



"The driver of the boat, a rifle strapped over his shoulder, balanced himself on his only leg"

►► There were five of them in the boat, each armed with a Kalashnikov, each wearing dusty white-robed djellaba and black-and-white checked kaffiyeh, the Arab headdress of the region. The driver of the boat, a rifle strapped over his shoulder, balanced himself on his only leg. As the aluminium boat banged against our hull, an old man, apparently their leader, grabbed onto the side of our boat and began shouting something unintelligible. I shrugged my shoulders and shook my head.

Chewing leaves of qat, a mild narcotic, he stood back, unstrapped his gun and waved it first at me and then at Jackie and shouted "You come! You come!"

The others in the boat also pointed their guns at us and began shouting.

"No, I stay with my boat," I said. "We leave soon."

"You come!"

"I won't leave my wife. We go soon."

The old man, a slurry of green leaf dribbling from his puckered mouth, pulled back the cocking lever and his forefinger began to massage the trigger.

"You come!"

It was when he lifted the barrel of the gun toward my face that I decided I had better go. "OK, I go. Jackie, if I'm not back within the hour, you call the embassy on the HF radio. And anyone else you can get on the frequency."

As we motored away, I turned and saw Jackie standing on the deck, bewildered and frightened, wondering if she would ever see me again.

We were approaching what appeared to be a destitute little fishing village, a collection of animal skin and mud wattle huts, and an occasional cement building. The pointed bow of a sunken patrol boat poked out of the water, its deck gun pointing skyward. A lone camel chewed on the beach grass.

The men helped me out of the boat and marched me ahead of them, guns at my back. The old man walked silently beside me. A few children ran alongside and women in chadors and colourful sarongs emerged in the doorways and silently watched us pass.

This village seemed to survive in spite of itself; the few cement buildings still standing had been heavily damaged by artillery or bombs, the walls scarred by bullet holes, and the one partially paved road that ran through town was cratered from what must have been a massive artillery barrage.

"Tio," the old man said, waving his hands over what was left of the town. "Tio, this Tio."

We walked down the road to an undamaged cement building with a rusting tin roof and a sandblasted white sign written in faded Arabic that teetered over the doorway. A large bronze lock secured a dented iron door. One of the guards behind me muttered something to the old man, the old man nodded and seemed to agree and the

gunmen ambled away, their jobs done.

He dug deep into his robe and pulled out a large old-fashioned key and slipped it into its lock. "You come. This office."

Inside, I was struck by unexpected daylight. The entire back wall was missing, apparently blown away by incoming artillery fire; from inside, the town lay before us.