

The Shark Mutiny

Admiral Arnold Morgan, #5

by Patrick Robinson, 1940–

Published: 2001

✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻

Table of Contents

Dedication

Cast of Principal Characters

Prologue



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 13

Epilogue



Acknowledgements

* * * * *

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



This book is respectfully dedicated to everyone who opposes the reduction of U.S. Naval budgets, especially those politicians willing to reverse the process.

Cast of Principal Characters

SENIOR COMMAND

The President of the United States
(Commander-in-Chief U.S. Armed Forces)
Vice Admiral Arnold Morgan (National Security Adviser)
Robert MacPherson (Defense Secretary)
Harcourt Travis (Secretary of State)
General Tim Scannell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs)

U.S. NAVY SENIOR COMMAND

Admiral Alan Dixon (Chief of Naval Operations)
Admiral Dick Greening
(Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet [CINCPACFLT])
Rear Admiral Freddie Curran
(Commander Submarines Pacific Fleet [COMSUBPAC])
Rear Admiral John Bergstrom
(Commander Special War Command [SPECWARCOM])

USS SHARK

Commander Donald K. Reid (Commanding Officer)
Lt. Commander Dan Headley (Executive Officer)
Lt. Commander Jack Cressend (Combat Systems Officer)

Lt. Commander Josh Gandy (Sonar Officer)
Master Chief Petty Officer Drew Fisher (Chief of Boat)
Lt. Shawn Pearson (Navigation Officer)
Lt. Matt Singer (Officer of the Deck)
Lt. Dave Mills (ASDV helmsman)
Lt. Matt Longo (ASDV navigator)

U.S. NAVY SEALS

Commander Rick Hunter (Team Leader, Assault Team Two)
Commander Russell "Rusty" Bennett
(Overall Commander, Assault Team One)
Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer (Team Leader, Assault Team One)
Lt. Dan Conway (Second in Command, Assault Team One)
Lt. John Nathan (High Explosives Chief, Assault Team One)
Chief Petty Officer Rob Cafiero
(Base Camp Chief, Assault Team One)
Petty Officer Ryan Combs (machine gunner, Assault Team One)
Combat SEAL Charlie Mitchell (Electrics, Assault Team One)
Lt. Dallas MacPherson
(Second in Command and Explosives Chief, Assault
Team Two)
Lt. Bobby Allensworth
(personal bodyguard to Commander Hunter)
Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook
(explosives assistant to Lt. MacPherson)
Petty Officer Catfish Jones (combat assistant to Lt. Allensworth)
SEAL Riff "Rattlesnake" Davies
(machine gunner, Assault Team Two)
SEAL Buster Townsend (Assault Team Two)

NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY, FORT MEADE

Admiral David Borden (Acting Director)
Lt. Jimmy Ramshawe (Security Ops Officer)

THE COURT-MARTIAL

President: Captain Cale "Boomer" Dunning
Judge Advocate General: Captain Sam Scott
Judge Advocate/Observer: Captain Art Brennan
Trial Counselor: Lt. Commander David "Locker" Jones
Defense Counselor: Lt. Commander Al Surprenant

CHINESE HIGH COMMAND

Admiral Zhang Yushu (Senior Vice Chairman Peoples' Liberation Army/Navy
Council)
Admiral Zu Jicai (Commander-in-Chief, Navy)

CIVILIAN OIL TANKER MASTERS

Commodore Don McGhee (Global Bronco)
Captain Tex Packard (Galveston Star)

FIANCÉES

Kathy O'Brien (Admiral Morgan)
Jane Peacock (Lt. Ramshawe)

Prologue

**Summer 1987.
Hunter Valley Thoroughbred Farms.
Lexington, Kentucky.**

It was pretty damn hot for baseball. Only a light breeze ruffled the sweltering bluegrass paddocks in this big thoroughbred breeding farm along the old Ironworks Pike, out near the village of Paris. And young Dan Headley couldn't hit Rick Hunter's fastball to save his life.

"Easy, Ricky... take something off it... I can't hit that..." But again and again the baseball came screaming in, low and away, and slammed into the base of the red barn wall behind the hitter. And the tall 16-year-old pitcher kept howling with laughter as his best buddy swung and missed yet again.

"You gotta concentrate, Danny."

"On what?"

"The baseball, stupid."

"How can I, when I can't even see it? Nobody could see it."

"Pete Rose coulda seen it," said Rick solemnly, referring to the former Cincinnati Reds legend.

"Pete Rose coulda seen a howitzer shell."

"Okay, one more?"

"Nah. I'm all done. Let's go back and get some lemonade. I'm sweating like a bull."

Rick Hunter pulled off his glove, stuck the ball into the pocket of his jeans, and tied the sleeves of his warm-up jacket around his waist. He jumped over the post-and-rail fence into a wide paddock containing a half dozen mares and foals. Dan Headley followed him, swinging the Louisville Slugger bat, looking over at the foals, at the Kentucky-bred baby racehorses, the best of whom may one day hear the thunder of the crowds at Belmont Park, Royal Ascot, Saratoga and Longchamp. Perhaps even Churchill Downs.

"Still beats the hell outta me why you don't just stay here and get rich," said Dan. "Raisin' the ye'rlings, sellin' 'em for fortunes, just like yer daddy... Jeez, Rick. You got it all made for you, right here."

“Danny, we been havin’ this particular conversation for the biggest part of three years. And my answer ain’t varied none. I just ain’t interested. ‘Sides, in my judgment, this bull market for thoroughbreds ain’t here forever.”

“Well, it’s been here for more’n ten years. Ain’t showing no sign of flagging.”

“It’ll collapse, ole buddy. Bull markets always do in the end. And right then there’s gonna be a whole lot of penniless ole hardboots around here... guys who thought their good luck was some kinda birthright.”

“Yeah, but that ain’t why you plan to leave. You’re leavin’ because it bores you...even with all that money swilling around. But why the hell you want to be an officer in the U.S. Navy instead of riding around here like some goddamned czar...master of the Hunter Valley, right here in the thoroughbred breeding capital of the world...well, like I said. Sure beats the hell outta me.”

“Well, you’re planning to leave with me, right?”

