

CHAPTER ONE

The evacuation of Toulon left no time for anyone to be shy when it came to being active: the defences were falling to the French revolutionary armies in increasing numbers, the forts being abandoned, blowing their stores of powder, and the general situation was deteriorating by the hour. Even if Lieutenant John Pearce, a naval officer by accident rather than design, thought himself free from the need to respond to orders, to refuse to serve under such circumstances when the fate of the entire garrison was at stake, would have been churlish in the extreme.

Thus he found himself, along with those men for whom he had taken responsibility, aboard the fireship HMS *Vulcan*, heading past the Grosse Tour and into an inner bay known as the Petite Rade, his destination the naval harbour of Toulon, intent on adding to the destruction. Beneath his feet the ship was being primed,

which meant the barrels of powder and pitch with which it was equipped were being linked to the fuses and highly inflammable liquids which would turn the vessel into an explosive fireball.

HMS *Vulcan* was leading a small squadron made up of manned galleys under the command of Captain Sir Sidney Smith, tasked with ensuring that when the port finally fell to the enemy, little of military value would be left for their use. The fireship was to be laid alongside the capital ships of the French fleet, those not fit for sea or vessels that could not be manned and sailed out. Once ignited, HMS *Vulcan* would turn into the torch that destroyed them and they in turn would fire the rest of the vessels tied up to the naval quays.

Not content that such measures would be sufficient, it had been decided that fires must be set on the vessels themselves, to ensure ruin, just in case the French sought to save them. While Pearce agreed that the service was necessary, there were friends with him who did not: the group of fellows, of which he was one, who knew themselves collectively as the Pelicans.

‘They are short of men,’ Pearce insisted.

‘Short of men,’ grumbled Charlie Taverner, the least eager to undertake the service. ‘How can a whole fleet be short of men?’

‘There are not enough hands to crew all the ships in the French fleet, and according to Admiral Lord Hood scarce enough to man the vessels he already commands, given the losses he has suffered.’

‘Old Hood must be desperate to send for you, Charlie.’ That jest got Michael O’Hagan a queer look, which only made the huge Irishman laugh more, his eyes narrowing in that massive head, yet still able to twinkle from the reflected light of the fires that surrounded the bay. ‘Even Rufus here has at least the virtue of being willing.’

‘No I ain’t,’ Rufus Dommet protested: he had been agreeable when asked, but as ever when challenged, wanted to side with Charlie.

‘Well,’ Pearce sighed, ‘we are here now, so unless you’re in the mood to swim, it would be best to get through with it and then get back to the hospital to load the wounded afore that too is overrun.’

That was the duty he had been drawn away from. The hospital in question lay on the St Mandrier Peninsula and was extremely vulnerable to enemy attack, protected as it was by a poorly manned and equipped redoubt where the narrow neck joined the mainland; indeed, it would have fallen if its strategic position had been of value. Luckily the French attack was not one designed to take territory but to render the anchorages of Toulon untenable: in short, to drive out the combined fleets of Britain, Spain and Naples, because to stay within range of the shore-based enemy cannon would be too costly.

The name of the man directing this assault was known to all now: not the general in command but the artillery officer, a fellow called Buonaparte, who had cleverly eschewed infantry assaults and instead moved forward his guns in calculated steps that took no account of casualties

sustained, creeping ever closer to that inner bay. He knew, as did those he fought, that to command the entrance to the Petite Rade was to trap inside every vessel that remained. Lord Hood had reacted as he should: there were no more British or allied ships to ensnare now, they had all upped anchor and fled to the safety of the wide outer bay known as the Grande Rade.

HMS *Vulcan* was towing several boats, passing first a steady and departing stream of overloaded fishing and coastal trading vessels, then, within sight of the commercial waterfront, a quay densely packed with people intent on desperate flight, people who knew what was coming with the revolutionary armies: the guillotine and the representatives on mission from the Committee of Public Safety, men driven by a bloodlust that would see it employed for day after day to decapitate those they saw as the enemy of their murderous political philosophy.

‘Look at them, poor souls,’ Michael said.

As the Irishman said this the press became so great that several of those at the front, hoping for a boat, were pushed into the water, their distressed cries echoing over the rumble of the mob. The few boats left at the quay were loading only those with the means to pay, their chattels with them if they had enough funds. Those without means were left to pray or fall; indeed, the harbour was already awash with the floating bodies and possessions of those who had suffered and could not swim.

