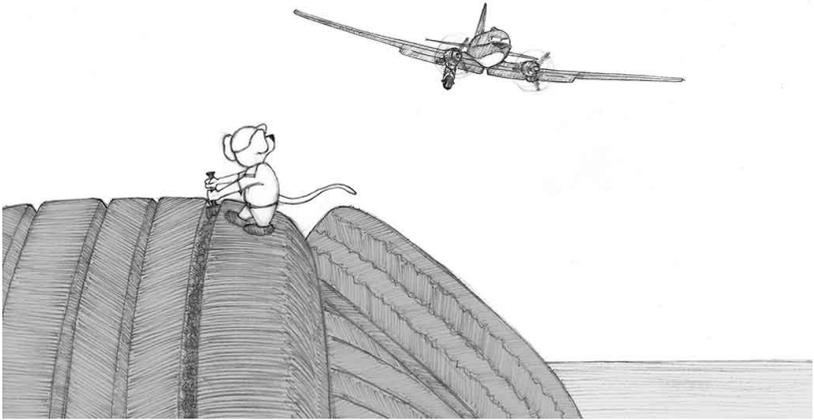




A Bad Day For Bumble



It was a quarter past six in the morning when the emergency siren blasted from tower control. Bumble Humblestone was already up and hard at work digging out the treads on a stack of dirty spare tires when he saw the distress flare fired from the cockpit of *Ace's High*. His fur stood on end.

Fibblejibbits! That plane is going to crash he thought, then jumped off the tires, grabbed his gear and started running.

"Chief! Stop sniffing! We're in trouble!" he yelled as the plane roared overhead. Chief burst out of the nearby bushes and squatted down for Bumble to climb up his leg and grab a hold of his collar. "Ready?" Chief shouted. His tiny friend nodded and they took off in hot pursuit.

From their view under the plane, they could see the left landing gear hadn't lowered and she'd have to make an emergency landing on one wheel.



"That plane is going to crash..." said Chief.

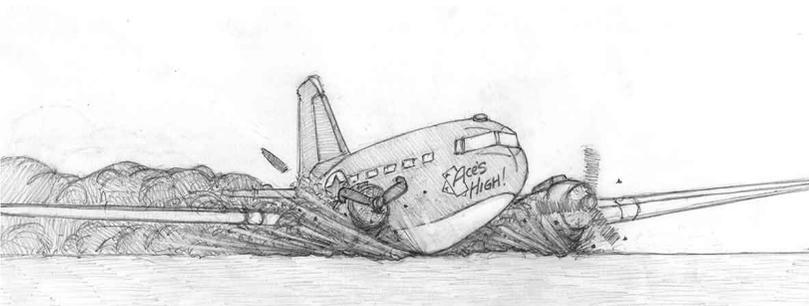
"That's just what I was thinking."

"But my Person is in there..."

"If anyone can get her down in one piece, it's him - now hurry!"

The plane raced down the runway and they followed as fast as they could. The right wheel inched down...closer...and closer...until it touched down.

"Here we go!" Bumble yelled.



The single landing gear creaked and groaned under the full weight of the plane. After a few seconds, the gear snapped, and *Ace's High* crashed down hard.

Sparks flew in all directions as the plane screamed down the runway, out of control. It careened off course into the mud, which splattered everywhere. Bumble frowned and shook his head as a big glob hit him right in the face and dribbled down into his jumpsuit.

"AAARRRG!"

He hated getting dirty and Chief knew it.

"Bullseye! Right in the teeth!"

"Not funny!"

After a few more yards (and a lot more mud), the plane finally slid to a complete stop, and then, all was quiet.

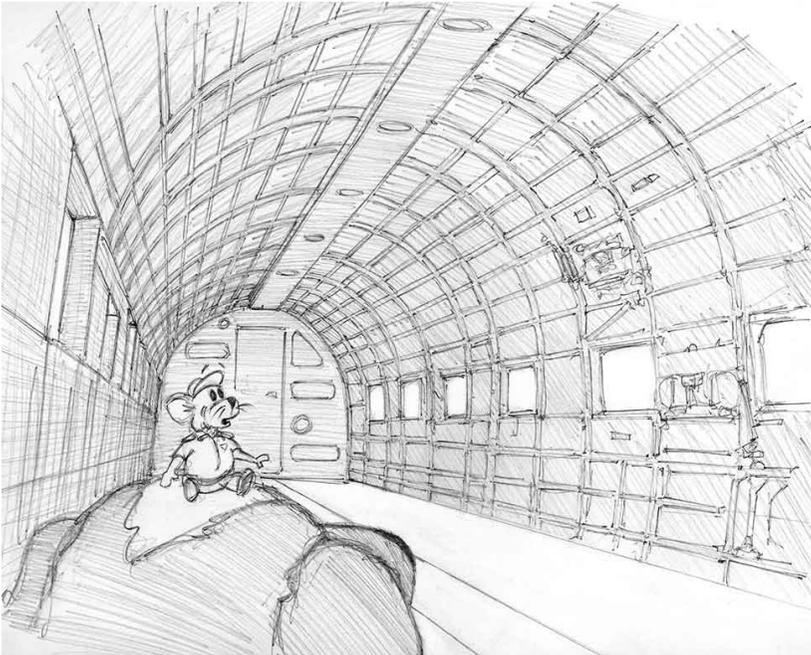
Bumble began wiping the mud off his face. "All's well that lands well..."

