

THE APOCALYPSE TRIGGER

By

Douglas Misquita

A Luc Fortesque adventure thriller

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Douglas Misquita is an action-adventure thriller writer from India. His books have been praised for their quick pace, visuals, intertwining plots, and high-octane action.

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Know Thy Enemy

For my brother, Dallyn Misquita, for always supporting everything I do.

PRAISE FOR DOUGLAS MISQUITA

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Well written ... tight edge-of-the-seat action drama... the story line is well thought out and the book definitely is (sic) a good read. - [Hemantkumar Jain](#)

THE APOCALYPSE TRIGGER

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Misquita is a prolific author; he is creating his own oeuvre in the action-adventure-thriller genre, and uses history, technology and fiction quite effectively. - [Roshmi Sinha](#)

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PART I: IN THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER 1

MALACCA STRAITS, JUNE 1947

.. .. .

The radio officer aboard the Silver Star scrawled quickly. The message sent a shiver down his spine. Even with the porthole open to the sea-breeze, the radio room was stuffy with five men pressed in tight, staring at him silently. He knew some of them had already translated the Morse code, but he dutifully handed the message to his captain and chewed on the end of his pencil.

"I die," Captain Silas read in a hushed voice. He passed the notepad to his Chief Officer. "What about the earlier message?"

"Gibberish, Captain," the radio officer replied wiping his brow and looking at the pages near his communication equipment. "Unless it's a coded message, but I haven't attempted to decipher it."

"We'll look at it later, son," the Captain said. He turned to the sandy haired Chief Officer beside him. "Have a boarding party ready, Andy. We should bear down on the Ourang Medan within the hour."

"Yes, Captain." The chief officer stepped out to make arrangements.

The Captain said, "Alert us if there's anything else. Send a message to all vessels in the vicinity that we are en route to the Ourang Medan. I have a bad feeling about this but we cannot ignore an SOS."

As the radio officer turned back to his task, his eyes strayed to one of the pages and the grisly words seemed to come alive. 'Captain and officers are dead in the bridge. All crew is also possibly dead. There is no one, I think...'

As his imagination took hold he envisioned horrifying things that lay in wait for them and he hoped the Silver Star was not unfortunate to be the nearest merchant vessel to the distressed Ourang Medan.

The Medan came up on their port bow. There was not a wind to be felt and the waters were eerily calm. As the Silver Star approached, Captain Silas ordered three signaling blasts on the horn. The crew of the Silver Star lined the bulwarks looking out to the silent ship, squinting against the reflection of the sun in the waters.

Silas stepped out onto the bridge wings and raised a bullhorn to his lips. "SS Ourang Medan, this is Captain Silas of the Silver Star. If there is anyone alive, please respond."

There was a macabre excitement that rifled through everyone on the Silver Star when no response was returned by the Medan. Silas tried twice more; then gave up. "All stop!" he ordered and the command was rung down to the engine room. The steady throb of the Silver Star's engines ebbed and died beneath his feet. The Star slowly drifted closer to the Medan. Silas turned to the radio officer who had come into the bridge room to watch. "Anything from the registry? The owners?"

"Not a squeak, sir."

"Fair enough," Silas said convinced that his next action and destiny was to send a boarding crew. He said to the helmsman, "Keep safe distance," then nodded to Chief Officer Andrew Foley, giving him the go-ahead. "No unnecessary risks, Andy."

"I don't intend to spend any more time aboard than is necessary."

Ten minutes later, one of the Silver Star's lifeboats was lowered and making its way across the channel separating the two ships. Foley fingered the safety of the pistol that was holstered around his waist as they neared the rust-stained hull of the Ourang Medan. There was a wisp of smoke emanating from her smokestack but the ship was simply idling in the currents. He noted ominously that there were no clouds and the silence was oppressive. He glanced back

at the Silver Star as the lifeboat rode a crest and he saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off the lens of binoculars. Captain Silas was keeping close watch.