‘We should be lookin’ to them, not setting ships afire. We’s about the wrong duty.’

‘Who speaks there?’ came a loud and commanding voice. ‘Am I leading traitors to do their duty?’

‘Quiet, Michael,’ Pearce snapped: he knew his friend well enough to guess there would be a response and an impolite one. Then he turned to face the officer commanding the ship, a long-serving lieutenant called Hare, whom he had only met when coming aboard that evening. ‘My man speaks from humanity, sir.’

‘Humanity be damned, sir, when necessity calls. Tell him to mind his tongue or, by God, he’ll feel the lash when this is over.’

That the ship’s captain meant what he said was evident by the look on his face, made more menacing by the fact that it was lit in orange and red by the flames from ashore, these reflecting off the dense, low cloud as well as the still harbour water. Raging along the hills that led up to Mont Faron, the ridge that dominated the port, the fires were caused by the burning defence works, the redoubts and small forts, which had been built since the allied fleets had taken possession of the anchorage in August. Below, the town itself was being bombarded by revolutionary cannon, setting building after building ablaze. The task set for this little flotilla was straightforward: anything that might be of use to the besiegers, soon to be the owners of this premier naval port, was to be torched – the arsenal, the rope-walk, sail lofts and warehouses full of stores.

Given they were almost the first words Hare had addressed to John Pearce his impression of the fellow was based only on what he could see. There was

arrogance in his posture: hands behind his back, feet spread to anticipate any slight roll of the ship and a sort of sneer on his heavily pockmarked face.

‘You do not see the need, sir, to offer succour to these poor unfortunates?’

John Pearce should not have spoken, he knew that even as he said the words: regardless of how he perceived his status, to take issue with a fellow officer and one ranked as a master and commander, much senior to him in years served, was inadvisable at the best of times and this was far from that. Yet he was incapable of allowing roughshod authority to rule his behaviour.

The response was a bark. ‘I see the need, sir, to serve my king.’

‘Then perhaps, sir, those of Naples and Spain are more Christian sovereigns.’

‘Damn you, sir, what do you mean?’

‘I mean, sir, that if you look yonder to the outer mole you will observe Neapolitan and Spanish warships taking off the refugees, an act which shames those like us who serve their royal cousin.’

Hare stalked up to him and looked Pearce right in the eye, his nose an inch away. ‘You dare dispute with me, sir?’

Pearce held both his ground and the man’s eye. ‘Not dispute, sir, I merely point out what I see.’

‘Well, sir, I will take note of what you do, and if it does not satisfy, you may well find that a court decides you are not fit to hold a lieutenant’s commission.’

‘They can have it now, sir, given it is not something

I value so highly that I will not speak as I find.'

'Gentlemen, please,' said another voice, gentle but authoritative, that of their titular commander, though given he was clad in rating's clothing, check shirt and ducks, it would have been hard to identify him as a post captain. 'We are not lacking in enemies to dispute with, I see no virtue in arguing amongst ourselves.'

'We cannot have troublemaking, Sir Sidney.'

The man actually laughed. 'Then I am in the wrong place, Mr Hare, for I am bent on that very thing.' He then looked at the other party to the dispute. 'Lieutenant, I confess I do not know your name.'

'Pearce, sir.'

'Then, Lieutenant Pearce, your concern for these poor folk is to be commended.' That brought a hiss from Hare. 'But so is the captain's love of duty. If we do that, which I confess must be our primary concern, perhaps then we will have time to look to our compassion. Captain Hare, I require to be put ashore with the men designated to join me, so that I may supervise the destruction of the port facilities.'

As he uttered those words a cannonball landed right alongside the ship sending up a great plume of water, which, on a windless night, rose to a great height before dropping straight back down again, soon to be followed by a second. Seeking the source, it soon became obvious that some of the vessels chosen to be destroyed were manned and a few of their cannon were being employed to defend them.

'I see the rats have emerged from their cellars,' Smith said. 'Toulon is full of men whose loyalty is attached to

a weathervane, for the monarchy one minute and the Revolution now the tide has shifted. Captain Hare, I require that your guns be employed to keep those fellows honest.’

