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Break Up

Main Action: 4 July 1942
The big attack on Arctic convoy PQ17

(See Maps 1 and 13, and PQ17's formation diagram)[1]

At 8.21 p.m. on 4 July 1942 a distant buzzing was heard.[2] Listening intently, their hearts in their mouths, were the sailors on the bridges and decks of 33 British, American, Dutch and Soviet merchant ships that were steaming slowly north-eastward through the freezing cold waters of the Barents Sea.[3]

It was a sound they had been dreading. It was not long before they realized the distinctive noise emanated from the engines of some twenty-three German Heinkel 111 torpedo bombers that were fast approaching from the south.[4] Nothing was going to divert the bulk of the planes participating in the mass air attack, that for several days had been the main topic of conversation for most if not all the Allies' seamen in the convoy, which were now charging in.

The huge lumbering freighters that were about to be attacked north-east of Bear Island (see 6A in Map 1, 5 in Map 13 and Note 5 for location) were the key elements of Arctic convoy PQ17.[5] Like the vessels in PQ17's sixteen predecessors, the convoy's merchant ships were supposed to be carrying tanks, aircraft, and an assortment of other vehicles, weapons, equipment and raw materials manufactured or made available in America and Britain, from the assembly point in Iceland to the Soviet Union.

It was part of the aid promised by Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill and America's President Franklin D. Roosevelt so that it could be used by Joseph Stalin's forces against their common adversary, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. Only now, all of a sudden, the convoy's destination, the northern Russian port of Archangel (Arkhangelsk), still some 800 miles to the south-east, seemed a world away.

Although the merchant ships, which were lined up in nine spaced-out columns, were bristling with guns, and the convoy was ringed by British and American warships under the overall command of Britain's Royal Navy, the freighters' crews knew full well they now faced an existential threat. If they failed to come up to the mark, all that effort since they had last raised their anchors in Hvalfjord (Hvalfjörður), on the west coast of Iceland, seven days earlier, would have been for nothing.

They had already been sorely tested. For much of the period commencing on 1 July 1942, when the convoy had been sighted by the Germans for the first time, their every move had been made under the watchful eyes of the crews in German Blohm & Voss 138 spy planes.[6] These monstrous aircraft with their dipped fuselages, raised wings and uplifted snouts, which made them look like a cross between an angry insect and a predatory pterodactyl from the age of the dinosaurs, had repeatedly circled the convoy and signalled their location back to the Luftwaffe bases in occupied northern Norway, some 300 miles away.

That was enervating. But not nearly as disturbing as the recurrent thought that a devastating knockout blow might be struck by the Luftwaffe at a time of the Germans' choosing. The guns on the decks of the merchant ships and escorts, the gunfire coming from the American destroyers being particularly effective, had already batted away three tentative raids (see Note 7 for the American contribution).[7] The first, on 2 July, which was made by around six torpedo carrying seaplanes, ended with their torpedoes being dropped miles away, no scalps for the Germans and the loss of one aircraft. [8] Admittedly the second attack during the early hours of 4 July had resulted in an American merchant ship being torpedoed. But it was a one-off strike by a single plane that had just got lucky – the plane had swooped down through a gap in the clouds taking the escorts by surprise – rather than a sign that the convoy's defences were overwhelmed, leading to fears the torpedoing would be repeated.[9]

The emotions that these attacks, and a third limp raid made during the afternoon of 4 July, induced were nothing compared with the fear tinged with excitement generated when the enemy finally appeared in force, or the blind panic demonstrated by at least some of the merchant seamen as they came face to face with the realization that they might be minutes away from annihilation.[10]

Ensign Howard Carraway, a 24-year-old US Navy officer from South Carolina in charge of his ship's armed guard, was well placed to view this and more from one of his gunners' action stations in the rusty old Panamanian-flagged freighter SS *Troubadour*. She was chugging along at the back of the convoy's second column (see PQ17's formation in Appendix A).[11] Afterwards he described the moment when he first appreciated that a large group of aircraft were advancing towards them in the following terms:

'I was relieving half the gun crew . . . when the Carpenter, using a pair of glasses, called to me to look to the south: (he said) there was a plane headed straight in. I looked, and saw three. Big, black, fast, the noise of their . . . motors already audible. They were coming in on our starboard quarter.