"Gas masks on," Foley ordered and the six-man boarding team donned their gear, adjusting faceplates and breathing apparatus. Now, hearing only the sound of his breathing in his ears, Foley put out a hand as they came alongside the hull. His fingers scraped against the rust streaks. It was like touching a tomb, he thought. Foley gestured and a rope ladder with hooks at the other end went sailing into the air and caught on the Medan's bulwarks. Foley and four of the crew climbed up leaving two men in the lifeboat.

Foley's boot touched the deck of the Ourang Medan and he froze for a moment, one leg still in the rope ladder. A chill coursed through him as he assimilated what his eyes beheld.

A body lay twisted on the deck, not ten feet from him. It was as if the sailor had been crawling toward the bulwark to jump overboard. The dead fingers clawed at the deck, and the face was contorted: a mask of agony and desperation.

Foley's eyes never left the corpse as he made way for the others to climb aboard. Each one of them started at the sight of the crawling dead man and they exchanged frightened looks. Some crossed themselves. Foley wished they were better armed as he cautiously stepped toward the corpse as if expecting the dead man to suddenly come alive and lunge at him.

He did not want to touch the body, unsure if there was a risk of contamination and so he used the tip of his boot and nudged the corpse. Rigor mortis had not set in and so with a quick mouthed apology for his disrespect of the dead, Foley overturned the body with his foot. The corpse rolled, and one lifeless hand fell splat against the deck. Foley crouched close to the body, his breath going deeper instinctively. He peered close at the agonized face, the clenched hands and then down to the buckled knees looking for any signs of injury. But there were none. Whatever killed this man had left no mark.

Foley was suddenly thankful they wore gas masks. Toward the end of the War there was much research into nerve agents and a ship just drifting in these Straits simply raised red flags. He stood and using hand signals split up the boarding team. Two would check the forward section of the ship and the rest would come with Foley. With a final parting glance for luck, Foley and his team ran down the deck toward an open doorway. Silent derricks rose above them like grim crosses. He held his gun in front of him and stepped out of the sunlit deck into the darkness of a corridor that led into the superstructure of the Ourang Medan.

Almost immediately a moan rang out from somewhere in the ship. It almost sounded like a —

'Dog', one of the crew mimed, making a dog silhouette with his fingers.

Foley nodded and led them up the stairwell toward the bridge. Their shoes and boots clanged on the metal stairs. The moan rang out again and they stopped to get a bearing on its source but the hoods of their breathing gear made it difficult. They continued up and at one point had to shimmy along the walls as they came upon two bodies lying at angles across the steps. The same contorted expressions on the faces and the same desperate frozen postures. Everyone clawing their way to an escape.

They stepped past the two bodies and just around a corner came upon the radio room. Foley stepped inside and saw a sailor slumped over the communication desk, one bony fingertip resting on the transmitter key. This was the man who had sent the distress call and his final words, 'I die.' The sailor's eyes were wide in shock; mouth open in a silent scream.

A shuffling sound behind them made the boarding party spin around. What they saw broke through their tough demeanor and chilled them. The ship's dog, a black German shepherd stumbled into the radio room. It swayed unsteadily on its trembling legs and looked at them through mournful eyes. The dog opened its mouth and they saw the muscles in the chest tense as if to bark but all that came out was a cracked whimper. Spittle foamed at its jaws and the dog collapsed onto the floor and began bucking, its stomach and chest puffing like a billows. Its legs extended in a final spasm, its claws splayed out and the tail thumped weakly against the door jam. Then the dog was still, only its eyes moved, looking at them, pleading with them; then... nothing.

The bridge room was a scene of death. They found the Captain and other officers fallen by the control helm of the ship, even clutching the wheel in a death grip or slumped over the navigation table in the chart room. Death had caught them unawares in their routine duties.

But, Foley thought, if death had come upon them suddenly, who had set the engine speed to All Stop. He dismissed the idea of the radio officer carrying out that task because the Morse messages they had received had been panicked and at one point incoherent. A man operating under such confusion would not have the presence of mind to stop the diesels. And even if he did, had there been someone alive down in the engine room to respond?

