

The Midshipman

by David Drake, 1945–

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„I can see he’s a good officer; but is he lucky?“
—Attributed to Napoleon

"Woetjans!" Bosun's Mate Runcie shouted as he came out the forward dorsal hatch of the battleship RENOWN. "Where the bloody hell is—oh! There you are, Woetjans. We got a new midshipman here, McKinnon. I want you to teach him the ropes."

Ellie Woetjans was within an hour of the end of her watch, but she wasn't surprised that Runcie had just put her on a task that'd take her three hours to do right. The bosun's mate didn't like her, maybe because he knew that despite his rank and experience, Able Spacer Woetjans could've done Runcie's job better than he could.

Woetjans stepped down onto the hull. She'd been inspecting the running rigging of Dorsal A while the antenna was extended here in Harbor Three on Cinnabar. She eyed her new charge without enthusiasm.

Mckinnon braced to attention as she looked at him, but he met her eyes squarely instead of keeping them straight ahead. He was five nine or so and probably 21—the usual age for graduation from the Academy. Though he wasn't overweight, Woetjans thought he looked a bit soft.

Anyway, physical fitness was a good place to start. She opened one of the equipment lockers set around the base of the antenna and said, "Okay, kid. Pick a pair of gauntlets and lets see how quick you can skin up to the masthead."

"Yes, ma'am," Mckinnon said. He squatted to review the selection of rigging gloves in the locker, then picked a medium pair. Dorsal A had two sets of ratlines, aft and starboard. The kid put his hand on the aft set, but Woetjans said, "Take the others. I'm going up these to watch you."

The Mckinnon nodded, then started up the starboard lines, using his hands for balance but climbing with his legs. The rigging was woven beryllium monocrystal. Though strong and tough, individual strands frayed and broke. The gauntlets protected the kid's hands, but if his arms or legs brushed a break standing proud, it would lay him open.

Woetjans could see that Mckinnon was being careful about how he moved. That was common sense, but this was a test of how he performed under stress. If she'd read the kid as a different sort of person, she's have reached over and whacked him on the ass with a length of cable, but there was another way to deal with the likes of Mckinnon. Woetjans started climbing at speed.

Ellie Woetjans was six feet six and even stronger than she looked. She swung onto the inside of the shrouds so that she didn't brush them, doing all the work with her arms. She'd reached the platform at the first antenna joint before Mckinnon knew what was happening.

There was a chance that the kid would try to do the same thing himself—and inevitably fall. Twenty feet to the steel hull would break bones, probably; but it wouldn't kill him, probably. Woetjans was teaching him a lesson, after all.

Mckinnon hesitated a moment—Woetjans looked down past her dangling boots—but he stayed on the outside of the lines. His speed picked up considerably, though, which is what Woetjans had intended. She waited at the masthead, a hundred and thirty feet above the hull and waited for the kid to reach her.

Mckinnon's face was red, and Woetjans could see tags of torn fabric hanging off the new utilities he'd put on for his first day on his first ship. He got onto the little platform and met Woetjans' eyes squarely, though he had to tilt his face up to do it.

"What next, ma'am?" Mckinnon said. He managed to control his breathing, but he couldn't do anything about the rasp in his voice.

"Now we go back down," Woetjans said, grinning. "Go ahead—I'll catch you up."

Mckinnon started down, feeling for the ratlines with his boots. He wasn't good at it because he didn't have enough experience to *know* where the line was. The spacing of the ratlines was always the same, no matter how big or small the vessel.

Grinning, Woetjans pushed off the platform, grabbed the first line ten feet below with her left hand, and pushed off again. She half-turned her body in the air so that she could catch the next line with her right hand instead. Woetjans was as fit as anybody, but this afternoon's workout was going to have her aching in the morning and no mistake.

Two jumps later, she rotated her body again. She couldn't afford to have a muscle cramp when she was high in the rigging.

Mckinnon watched with a desperate expression as Woetjans went past. He tried the same technique, kicking his body out from the shrouds and catching a ratline below. To Woetjans' surprise, the kid had the timing down already: twice, a third time—and then fifty feet above the hull, his hand cramped and didn't hold. It tipped him over, though. He plunged head-first toward the thick steel.