“Sure I am, Ricky. But, Christ, my daddy’s just the stud groom here. Your ole man owns the whole place. And you don’t even have any brothers and sisters. It’s all gonna be yours. All two thousand acres of it. And all them goddamned blue-chip broodmares.”

“Come on, Danny. You understand the horse-breeding business better’n I do. You could make a real go of it yourself, if you wanted. Your daddy’s got a coupla mares of his own. Everyone has to start somewhere.”

“Ricky, I couldn’t save enough money for a place like this in a thousand years. I’d just end up another stud groom. Anyone could see why I’d rather be Captain Dan Headley, commanding officer of a U.S. Navy battle cruiser, than Danny Headley, stallion man at the Hunter Valley.”

“Raisin’ horses bores you too, don’t it?” said Rick, grinning, in the sure knowledge that he had a soul mate.

“Some. But I just don’t have the advantages.”

“Wouldn’t change nothin’ in my opinion. You just want adventure... I guess like me. Fast horses take too long to raise. We just ain’t got the time, right?”

Dan grinned. He was much shorter than the towering Rick Hunter, and he had to walk about half a stride faster to lay up with his lifelong friend. They moved steadily across the magnificent grassland, walking on a slight uphill gradient, watching the foals edging toward them, eager, curious, the mares moving at a much slower pace behind.

“Who’s that chestnut filly by?...”

“Which one, Danny? The one in front with the white star?”

“Yeah. She’s gonna have a backside like a barmaid when she grows up.”

“Guess she could have a motor. She’s by Secretariat, out of a halfway decent daughter of Nashua.”

“That’s real local, right? Nashua next door, and the Big Horse is just up the road.”

Kentucky horsemen always referred to the 1973 Triple Crown winner as the Big Horse, despite his unspectacular performance in the stud.

“Dad owns the mare, swears to God Secretariat’s gonna be a great sire of broodmares. We’ll be keeping that filly for sure.”

“How about that little bay colt over there, the one who keeps pushing the others around?...”

“He’s by Northern Dancer. Typical, kinda boisterous and small. He’ll go to the sales, probably end up in Ireland with Mr. O’Brien. Unless the Arabs outbid everyone. Then he’ll end up in Newmarket, which ain’t quite so good.”

“Guess the dark gray is by the Rajah, right?”

“That’s him. He’s by our own Red Rajah. Bart Hunter’s pride and joy. That stallion is one mean sonofabitch. But my daddy loves him, and your daddy copes with him. Bobby Headley, best stallion man in the bluegrass. That’s my old man’s verdict.”

“Well, I been around the Rajah for five years, and I ain’t seen nothin’ mean about him.”

“I have. Trust me. He just don’t like strangers, Dan. But he acts like an old dog when your daddy’s with him.”

They walked on, to the fence, climbed it and came around into the main yard, walked right into Bobby Headley, hurrying down to the feed house. He was a slim, hard-eyed Kentucky horseman of medium height, not as handsome as his dark-haired 16-year-old son, and he had a deep resonant voice that seemed out of place in a man so lacking in bulk.

“Hey, boys, how you doin’?” he said, looking at the baseball bat. “Still gettin’ that fastball past ’im, eh, Ricky?”

“Yessir. But it ain’t easy. Lose your concentration, and that Danny can really hurt you.”

Bobby Headley chuckled. “Hey, Dan, do me a favor, willya? Run along to Rajah’s box and pick up my brushes. I left ’em right inside the door.”

“Sure. Rick, will I see you back at the house?”

“In five, right?”

Dan Headley jogged along to the three big stallion boxes at the far end of the yard, unclipped the lock on the eight-year-old Red Rajah’s door, and slipped inside, muttering softly, “Hey, Rajah, ole boy... how you bin? They still treatin’ you good?”

The big stallion, just a tad under 17 hands, and almost milk white now with the advancing years, did not have a head collar on and he was not tethered on a long shank to the sturdy iron ring on the wall. This was a bit unusual for a stallion of his hot-blooded breeding. The powerful ex-California Stakes winner was a grandson of the fiery Red God, out of a fast daughter of the notorious English sire Supreme Sovereign.

To a professional horseman this was an example of breeding made in hell, a recipe for a truly dangerous stallion. Supreme Sovereign was so unpredictable, so lethal to any human being, they kept a high-powered fire hose in his box, in case of an emergency.

Red Rajah himself had several times attacked people, but he’d been a high-class miler in his time, a good tough battler in a finish, and he was a highly commercial sire, standing for \$40,000. In the last couple of years, Bobby Headley seemed to have him under control.

The Rajah gazed at young Dan Headley moving softly behind him. He betrayed no anger, but those who knew him would have noticed his ears set slightly back, and his eye flicking first forward, then back; far back, looking at Dan without moving his head.

The boy bent down to pick up the brushes, and as he straightened up, the stallion moved, imperceptibly. Dan, sensing a shift in the horse's mood, reacted like the lifelong horseman he was, lifted up his right arm like a traffic cop, and murmured, "Whoa there, Rajah... good boy... easy, ole buddy."

Right then Red Rajah attacked, quite suddenly, with not a semblance of warning. He whipped his head around and slammed his teeth over Danny's biceps, biting like a crocodile, right through the muscle and splintering the big bone in the upper arm. And he didn't let go. He dragged the boy down, pulling him onto the straw, preparing for the killer-stallion's favorite trick, to kneel on his prey, like a camel or an elephant, crushing the rib cage. The thoroughbred breeding industry is apt to keep this kind of savagery very quiet.

Dan Headley screamed, with pain and terror. And his scream echoed into the yard. Rick Hunter was on his way down the walkway toward the main house when he heard it. No one else did. A thousand dreads about the true nature of the grandson of Red God flew through his mind.

Back in the barn, Danny screamed again. He was facing death. He knew that, and he kicked out at the stallion, but it was like kicking a pickup truck.

Rick Hunter was by now pounding across the grass quadrangle toward the boxes as he heard his friend's second scream. He dashed straight to the first box where Red Rajah lived. When he got there he searched instantly for a weapon, and saw the trusty Louisville Slugger against the wall. Grabbing it with his right hand, he whipped open the door and faced with horror the scene before him—Danny, blood pouring from his smashed right arm, trying to protect himself against the onslaught of the stallion looming over him, preparing to kneel.