"But they crashed."

"Mmm-hmmm." Bumble reached around his collar and flicked more mud to the ground.

The cargo door opened and out jumped Captain Davenport. Smiling from ear to ear, he gave the thumbs-up signal that everything was okay. Chief barked happily, seeing that his Person was safe. Next out was the co-pilot, Eugene "Crash" McCormick. He leaned against the door, wiped his forehead with a shaking hand and drank a deep, grateful glug of water from his canteen. Last was Victor Wiesnewski, the navigator and radio operator, who stumbled out in relief and collapsed into the mud with a splash. Davenport and Crash each grabbed an arm, picked him up and started walking him towards tower control.

Happy as he was that the men were safe, Bumble looked at *Ace's High* with a lump in his throat. To him, there had now been too many accidents at Station 102 for them to all really *be* accidents, and the timing of this morning's crash could not have been worse. Later tonight, he and all the rest of the mice had to report to the Monthly Meeting. The Leak and Puddle Patrol, Nuts and Bolts Retrieval and Tire Tread Task Force units were all going to be lectured by Inspector Baxter, the Head Mouse, who always went out of his way to find something, anything wrong with their work. All of this made Bumble very nervous. He had a nose for trouble, and it was tingling. And unfortunately for him, his nose was almost always right.

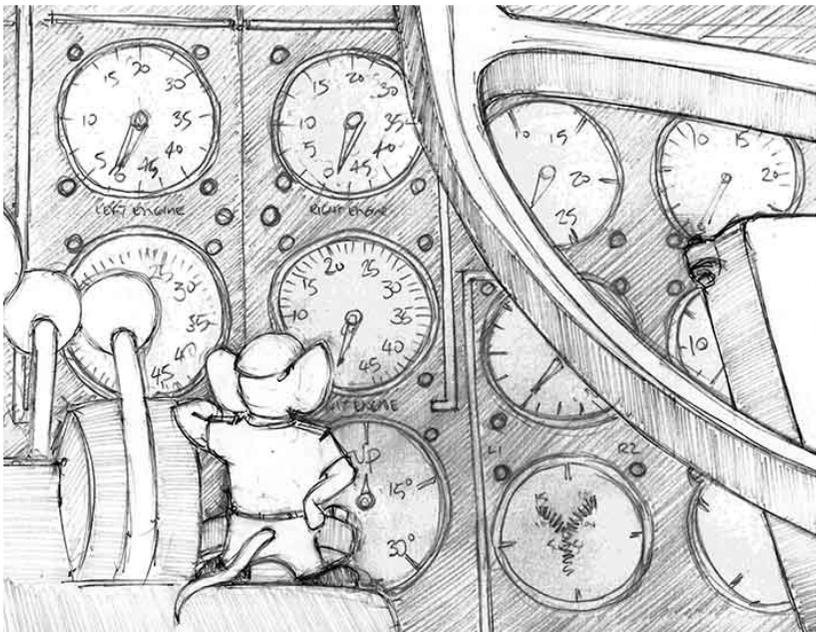


Chief sniffed around the outside of the wreck while Bumble got a better look at the damage. What a mess! The

landing gear was crushed under the belly. The propeller blades were badly bent and the engines looked cracked. Chief gave the cargo door a nudge with his nose, and they jumped inside.

Bumble looked up the length of the main cargo hold and felt even smaller than usual. "I feel like I've been swallowed by a whale!" he squeaked. His tiny voice echoed in the massive empty space.

They made their way up to the cockpit. Bumble jumped onto the control pedestal to get a better look at all of the levers, dials, switches and buttons spread across the instrument panel. He found what he was looking for right away.



The Landing Gear Dial and the Hydraulic System Dial were both down to zero. Bumble guessed that somewhere a hose must have split or burst, and as a result, the pressurized hydraulic liquid didn't get to the left (port) side landing gear as

it should have. Without hydraulic fluid, the landing gear didn't lower, and the plane crashed. Bumble scratched his chin.

"Hmmm. Very interesting," he said. "Okay Chief, we're done up here."

Chief carried Bumble out of *Ace's High* and down to the grass, much to his relief.

"Well Chief, this crash may not have been an accident." he said confidently. "There's one more thing we need to check to be 100% sure."

"But my Person saved the plane!"

"Well, that may be true, but I think someone around here is up to no good. Someone who *knows* how to be up to no good is up to no good. And that is *not* good. There's a mole at Station 102, so we need to be very careful."

"I resent that!" came a voice.



Out of the ground popped Mortimer. Mortimer was a mole, and a fussy and difficult one at that.

"Of course there's a mole at the base! You're looking at him! Me!" he thumped his thumb against his chest.

"Hi Mortimer..." Bumble and Chief sighed together. This could take some time. Once Mortimer started talking, minutes felt like hours, and the only way to end it was to agree with him and let him finish, no matter what he said.

"We of course meant 'mole' in the deep-undercover-secret-agent-sense you understand, not the biological-mammal sense..." Bumble said delicately, but Mortimer wasn't listening.

"All these accidents at the base – they're not my fault. Might be a mole doing it, but not *this* mole. No way! And why do they say 'mole' anyway? It's narrow-minded – and borderline discrimination – if you ask me!"

Bumble had an idea. Mortimer could actually be of help.

"Listen Mort. We need a favor. Need you to do some digging." He pointed at the right (starboard) wing. "Can you dig under that engine, take a peek at the wheel well? What we're looking for -"

"I'm on it! Be right back!" interrupted Mortimer. He disappeared into his hole and started digging. Chief was amazed, and Bumble smiled.