Woetjans leaned out and grabbed him. She caught him around the upper arm and swung him free between the two sets of shrouds.

Mckinnon flailed and tried to reach the aft ratlines, but Woetjans kept him too far out. Any input Mckinnon had in his current physical condition would make things worse. They were dangerous enough as it was.

Woetjans resumed climbing down in ordinary fashion until she could set the kid on the hull and stand beside him. He tried to brace to attention, but the pain made him massage his left arm where Woetjans had gripped him. She'd thought she might've dislocated his shoulder, but apparently not.

"Ma'am, what next?" he said in a husky whisper. If she hadn't been able to see his lips, she wouldn't have known what he was saying.

Cheeky little bastard, Woetjans thought. She felt her lips smiling.

"Next..." she said. She glanced around. As she'd expected, the twenty odd spacers who'd been on the dorsal hull while this was going on were all staring at them.

If the kid had dropped on his head, every one of them would've sworn that it wasn't Ellie Woetjans' fault; but they'd be wrong. She'd been showing off, and she'd already known that Mckinnon was the sort who wouldn't quit.

"Next," Woetjans repeated, "you get to the sick bay and see that you haven't torn anything, then you're off for the rest of the watch. Rudolf and Dimitrovic—" two senior midshipmen, among the present spectators—"you help the kid, all right?"

She didn't really have any authority over the midshipmen, but she'd found that folks pretty much obeyed when Ellie Woetjans told them to do something. She'd have carried Mckinnon to the sick bay herself if there'd been any back-talk, but there wasn't.

Woetjans watched the midshipmen stagger to the forward hatch. She hoped the kid had learned something. *She* bloody well had.

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Woetjans was long off-watch, but she'd gone back to the running rigging of Dorsal A. It wouldn't be past Runcie's sneaky little mind to claim that she hadn't completed the job the bosun—Marigny—had set her at the beginning of the watch, without mentioning that Runcie himself had taken her off it.

She'd just dropped down onto the hull when Rudolf came out of the forward hatch and strode over to her. He seemed concerned, so Woetjans said, "How's the kid? I know he had a bit of a jolt there."

"Well, he says he's coming right back out in a couple minutes," the midshipman said. "He doesn't want anybody to think he can't take it."

"Nobody bloody thinks that!" Woetjans said. "And if anybody does, send 'em to me and I guess I'll convince 'em another way."

"Yeah, well, Woetjans..." Rudolf said, turning his head a bit aside. "Mckinnon's kinda funny, I guess because of his grandfather. Which maybe you don't know?"

"I don't know a bloody thing!" Woetjans said. "So tell me, why don't you?"

Has that bastard Runcie dropped me into something? Bloody hell!

"Well, you see, his grandfather's Admiral Mckinnon, who was supposed to take over the Home Fleet—only Admiral Anston got Chairman of the Navy Board," Rudolf said. "They had a history. Mckinnon was posted Inspector of Supply and resigned instead. The thing is, Mckinnon wouldn't be the first officer to make a comeback when an administration changes, and my uncle says Admiral Mack has a lot of friends still."

That bastard Runcie, Woetjans thought; not for the first time. She went back over the way she'd treated the kid. After a moment she barked a laugh.

"Ma'am?" Rudolf said. It wasn't the reaction he'd expected.

"Look, kid," Woetjans said. "The only way I know to do a job is to just bloody do it. That's training too, if that's the job I got. So thanks for the warning, but I guess not much is going to change. Except I won't push quite the same way on Mckinnon, now that I'm sure he's going to give a hundred and ten percent."

Mckinnon with Dimitrovic behind him came out of the hatch. "So, kid," Woetjans called, strolling toward them. "The medic got you fixed up again?"

"The Medicomp checked me out and says I'm fit for duty, ma'am," Mckinnon said.

"Then let's take a look at the Dorsal A lifting cables," Woetjans said. "And if I decide they're worn, you and I are going to replace them. And I don't mind telling you, that's a bitch of a job—if you're up for it."

"Yes, ma'am!" the kid said.

It *was* a bitch of a job for an untrained midshipman, even with a top rigger as the other half of the team. But they did it.