Rick never hesitated, wound back the bat and slammed it into Red Rajah's ribs with a blow that would surely have killed a man. It did not, however, kill Red Rajah. The great white horse swung his head around, as if deciding which of the two boys to attack first. So Ricky hit him again, with all his force, crashing the bat into the ribs of the stallion, simultaneously yelling, "GET OUT, DANNY! FOR CHRIST'S SAKE GET OUT... SHUT THE DOOR BUT DON'T LOCK IT..."

Dan Headley, half in shock, maddened by the pain, rolled and crawled out of the box. Still flat on the ground, he kicked the door shut. And 16-year-old Rick Hunter turned to face the raging horse again.

By now he was in the corner 15 feet from the door, watching the Rajah backing off a stride or two. Rick held the bat in both hands, not daring to swing in case he missed the head, and the horse came at his throat, or, much more likely, his testicles.

In a split second he got his answer. Red Rajah came straight at his face, mouth open. Rick shoved the bat straight out in front of him, still holding the handle with both hands. And the Rajah's teeth smashed down onto it, splintering it like matchwood.

Outside Dan Headley had passed out from the pain.

And now Rick was on his own. Again the Rajah moved away a stride, his ears flat back, his white-rimmed eye still flicking back and forth. Rick's mind raced, back to a conversation he had once had with an old local hardboot, who had told him, *There's only one way I know to stop a stallion who's bent on killing you.*

Rick Hunter dropped down onto all fours, knowing that if this ploy failed he might be as dead as Danny would have been if he hadn't arrived in time.

Rick flattened himself into the pose of the horse's most ancient and feared enemy, the lion. He tried to assume the crouched, threatening stance of a big cat preparing to pounce, trying to reawaken thousands of years of unconscious phobia in the psyche of the horse. He burrowed his boot into the straw, made a scratching noise on the concrete beneath, snarled deeply, staring hard into the horse's eyes.

Then he moved his head forward and let out a roar and then another, crawling one step nearer. Red Rajah stopped dead. Then he moved a half step backward, a slight tremor in both shoulder muscles. He backed up some more, dipping his head as if to protect his throat. It was an instinct, not a reaction.

Rick roared like a lion again, all the while trying to get the warm-up jacket from around his waist. The fight seemed to have gone right out of the Rajah, who was now standing stock-still. And he was not prepared when the six-foot-four-inch heir to Hunter Valley jumped up and dived at his head, ramming the jacket hard down over his eyes and face.

Red Rajah was in the pitch dark now, and no horse likes to move when he's unable to see anything. He just stood there, stock-still, trembling, blind now, with the jacket still over his head. And Rick carefully edged toward the door, eased it quietly open, and made his escape, slamming the lock shut as he went.

Outside, Dan was conscious again. Rick hit the alarm bell, and sat with his buddy until help arrived minutes later.

He, and both of their fathers, remained with Dan all night in Lexington Hospital, while two surgeons meticulously restitched the muscle, reset and pinned the shattered right arm.

And in the morning when Dan was in the recovery room, the patient finally came to, slowly focusing on the young lion from Hunter Valley. He shook his head in silent admiration of his friend's courage. And then he grinned, and said, "Jesus, Ricky. You just saved my life. I told you we'd be better off in a warship."

"You're right there, ole buddy," said Rick. "Screw this racehorse crap. You can get killed out here. I'd rather be under fire. You think Annapolis is ready for us?"

Chapter 1

January 23, 2007.

The White House. Washington, D.C.

Admiral Arnold Morgan was alone in his office contemplating the two major issues in his life at this particular lunchtime. The first was his decision to stay on as the National Security Adviser to the President for one more year, against all of his better judgment.

The second was a Wagnerian-sized roast beef sandwich, fortified with heavy mayonnaise and mustard into a feast he would never have dared to order had his secretary and wife-to-be, the gorgeous Kathy O'Brien, been anywhere near the precincts of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Happily she was out until 4 P.M.

The Admiral grinned cheerfully. He saw the sandwich as a richly deserved gastronomic reward for having succumbed to weeks of being badgered, harassed, coaxed and ultimately persuaded to remain in this office by some of the most powerful figures in American politics and the military.

His decision to hang in there had been wrung out of him, after nine weeks of soul-searching. The decision to hit a roast beef sandwich *el grando*, before Ms. O'Brien came sashaying back into the office, had been made with much less anguish. Nine weeks' less.

The Admiral, 61 years old now, was still, miraculously, in robust health, and not more than 8 pounds heavier than he had been as a nuclear submarine commander 27 years previously. Immaculately tailored, wearing a maroon-and-gold Hermès tie Kathy had given him for Christmas, he tucked a large white linen napkin into his shirt collar and bit luxuriously into his sandwich.

Through the window he could see it was snowing like hell. The President was, shrewdly, visiting Southern California where the temperature was a sunlit 78 degrees, and right here in the West Wing of the White House there was absolutely nothing happening of any interest whatsoever to the most feared and respected military strategist on the planet Earth.

"I still have no idea what the hell I'm doing here," he muttered to himself. "The goddamned world's gone quiet, temporarily. And I'm sitting here like a goddamned lapdog waiting for our esteemed but flakey leader to drag himself out of some fucking Beverly Hills swimming pool."

Flakey. A complete flake. The words had been used about the President, over and over at that final meeting at the home of Admiral Scott Dunsmore, the wise and deceptively wealthy former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Arnold Morgan could not understand what the fuss was about. Plenty of other NSAs had resigned, but, apparently, he was not permitted that basic human right.

Christ, everyone had been there. And no one had even informed him. He'd walked, stone-cold, into a room containing not only General Scannell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, but *two* former chairmen, plus the Chief of Naval Operations, and the Commandant of the United States Marines. The Defense Secretary was there, two senior members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, including the vastly experienced Senator Ted Kennedy, whose unwavering patriotism and endless concern for his country made him always a natural leader among such men. Altogether there were four current members of the National Security Council in attendance.

Their joint mission was simple: to persuade Admiral Morgan to withdraw his resignation, and to remain in office until the Republican President's second term was over. A few weeks previously, at the conclusion of a particularly dangerous and covert Naval operation in China, the President had demonstrated such shocking self-interest and lack of judgment that he could no longer be trusted to act in the strict interests of the USA.