"Sometimes, all anyone needs is a job to do and they perk right up. Mortimer will tell us if the hydraulic connector rings are in place. My guess is no."

"How do you know so much about airplanes?" asked Chief.

"I think I've read every safety and repair manual we've got here, cover to cover. Some more than once. I've been dreaming about flying my whole life."

"Then why are you just working on tires?" The question stopped Bumble cold. He sighed.

“Long story. Or maybe it’s a short one. I don’t know. It’s me. I give up too easily, always have. Whatever my dreams of doing something important might have been, here I am, on the ground, just working on tires, and that’s that. End of story.” He sighed again.

Chief looked his friend square in the eye.

“You know, all anyone needs is a little adventure now and then and they perk right up,” said Chief. “You said it yourself. If it applies to others, it has to apply to you too.”

Bumble smiled. Good old Chief.

“Thanks Pal. You’re right. I guess it can’t rain every day, can it?”

“But it’s not raining.”

“It’s only a figure of speech.”

Just then Mortimer popped back up. “Who said anything about rain? It’s dry as a bone today! Anyway, I got under the wheel well just like you said. Horrible mess.” Bumble snapped out of it.

“Did you see anything? Like a connector ring? Were the hydraulic hoses intact? Were there any -” Mortimer interrupted again.

“Hey, hey, hold on. Like I said, it’s a mess. I’m no mechanic. You want to take a look? Follow me!” Back into the hole he went. Bumble gulped. Chief smiled.

“Your adventure begins...”

Bumble took a deep breath and jumped in. Up ahead, Mortimer stopped to pull a slithery earthworm out of the tunnel wall.

“Want some? They’re really tasty.”

“No thanks.”



“Your loss.” Mortimer slurped the earthworm up like one giant string of spaghetti. “Mmmmmm.” Then he burped. Then he farted right in Bumble’s face. It was awful. They pressed on, and after what seemed like a very long time, they finally got to the end.

“Here we are.”

They climbed up out of the tunnel and found themselves dead center in the wheel well. And Mortimer was right; things were a mess. The main hinge was twisted like a corkscrew. The struts were broken, and frayed wires dangled from above. Oil that was supposed to be in the hydraulic hoses was dripping everywhere. Then Bumble saw something that confirmed his worst fear: the main connector ring was missing from the interior wall. It had been intentionally removed. Unscrewed. Without the ring, vibrations during the course of the flight worked the hydraulic hoses loose from each other. Precious oil needed to operate the landing gear for a safe landing had poured out. Bumble shook his head.

He signaled to Mortimer that he was ready to go. This time Bumble went into the tunnel first in case Mortimer farted again. Good thing he did. He heard a few on the way back.

Climbing out of the hole and into the open air, Bumble was visibly relieved. He patted the dirt off of his jumpsuit as

Mortimer popped his head up out of the hole and Chief sat down.

“Well...I’m afraid it’s sabotage. The hydraulic hose connector ring has been removed.” said Bumble. “We find that ring, we find our saboteur.”

“Sabotage! At our base? Unacceptable. Completely unacceptable.” said Mortimer.

“Completely. Unacceptable.” repeated Chief.

All three shared a worried look. The reality of their situation was beginning to sink in. In the distance, a repair team was walking towards *Ace’s High* to inspect the damage. Mortimer grumbled and took off underground. Bumble saddled up on Chief and they left the wreck. Further investigation would have to wait. It was time to get back to work.

2

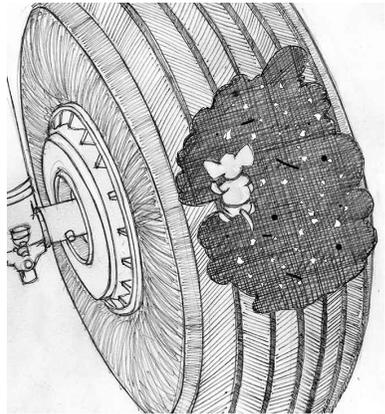
From Bad To Worse

Bumble's job as the head of the Tire Tread Task Force was to make sure that the treads on every plane's tires were clear from debris, and that they hadn't picked up any nails, tacks or anything else potentially dangerous from another airfield. And so, he and his team had to inspect every tire on every plane, on every flight coming and going, in and out of Station 102 every day. It was back-breaking, never-ending, completely thankless work.

After the crash, the rest of Bumble's day dragged on like so many others had before.

For the remainder of the morning he cleared the treads on two planes, *The Goose* and *Ready 4 Duty*, while his afternoon was ruined by a nasty surprise smeared all over the starboard wheel of *Dream Girl*.

She had rolled through a puddle of fresh hot tar at a



neighboring air base. The sticky mess had gotten deep into the treads and picked up all sorts of junk as a result. It was hard, sweaty work getting it clean, and Bumble wound up doing it all by himself, as the other members of the Tire Tread Task Force - Ed and Fred - were nowhere to be seen. It didn't matter. He was determined to do the best job possible, even if it meant doing it alone. But while he worked on it, he couldn't

stop thinking about the crash and that missing connector ring. It bugged him all day.