On Foley's signal, they quickly began searching the ship's documents and logbook. One of the crew put their finds into a cloth bag they had brought along. Foley motioned to him, took a

pen and wrote on one of the charts: Get back to the Star and let's get towing lines across. I will reconnoiter the lower decks in the meantime.

The crewman set off, glad to be away from the Ourang Medan. Foley stepped to the bridge and watched the lifeboat pull away from the Medan. The other two men who had been dispatched to the forward section were returning to the rally point. Foley signaled to them to hold their position (they could help with setting up the tow lines) and then he and the other two men descended from the bridge below decks.

When the lifeboat returned, Captain Silas immediately set about organizing for the Ourang Medan to be towed behind the Silver Star to Jakarta. He bade the crewmen who had returned to hold their tongues — he didn't want superstitions or rumors to sully any of his men. Yes, the report of the Ourang Medan was disturbing but if he was apprehensive of sending a salvage crew aboard to steer her to the nearest port, he wasn't going to let those poor souls drift. They deserved a proper burial.

On his command, the Star began closing the gap separating the two ships and fat coils of rope were readied to be tossed over to the boarding party on the Medan. Watching the operation from the bridge wings, Silas didn't like it one bit that Foley had gambled and sent the lifeboat back leaving the boarding party almost stranded on the ship, but then again, Foley was an experienced sailor. He probably knew what he was doing.

He could not have been more wrong.

Andrew Foley gagged.

The passageways were littered with bodies of the crew of the Ourang Medan. He had never seen so much death piled in so close. What had killed these people, he wondered. He looked at the men behind him and their wide eyes told him they were thinking the same thing. They were also questioning him: Why are we staying here?

Foley didn't want to be down here any longer. If there was an epidemic on the Ourang Medan, he had put everyone's life at risk by venturing deep into the crew's quarters. He needed to get topside and call-off the salvage operation which he was sure was well underway. He put up a hand to signal they were returning when something caught his eye.

At the far end of the passageway beneath a weak yellow overhead light a door rested flush open. Propped against the door was a man carrying a Japanese Type 99 bolt-action rifle. There was another man lying across the threshold and a rifle had fallen from his limp hands. Foley started toward the fallen men, sidestepping the other dead bodies. He noticed now as he carefully placed his toes, that some of them carried pistols but had apparently not had a chance to use them – one man’s hand rested on the button of his holster.

“Easy! Easy!” Captain Silas cautioned as the gap closed to fifteen feet and then to less than ten feet. “Hold it! Steady!”

The two ships were now abreast and the Silver Star inched forward. Silas watched as his crew – all protected by gas masks – tossed heavy towing lines across to the boarding party on the other ship, the thick coils undulating in the air like flying snakes before landing with fat thumps on the deck of the Medan.

He had some of the crew keeping a close eye on the dead ship; he didn’t want the Medan plowing into his ship. Though at such a close distance the chances of serious damage were low, he was still cautious. He had only a requisite number of crew above decks. The message that had gone out to all hands was that there had possibly been a gas leak on the Medan and hence the precautionary measures. The crew bought the story even though it had no factual basis; with World War II just ended, it was plausible enough.

Foley stepped over the body and into the cabin. In a corner of his mind he noted that the dead men with rifles wore the dress of the Japanese Imperial Army. And they were guarding —

The cabin was ransacked — literally torn apart: floorboards pulled up, the bunk standing on its side. It looked like whoever it was, had found what they were looking for: built into the bulkhead was a safe. It had been hidden by the cupboard which now lay tossed carelessly to one side. The safe’s solid iron door was blasted open and hung crumpled and warped, from one twisted hinge. In the gentle bobbing of the Ourang Medan, the battered door creaked as it swung.

Oh, my God, Foley thought as the implications of what he was seeing reached home. Someone had killed everyone aboard the Ourang Medan to get at whatever was in this cabin.