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Woetjans was on boarding watch with Abnason, watching four spacers come across the extension catwalk from the quay. The huge bulk of the SOVEREIGN loomed on the other side of Noyen Harbor. The BULWARK, third battleship of Force D, Admiral Vocaine commanding, orbited over Ciano. In two days the RENOWN would replace the BULWARK. The lesser ships of Force D, the Haywright District Protection Squadron, were either in smaller harbors or—two destroyers, and a miserable duty that must be—orbiting with the BULWARK.

"I recognize Mulcahy," said Abnason, a Tech Two, peering at the returning liberty party. "The other three's riggers, aren't they?"

"Balliol, Renzler, and I guess that's Dowd," Woetjans said. "They're aft-section crew, but I know 'em, sure."

You could tell the riggers easy enough by the fact that, though probably drunk out of their skulls, they strode along the catwalk without hesitation. Mulcahy, a Power Room tech, would've been in the harbor if his rigger friends hadn't been helping him.

The liberty party paused for a breather when they reached the boarding ramp. It was the hatch itself, pivoted down to the starboard outrigger.

"Hey, who's that?" Abnason said when he saw another spacer pounding along the catwalk behind the first four. The newcomer was shouting something.

"That's Rudolf, one of the middies," Woetjans said. "What the hell happened to him? His tunic's nigh tore off."

She picked up the length of pipe she kept handy and thrust it through her belt. "Come on, let's take a look."

She started down the ramp. There were sub-machine guns and two stocked impellers in a locker behind them, but boarding watch in a friendly port didn't require guns and Woetjans had never been able to hit anything she shot at anyway.

Abnason picked up his adjustable wrench and came with her. Something was up.

Rudolf stopped with the liberty party at the base of the ramp. They were chattering at him but he seemed to be too out of breath to answer. When he saw Woetjans loom up, he lifted his face to her and said, "Ma'am, we need the Shore Police! Some Sovereigns 've got Mack!"

The gabble from the little group picked up like so many chickens being fed, but Woetjans said, "Shut up, all of you! Rudolf, where they got him?"

"We were drinking in a little pool room just the other side of the Strip," Rudolf said, "and must be a dozen Sovereigns come in, pretty well oiled already. We tried to get out but they grabbed us."

He swallowed. "I broke away, but I guess they still got Mack. We gotta get him back cause they're pretty mad."

"Right," Woetjans said. "Can you find this place again, Rudolf?"

"Yeah, sure," the midshipman said. "We didn't know it was a *Sovereign* place, we were just playing pool and having a couple beers."

"Well, let's go then," Woetjans said. "We don't need the cops."

She started toward the quay, her arm around Rudolf's shoulder just in case he needed support of one kind or the other. She couldn't quarrel with not wanting a fight against that kinda odds, but she didn't figure you left a shipmate behind to save yourself some bruises.

"Woetjans!" Abnason said. "We're on bloody watch, we can't just leave the ship open."

Woetjans turned. Abnason added, "I'm not afraid of a fight, but this is a job for the Shore Police."

Woetjans looked at the hesitating liberty party. She made a face but said, "All right, Abnason. Give your wrench to Balliol—" a black-bearded rigger with arms almost as long as Woetjans' own—"and take Mulcahy to fill the watch."

Relieving off the watch book was a bloody serious offense, but that didn't count for much right now. And Mulcahy was legless, so he wouldn't be much use in a dust-up.

"Balliol, you got the balls?"

"Sure, Ellie," he answered, taking Abnason's wrench. "Come along, you guys. We can find something for you when we get there, but with just some pussies from the Sovereign to worry about, we may not need to."

Woetjans knew that the quicker they reached Mckinnon, the likelier it was that he'd be able to walk back under his own power. She also knew, though, that it wouldn't do any good to push her people beyond what their bodies could do.

Come to think, Mckinnon himself had reminded her of that lesson. She grimaced. She really hoped they'd get there in time. She didn't let herself dwell on what "in time" might mean. They half walked, half jogged, along the next street back from The Strip facing the water.

"They wanted us to sing while they recorded us," Rudolf said. He'd got his breath and seemed to stand taller now that he was backed by four veteran riggers. "*We're middies from RENOWN, and we love to bugger sheep.*"

"That was when you took off?" Woetjans said.