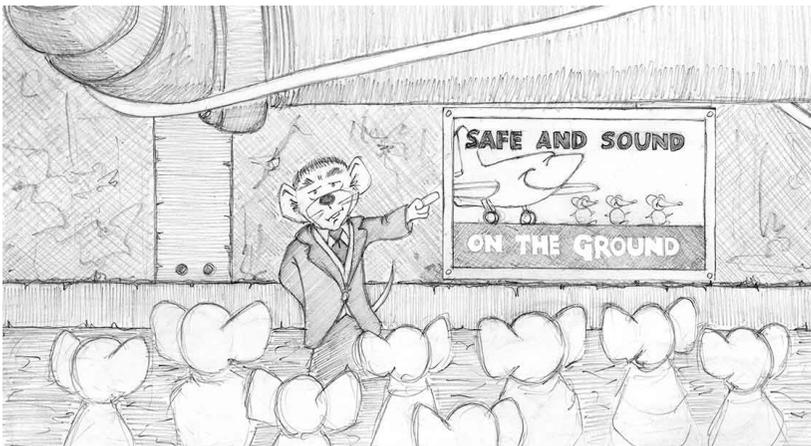
Eventually, night fell at Station 102. Between the cinderblocks and under the cold pipes of the storage shed, the mice all gathered together for the dreaded Monthly Meeting. Everyone was dirty, hungry and grouchy, especially Bumble. Going to the meeting was the last thing he wanted to do.

Inside, the Head Mouse, Inspector Baxter, welcomed the group.

“Good Evening fellow mice!” he said cheerfully.

“Good evening, Sir” they all replied.

“Thank you for meeting me tonight. I will be brief as I know you haven’t had your dinners yet.” He unrolled a poster from under his arm and tacked it up on the wall. It read: *Safe And Sound On The Ground*, and showed a row of happy mice cleaning up the runway under a happy-looking airplane.



“Words to live by, wouldn’t you say?” he asked the group. They all nodded in agreement. Except Bumble, that is,

who let out a big loud yawn. He couldn't help it, that tar was so sticky and took so much work to get loose. Inspector Baxter ignored him and moved on.

"Well to be honest, I wonder if you really *are* safe and sound...after today's accident I am very concerned. Our jobs require us to do what?" He pointed at the poster and answered.

"Stay on the ground, with our noses down. Stay out of the way, every day." He raised a single finger for emphasis. "And above all, we should never, ever talk to any of the humans. Even though we've learned their language, they must never, ever know that we can speak it." The group all nodded, except for Bumble who crossed his arms. He didn't like what he was hearing, and his nose started tingling. If the other mice wanted to listen to these orders and follow them, that was their business, but he didn't agree. Baxter glared at Bumble's crossed arms, then continued.



"Let's take attendance." He pulled out a clipboard and pencil. "The Leak and Puddle Patrol?" Four anxious hands went up. He checked them off the list. "Nuts and Bolts Retrieval?" This time five hands went up. "Okay...who's left?" he said as he scanned the room. But he already knew.

Bumble raised his hand, along with Ed and Fred, his useless teammates. Inspector Baxter smiled a cruel *I'll-teach-Bumble-a-lesson* smile.

"Ah yes...Bumble Humblestone and the *mighty* Tire Tread Task Force."

Ed and Fred nodded sheepishly while Bumble proudly said:

"Yes Sir, that's us."

"Well, I imagine today's accident must have been very upsetting for you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, *Tumble Fumblestone*, one of the wheels didn't lower as it should have."

Bumble turned red. A few of the other mice snickered. Inspector Baxter continued.

"The wheels are your department, yes or no?"

"The tire treads are, yes."

"Well then, it could very well be *your* fault, *Mumble Grumblestone*, that the wheel didn't lower, and that the plane crashed."

All the mice laughed. What a terrible thing to say! Bumble's blood boiled while Ed and Fred took a step backwards in fear. Unfortunately for Bumble, being insulted, tired, hungry and irritable, he was about to say more than he probably should have.

"For the record Sir, the tire treads and the hydraulic landing gear are two completely different things and blaming us for the crash is completely unfair! So is making fun of my name! That's uncalled for."

"For the *wreck-ord*, HQ is looking to me to whip things into shape around here, and neither you nor your team are going to stop that from happening. Understood? Heads will roll if something else goes wrong around here, starting with

yours. I can promise you that!" The room was silent. Ed and Fred stepped forward in a mild panic.

"Ah, Sir, we're not really a team..." said Ed.

"We report to Bumble, so he's in charge, he's the one to talk to not us..." added Fred.

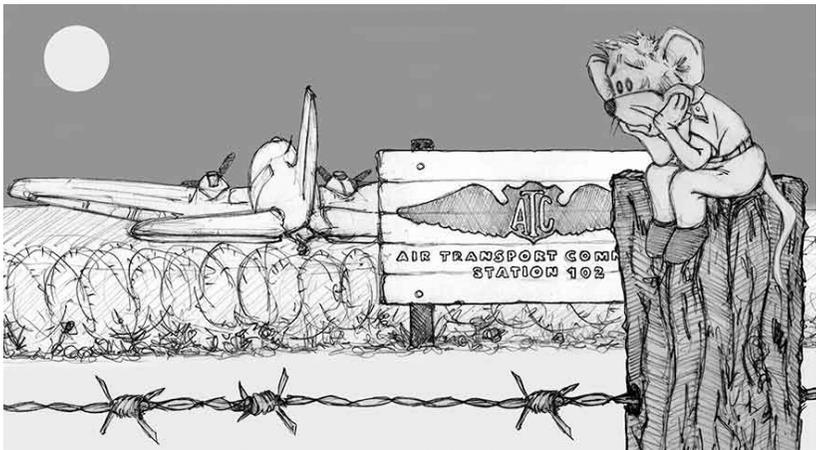
Bumble couldn't believe what he was hearing, but decided to take the high road.