‘With the men you propose to take ashore, sir, I am light on gun crews.’

‘Then let us oblige, sir,’ said Pearce. ‘My men and I will happily help work one of your cannon.’

‘Well said, Mr Pearce. Now, Captain Hare, let us have the boats alongside and see to what we are about.’

Pearce, Michael, Rufus and Charlie found themselves helping to work a long nine-pounder with the rest of the gun crew made up by a trio of men from *Vulcan* and, if they were unfamiliar with each other, so common was the discipline of the Royal Navy that they were soon serving the weapon handsomely, knocking, at near point-blank range, lumps out of the enemy bulwarks and seeking to silence any counterfire.

Other cannon were playing along the shore, to keep the enemy clear of the route to the arsenal, or to be more precise those Toulonnais who had reason to seek to stop the destruction, the folk who earned their livelihoods in that facility. Already flames were beginning to lick around the major buildings and there was the constant crack of musketry as the detachment of soldiers sent to defend the firing parties went about their duty, albeit with many a returned discharge from the French workers.

Coat and hat off now, John Pearce was on the lanyard, both aiming and firing the weapon, peering through the gun port to do the former, this while the weapon was

levered round and the elevation wedged at his command. He stood well clear once the gun was loaded and primed, to haul hard on his line and fire the flintlock, the discharge sending the huge lump of black metal, as well as the trunnion on which it ran, jumping hard back on to its restraining tackles. Powder monkeys raced to and from the magazine with charges taken from the gunner, sat, hopefully safe, behind his wetted screens, this while the more useless ratings fetched balls from the lower-deck storerooms to keep regular the bombardment.

Much as they were playing hard on their enemies, along with the other vessels in the flotilla, the Pelicans were under return fire and shots were striking home, either slamming into the hull and rocking the whole ship or, aimed better, taking out great chunks of the bulwarks or raking across the deck to land in the water behind, having sliced through rigging and ropes, while all around and beneath him there were men working flat out, still priming the ship.

Pearce never knew what set off one part of that: an enemy shot striking a deadly spark or a piece of foolishness by one of those employed in the task; all he felt was the result. The dull boom coincided with the planking beneath his feet rising up as if forced skywards by a giant's hand. It then began to crack open as the first flames emerged with the rest of the blast, the gun they were working, just run in and unstable, tipping over on its side on the suddenly uneven deck.

He was thrown to his knees, while Michael O'Hagan

was blasted backwards to roll along the deck. Rufus Dommet – a terrified look on his young, freckled face – was slammed into the bulwark, while Charlie Taverner, seemingly unaffected, stood still and shocked. Then his tricorne hat went sailing through the air and Charlie dropped down to his knees, holding his ears. John Pearce had felt the same pressure, but he was able to turn to see where the real damage had been done.

The explosion had come from under the quarterdeck, at one time full of people but now utterly empty, with the wheel gone, the front of the poop shattered and the cabin behind it ripped open, the bulkhead shredded to expose a scene of devastation in what had been Hare's quarters. Getting to his feet with some effort, Pearce headed aft, able on the way to help raise a shocked and bewildered Michael, though in grasping to pull him up he nearly fell over himself.

'What in the name of Holy Mary was that?' Michael shouted, though all a deafened John Pearce could hear was a muffled sound that seemed distant. The ship was rocking like a see-saw and it was with some difficulty they made their way across the splintered planking to join men equally bewildered and equally deaf, all shouting at each other and all unable to properly hear what was being said. Looking through the gap that had once been the starboard bulkhead he saw in the water two blue coats, one on his back and another face down.

There was no time for hesitation, no time to issue any orders, he just had to hope the men left standing

would show some sense. Kicking off his shoes he dived in, hitting the waters of the harbour, so cold it made him gasp. In an instant he struck out to get to the second blue coat and turn him face up lest he drown and as he reached him a rope landed in the water by his arm. Looping it round the body was not easy but Pearce did manage to get enough of a knot on the man to allow them to haul him back to the ship.

That done he swam over to where Hare lay on his back, his eyes closed, his mouth open. There was no time to see if he was alive or dead, only time to get underneath him and grasp his shoulders, then kick out for the ship's side. Hands were there as he reached the rough scantlings, ready to haul the captain out, then reach down for Pearce and help him back on deck, where he found an anxious midshipman leaning over the comatose bodies, examining them.

