A Fateful Decision

‘Proceed on Course’

At dawn on 11 November 1940, the British merchant ship SS Automedon (7,528 tonnes) was steaming 250 miles southwest of Achin Head, the northwestern tip of Sumatra. She was just one-and-a-half days away from Penang, her next port of call. It was the twenty-second anniversary of Armistice Day, when Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicated and a ceasefire agreement was signed to end the First World War. The sea was calm like a sheet of glass and visibility was excellent. The Automedon was making good progress.

With Penang so close, a rather more relaxed atmosphere began to prevail on board, and conversation became more cheerful. Forty-eight days had passed since the Automedon had set sail from Liverpool. The voyage had been particularly testing since she had left Durban and entered the Indian Ocean: it had been two weeks of nothing but sea and sky, day and night. All but the most seasoned seafarers were bound to begin doubting whether they would ever reach their destination and to yearn for dry land. This would also be the mood on board the SS Asakamaru (7,399 tonnes), owned by the Japanese Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) and chartered by the Japanese Navy, the following April.1
Homeward bound for Japan, which was preparing for war at a frenetic pace, the *Asakamaru* was carrying a full cargo of munitions and supplies from Germany and Switzerland, including 20mm Oerlikon cannons for Zero Fighters, machine tools and mercury. Setting sail from Bilbao, she had rounded the Cape of Good Hope and steered a course similar to that of the *Automedon*. She was crossing the Indian Ocean non-stop, heading northeast to the Lombok Strait. Her crew did not sight land for days at a time and were on guard for British Navy visitations, blacking out all lights at night. Even the naval officers on board became unnerved by the endless days at sea, and repeatedly sought reassurance from Captain Kingo Toriumi of NYK that they would reach Japan safely.

On the bridge of the *Automedon* that November morning in 1940 Able Seaman Stanley Hugill was at the wheel, while Second Officer Donald Stewart, struggling to stay awake, was the Officer of the Watch. As the clock on the bridge struck 7.00 the end of his shift approached, and he looked forward to his breakfast. It was then that he spotted another boat, which was a mere speck in the distance. The *Automedon* was steering north–north-east and this vessel was at 34 degrees off the port bow. She was hull down, and even through the telescope Stewart could barely make out the tip of her mast. He could not discern her shape, let alone what type of vessel she was or her nationality or name. Nevertheless, he made the precautionary decision to inform the Captain, W.B. Ewan. Since leaving Durban the crew had been particularly vigilant, and it was required that any sighting of a ship was reported to the Captain. Having checked through the telescope once more Stewart ran down from the bridge to wake Ewan who was still asleep in his cabin.

Dismissing his momentary misgivings, the Captain dressed hurriedly and proceeded to the bridge. He stood next to Stewart, who asked whether they should alter their course slightly, and stared through his binoculars without reply. The unidentified vessel appeared to be following the shipping lane from Madras to the Sunda Strait. The ship that eventually emerged more clearly in the circular field of the telescope closely resembled the Dutch ships often encountered in these seas, *en route* to the Dutch East Indies. Moreover, the Royal Navy had only warned of ambushes by German raiders and U-boats in the waters north of Madagascar; to avoid this area as much as possible the *Automedon* had been steering an easterly course since leaving Durban.