"Well, Mack yelled run for it and I did," Rudolf said. "Only he started laying about him with the butt of his pool cue instead of following like I figured. I decided I'd better get help."

Woetjans didn't say anything. She might've done in a moment, but the midshipman pointed down a side-street and said, "It's just along here. On the left side."

Several spacers stood on the pavement, facing a shop whose sign read FROSTY'S above a pair of crossed pool cues. The clothing store to the left was closed, and a pair of bouncers guarded the door to what was probably a knocking-shop to the right. The bouncers kept careful eyes on the rescue party, but they didn't intervene when Woetjans led the rush.

A quick right and left from her baton laid out two of the Sovereigns, and Renzler and Dowd pitched the third through the pool hall window. One of the panes had already been broken from inside.

Balliol was a hair ahead of Woetjans going in the doorway, but there were plenty of targets left for her when she followed swinging. The spacers in the pool hall were taken completely by surprise. They'd clustered in front of the manager's office on the opposite wall. When they turned, it was the spacer flying through the window who drew their attention rather than the Renowns coming in the door.

Balliol was mostly right about not needing weapons, though he didn't drop the wrench. Woetjans kept laying about with her tubing as long as there was a head raised. Dowd and Renzler were used to working as a team in the rigging. They did the same thing here, hurling Sovereigns into whichever was the nearest wall. One human missile went halfway through the partition beside the door marked MANAGER.

"Where the hell is the kid!" Woetjans bellowed, looking around. She stooped to make sure he wasn't lying under one of the three pool tables.

"Renown!" somebody shouted. The office door was sturdier than the wall it was set in; it flew open.

Mckinnon stood in the doorway, the butt of a pool cue in his hand. His tunic had been ripped off and there was blood on his scalp—but on the pool cue also.

When he saw Woetjans, he braced to attention, and said, "Ma'am! What next?"

"Next we get our arses back to the ship before the cops arrive!" Balliol said.

"That's a bloody good idea," Woetjans said. She paused to wipe the business end of her tubing on the tunic of a fallen Sovereign.

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Dashiell City on Mantanega wasn't Woetjans' first dismount, but she sure wouldn't be sorry if it was her last. They were guarding the headquarters of the Loyalty Party in the western suburbs, and the operation had been snakebit from the start.

Lieutenant Bowerby was supposed to be leading the detachment of twenty spacers, but she'd screwed her knee up boarding the ground truck that was supposed to carry them to the site. Instead of replacing her with another lieutenant, Captain Ogawa had assigned the detachment's Number Two, Midshipman Dimitrovic, to command.

Dimitrovic wasn't a bad kid but he didn't give Woetjans the impression of being the guy she wanted in charge if it started to go tits-up. Now she stood on the roof in the sheltered doorway at the head of the stairs from the second floor, eyeing the three-story building across the street. Balliol stood at the edge of the roof, looking down over the six-inch parapet into the street. Woetjans didn't hear any traffic.

"You know..." Balliol said as he walked back. Like Woetjans, he held a stocked impeller. "This district is supposed to be all Loyalty Party, but they sure-hell don't seem very friendly to me."

A volley of shots came from the building opposite, through third-floor windows and from the roof. Balliol's left leg went out from under him. He sprawled forward, then rolled onto his back and started shooting at the hostiles on the roof. He was likely to break his shoulder, using a full-sized impeller with a hard surface behind him, but Woetjans supposed Balliol didn't have much choice.

She did, though. She stepped out onto the roof, pointed the impeller toward the opposite building, and shot off the entire magazine as fast as she could jerk the trigger. Huge clouds of beige stucco spewed up from every round. The wall must have been cinder block underneath because moments later a section you could walk through collapsed into rubble. Three or four slugs hitting pretty close together had crumbled it.

The shooting from across the way stopped. Woetjans didn't figure she'd hit anything except the building, but the racket of the shots and then the slugs smashing blocks would make most folks drop their heads while it was going on.

She tossed her empty impeller through the doorway behind her, then took Balliol under the arms and dragged him back out of sight in the stairhead. He'd kept hold of his weapon but he'd only gotten off a couple shots before the pain really hit him. His face looked gray.