"With all due respect, I disagree." he said quietly. He shook his head and bit his lip.

"Duly noted, moving on..." was Inspector Baxter's final reply. The discussion was over. Everyone looked at the floor, shuffled their feet and stuck their hands in their pockets.

Baxter ended the meeting with one final thought. "All of you, remember this: we are *mice*. Gravity itself keeps us on the ground. It is where we belong. Don't let your imaginations run away with you and think you can do more than you can, because you can't. You – me – all of us – we are *only mice*."

After that, everyone quietly walked to the mess hall for dinner, while Bumble wandered off on his own. He had lost his appetite.



He climbed up on the outer fence, found a comfortable post to sit on, and sat down. What a mess things were. What a terrible day! Above him, the moon rose high into the night sky and shone brightly.

Bumble sighed, shook his head and thought about it all...long into the night.

3

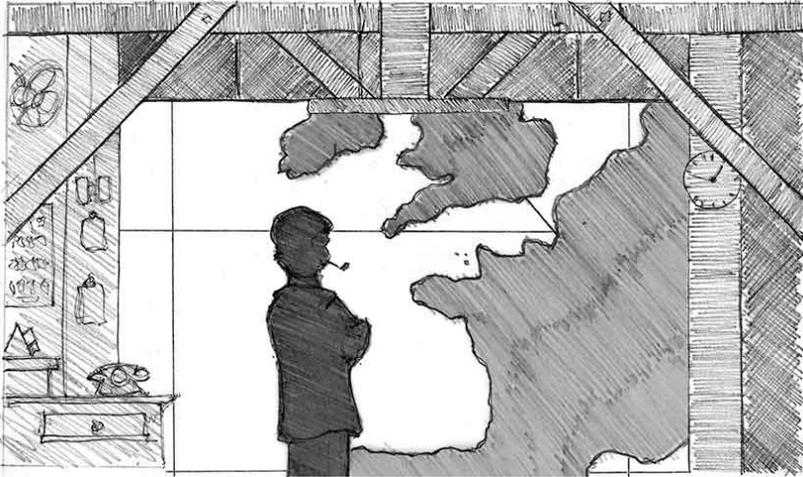
The Deception Division



Meanwhile, in the heart of London, between Parliament and the Prime Minister's office, there stood a large, ordinary-looking building called The Office of Works. Hidden deep in its basement, under solid concrete and beams of thick steel was Britain's most secret and important set of offices: The Cabinet War Rooms. Tucked safely away from the nonstop bombing raids above ground, it was here that Winston Churchill and all his heads of intelligence and planning were able to run the war, undisturbed, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Life in the War Rooms was cramped and smoky. Officers puffed on pipes and cigarettes, while their assistants carried reports from one department to the next. Switchboard operators connected calls while nearby typists typed away, and secret messages were put into capsules, loaded into tubes, and

wooshed by compressed air into either the Map Room, the Communications Room or the Main Cabinet Room where all the senior officials met.



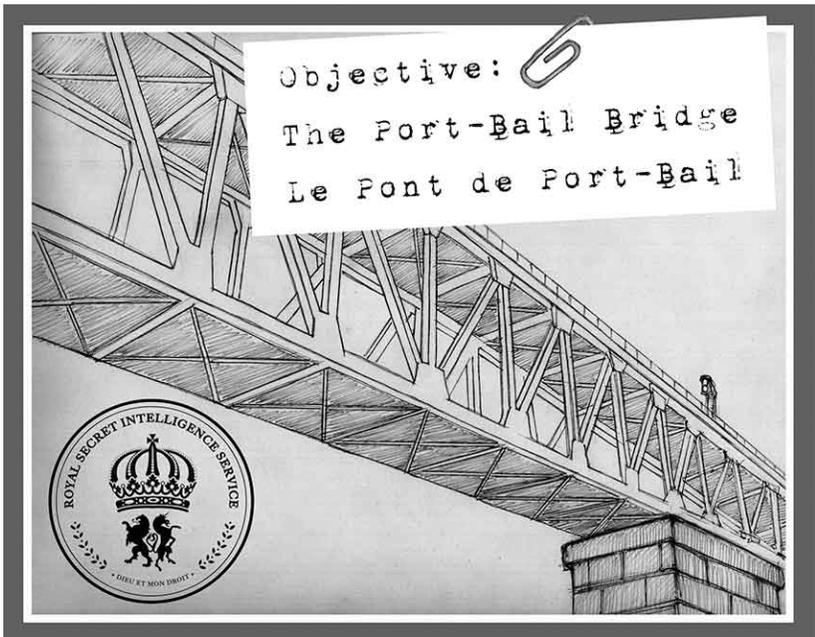
In the map room, General Fletcher was deep in thought, staring at a map of southern England, northern France and the Channel Islands scattered between them when Corporal Carruthers knocked at the door.

“Ah, Carruthers, come in,” Fletcher said warmly.

“I’ve called you in here to explain your new assignment. You have a big day ahead of you.