' "Man your guns!" I yelled, and scampered for the bridge. Once there, I glanced over [to] the horizon with my glasses, and saw not three, nor six, but twelve of them . . .

'I turned to look at the Commodore's ship, ironically named the *River Afton* (after the peaceful Scottish stream in the famous Robert Burns poem "Afton Water", as Carraway, who had studied English literature at university, had understood) and saw the dreaded JG signal hoisted. It was late, but it told us we were doing the proper thing. It . . . [was] code for "Prepare for instant action".

'I . . . told [the gunners] . . . to hold fire until they were in close, then to give 'im hell . . .'[12]

Hauptmann Bernd Eicke, commander of the 23 Heinkel 111 torpedo bombers from the 1st wing of Kampfgeschwader (KG) 26 which had all of a sudden appeared over the horizon, has also commented on his thoughts and fears at this pivotal moment. The German pilots had good reason to be anxious. They had been flying perilously close to the water in order to avoid detection, and they would have to continue on their low flight paths if the launching of their torpedoes was to be effective. The following

extract from Hauptmann Eicke's report highlights how this spelt danger for attacker and those targeted alike:

'After the southernmost escort ship broadcast the alarm, I noticed what was lying straight ahead of us: the superstructures of an enormous convoy. A mass of funnels and hulls rose up out of the haze.

'I gave the order to attack when we were around 10 kilometres away. The two waves flying behind me came up to the left and right of my wave. This created an open quarter circle, allowing us to make a kind of pincer attack.

'[But] while still a long way from the target, we were greeted with murderous defensive gunfire. We had not only to contend with the ships' flak; there were also huge pillars of water rising up from the sea towards us, created by the shells fired at us by the British . . . [warships]. Some were so close, one felt one could just reach out to touch them.'[13]

That did not deter Leutnant Konrad Hennemann, the 22-year-old pilot of the first Heinkel to reach the merchant ships. After approaching PQ17 from the rear, he courageously flew up between the ships constituting the convoy's 4th and 5th columns, whose masters like all the freighter captains had been instructed to stay some 600 yards away from the ships in the next columns. Then when just 200 yards from the starboard side of SS *Navarino*, the British merchant ship in the second row of the 4th column, his aircraft's two torpedoes were released. This amounted to point blank range for such a well-trained crew.[14]

'As the aircraft approached, I put the helm hard over to port in an effort to upset his attack,' *Navarino*'s Captain Archibald Kelso reported afterwards. 'As I was doing so, someone shouted 'Torpedo!" I ran out and saw a torpedo approaching the ship 45 degrees abaft my beam. I was hoping that as the ship was swinging . . . the torpedo . . . might miss . . . but unfortunately she was not quick enough . . . and the torpedo . . . struck the ship amidships under the bridge.'[15]

There was an explosion that threw up a fountain of water, and the ship 'immediately took a list of 30 to 40 degrees [to port] so that the bilge keel came right out of the water on the starboard side,' Kelso concluded. However according to Carraway, while observing this act of German heroism: 'a yell [of jubilation] went up. A red glow was seen growing ever larger in [Hennemann's] . . . forward hull. A trail of black smoke slid from it . . . He

dove straight into the water [in front of the convoy], tracers from the forward ships' guns still pouring into his flaming carcass.'[16]

In the words of the 19-year-old radio operator Robert Henderson, who was stationed in the American merchant ship SS *Washington* at the front of the convoy's second column and observed the climactic end to Hennemann's suicide mission at close quarters: the plane flew across the convoy 'at an altitude of about seventy-five feet', and after dropping its torpedoes, it 'continued across our bow and was a blazing torch when it hit the water.'[17]

The downing of the German plane elicited contrasting responses. Captain Willem Sissingh, the 48-year-old master of the SS *Paulus Potter*, the Dutch ship at the front of the convoy's left column, was prompted by his crew's reaction to this event to write in his after the action report: 'War transforms every man into an animal . . . On the ship there was enthusiastic applause even as the men in the plane were burning alive.'[18]

But that was afterwards. As the crews in the merchant ships were helping their gunners to reload their guns, there was no time for such fastidiousness. Carraway was so buoyed up by this early victory, the fact that three of the planes approaching his ship from behind the convoy had turned tail, and by the powerful booming sound made by the guns attached to two Russia-bound tanks on *Troubadour*'s deck which his gunners had commandeered, that he could not resist playing an active part in the defence of his ship. He fired his own relatively puny machine gun at another aircraft, ignoring for a moment the rabble that were effectively running amok all around him. He later reported how:

'. . . all the crew, except a few of the faithful black gang slaving in the heat below, were running around the deck, yelling and screaming in all their forty tongues, looking like demons, as will men . . . [with] addled brains, . . . in their bundled arctic clothing, clumsy life jackets, [and] silly [anti-]shrapnel helmets.'[19]

So preoccupied was he with the fast-moving plane in his sights that he was not even diverted from his shooting by what he referred to as another 'loud tearing explosion' which he later identified as the noise made by the torpedoing of the SS *William Hooper,* an American Liberty ship, at the back of the convoy's first column, a few hundred yards away from his ship's port side. 'The torpedoes had hit her near the stern on the

starboard side,' he reported. 'The whole after end of the ship was blown to hell. Some of her explosive cargo must have been hit.'

His report continues: '[But] then my knees buckled, my heart crowded my tonsils, my blood turned to water, and fear gripped me. Headed straight for our side was . . . [another] torpedo . . . What chilled me so was the . . . [anticipated] point of contact, directly below me under the bridge to starboard. I . . . screamed . . .: "Torpedo on the starboard beam!", hopped from the pill box and headed for the after tank . . . where two men were trapped if the torpedo went off. And it must go off!

'I stuck my head into the wheel house and yelled "Hard a-port!" in an effort to turn the ship's head away from the torpedo's track. But I couldn't stay to follow it up, for the two men aft in the tank were on my mind. I was scared stiff, but I ran, faster I think in all the heavy clothing and boots than I had ever run on a . . . track, (a judgement which really meant something, coming as it did from Carraway, a keen runner and before the war the sports editor on the local newspaper in his home town in South Carolina). On reaching the tank, I yelled to the boys there . . . to "get out, torpedo!" They didn't hear me, and I started to climb the tank, but looked and saw the torpedo a scant fathom (two yards) from the ship's hull. I dropped to my knees, grasped a nearby hatch cover and held on waiting for the explosion.

'Kneeling thus, as if in prayer, for a few seconds, and hearing nothing, the unbelievable dawned on me. By some miracle, the thing had either missed the ship, or had failed to go off.

'I leapt to my feet and scrambled back forward to my gun. When I got to the bridge deck, I saw the crew watching the port side blabbering crazily . . . The torpedo was now on the port side, travelling in an arc towards the ship's side somewhere astern. A Portuguese and [a] Spaniard were standing at the rail, stark terror on their faces, waving the torpedo away, repeating some phrase in their native tongues that could only mean "Go away!" It was pitiful, their terror, but the sincerity of their pleas was touching – and [in retrospect at least] funny.

'When I saw what was happening, I felt a swell of pride. Bill Lawson, a big blond kid from Virginia . . . was keeping the torpedo away from the ship by the simple method of firing burst after burst of machine gun fire just ahead of it as it turned towards the ship, deflecting it away.

'Up atop the bridge, the Captain was helping by yelling orders to his

helmsman, manoeuvring the ship away from the deadly little iron fish. Both of them were cool, collected, logical. The only two such on the ship.' This was praise indeed, given that in his diary before setting off from Iceland, Carraway had written off *Troubadour's* 34-year-old master George Salvesen as a dull 'squarehead', a man who 'is 100% Norwegian . . . and is scornful of America and Americans, as well as any other nationality except Norwegians.' But Carraway would not be the first to revise his first impressions of a fellow human being in a life and death situation. That was certainly how Carraway regarded it, as is made clear by the next words in his account.

'I was desperate . . . This was one of those torpedoes designed to travel in a 100 yard circle and it must be avoided. Back on the bridge I manned my gun and waited. In a few moments I saw the track cross our stern and head for me again. I sighted my gun on it and let fly . . . at its nose, hoping to set it off, or sink it before it could reach us again. Before the pan was fired out, I saw her nose turn up and vanish. She was sunk. The *Troubadour* was saved. It was hard to believe, but there it was.'