Foley swung around to warn the others to get off the ship when there was a deep boom from somewhere within the ship and the Ourang Medan shuddered. Foley and the crewman flailed for support, knocked off-balance. The sound of the explosion reverberated through the corridors of the dead ship and the lights flickered and then went out, plunging everything into darkness.

“What the hell!” Silas shouted.

He had heard the explosion from the Ourang Medan followed by an expulsion of thick smoke from the forward hatches. The Medan shivered and listed to starboard. Silas watched in mounting trepidation as the derricks near the explosion creaked and swayed. Then with a ringing snap, one of the derrick’s guy-lines snapped. Time seemed to slow down as the cable whiplashed and Silas saw a spray of blood as one of the boarding crew was cleanly severed in half. His torso went into the air as his lifeless legs crumpled grotesquely to the deck. Then with a groan, the derrick boom began to fall and swing.

Silas came out of his stupor shouting, “Pull clear! Pull clear! Get down!” as more smoke engulfed the forward section of the Ourang Medan.

The helmsman swung the wheel frantically opening the gap between the ships as commands were rung down to the engine room. The Silver Star rumbled to life but she would not get out in time! The Medan’s derrick boom came crashing down across the narrow channel between the ships with a resounding bang amidships the Silver Star and then began scraping in an arc across her deck like a scathe.

“We need to get out of here! Now!” Foley shouted. He picked himself up and stumbled toward the door. Everything was tilting crazily and they tripped over the dead bodies in the passageway as they made a mad dash for the stairs.

There was a hissing sound and one of the sailors screamed as an overhead pipe burst and engulfed him in scalding steam. The man went down clutching his blistering neck. One of the others stopped to help him. Foley pulled him back, shaking his head emphatically. But the sailor shook him off angrily and rushed back to help... just as another explosion shook the Ourang Medan and the overhead pipe completely gave way. A jet of superheated steam

billowed out and even with the gas mask and hood, Foley heard the two men screaming as they were lost in the cloud.

He turned and ran up.

Men jumped out of the way as the relative movement of the two ships caused the boom to plow across the Silver Star's deck. Silas watched as one man was cornered and picked up by the boom and slammed sickeningly into the hatch covers. He fell out of sight.

Silas glanced at the helmsman. The man's eyes were wide as he willed the Silver Star to turn.

Then a second explosion sounded from the Ourang Medan and the ship began to list even further. She would come crashing against the Silver Star if they didn't get out of there.

And then Silas saw Foley and two sailors come rushing out onto the deck and look about disoriented. Silas hailed them with the bullhorn and shouted, "Jump off! We'll pick you up! Get off the ship! Jump!"

Foley urged his team over the bulwarks. One of them leaped off and landed with a splash. The other hesitated. He shook his head and Foley saw his mouth move: I can't swim.

No time, Foley shook his head and mimed that he would be right behind. They stepped to the edge.

"Good Lord!" Silas said, unaware he still had the bullhorn to his lips. He watched as one of the tow lines that had already been fastened tautened as the two ships moved apart. If the Ourang Medan went down she would pull the Silver Star with her! "The tow lines!"

Foley looked in the direction Captain Silas was pointing to. And immediately saw the danger. Dammit!

"Come on!" he shouted to the crewman. The two of them ran on the canting deck, arms spread out for balance. They ducked beneath the swinging boom, mere inches above their heads. Foley was the first to reach the smit bracket and looked around wildly for something

to attack the tow line with. But the only thing he kept seeing was the quivering tow line as it picked up the strain of the two ships.

Foley jumped on the bracket in a mad attempt to unloop the thick rope. He pounded at it, grabbed at it, pulled with all his strength. And then the unthinkable happened: His hand caught in the rope and before he could comprehend anything the heavy-duty rope crushed his hand to pulp. Foley screamed in agony as he tried to free his hand. And then he was aware of the other sailor beside him. The man had found an axe and Foley knew what had to be done.