The world was presently a volatile place, and no one needed to remind Admiral Morgan of that. But the man in the Oval Office was prone to appoint “yes-men” to influential positions, and now in the final two years of his presidency he tended to think only of himself and his image and popularity.

Without Admiral Morgan’s granite wall of reality and judgment in the crucible of international military affairs, the men in Admiral Dunsmore’s house that day were greatly concerned that a terrible and costly mistake might occur.

Looking back, Arnold Morgan could not remember precisely who had put into words the hitherto unspoken observation that the President was a “goddamned flake, and getting worse.” But he remembered a lot of nodding and no laughter. And he remembered their host, Admiral Dunsmore, turning to his old friend, the Senator from Massachusetts, and saying, “The trouble is he’s interested in military matters. And we cannot trust him. Talk to Arnold, Teddy. You’ll say it better than anyone else.”

He had, too. And at the conclusion of a short but moving few words from the silver-tongued sage of Hyannisport, Admiral Morgan had nodded, and said, curtly, “My resignation is withdrawn.”

And now he was “back at the factory.” And he was ruminating on the general calm that had existed in the world’s known trouble spots for the past month. The Middle East was for the moment serene. Terrorists in general seemed still to be on their Christmas break. India and Pakistan had temporarily ceased to threaten each other. And China, the Big Tiger, had been very quiet since last fall. Indeed, according to the satellite photographs, they were not even conducting fleet exercises near Taiwan, which made for a change. As for their new XIA III, there was no sign of the submarine leaving its jetty in Shanghai.

The only halfway-interesting piece of intelligence to come Admiral Morgan’s way since Christmas was a report put together by the CIA’s Russian desk. According to one of their field operators in Moscow, the Rosvoorouzhnie factory on the outskirts of the city was suddenly making large quantities of moored mines. This was regarded as unusual since Rosvoorouzhnie’s known expertise was in the production of seabed mines, the MDM series, particularly the lethal one-and-three-quarter-ton, ship-killing MDM-6, which can be laid through the torpedo tubes of a submarine.

Rosvoorouzhnie was now, apparently, making a lot of updated, custom-made PLT-3 mines, moored one-tonners, which can be laid either through torpedo tubes, or from surface ships. The CIA had no information about where the mines were going, if anywhere, but their man had been certain this was a very unusual development. Most Russian-made mines these days were strictly for export.

Admiral Morgan growled to himself, *Now who the hell wants a damn large shipment of moored PLT-3s, eh?* He chewed on the roast beef and pondered silently. He did not much like it. *If the goddamned penniless Russians are building several hundred expensive mines, someone’s ordered ’em. And if someone’s ordered ’em, they plan to lay ’em, right? Otherwise they wouldn’t have ordered ’em.*

Where? That’s what we wanna know. Who’s planning a nice little surprise minefield?

He finished his sandwich, sipped his coffee and frowned. When Kathy came back, he’d have her call Langley and make sure he was kept up to speed on

Russian mine production. And if the overheads picked up any large mine shipments leaving any Russian seaports, he wanted to know about that. Immediately.

Just don't want some fucking despot in a turban getting overly ambitious, right? The Admiral glared at the portrait of General MacArthur that hung in his office. *Gotta watch 'em, Douglas. Right? Watch 'em, at all times.*

0900 (local). January 23, 2007.

Renmin Dahuitang, the Great Hall of the People.

Tiananmen Square, Beijing.

The largest government building in the world, home of the National People's Congress, was locked, barred and bolted this Tuesday morning. All 561,800 square feet of it. Business was canceled. The public was banned. And there were more armed military guards patrolling the snow-covered western side of the square than anyone had seen since the 1989 Massacre of the Students.

Inside, there were more guards, patrolling the endless corridors. Sixteen of them stood motionless, with shouldered arms, in a square surrounding the only elevator that travels down to the brightly lit underground Operations Room, designated by the late Mao Zedong to be used only in the event of foreign attack on mainland China. The room was massively constructed in heavy cast-concrete. It was white painted, almost bare walled and functional, situated deep below the 5,000-seat banqueting hall.

Aside from the heavily armed members of the People's Liberation Army, there were fewer than a dozen people being gently warmed by the Great Hall's vast central heating system, designed to keep at bay the freezing outside temperatures that occasionally grip the Chinese capital at this time of year.

Today there were brutal north winds, right out of the high plateaux of the Inner Mongolian plains, and they were presently refrigerating this entire part of northern China. Snow coated the yellow roofs of the Forbidden City, out beyond the northeastern corner of the Great Hall. Sudden squalls hurled white drifts against the vermilion walls.

The Stream of Golden Water was frozen rock-solid beneath the five bridges in front of the towering Meridian Gate, the spectacular entrance once reserved for the Emperor alone. Tiananmen Square itself was under an immense blanket of white. The total absence of thousands of government workers gave the heart of Beijing a look of abandonment. It was windswept, quiet, deserted, like a great stadium after the games were over.

Inside the Ops Room there was an atmosphere of high tension. Standing at the far end of the room, next to a 10-foot-wide illuminated computer screen, was the formidable figure of Admiral Zhang Yushu, recently resigned from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the People's Liberation Army/Navy, and now installed, by the Paramount Ruler himself, as the senior of the four Vice Chairmen of the all-powerful PLAN Council.

Eight weeks previously, Admiral Zhang had leapfrogged clean over the other three highly experienced members, and now occupied a position of such authority

he answered only to the State President, the General Secretary of the Communist Party and the Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission—and that was all the same person. The Paramount Ruler had once occupied these three Highest Offices of State, and there were those who thought it was just a matter of time before Admiral Zhang himself rose to such eminence. The Paramount Ruler would hear no word against him.

And now the Admiral addressed his audience for the first time, speaking carefully, welcoming them all to the most secretive meeting ever assembled in the 48-year history of the Great Hall—a gathering so clandestine they'd shut down the entire government for the day to avoid eavesdroppers.

Admiral Zhang's three elderly colleagues on the Military Council, all ex-Army commanders, were in attendance. The new Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, Admiral Zu Jicai, was there, seated next to Admiral Yibo Yunsheng, the new Commander of China's massive Northern Fleet. The Navy's powerful Political Commissar, Vice Admiral Yang Zhenying, had arrived the previous night from Shanghai in company with the Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Sang Ye.