'They're alive,' he yelled, into the cloth ears around him, looking to see if they had heard, reassured by the eager nods.

Pearce, dripping wet, was quick to realise, after a searching glance, he had to be the most senior person left aboard. He also knew that if there had been one unwanted explosion there could very easily be a second and third which would rip them all to shreds. Issuing the orders that followed his conclusion was a nightmare of endless shouting, always facing the person he was addressing so at least they would have his lips as an aid to comprehension, this while he got

back into his shoes and his uniform coat.

‘Prepare a boat. We must get any wounded to St Mandrier, while all the other boats are to be made ready to abandon ship.’

The midshipman mouthed the need to get the cannon loaded and run out, so they would go off as the fire took hold of the ship, helping to demolish whatever they were aimed at. A party had to be organised to man the relieving tackles below decks, given the ship’s wheel had been shattered in the explosion. Those who could handle muskets needed to get them loaded so as to play upon the decks of the two capital ships between which he was going to jam HMS *Vulcan* and keep them clear of renegade French sailors.

‘Do you know where the main fuses are to be lit?’ he shouted to the midshipman, relieved when the lad nodded. ‘Then get to them and stand by to ignite them on my command.’

He turned to a quartermaster’s mate who had not been on deck at the time of the explosion but had rushed to the station immediately it had occurred. ‘Stand by the companionway to shout down the orders to steer.’

That directive was followed by a stream of others, calling for sails to be set by men who seemed to move as slowly as bearers at a funeral. There were no specific commands, anything that would serve to give them steerage way would do, though with no wind to speak of that led to limp and useless sails. Instructions were sent to the men who, on his orders, had piled into the boats,

to get up ahead and take tow. Their efforts brought round *Vulcan's* bowsprit, damned slowly but round all the same, with Pearce shouting to the quartermaster's mate the orders that would ease the rudder to aid them and, once on course, to get the men from below to lash off their tackles and be ready to disembark.

Onshore he could see the results of what Sir Sidney Smith was about, though he could only hear muffled evidence of the explosions. The arsenal was alight from end to end, the flames seeming to lick the low clouds, creating a glow that lit up everything around the naval harbour in a sort of hellish montage. HMS *Vulcan* had drifted into position, the towing boats having got enough way on her to get her heading to where Pearce needed her to be, her bowsprit right between the bow and stern of a pair of French seventy-fours.

It had to be well timed: Pearce had to get himself and the remainder of the crew off the ship after the fuses were lit but before they took hold and exploded the powder, he having no true idea of how long that was. So he ordered everyone into the boats and went below himself to join the midshipman, who now stood over a tangle of fuses, long trails of primed cord, with a piece of slow match smouldering away in his hand. Sign language rather than words told Pearce that, once ignited, they would be required to run like the devil. After a nodded acknowledgement, the lad touched the fuse ends and they immediately began to splutter and trail off in a cloud of acrid smoke, progressing towards the various charges.

He and the midshipmen were no longer there. The boy was racing ahead of Pearce, taking the companionway three steps at a time, but he had to be grabbed and directed to where the last boat, manned by the Pelicans, lay rocking and waiting. As soon as they had one foot on the cutter, the oars were dipped and they began to pull away from the ship's side.

Pearce should have sat down, but he was keen to see what the result would be and it was impressive: HMS *Vulcan* went up like a volcano erupting, a great sheet of flame shooting from her deck, that followed by a boom as the powder barrels went up. It was as though she grew to twice her size for a second, but that was blotted out by the mass of flames that engulfed her, great streams of burning pitch shooting out to run along the scantlings of the French seventy-fours, some rising high enough to set afire the standing rigging, that rapidly catching fire.

Taking his naval officer's hat from Michael, who had had the presence of mind to gather it up, Pearce jammed it on his head just as the debris from the explosion began to fall. Had he not been wearing it the lump of wood might have done him serious harm. As it was, landing on the crown of his scraper, it was hard enough to fell him and knock him unconscious.

'Row for St Mandrier,' Michael O'Hagan ordered, a shout that included the boat carrying the two wounded officers. In doing so he completely ignored the bemused midshipman who should have issued any command.