," Oram ordered the radioman. "And let me know as soon as you have them, please."

"Shore station's calling us, sir," the radioman reported a second later. "Our tender got some of the blast and reported we were probably hit."

"Right, I'll talk to them," and Oram took up the radio telephone.

The voice faded out, and Lieutenant Paull tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

The men had gone back to their comrades. Oram called the shore station again. "Any luck with the ships, sir?" he asked. There was a slight pause and a faint sound from the earphones. "That's absolutely certain, then, sir?" There was a longer pause, a few more sounds from the phones. "Thank you, sir. I'll call again—later."

"Assemble the men, please, Mr. Paull," he ordered. "I wish to say a few words to them."

When everyone was gathered, Lieutenant-Commander Oram came in. He was carrying the four bottles of whisky and a tray with six white mugs; putting them down, he faced the crew.

"Men," he began, and hesitated. "Men, I have a few things to say and they're not all pleasant, nor easy. First, I'd like to say that I think you're the finest crew I've ever seen, let alone commanded. . . . I know that you will take this news like men. You know what's happened. Well, we're stuck. And we're stuck until someone on top pulls the sub up, for all our hatches are stuck too. Now there is one very hard job to be done, but it's one that can be done only by men with families. You know them; they drew lots for the job just now and Preece, Nordin, Speer and Jenvey got it. I'll tell them what it is in a few minutes. I thank you for the quick, cheerful way you have carried out orders. . . . That's all. Now all pass here with your mugs, married men last, and we'll drink a toast. No early sipping and no heeltaps and then we'll get on with our next job."

With a face white as death he poured a stiff drink in each man's cup. He gave Preece, Nordin, Speer and Jenvey four of the white mugs which were already charged. He gave the fifth one to Lieutenant Paull and took the last one himself. He raised his cup.

"God save our country and King," he said and drank.

The men drank; and drinking, died. Like one man, they stiffened, choked and fell. The cups clattered on the floor.

Only Lieutenant-Commander Oram, Lieutenant Paull and Preece, Nordin, Speer and Jenvey remained standing, white mugs in their hands.

Then Oram spoke, his voice harsh and clipped.

"Men," he grated, "the shore station reports our tender is wrecked and on fire. The other one is in dry dock, as you know, and can't get

here for a week. They have contacted all the planes they can and the earliest any help can arrive is between six and seven days. We had air for less than two days for all of us. Now there will be air for all five of you for seven days. Obey my last orders. Mr. Paull, you will take command. Men, remain alive and take your orders from Mr. Paull. You can still serve your country. Your job is to—wait."

"And why not you, sir? whispers Nordin." Preece's voice again.

"I am going to join my crew as soon as I have made my report," was Oram's quiet answer.

He wrote out the report and signed it. He had the bodies placed in an end compartment. Then he called the shore station.

At that flat, unemotional voice: "I have arranged that Lieutenant Paull, Engineers Nordin and Jenvey, Torpedoman Preece and Coxswain Speer will survive, by arranging the death of the fifteen others—there was a horrified squawk from the earphones. He went on: "None of the others had the least idea of what I intended doing. I arranged that the men with families should survive. The entire responsibility is mine. . . . No, sir, you won't be able to court-martial me. I could condemn my whole crew to death or sacrifice fifteen and save five, and am going to join the others. Good-bye, sir."

"Then six days later they reached us, sirs. God, we was glad."

"That is all," said the president of the court. He turned to the officers:

"Gentlemen, it is for you to decide, guilty or not guilty."

Michael Bruce, born in Alberta, was a gunner in the Canadian Army during the Second World War. He spent three years overseas in the artillery and in a note to MACLEAN'S, which published his 'Gentlemen, Your Verdict' (Jan. 1, 1947), he said that the idea for his story "grew out of a barrack room argument—whether a commander was justified in sacrificing some of his men to save others".