The most influential of the Chinese Navy's Deputy Commanders-in-Chief, Admiral Zhi-Heng Tan, was seated next to Zhang himself at the head of the broad mahogany table. Behind them was a single four-foot-high framed print of Mao Zedong, the great revolutionary whose only wish was for a supreme China to stand alone against the imperial West. The print was a replica of the giant portrait of Mao that gazes with chilling indifference across the square from the Tiananmen Gate. Today, it served to remind the Chinese High Command in this brightly lit room precisely who they really were.

The other three men in the room were Iranian: the most senior a black-robed, bearded Ayatollah, whose name was not announced. The two Naval officers accompanying the holy man were Rear Admiral Hossein Shafii, Head of Tactical Headquarters, Bandar Abbas; and Rear Admiral Mohammed Badr, the Iranian Navy's Commander-in-Chief Submarines.

Admiral Zhang, who stood six feet tall, was by far the biggest and the most heavily built of the Chinese. But he spoke softly, in an uncharacteristic purr, a smile of friendship upon his wide impassive face. The language was English, which all three Iranians spoke fluently. The words were translated back into Chinese by Vice Admiral Yang who had, in his youth, studied for four years at UCLA.

"Gentlemen," said Admiral Zhang Yushu, "as you are all well aware, the new Sino-Iranian pipeline from the great oil fields of Kazakhstan will come on stream within a few weeks. Thousands of barrels will flow daily, from out of Russia, right across your great country, south to the new Chinese refinery on the shores of the Hormuz Strait.

"This, gentlemen, should herald a new dawn for all of us, a dawn of vast profits for Iran, and thank God, an end to China's endless reliance on the West, in the matter of fuel oil. The alliance of the past ten years between our two superb nations was, indeed, made in heaven."

Admiral Zhang paused, and opened his arms wide. And he walked around to the right side of the huge table and stood beaming at the men from the desert. The Ayatollah himself stood first and took both of the Admiral's hands in his own,

wishing everyone the everlasting peace of Allah. Then the two Admirals from Bandar Abbas stood up and embraced the legendary Chinese Navy commander.

Zhang walked back to his position at the head of the table, and glanced briefly at his notes. He allowed a flicker of a frown to cross his face, but then he smiled again, and continued: "I have no need to remind anyone of the enormous cost of building this one-thousand-mile pipeline, and the construction of the refinery. It ran, of course, into billions of U.S. dollars.

"However, as of this moment, there is but one dark cloud on our horizon...and that is the extraordinarily low cost of a barrel of oil on the world market. Last night it was down to thirteen dollars and falling toward a ten-year low. The Arab nations cannot be controlled because of their reliance on American protection and commerce. Which leaves us to sell at a half, or even a third of our oil's true value. Now, Iran is earning twenty percent of every barrel to reach the new refinery, and at present that's under three dollars. It will thus cost your country millions and millions in unearned revenue every month.

"Gentlemen, I ask you. What is the solution? And I must remind you, this is a PLOT... a diabolical Western PLOT... to devalue our great economies... to allow them to dominate us, as they have always tried to do."

Admiral Zhang's voice had risen during this delivery. But now it fell very softly again to the calm, gentle tones of his welcome. "We have the solution, my friends. It is a solution we have discussed before, and I believe it is a solution that will find much favor with both of our governments."

The Ayatollah looked genuinely perplexed. And he looked up quizzically.

Admiral Zhang smiled back, and without further ceremony, he said flatly, "I am proposing we lay a minefield deep in the historic, national waters of the Islamic State of Iran. Right across the Strait of Hormuz."

Admiral Badr looked up sharply and said immediately, "My friend, Yushu, you have become a tried and trusted confidant of my nation. But I feel I must remind you we have considered many times a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. But we have been frustrated for the same three reasons every time—one, the far side of the strait belongs to Oman, a country that is totally influenced by the American puppets in London.

"Two, we could never lay down a minefield quickly enough without being seen by the American satellites, which would surely bring down upon us the wrath of the Pentagon.

"And three, well, ultimately the Americans would clear it and paint us as lawless outcasts, enemies to the peaceful trading nations of the world. No good could come of it, not from our point of view."

Admiral Zhang nodded, and asked for the forbearance of the meeting. "Mohammed," he said, "all of your reasons are correct. But now times have changed. The stakes are much higher. You and I have different oil both to sell and to use. We also have an unbreakable joint interest, our own oil routes from the strait to the Far East. And you, Mohammed, have the entire backing of the People's Liberation Army/Navy.

"Together we could most certainly lay down a minefield, using both submarines and surface ships. And we could achieve it so swiftly, no one would have the slightest idea who had done what."

“But they would find out, surely?”

“They would not find out. Though they might guess. And they would not be in time. Because one day a big Western tanker is going to hit one of the mines and blow up, and for the next year oil prices will go through the roof, except for ours. Which will of course cost us just the same—almost nothing. But that which we sell will be worth a fortune, while the world’s tankers back up on both sides of the minefield, all of them afraid to go through. For a while, we’ll very nearly own the world market for fuel oil.”

Admiral Badr smiled and shook his head. “It’s a bold plan, Yushu. I’ll give you that. And I suppose it just might work. But my country, and my Navy, have been on the wrong end of the fury of the Pentagon before. And it is not a place we want to go again.”

“So has mine, Mohammed. But they are not invincible. And in the end they are a Godless society interested only in money. They will raise heaven and hell to free up the tanker routes to the gulf, but I think they will see it as a business problem, not cause for armed conflict. And besides they will not want an all-out shooting war in the gulf because that will just compound the oil problems and send prices even higher, and the sacred New York Stock Exchange even lower.”

“But, Yushu, if they suspect China is behind it, they may become very angry indeed.”

“True, Mohammed. True. But not sufficiently angry to want a war with us. That would send their precious stock market into free fall.

“No, my friends. The Americans will clear the minefield. Open up the tanker routes again, and send in heavy U.S. Naval muscle to make sure they stay cleared. By then we will have made vast sums of money, China and Iran. And, hopefully, many new friends, and customers, who will perhaps prefer to do business with us in future.

“One little minefield, Mohammed. Twenty miles wide. And we open a gateway to a glittering future together.”

Same day.

Headquarters, National Security Agency.

Fort Meade, Maryland.