“A top-secret operation to destroy the Port-Bail Bridge in occupied France has failed. Unfortunately for us and our French Resistance friends, their once-secure communications network has been broken by the Germans. As a result, nine out of ten of their secret meetings now result in capture - or worse - death. And so, the commando team we sent to blow the bridge has gone missing, and there is nothing we can do

stop a major troop and equipment train convoy scheduled to cross over it in two day's time."



"How does the Resistance communicate?" asked Carruthers.

"By mail. Their phones are tapped." answered Fletcher.

"Hmmm..."

"You will supervise the delivery of a newly built communications device to this air base here..." Fletcher pointed to Station 102 on the map and traced a line south "...and from here you will navigate the cargo's flight to a spot just below the Channel Islands for pickup. Far enough away from the French coast to avoid detection, but close enough to be within easy reach for pickup. The Resistance is counting on

you and so am I, so don't let us down." Carruthers nodded "yes" but had a question.

"Sir, hasn't Station 102 been flagged with a bad accident rating? On the list of bases to be closed down?"

"Yes, they have. Lots of accidents recently. But an important mission like this should help them pull their act together, put their best foot forward, that sort of thing."

"When do we need to deliver the gadget?"

"You leave now. Let's give it a look."

Tucked away at the farthest end of the longest hallway, down a short flight of stairs into the sub-basement, was a room that didn't have a number or a name. The door made it look like a broom closet or storage room, but inside was the home of The Deception Division, and the two terribly difficult but brilliant geniuses whose job it was to come up with plans to outwit the enemy without the use of deadly force. The ideas they invented were considered so top secret, that their identities had to be protected by the use of code names. These names changed every day, sometimes a few times a day. Fletcher and Carruthers stood at the door. Carruthers cleared his throat and knocked.

"Agent Arcadia, Agent Argonaut, Command wishes to see you both."

"Arcadia and Argonaut were last week, try again," answered a voice from the other side. Carruthers pulled an index card from his pocket.

"Agents Flintlock and Forager?" he read.

"No! Now get it right or go away," answered the second voice.

"Oh, I hate these names, they were never my idea. Just open up!" Fletcher thumped on the door.

Carruthers stared at the card and racked his brain to come up with the right combination. He looked at his watch and sighed.

"Agents Backhander and Brimstone, please open the door."

To his great relief, seven locks, chains and bolts unlatched from top to bottom until the door finally swung open.

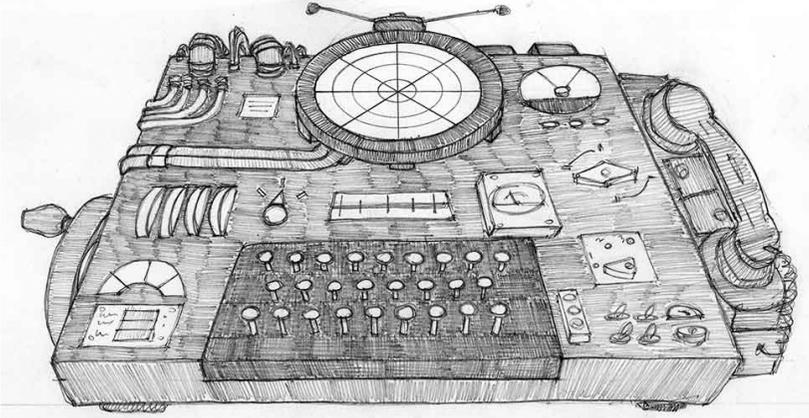
"Carruthers, you know better," scolded Backhander.

"Yes Sir, Agent Sir."

"But it's not finished yet!" yelled Brimstone.

Inside, the workspace was a complete mess. Papers were piled on the floor, blackboards were filled with scribbles, maps were stuck with pins, and bits and pieces of machinery were thrown around everywhere.

In the center of the room, the agents were putting the finishing touches on their latest masterpiece. Part telephone, part typewriter and part radio, the Top-Secret Resistance Communications Device was a very large and complicated-looking control box. It had a telephone handset on its right side, a hand crank power generator on the left and a raised typewriter keypad in the center. It had knobs and switches everywhere. Two antennas sprouted out from the back of the unit while a large radio compass dial was mounted above the center keyboard, like a single unblinking eye. No one had ever seen anything quite like it before.



Brimstone turned the hand crank. Lights lit up. Gears started whirring to life. It almost seemed to breathe as a low and menacing hum rose from somewhere deep inside the mechanics. Backhander made one last minor adjustment to the back of the machine and gave the thumbs up signal. It was finally finished. General Fletcher was very pleased. The Agents looked on like proud parents.

“Spectacular. Brilliant. First rate.” the General said.

But their moment of accomplishment was not to last. The instant they turned it off, Fletcher snapped his fingers and two soldiers wheeled a wooden transport crate into the room, along with a long metal canister on a hand truck. They leaned the canister against the wall and hefted the heavy communications device into the waiting crate. After bolting it in place and tying it down with straps, the top of the crate was nailed shut with several loud hammer strikes.

Carruthers crouched down and painted black identification numbers on the side of the crate with a set of stencils. While he did this, the Agents collected a few last-minute items to add to the canister. A standard “C” type

cylinder, it stood five and a half feet tall and was filled with all sorts of supplies, from boots and blankets, to first aid kits and knives, canned food, flashlights, batteries, radios and more.

Backhander grabbed some small envelopes, pens and a thick book of French stamps from a desk drawer and placed them into the canister. Brimstone pointed to a nearby shelf.

“Don’t forget the edible rice paper.”