Carraway's was far from the only account by men in the Allies' merchant ships which described their witnessing a near miss.[20] Nor were the escorts immune. HMS *Keppel*'s Commander Jack Broome reported how his destroyer 'under full helm, avoided a torpedo by inches.'[21] But perhaps the most remarkable survival story on the side of the Allies that day occurred after a torpedo was fired at the starboard side of the Soviet tanker *Azerbaijan*, the 4th vessel in the convoy's 6th column. In the words of her captain, Vladimir Nikolaevich Izotov, as the missile hit, 'our ship shuddered violently, a loud explosion was heard, and the whole stern of the ship . . . was hidden behind a mass of [linseed] oil and diesel fuel thrown upwards into a huge column that was higher than the mast and which was blazing at the top. The ship abruptly veered to the left, and then leant over to her right.'[22]

Yet rather than panicking and immediately ordering his men to abandon ship, which might well have been the reaction of the majority of masters in the convoy had they seen such a terrifying sight from the bridges of their ships, Izotov coolly waited to see whether the situation really was irrecoverable. He was rewarded for his bravery when within minutes, the column of oil and scalding steam subsided. Then he set about issuing the orders that would enable the vessel to continue on her journey.

One group of men was ordered to move the content of one of

Azerbaijan's starboard holds to the port side in order to counteract the list. The engineer repaired one of the engines that had been damaged by the explosion, and the men who had fallen into the sea when their lifeboat had been lowered prematurely and clumsily, were picked up. At around 8.45 p.m., about half an hour after sustaining what at first appeared to be catastrophic damage, Izotov was in a position to order his engineers to go full steam ahead so that they could start the long haul that was designed to see them catch up with the convoy.

Some of the German Heinkel crews survived in spite of living through equally dangerous circumstances. Eicke, whose plane had reached the back of the convoy, had been so impressed by the clouds of steam and smoke, and the huge fireball, issuing forth out of *William Hooper* as he had pulled his plane up to avoid the ship's mast that he temporarily dropped his guard. Seconds later he had been brought back to his senses when his radio operator reported that some of the smoke he could see was being made by his own plane. Thick white smoke was billowing out of his right engine which was on fire. 'I glanced at the instruments,' Eicke reported later. 'The oil pressure was dropping. The temperature was rising.'

There was nothing for it but to break off the attack immediately. He eventually switched off the burning motor, and he and his crew only made it back to the base at Bardufoss after dropping out of the plane the ammunition drum, and even its armour-plated panels to lighten the plane's load.[23]

Given the intensity of the defensive fire emanating out of the Allies' ships' guns, it was not surprising that some of the other German pilots also came to grief. The 32-year-old Roger Hill, the lieutenant commander in charge of the British destroyer HMS *Ledbury,* which formed part of the protection force on the convoy's starboard side, later wrote: 'Up to this time of the war, I had never seen such a barrage put up against an air attack. The whole sky round the convoy was a mass of bursting shells, with the black bursts remaining in the sky. Tracers were going in all directions, and the sea [was] boiling with the falling shrapnel. The noise of the gunfire was continuous, and in the centre [of the convoy there was a] . . . great pall of black smoke, slowly rising where a ship loaded with arms and ammunition had been hit.'[24]

The confusion – and cruelty – of war was highlighted by the following extract from the report by the 32-year-old actor Douglas Fairbanks Junior,

who in his capacity as aide to the commander of USS *Wichita*, one of four cruisers in the 1st Cruiser Squadron that was shadowing the convoy, was looking on from five miles away: 'A plane is falling in flames. It crashes. Great blinding flash of fire hundreds of feet high, then black smoke. Big cheer from *Wichita*. Like being in the bleachers at a ball game: "Go get the bastards!" Now we hear the explosion and the sickening whoosh of the fire. Looks like a ship is hit badly. Fat smoke curling upwards. Yes, it is a ship. Now another plane dives in flames: another Nazi bites the dust.'[25]

No-one has better described what it was like to be on the receiving end of all this shelling and flak when flying at just 20 to 25 metres above the sea than the 27-year-old Leutnant Georg Kanmayer. In his account he related what occurred when he recklessly flew his plane too close to the American destroyer USS *Wainwright* which was located on the convoy's starboard bow between 3,000 and 4,000 yards away from the nearest merchant ship: '[As soon as] I came within the range of the destroyer *Wainwright*, I was surrounded by pillars of water. My aircraft swayed as if drunk because of the shells exploding near me, [and] my radio stopped working after being hit.