Lieutenant Jimmy Ramshawe downloaded his computer screen for the umpteenth time that afternoon. As SOO (Security Ops Officer), his tasks included designating printouts to selected officers all over the ultrasecret labyrinth of the U.S. military Intelligence complex; a place so highly classified the walls had built-in copper shields to prevent any electronic eavesdropping.

The Lieutenant had been routinely bored by the entire procedure since lunchtime, sifting through screeds of messages, reports and signals from United States surveillance networks all over the world. But these two latest documents just in from the CIA’s Russian desk caught and held his attention:

Unusual activity in Rosvoorouzhnie mine production factory outside central Moscow. Three heavy transit military vehicles sighted leaving the plant, fully

laden. Sighted again at Sheremetyevo II Airport, Moscow, two hours later. Then again leaving the airport 1400 EST, empty. Destination unknown.

From the precise same source another signal came in 94 minutes later at 1534 EST. Langley had so far offered no comment. Just the bald fact: "Russian Antonov 124 took off Moscow 2300, believed heading due east. Aircrew only, plus heavy cargo. AN-124 took 3,000 meters to liftoff. CIA field officer traces no flight plan. Inquiries continue."

To Jimmy Ramshawe this was food and drink—a complex, slightly sinister problem that wanted studying, if not solving. He knew the gigantic Antonov freighter—known as the RUSLAN, after a mythological Russian giant—could carry a colossal 120 tons of freight 35,000 feet above the earth's surface. He had a good imagination and did not need to utilize much of it before he could visualize 120 big sea mines hurtling through the stratosphere at 550 knots, bound for some distant ocean where they could be primed to inconvenience U.S. Navy fleets.

At the age of 28, Jimmy had been selected by the Navy to serve in the Intelligence service. A tall dark-haired young officer, he possessed an acutely analytical mind. He was a lateral thinker, an observer of convolutions, complications and intricacies. As a commanding officer he would have developed into a living nightmare. No team in any warship would ever have provided him with *quite* sufficient data to make a major decision.

But he had a superb intelligence, the highest IQ in his class at Annapolis, and his superiors spotted him a long way out. Lt. Ramshawe was born for Intelligence work at the highest level. And while his young fellow officers went forward, following their stars as future commanding officers of surface or subsurface warships, the lanky, athletic Jimmy was sent into the electronic hothouse of America's most sensitive, heavily guarded Intelligence agency, where, to quote the admissions Admiral, "There would be ample outlet for his outstanding talents."

He was an unusual member of Fort Meade's staff for the simple reason that he looked and sounded like an Australian. The son of a Sydney diplomat, he had been born in Washington, D.C., while his father served a five-year tour of duty as Military Attaché at the grandiose Australian embassy on Massachusetts Avenue. They'd returned to New South Wales for just two years before Admiral Ramshawe accepted a position on the board of the Australian airline Qantas, working permanently in New York.

Young Jimmy, with his U.S. passport, went to school in Connecticut, starred for three years as a baseball pitcher who sounded as if he should have been playing cricket. And then followed his father into a career in Dark Blue. American Dark Blue, that is. He'd been in the U.S. Navy now for 10 years, but a couple of weeks earlier he had still brought a smile to the lugubrious face of the NSA's Director, Admiral George Morris, by announcing, "G'day, sir... I picked up that stuff you wanted... gimme two hours... she'll be right."

Ramshawe was always going to *sound* like Banjo Patterson and other members of Australian folklore, but he was American through and through, and Admiral Morris valued him highly, as highly as he valued his longtime friendship with Ramshawe Senior, the retired Aussie Diplomat/Admiral.

The trouble was, right now, Admiral Morris had just been admitted to the Bethesda Naval Hospital with suspected lung cancer, and the deputy director,

Rear Admiral David Borden, was a more remote, formal figure, who was not instantly receptive to young Lt. Ramshawe's observations. And that might prove difficult for both of them—the acting director because he might miss something, for Jimmy because he might not be listened to.

He stared at the two signals in front of him, and attacked the problem as he always did: going instantly for the obvious worst-case scenario. That is, *some foreign nutcase has just bought several hundred sea mines from the bloody Russians with a view to laying the bastards somewhere they want to keep private.*

Lt. Ramshawe frowned. It seemed unlikely the Russians were using the mines themselves. They had nowhere to mine, and these days they rarely manufactured Naval hardware unless it was for export.

So who the hell did they make 'em for? Jimmy Ramshawe ran the checks swiftly through his mind. One of those crazy bastards in the gulf... Gadaffi? The Ayatollahs? The Iraqis? No reason really for any of them, but the Iranians had threatened a minefield more than once. But then the AN-124 would have been running south, not east. Or else the mines would have been transported by road. China? No. They'd make their own... I think. North Korea? Maybe. But they make their own.

Lieutenant Ramshawe deemed the puzzle worthy of careful consideration. And he gathered up the two signals, muttering to himself, "I don't think we better fuck this up, because if ships start blowing up, somewhere in the Far East or wherever, we're likely to get the blame. 'Specially if an American ship was lost... bloody oath there'd be trouble then."

He stood up from his screen, pushed his floppy dark hair off his forehead and walked resolutely out of the ops area down to the Director's office. He was still reading the signals when he arrived in the hallowed area once occupied by Arnold Morgan himself. And he walked through absentmindedly, still reading, tapped on the door, pushed it open and walked in, as he always did.

"G'day, Admiral," he said. "Coupla things here I think we want to take a sharp look at."

David Borden looked up, an expression of surprise on his face.

"Lieutenant," he said. "I wonder if you could bring yourself to give me the elementary courtesy of knocking before you enter my office?"

"Sir? I thought I just did."

"And then perhaps *waiting* to be invited in?"

"Sir? This isn't a bloody social call. I have urgent stuff in my hand which I think you should know about right away."

"Lieutenant Ramshawe, there are certain matters of etiquette still observed here in the U.S. Navy, though I imagine they have long been dispensed with in your own country."

"Sir, this is my country."

"Of course. But your accent sounds like no other U.S. officer I ever met."

"Well, I can't help that. But since we're wasting time, and I don't want to get off on the wrong foot now that you're in the big chair, I'll get back outside and we'll start over, right?"