"Medic!" Woetjans bellowed down the staircase. The detachment hadn't brought a Medicomp along, but there was a good chance that somebody knew more about first aid than she did. "Balliol's got one in the leg!"

The upper thigh of Balliol's trousers was sodden, but the blood wasn't spurting. Bloody hell, whose idea had this dismount been? Nobody close enough to hear the shooting, that was for sure—or who'd figured to be that close.

The hostiles had started firing again, long bursts on full auto. Some slugs ripped high over the roof of the headquarters building. Woetjans guessed that the shooters were sticking their gunhands around corners or over walls and emptying the magazine. That way their heads were well under cover.

Dimitrovic and Tech Three Sapony came up the stairs. The midshipman was wearing a commo helmet linked to the base unit in the main hall. The tech bent over Balliol and opened a medical kit while Dimitrovic huddled beside Woetjans.

Rather than take the time to reload her own impeller, Woetjans took the one that'd finally slipped from Balliol's hands. She hadn't pulled the stairhead door fully closed, so she could see the building opposite while staying in shadow.

The barrel of the weapon she'd emptied still glowed. Dimitrovic glanced at it and said, "Bloody hell, Voyt. Did you run the whole magazine through rapid fire?"

"Yeah, I guess," Woetjans said. She rubbed her right shoulder with her left fingers; it hurt like hell. "I couldn't hit anything even if I aimed so I just blasted away to keep their heads down. I could get Balliol back then."

She glared at the midshipman. "Say, what's all this about? I thought we was on their side?"

Dimitrovic shrugged. "We aren't on any side, Loyalist or Freedom Party either one," he said. "Two thirds of the RCN bulk supplies for the sector ship out of Dashiell Harbor, though, so Navy House sent Vocaine here to keep the lid on when the riots started. I guess Elder Foscara started out thinking we were going to help him mop up the Freedom Party, and he wasn't best pleased when he found out we weren't."

"Not a reason to start shooting at us," Woetjans muttered. In her heart she figured it was all you could expect from the locals once you got off Cinnabar.

There was a sustained burst of firing from an automatic impeller across the street. Metal rang as the osmium slugs tore through something out of Woetjans' sight. There was a dull *boom!* Their—the detachment's—truck's diesel fuel exploded.

Dimitrovic swore. "RENOWN," he said, keying the link on his commo helmet. "This is Unit Twelve, over."

Woetjans could hear the response as insect sounds, but she couldn't make out words. She continued to scan her narrow angle of the building opposite.

"Sir," Dimitrovic said. "They've got an automatic impeller. I don't think aircars to the roof are survivable. Isn't there a way to get a company of Marines into the back side of the building the shooting's coming from? Over."

Buzzing.

"Sir," Dimitrovic said, "I appreciate that the Marines have a lot of their plate now, but we need some help here and we need it bloody fast! We don't *have* an hour, over!"

Buzzing.

"Unit Twelve out!" Dimitrovic snarled. He looked at Woetjans and took a deep breath. "They're working on it!" the midshipman said, making the phrase a curse.

It's gone tits-up for good and all, Woetjans realized. Oh, bloody hell!

"Look," she said. "This place has a back way out, don't it? Maybe we can at least get into another building that they're not looking down on the way they do this one."

A slug from the opposite roof came in through an angle to hit the inside of the door they were sheltering behind. It ricocheted off the steel with a whang! and a spray of white sparks. The main portion of the osmium projectile shrieked across the stairhead. It blew a hole through the back wall.

"They're back there too," Dimitrovic said. "We tried the alley when the shooting started. Bevan got one in the chest. Now they've rolled a cart down to block the door and we can't even push it open from the inside."

Bloody hell! The thing to've done was to charge on through right at the start before the hostiles set up. Sure, you'd have a couple people shot, but if you go in hard and fast the chances are that a bunch of untrained civilians are going to run. Most of them would throw away the guns they likely saw that morning for the first time.

Too late now. Oh, bloody hell! And if the rest of the detachment had gotten out by the alley, she and Balliol on the roof would've been well and truly screwed.

Which they were anyway, of course. The only chance Woetjans saw for them was that the hostiles were going to take hostages. Probably not: both sides in Dashiell had been burning prisoners alive before Force D landed, and no admiral who did a deal with wogs had a career left in the RCN.