'When I was close enough, I dropped one of my torpedoes [and] I can still recall how at that point someone in the plane remarked that we were doing OK. It was at that precise moment that I heard a terrible noise, and for a few seconds I was unable to see anything except splinters and dirt.

'When I could see again, I noticed that my aircraft was flying straight at the destroyer. The plane's left engine and the hydraulic oil that had leaked into the cockpit were on fire, and my body was also being burned by the flames. All the windows and instruments in the aircraft had been shattered.

'Our mechanic . . . came to my aid. I indicated with my head that I was still conscious. On seeing this, he ran to the back of the plane to fetch the fire extinguisher which I used to put out the flames on me. I realized at that point the index finger on my left hand was in a terrible state, and was only connected to my hand by a piece of skin.

'While I pulled the plane up to the right in a steep curve, my observer shot at the destroyer with the 2 cm cannon, and it was then that the aircraft was hit in its oil tank.

'In the meantime my mechanic had dropped the second torpedo as an

emergency measure, but I could not extinguish the fire as the air rushing into the plane directed the flames into the middle of the plane . . .'

In the end Kanmayer decided there was no option but to turn off his left engine and endeavour to crash land his plane in the sea. This he managed to do after bouncing a few times, no mean feat given that when he hit the water, he was still travelling at around 125 miles per hour.

The impact of the landing threw him out of his seat, and left him nursing a broken left hand to add to the injury to his finger. But the action ended well for him, and the other three men in his crew, because after they had climbed out of the wrecked Heinkel into its floating rubber dinghy, they were approached by *Ledbury* and rescued by her crew. The British destroyer's Lieutenant Commander Hill was so impressed by the German pilot's bravery that he refused to comply with the normal rule that forbids the making of any detour to rescue a fallen enemy in U-boat infested waters lest such an act jeopardize the safety of the warship's crew. Also, like one of those merciful jousting knights one reads about from ancient times, he nobly felt it behoved him to save the four Germans because notwithstanding *Keppel*'s Commander Broome's subsequent statement that the American destroyer had been responsible, Hill believed it was *Ledbury*'s guns, rather than *Wainwright*'s, which had shot down Kanmayer's plane.[26]

Kanmayer's aircraft was one of four Heinkels that failed to make it back to Bardufoss after the attack. Equally significant was that of those that did return, there were hardly any that were not damaged.[27] This reduced the likelihood that the mass attack could be repeated. What must have been particularly galling for the German commanders was the realization that they had been masters of their own misfortune. Their faulty tactics had lessened their chances of success: the firepower focusing on the Heinkel torpedo bombers could have been reduced if the other Luftwaffe unit sent to attack the convoy had been able to deploy at the same time as Eicke's group rather than arriving on the scene earlier.[28] That is not to denigrate what the armed guards and gunners in the Allies' ships had achieved, for the men protecting PQ17's merchant ships had shown how difficult it was to decimate a well-disciplined convoy from the air.

That lesson made what happened next, while the convoy was still heading in a north-easterly direction towards the relative security provided by the ice edge, so difficult to comprehend (see 6B in Map 1, 6 in

Map 13 and Note 29 for the location, to the south-east of Hope Island).[29] Some minor details in the following account by *Ledbury*'s Roger Hill have been justly challenged (see Note 30), but no-one disputes the fundamental thrust of what he said took place shortly before 10.30 p.m. that night, less than two hours after the last aircraft had flown away to the south-west: 'The Commodore hoisted a string of flags. The Yeoman knelt down, and using his big telescope, called out the letters for someone to write down. Then he looked them up in the code book, and said to me: "The Commodore's Chief Yeoman has made a proper balls-up this time; the signal means: Convoy is to scatter."

' "Put the answering pendant at the dip," I replied (which means: your signal not understood, and makes the originator check it). I saw that the destroyer near me had also got the answering pendant at the dip.