“Right! Almost did...” Backhander replied. He spoke to the soldiers as he rolled up a handful of sheets and stuck them into the canister. “If you have to eat your note, might as well make it easily digestible...”

“Tastes better than regular paper too!” added Brimstone. The soldiers closed the top of the canister and tied it down with a canvas strap.

“Gentlemen, thank you. Again, well done,” said General Fletcher. The soldiers carried the crate out of the lab, while Carruthers wheeled out the canister and the General followed, closing the door behind him. The Agents locked the seven locks.

“Goodbye sweet prince. Good luck...” sighed Backhander.

“Oh, don’t be so silly! Carruthers will be back.”

“I was talking about the machine!”

In the hallways of the Cabinet War Rooms, everyone watched in hushed respect as the big crate made its way through the facility. The dolly squeaked as it slowly rolled along. One assistant even saluted it as it passed. The crate and canister were wheeled into a cramped elevator that slowly brought them up to street level, where a covered transport truck was waiting. The soldiers loaded everything onto the back of the truck and climbed in to guard them for the very

long drive down to Station 102. Carruthers climbed behind the wheel and saluted the General.

“They did quite a job on that thingamabob...” Carruthers winced, realizing too late that he had just made a very corny rhyme.

“There’s a lot more to it than meets the eye, my boy.” answered the General. “We’ve done our part. Now, off you go. The head of Station 102 will have more instructions for you when you arrive. Good luck.” The General saluted back as Carruthers put the truck into first gear and drove slowly away.

General Fletcher watched the truck disappear into the darkness, and with that, the Cabinet War Room’s part of the operation was over. He went back inside to focus on the hundred other secret operations that were waiting for him.



Operation: Mercury

Early the next morning, the entire base gathered into the large Briefing Room. Big meetings of this kind were very rare at Station 102, and everyone wondered what was going on. Chief trotted around, sniffing under all the chairs but Bumble was nowhere to be seen. *He should be here...* thought Chief, and he ran out to find him.

Back at the sleeping barracks, Bumble was taking his time getting dressed. He had overslept, but a nice hot shower had done much to shake off his grogginess. After zipping up his jumpsuit, he strapped on his tool belt and pulled out his shovel. He took a long hard look at it. Would this be all he would ever get the chance to do? Was this all he was good for? Cleaning tire treads? He heaved a heavy sigh. Just then, Chief ran into the barracks and slid to a stop.

"Hey Bum!" he said.

"Hey chum." sighed Bumble.

"Something big is happening. We've got to go. The whole base is meeting."

"Good, then we can talk to Mortimer and figure out what to do. We need to find him."

"Sure, but we go to the meeting first."

"Why?"

Chief crouched down and looked his friend square in the eye. "Because it's important – and it's the right thing to do." Bumble dropped his head, beaten.



"Argh! I knew you were going to say that! Why did you have to say that?"

"You have a job to do, like it or not. So climb on. Up you go!"

As Bumble climbed up Chief's coat and grabbed a hold of his collar, Chief thought he heard the slightest protest.

"And no grumbling."

They bolted out of the barracks and ran towards the Briefing Room. As they approached, they saw Commander Hammond get out of his jeep. "Thank you Reggie. Glad someone remembers where the Briefing Room is!" he said with a wink. Philip Hammond was the base Commander, and was a cheerful man with a difficult job. It wasn't easy keeping Station 102 running properly, and thanks to the recent string of accidents, many of the men were spooked. They needed to focus their efforts, and today's news should do just that.

Chief and Bumble made it in just before the Commander, and they found a place in the back to sit and watch. As Hammond entered, the entire room shot to their feet.

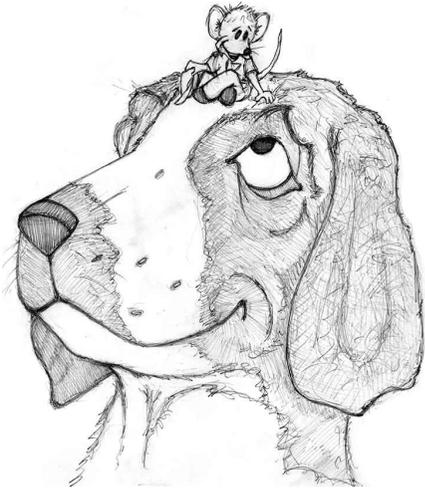
"At ease! Thank you, Gentlemen. Be seated."

Everyone sat down as Hammond made his way up to the front. After a moment, complete quiet overcame the room.

“As you know, the recent string of accidents has been very bad for our reputation. So much so, that there has been actual talk of shutting us down. But fear not! Headquarters has just given us a gift. Wrapped with a big bow, in silver paper. A job we can be proud of, and something which should put Station 102 back on the map.” The room erupted in applause. Bumble climbed up on top of Chief’s head so he could see better, and sat between his attentive ears. This sounded good so far. He scratched Chief’s head as Hammond continued.

“We have been given a front-line assignment. Highly classified. It’s a first for any Air Transport Command base. HQ calls it *Operation Mercury*. For those of you without a working knowledge of Roman mythology, Mercury was the God of Messages and Communication.” Hammond raised his hand. “I myself had to look it up.” Everyone laughed. Hammond smiled broadly and continued.

“We are going to deliver a top-secret cargo to our friends in the French Resistance. Some sort of newly designed communications system for them to use. And we’re going to do it by flying a single aircraft: in daylight, at low altitude across the English Channel, over enemy territory, and without escort. There and back again as swiftly - and safely - as possible.”