Another slug hit the door, this time from the outside. Again it howled away, but the impact bumped the panel closed and on the inner surface left a glowing red dent the size of a soup plate. Woetjans pushed the panel part-open again.

Buzzing.

"Unit Twelve, over," Dimitrovic said.

Buzzing.

"Bloody hell! Can you? But there's at least forty of them and a full-size automatic in the front. Over."

Buzzing.

"Roger that! We'll be ready! Unit Twelve out!"

Dimitrovic looked at Woetjans and said, "That was Rudolf! He and Mckinnon are coming to take us off the roof in the RENOWN's pinnacle! I'll get things organized below!"

The midshipman disappeared down the stairs as another slug zipped through the stairhead from right to left, this time without touching the steel door. Grit and dust from the walls exploded around the spacers.

Sapony bent over Balliol to cover the wounded man's face. He bent his left arm over his own nose and mouth. Balliol's trousers were ripped open and the thigh was bandaged. Blood hadn't seeped through the padding yet.

"Can a pinnacle land on the roof here?" Sapony asked when Woetjans glanced back.

"It'll light it on fire," Woetjans said. The roof was covered with a mixture of sand and tar.

She shrugged. "Guess we'll have burns. It's still the best idea I've heard yet."

The bigger question, which Woetjans didn't mention aloud, was whether the roof trusses could support the weight of the pinnacle. For herself, she wouldn't bet on it—but like she'd said, it was the best idea she'd heard yet. The pinnacle's hull plates were over an inch thick; they'd turn even slugs from an automatic impeller.

"You gonna give me a hand with Balliol?" Spony asked. "I give him a shot and he's really out of it."

"Yeah, sure," Woetjans said. There were going to be more wounded—and maybe dead too, though Dimitrovic might decide to leave them behind. If the building burned, the locals wouldn't find much to wave around for a trophy.

The locals kept shooting. Every once in a while somebody in the RCN detachment would shoot back, but when that happened a storm of shots replied. Dimitrovic had guessed more than forty hostiles, but it must be closer to a couple hundred. They could've brought the whole building down if they'd known what they were doing, but Woetjans figured you could usually trust wogs *not* to know what they were doing.

Spacers started up the staircase. They weren't crowding or panicked: just ready to move when they got the word. Looking down, Woetjans saw two more wounded, each being supported by a buddy or two.

Clason moved up beside Spony. Woetjans was afraid more would try to squeeze into the stairhead—and there wasn't room. Clason said, "I'm supposed to help get Balliol aboard."

"I figured I'd do that," Woetjans said in surprise.

Clason shook his head. "Dimitrovic wants you at the end with him for clean-up, Voyt," he said.

Woetjans nodded understanding. That made sense. Dimitrovic was doing okay for a green midshipman.

"They're about to splash!" Dimitrovic shouted up from invisibly below. "Hang on!"

Woetjans expected the pinnacle to arrive from the left because the hatch was on the starboard side, but instead the boat roared up the street from the right. *They're moving too fast...* As the boat approached the buildings, it rotated a quarter turn on its axis.

"He's lost control!" Spony shouted.

No. The helmsman had just bathed the front of the three story building with the plasma exhaust. Shots had been pinging and sparkling on the spaceship's heavy plates. That stopped instantly and Woetjans thought she heard screams over the reflected roar.

The pinnacle slanted upward as it pulled away and began to turn. Woetjans pushed the door most of the way open so that she could lean out and follow what was happening. Minutes before that would have gotten her head blown off, but now the hostile base was a three-story pyre. Fire puffed out of every window she could see.

The pinnacle curved back around. Its hatch was lowering as it approached.

"Go! Go! Go!" somebody shouted behind Woetjans. She turned and saw Dimitrovic pushing up the stairs past the waiting spacers.

The midshipman came abreast of Clason and Spony. "Move out!" he said.

"Are you nuts?" Woetjans said. "Even if he shuts down as soon as he lands, the exhaust 'll fry anybody on the roof before then!"

"It's Mack flying her!" Dimitrovic said. "He's going to hover over the street and we'll jump through the open hatch!"

I'll believe that when I see it! Woetjans thought, but she helped Spony lift Balliol and then got out of the way when Clason took over. The three of them staggered onto the roof and the rest of the detachment followed.

