

Four Hours at Sea

"And out of the darkness came the sea . . ."

It was near midnight . . .

As I straightened the red goggles over my sleep-filled eyes, I could feel the ship roll and pitch violently beneath my feet. Outside, there was a great theater . . . the curtain had been raised and the scene of fierce winds, heavy rains, and total darkness was present.

I slowly dressed with a feeling of weariness as the hour hand of my watch had silently slipped toward midnight. I was mindful that I would soon find myself upon the stage of Nature's theater, struggling through a four-hour play with the wind, rain, and darkness as the supreme characters.

I checked and rechecked my many belongings, took one sharp glance at the picture of Anne on the top of my bunk, quietly turned the knob and closed the door behind me. As I walked down the narrow passageway, I felt the red glow of the battle lights on the sides of the bulkheads fill my eyes. The hazy dim redness seemed to contribute a bit of warmth to the inner part of the ship. The stillness was a quietness of peace and a peacefulness still and lonely. Rounding the corner, I pushed aside the blackout curtains, returned them hastily to their original position, and opened the hatch leading on deck.

The terrific blast of cold air penetrated my body in such a short time that it was hardly a part of time at all. I slipped off my goggles only to find the wind's rage tearing deeper into my body through the open doorway of my eyes. My vision was filled with water and I could see only mere shadows of blackness reeling back and forth across a backdrop of full, gray clouds.

A deep, hollow moaning filled the very uttermost regions of my

heavily clothed body, and I stood motionless gazing into what appeared to be an unknown world. I was suddenly struck with the realization that I had become a living part of this world, to walk its long dark corridors, seeking desperately to uncover its secrets, or to reach blindly into its depths, being mindful that there was no end.

Minutes of blackness drenched with rain soaked into the element of Time, and I soon realized that my rigid, gloved hands were grasping the ladder leading topside to the bridge. I trudged up the great stairway . . . into the wind, the darkness, and beyond the darkness into what appeared to be a black draped eternity. But suddenly there was no wind any longer . . .

By
Charles Emerson Wilfong

only stillness. I had passed behind a section of the ship and the blasts were silenced. Then just as quickly as they had disappeared they returned . . . ripping with a continual roar in my ears that seemed to ring like the toll of a huge bell. The higher I moved the more I could see of the horizon, only a thin line as if it had been drawn with a pencil of silver lead. Sheets of darting rain drops fell crazily into the mountainous swells of the sea as I reached the bridge. I glanced momentarily across the great expanse of water and faintly saw numerous ships of the convoy, bouncing upward and downward in a giant pool under the black floor of heaven.

As I began walking across the watery deck of the bridge, I saw Marcus standing near one of the twin y-millimeter guns. He had been a part of this raging hell for

two hundred and forty minutes. We exchanged headphones and spoke only a few words as he wanted to go below for coffee immediately. I had just buckled the second strap of my phones when I saw him turning down the ladder and being engulfed in the blackness.

The only light that I could detect from my position was a tiny, flickering blue stern light on the ship to our port beam. It gave me a sense of security, as I watched it rise and fall, to have it remind me once again that we were not alone in this maddened sea. I followed its waving path for a seemingly endless chain of moments . . . the faint blueness shrouded me in a curtain of memories, pinned back by these tiny blue jewels of friendly light. Suddenly I could see the Christmas tree at home with its colorful sparkle . . . then it was the blueness of Anne's dress the morning we said goodbye on the front porch of her home . . . then came the lazy blue of a summer sky sprawling across the heavens . . . but all at once there was no Christmas tree, no blue dress, no summer evening sky; this curtain of memory had been ripped to threads of reality by the sound of a screaming voice moving rapidly through the wind.

The seaman at the wheel shouted that the giant, wooden circle under his hands had failed to respond to one of his turns. Ensign Roberts, the mate on watch, was inside the wheelhouse in a brief instant dialing the Captain's cabin on the interphone. As I approached the scene, the wind lashed me to the outer railing; and between the short intervals of blinking my eyes I saw Captain Silk bounding up the ladder. His grey hair was blowing wildly and his white shirt lapped fiercely at his tanned body. He called me to hoist two red lights on the for-