"Sounds dangerous." said Bumble.

"Sounds important." said Chief.

Everyone in the room started talking. A few men raised their hands with questions.

"Why one plane, Sir?"

"Why alone?"

"Well, it's simple." Hammond replied. "If the cargo gets captured, it would be a disaster, and we can't allow that. The enemy won't be looking for a single transport plane by itself; they're too busy looking for squadrons of fighters. One C-47 flying low and fast should be able to get in and out of the target area without being detected. At least that's Headquarters' idea – and we have to prove them right."

Another hand went up. "When, Sir?"

"Ah yes..." He looked at his watch. "I'd say roughly nineteen hours from now. Probably less." An excited whisper spread across the room. "The Resistance is planning something big and they need this secret cargo immediately. So starting right now, we prepare for its arrival. This is our first, last and only mission. The future of Station 102 depends on it! Any other questions then?"

Up in the front row, Inspector Baxter turned around and eyed all the mice to make sure no one raised their hands to ask anything. Bumble frowned, crossed his arms and shook his head. Chief saw that Bumble was upset and uttered a low growl in support of his best friend.

"All right Gentlemen, that's all for now. You are dismissed. Captain Davenport, would you remain please?" The men all started heading for the exit. Bumble and Chief were closest to the door, so they ran out first.

"Did you hear that? He asked my Person to stay. My Person is going to lead the mission!" Chief said proudly.

"Yes, I bet he is. Now let's get out of here and find Mortimer!"

"On our way!" and off they went.

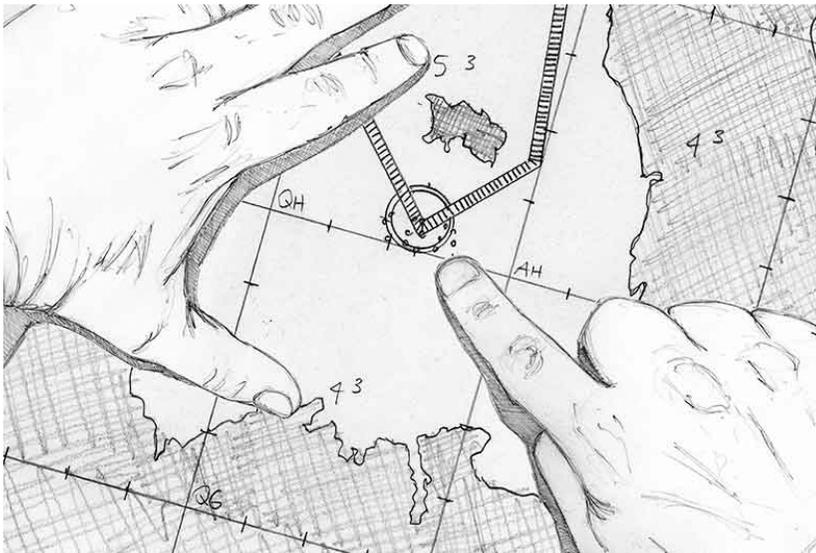
Captain Davenport made his way through the crowd and up to the front to greet the Commander.

"Hello Sir."

"Davenport. Have a seat."

Hammond rolled a map out on the table, and pulled several large manila envelopes from his briefcase – they were labeled "Top Secret" and each had a large red "X" crisscrossing it from corner to corner. He waited until the last man had exited the room.

"As you're top banana around here, this assignment goes to you."



"Thank you, Sir."

"Here's the story: we can't drop this thing over mainland France, you'll get cut to pieces by anti-aircraft guns before you even reach the coast. Not to mention fighters. So it's the Channel Islands." He pointed to the map between the south coast of England and the north of France.

"Now we can't drop on any of the actual islands, as they're all occupied by Germans. However, their closeness to the French coast, and therefore our Resistance friends, makes them ideal for us now. So, we will drop here – just below the main island of Jersey, over a collection of small, uninhabited rocks called 'The Minquiers', or 'Minkies' as they're called back at HQ." He pointed to a group of tiny dots about 9 miles south of Jersey. "After you drop, a Resistance group will sail out that night and grab the crate under cover of darkness. That's the easy part. The hard part is getting you there and back again safely." Davenport smiled as he studied the map, enjoying his first big assignment. Hammond grinned and continued. "Flying over Jersey is too dangerous, so you will have to approach The Minkies this way..." His finger followed a line on the map that looped south around Jersey, down over The Minkies, then back up north across the Channel to England. "You have your choice of crew and aircraft. What you see here is for your eyes only. You can share the information with your crew once you are in the air. Until then, zip your lip. Any thoughts?" Hammond thought he had done a very good job of outlining the mission.

"Yes Sir. I'll take McCormick as my second, and Wisniewski as my navigator."

"Sorry, forgot to mention. HQ is sending a man down to baby-sit the cargo, so he'll act as navigator on this one for you. What about your plane?"

"I'd like *Eightball Charlie*, Sir."

"Really? She's an old tub!"

"Yes. But if anything were to go wrong, you'd still be left with a few good planes."

"Ah, I see. Good thinking. Alright, see to it that she's made ready." Hammond turned and started walking towards the door.

"Best of luck, and 'drop that pickle in the bucket' as they say," he concluded cheerfully. The meeting was over.

Davenport rolled up the map, collected the files and followed Hammond out the door, and the Briefing Room went back to its usual condition: empty.