The pinnacle pulled into a hover alongside the building, well out in the street. Tilting slightly to starboard, the vessel slid inward until the end of the ramp crushed the low parapet like the blade of a bulldozer.

Balliol and the two spacers supporting him jumped onto the ramp, then started up into the empty bay. The rest of the detachment came by ones and twos. There was no pushing or panic; it made Woetjans proud to be RCN.

"They hijacked the pinnacle," Dimitrovic said in Woetjans' ear, shouting over the thruster exhaust. "They couldn't get clearance from Vocaine and Mack said, *Screw it, let's do it ourselves. I know I can hold her near enough the roof to get 'em all aboard.* Rudolf went along with him, and by heaven they've done it!"

A burst of shots slanted up through the roof, coming from the back. One round clanged from the pinnacle's stern. The outriggers weren't deployed, probably to fit better in the width of the street.

"Let's go," Dimitrovic said, running forward as the last three spacers reached the ramp. Woetjans strode alongside him, still holding the borrowed impeller.

The roof spurted three slanting geysers of wood shreds, powdered cement, and tarpaper. Dimitrovic gave a startled yelp. His left leg kicked high overhead and he flipped onto his back. His left foot was gone.

The hostiles had an automatic in the back also. The gunner there seemed to have more on the ball than the fellow in front had.

Woetjans dropped the impeller and threw the midshipman over her shoulder. He needed something on the stump but that could wait till they were inside the boat's steel hull.

Woetjans sprinted up the ramp. The hatch between the hold and the cockpit was open. Clason stood in it. When he saw Woetjans enter with her burden, he shouted to the helmsman. The exhaust note changed and the pinnacle started to lift.

Two heavy slugs whanged into the hold while the ramp was still down. The re-echoing *Clang-g-g!* was deafening. Vivid pink, orange, and green flashes filled the compartment momentarily as projectiles ricocheted from the bulkheads. Clason yelped and pitched forward, but he was up almost instantly.

The pinnacle staggered. Woetjans was afraid that the hostile burst had shattered one or more thruster nozzles, which would be fatal at this altitude. The thrusters continued to roar normally as the pinnacle recovered and curved toward the RENOWN in harbor.

The boarding ramp slammed shut, making the hold quieter. From the vibration, the outriggers were deploying so that they could land.

Spony crawled over with his kit. Woetjans clamped both hands above Dimitrovic's shattered ankle so that Spony could fit a proper tourniquet. Woetjans hoped that the midshipman hadn't already lost too much blood, but you did what you can. There'd be a Medicomp in the RENOWN's hold.

The thrusters roared again. The pinnacle bucked. They splashed stern-low into water and skidded onward, pitching and bobbing. It wasn't a good landing but

Woetjans wasn't going to complain. The kid had gotten them out when she hadn't seen any way to do that.

One of the rescued spacers used the override lever in the hold to lower the ramp. The pinnacle's four small thrusters put out too little energy to create enough steam and ions in the open harbor to be dangerous or even noticeably unpleasant for veteran spacers.

Woetjans went forward toward the cockpit. She met Clason sticking a self-adhesive pad over his left forearm.

"A ricochet from that last burst?" Woetjans asked.

Clason shrugged. "Spray from the bulkhead only," he said. "The slug itself missed, and a bloody good thing too."

"Yeah," said Woetjans. "You'd need a new arm if it'd done that."

Rudolf had just risen from the starboard station. For volume reasons, instead of a console the pinnacle had side by side flat-plate displays for the helmsman and helmsman's assistant.

"Hey, you guys did a bloody fine job," Woetjans said. She was still trying to accept that she was really alive. "The Alliance don't have a prayer with officers like you coming up in the RCN."

"Mack did it all," Rudolf said. Tears were running down his cheeks. "All I did was take over when the hard part was done."

Rudolf turned to look toward the bow. That shifted his body enough that Woetjans could see past him to Mckinnon at the port station. The ricochet which missed Clason had struck Mckinnon in the back of the skull, continuing through to smash the display beyond. His blood and brains painted the forward bulkhead.

I'm glad it was quick, Woetjans thought. He'd have made a bloody good officer.