'The Commodore's ship lowered the flags, and then hoisted the same ones again . . . At the same time [Commander] Jackie Broome in [the destroyer HMS] *Keppel,* came up on the radio telephone: "To all destroyers: Strike!, repeat Strike!" '[30] That was the pre-arranged code, which when circulated without a time of origin, warned all destroyers to get ready to receive the order to join *Keppel* immediately.[31]

' "Christ!" I thought, "Here we go. Surface attack by the *Tirpitz* (the German battleship)." And I searched the horizon with my glasses.'[32]

Shortly afterwards, prompted by Broome, Hill issued the order to go full steam ahead to join *Keppel*.[33] Within minutes, *Keppel* followed by the five other destroyers under Broome's command, was pulling out ahead of the convoy so that they could all head off to the south-west together, the direction from which their crews expected *Tirpitz* would appear. But before they made their final move, Broome ordered his chief yeoman to use his most powerful signal searchlight to send a message to Rear Admiral Louis Hamilton, commander of the cruiser force, which was now clearly visible a few miles to the north-east, and which was surging southwards too.[34] Hamilton approved Broome's proposal that the six destroyers should link up with Hamilton's Cruiser Squadron One.[35] Then off they went together towards Norway, with lookouts on every ship scouring the horizon with binoculars for signs of the fearsome German battlegroup which at least some expected to spot on the horizon at any minute.[36]

It seems likely that many of the sailors in the Allies' two converging

forces believed at the time that what they were doing was not only right, but that it was heroic. However even then, there were some in the Allies' warships who reviled what they were witnessing. 'We hate leaving PQ17,' Douglas Fairbanks wrote in his diary. 'It looks so helpless . . . The ships are going round in circles, turning this way and that like so many frightened chicks . . . Is the German Fleet out? If so, what of it? That's what we came up for, isn't it?' Later, once he had realized that they were not going to meet up with *Tirpitz* after all, his diary struck an even glummer chord: 'The wind is out of our sails. We try and tell ourselves that there must have been good reasons for us to have avoided further action . . . [But] the men feel ashamed and resentful.'[37]

Fairbanks' gloss represented the charitable interpretation. Howard Carraway in SS *Troubadour* evidently felt he and his men had been betrayed: 'Brought into the middle of the fire and [only] then told there was no water,' was the caustic complaint he scribbled in his diary.[38]

But it was not just the abandonment that was causing upset. Some of the men in the ships left behind, who had seen how aircraft and U-boats had been stalking the convoy ever since it was first sighted, were terrified they were being cut loose and left to die. 'We're better off as we are,' wailed Sidney Kerslake, the 22-year-old coxswain on the armed trawler *Northern Gem* when he heard the new orders. 'On our own we have no chance at all.' His youth and the thought of missing virtually all his adult life made the prospect of death particularly horrific. He later admitted that he had only controlled his emotions because he felt it was expected of him on account of his responsible position.

However, even he lost it when another young member of the crew kept repeating over and again: 'We'll never make it', or words to that effect. 'I literally had to shake him by the shoulders to get him to stop saying what most of us were thinking,' wrote Kerslake. The young coxswain only adopted a more fatalistic attitude when it dawned on him that he was possibly becoming downcast for no good reason. 'I thought: "We are a small ship on a very large ocean, and with a bit of luck, we should take some finding." '[39]

No such sense of proportion was in evidence in the Soviet Union's take on the action up to this point, once it became known. In an excoriating critique of their allies' conduct, the following passages appeared in a letter

that the head of the political department of the Soviet Union's Northern Sea Fleet wrote to his country's Political Department Commissar:

'At the captains' conference [in Iceland just before PQ17 set out], the English bragged that the convoy was to be protected by a strengthened escort, and that there was therefore no need to be afraid of any attacks from the air . . . In theory with this strength, it was possible to repel a large attack . . . However something strange occurred. As soon as the planes arrived, the military vessels immediately turned around and steamed off in the opposite direction, "heroically" abandoning the merchant ships . . . In this way the British "warriors" saved their own skins . . . As the convoy was being dispersed, they said [to those they were supposed to be protecting] "Save yourselves if you can." '[40]

So what was this strange event to which the Northern Sea Fleet's political department chief alluded? Was it that Britain, an island nation famed for her navy, had allowed her fleet to become so antiquated, that even when reinforced by American warships, it was no match for *Tirpitz,* Germany's gigantic new battleship? Or was it that the British admirals, aided and abetted by their American partners, were at best refusing to take risks to aid another country, or, at worst, were running scared? Or was there something else going on behind the scenes, which was so secret that no-one was saying anything about it?