Before Admiral Borden could answer, Jimmy Ramshawe had walked out and closed the door behind him. Then he knocked on it, and the Director, feeling slightly absurd, called, "Come in, Lieutenant."

"Christ, I'm glad we got that over with," said Jimmy, turning on his Aussie-philosophical, lopsided grin. "Anyway, g'day, Admiral. Got something here I think we should take a look at."

He handed the two signals over, and David Borden glanced down at them.

"I don't see anything urgent here," he said. "First of all, we do not even know the mines were on board the Russian aircraft. If they were, we don't have the slightest idea where they might be going...and wherever that may be, it's going to take a long time for anyone to unload them, transport them, and then start laying them in the ocean. At which point our satellites will pick them up. I shouldn't waste any more time on it if I were you."

"Now, hold hard, sir. We got possibly several hundred brand-new sea mines almost certainly packed into the hold of the biggest freight aircraft on earth, now heading due east toward China, maybe India, maybe Pakistan, Korea, Indonesia? Brand-new mines specifically ordered and manufactured? And you don't think we want to trace the bloody jokers who own them, right away?"

"No, Lieutenant. I think we'll find out in good time without wasting any of our valuable resources, and in particular, your energies."

"Well, I suppose if you say so, sir. But that's a lot of high explosives, and... well, I mean some bugger wants it for something pretty definite. I think Admiral Morris would want it investigated... maybe alert the Big Man in the White House."

"Lieutenant, Admiral Morris is no longer in command of this agency. And from now on, I trust you'll respect my judgment. Forget the mines. They'll come to the surface in good time."

"Just hope they don't bring a pile of bloody wreckage with 'em, that's all."

Lt. Ramshawe nodded, curtly, turned on his heel and left, muttering to himself an old Australian phrase, "Right mongrel bastard he's turned out to be."

Evening, same day. Ops Room. Great Hall of the People.

The big computer screen had been switched off now. The Iranian delegation was heading northeast out along Jichang Lu toward Beijing International Airport. And Admiral Zhang was talking with Zu Jicai. Everyone else had gone. The two great Naval friends and colleagues sat alone, sipping tea, which Yushu had coerced a guard to produce, in the absence of any staff whatsoever in the Great Hall. It tasted, he thought, like a leftover thermos from Mao's Long March of 1935.

"I am still slightly mystified, Yushu. Do you really think there is enough advantage in this for us to become involved in a worldwide oil catastrophe?"

"Ah, Jicai. You are ever the tactician, ever the strategist. Always the battle commander. You see things very clearly, the immediate crunch, the immediate aftermath."

"Well, don't you?"

“I used to, when I was C-in-C of the Navy. But I must be political now, and I have changed my perspectives. I am trying to look at a wider picture.”

“I think, my Yushu, you will face a very wide picture indeed if an American tanker should collide with one of those Russian mines in the Strait of Hormuz.”

Admiral Zhang smiled, sipped his tea, grimaced and said softly, “Do you think they accepted my plan? Do you think Hossein will call back with the agreement of his government?”

“I am quite sure they accepted it. You can be very persuasive toward people who want to be convinced.”

“That’s part of my strategy, Jicai. I know that deep in the soul of every Iranian military officer there beats the heart of a revolutionary. Oh yes, they would like to make colossal sums of money from a world oil crisis. But what they really want is to strike a violently disruptive blow against the Great Satan, particularly one with the potential to cause widespread chaos in the everyday lives of ordinary Americans.”

“I am afraid you read them accurately, Yushu. And I am afraid your plan will take place. The minefield will be laid. But I am very afraid of the consequences. The Americans are likely to turn up in the gulf with guns blazing. Possibly against our own warships, and we are not really a match for them...”

“There you go again, my good Jicai. The immediate crunch. The immediate aftermath. Soon I will ask you to raise your sights. But not quite yet... not until we are given an affirmative answer by the Iranians. Then all will be revealed to you.”

“I look forward to that immensely, Yushu... but we have been in this room for almost twelve hours now. I think we should go and find some dinner together.”

The two men traveled up in the elevator to the central floor of the Great Hall, and an eight-man military escort took them to the main doors, beyond which lay the dark, freezing Tiananmen Square. A long black Mercedes, its engine running, awaited them, and the guard escort remained in formation until its tires had creaked out across the fresh, uncluttered snow, bearing its two high commanders north. North along the west side of the square, toward the Forbidden City, the old guardian of the Dragon Throne, and still, in the eyes of most Westerners, the symbol of the might of Communist China.

The great portrait of the unforgotten Mao Zedong, staring out, somehow shy, and cold, may not have formed a secret smile through the falling snow, as the Admirals’ Mercedes swept past Tiananmen Gate. But it should have. Mao, above all other men, would have loved Zhang Yushu’s as yet unspoken plan.

2100 (local). Same day.

NSA. Fort Meade, Maryland.

Admiral Borden had gone home. A new shift of U.S. surveillance operators was working through the night. Only one member of the day staff was still on duty: Lt. Jimmy Ramshawe was in his office, still working, behind closed doors, poring over maps of Asia, pulling up charts on his computer, trying to ascertain where the giant Antonov-124, with its lethal cargo of ship-killing high explosives, could be headed, and where, more importantly, it would have to refuel.

Those four big D-18Ts have gotta guzzle up more than ten tons of fuel per hour—which gives it a range of two thousand six hundred miles maximum. The bastard's gotta stop somewhere. And it's gotta stop soon.

Jimmy's thoughts were clear and accurate. He thought the aircraft would have to land around five hours after takeoff. Twice he checked with the CIA's Russian desk at Langley, but there was nothing new. Three times he checked with MENA, Fort Meade's Middle East North Africa desk, and they knew nothing either.

Lieutenant Ramshawe, however, had a stubborn streak the size of Queensland, and he had resolved to sit right there until someone told him precisely where the world's biggest cargo aircraft had landed.

The hour 2200 came and went. Then 2230. And right after that the phone rang, secure line from Langley. No one was telling him where it had landed. But the news was definite. The Antonov had just taken off from a guarded airfield outside the remote central Kazakhstan city of Zhezkazgan. The interesting part was the name of the airfield, Baykonur—top-secret home base of the Russian space program. The CIA had always had a man in there.

"Very nice and quiet, old mate," muttered Jimmy Ramshawe thoughtfully to the air traffic controller 7,000 miles away in central Asia. "Very nice indeed."