Foley immediately undid his belt with his free hand and the two of them cinched a tourniquet on his upper arm. The sailor picked up the axe and Foley nodded and put his other arm into his mouth to steel himself against the pain.

The axe blade fell, severing his hand off at the wrist. Foley fell back to the deck beholding the bloody stump. His eyes went wide and he was slipping into shock. Foley screamed like an animal, venting his pain. The sailor was hacking at the tow line with the bloody blade. Foley saw the strands part.

"Come on! Come on!" Silas pleaded as he took in the drama near the smit bracket. He saw Foley pulling off his shirt so that it hung over his amputated hand and then wrap it around tightly like a bandage. With a final swing the tow line parted and the two ships were free of each other. Silas steadied himself against the helm as the Silver Star rocked with the released tension. The tow line slithered off the Ourang Medan and splashed into the sea like a fat snake. He saw Foley get shakily to his feet and run into the sailor with the axe, barreling the two of them off the side of the ship.

"Get a boat lowered!" he roared. "Get them back! Quick!" The lifeboat that was used earlier to board the Medan was once again lowered from its davits where it had hung halfway all this time. Two seamen rowed powerfully picking up the other sailor who had jumped before continuing toward Foley and his companion.

Foley was in hell. His arm was numb and he was drowning... faster because the sailor clutching his neck couldn't swim. He pulled off his mask and sucked in water and sank beneath the waves. He kicked and rose above the waves and gasped for breath taking in more water

before sinking under again. His sinus passage stung, his vision narrowed and sound was a dull sensation. He felt the grip on his neck loosen and he didn't have the strength to protest or hang on. Then he felt something grab at his hair and shirt and he was rising. The dullness in his ears cleared and he could hear voices as he was pulled out of the water – sucking in copious amounts of air while simultaneously sputtering sea water – and manhandled over the gunwales of a lifeboat, and flopped exhausted in a puddle across the footings.

"Hang on," someone said, "You're almost home!"

And then everything went black.

Captain Silas wiped the sweat of his brow as they put distance from the dead ship. Granted he had lost men but it could have been worse, he thought.

And then it was as if the world ended.

There was a brilliant flash of orange and red and Silas had a brief impression of the Ourang Medan being *lifted* out of the water in an enormous spray. He was thrown off his feet, back into the bridge room. The flash was followed by a thunderous explosion that deafened him and shattered all the glass in the windows and portholes on the port side of the Silver Star. It was as if a giant fist had rammed into his ship and she began to list to starboard. Everything was falling and rolling. They were surely going to tip over. The deck tilted and tilted. People were screaming but he could only hear faint cries.

Then gradually, willed by the prayers and pleas of her crew, the Silver Star began to right herself. As they rolled back to port, Silas's jaw dropped as he beheld the smoldering remains of the Ourang Medan, sinking into the sea. She went down quickly, her bow rising at a forty-five-degree angle as she slipped to her watery grave.

CHAPTER 2

GHOST SHIP

The observer lowered his binoculars as the Ourang Medan disappeared. He turned to the Japanese soldier standing beside him.

"They got away," he said with a tinge of accusation.

The Japanese shrugged and said, "I played my part. It is not my fault that someone managed to get a mayday out."

The observer snorted dismissively and looked at his communications officer. "Get me a secure line." He wanted to kill the Japanese soldier right then and there; the man was getting on his nerves. The communications officer handed him a headset with an attached microphone. He took it and spoke quickly and softly while the others watched him expectantly. They didn't have the firepower to sink the Silver Star nor could they jam any outgoing radio chatter from the ship as it sped away, frightened by the sinking of the Ourang Medan.

On the other end of the secure line a voice rasped after nearly a minute of silence, "There must be no trace of the Ourang Medan for our cover up to work. It must be as if she or her crew never existed — a ghost ship. Do you understand? *No trace.*"

"Yes, sir," he replied. "I understand."

"Good." The line went dead. The observer turned to face his men. "We proceed as planned." Then he drew his pistol and nonchalantly shot the Japanese traitor in the head. "Toss him overboard."