Then he pulled up his computer maps again, and tried once more to assess the destination of the 120 sea mines. He checked the routes southeast to India, and gazed at the great high-peaked mass of the Himalayas, but in the end there was only one conclusion: The mines were on their way to China.

"And since the bastards only work underwater," he murmured, "a mighty intellect like mine would conclude they might be going all the way to the ocean, possibly Shanghai, or maybe one of the Chinese Naval bases in the south."

Either way, he decided, the Antonov would certainly have to be refueled again. But that would probably happen at a remote Chinese military base in the western part of the country.

In which case, I'm going home to bed, he thought. But twelve hours from now, a little before midday tomorrow here, I'm looking for a report that it's landed on the shores of the China Sea—probably near a Naval base.

Still, there's no point getting excited since the new bloke I work for wouldn't give a kangaroo's bollocks for my opinions. And he walked, somewhat disconsolately, through the huge main room, the dimly lit National Security Operations Center (NSOC), heading home.

Thus Lt. Jimmy Ramshawe, like his boss, was sound asleep when the Antonov touched down to refuel on northwest China's remote and forbidden airstrip—the one on the edge of the pitiless Taklamakan Desert, at Lop Nor, home of China's nuclear weapons research and testing facility.

The Taklamakan is China's largest desert, 1,200 miles long, uninhabited for vast areas. Its name means "the desert one enters, but never leaves." The Antonov, being Russian, completely ignored that, and one hour after landing, took off again with full tanks, heading southeast for another 1,700 miles to the headquarters of Admiral Zu's Southern Fleet.

Seven weeks later. March 13, 2007.

Southern Fleet Headquarters. Zhanjiang, Province of Guangdong.

The dock lights along the jetties did their best to illuminate the gloomy late evening. But rain from the west swept across the sprawling Naval base under low cloud and cold, drifting mist. Out on Jetty Five a black Navy staff car, its engine running, headlights on, windshield wipers fighting the downpour, was parked in the shadows.

Its two occupants, Admirals Zhang and Zu, were watching the departure of, probably, the first Chinese blue-water fleet to depart these shores for a foreign mission beyond home waters since the treasure-ship voyages of the eunuch Admiral Zheng He in the first half of the fifteenth century.

Back then, the seven epic voyages of Admiral Zheng, across the Indian Ocean, to the Persian Gulf and the coast of Africa, were acclaimed as the highest achievements of the greatest Navy the world had ever seen. And it was a great Navy. At its zenith there were 3,500 ships, 2,700 of them warships, based in a network of major Navy bases and dockyards along China's eastern coast.

Admiral Zheng took more than 100 ships and almost 30,000 men to the east coast of Africa, to Kenya, to Arabia, way up into the Red Sea, right into the gulf, through the Strait of Hormuz, anchoring and trading their silks and porcelain for advanced Arab medicines, and the Egyptians' preservative, myrrh. Pearls, gold and jade were taken on board from Siam en route home.

Admiral Zheng's own flagship was a massive 400-foot-long nine-master, almost five times the size of Christopher Columbus's SANTA MARIA, 60 years later. The Chinese Navy's great explorer beat Vasco da Gama to the coast of East Africa by 80 years, and it was just as well they did not arrive at the same time because the massive warships of Admiral Zheng would surely have obliterated the "tiny," 85-foot-long Portuguese caravels that struggled around the Cape of Good Hope.

Whatever possessed the Ming Dynasty Emperor to willfully eliminate his mighty fleet a few years later can only be guessed at: China's endless suspicion of foreigners, all foreigners? Its view of itself, and its ancient feelings of superiority? Perhaps its own melancholic sense of isolation?

It is possible that the death of the immortal Admiral Zheng He, halfway across the Indian Ocean during the final homeward voyage in 1433, may have left a gap in the high command of the Chinese Navy that was just too large to fill.

But perhaps the ultimate truth of the amazing decision to ban entirely overseas Naval adventures may be found in the words of the young Ming Emperor Zhu Zhanji, who presided over many of Zheng's momentous journeys.

"I do not," he once said, "care for foreign things."

He was not of course referring to sweet crude oil from the vast fields of Kazakhstan. And now, fast-forward in the long winter of 2007, Admiral Zhang Yushu could not afford to ignore foreign things. And he was about to reverse almost 580 years of Chinese Naval policy: policy from which that huge nation had not departed. Not until World War I were the giant battle fleets of the Ming Emperors matched, either in size or relative firepower, by any of the world's great powers.

Zhang Yushu stared through the windshield of the Navy car, watching them cast off the lines of the 1,700-ton guided-missile frigate SHANTOU, a warship that would have been dwarfed by Zheng He's PURE HARMONY.

"She's going, Jicai. And it's a historic moment in the long records of our sea power... Just think of it... that little Type 053 Jianghu frigate is steaming off in the wake of our ancestors of five hundred years ago. The same old sea-lanes, from the most glorious days of our history... just like the Silk Road. They're going back as the main power in the Persian Gulf, in a sense to conquer the trading world all over again."

"I'm not sure the Americans would be appreciative of your phrasing, Yushu. They think they have rights to the gulf and its waters anytime they see fit."

"Ah, yes. So they might. But remember we were there as welcome guests and trading partners with the Arabs half a millennium ago, and longer. Remember, too, in recent years Chinese porcelain from the Ming Dynasty has been discovered along the shores of Hormuz. We have long historic roots in that area, and the Persians want us back to help them in the struggle against the West... Oh yes, Jicai. We belong in those ancient waters of our forefathers."

"And we're taking a lot of high explosives to prove it. Eh, Yushu?"

SHANTOU eased out into the main channel, the driving rain gleaming on her big surface-to-surface guided-missile launchers. Her six twin 37-millimeter gun houses stood stark against the shore lights. Her five-tubed fixed antisubmarine mortar launchers could still be seen through the rain squalls.

What could not be seen, however, were the principal weapons of her forthcoming voyage, the 60 Russian made sea mines, secluded under heavy tarpaulin from the prying eye of the American satellite that had passed overhead two hours previously.

Out on the pitch-black horizon, there waited SHANTOU's two Shanghai-built sister ships, KANGDING and ZIGONG. They were in company with the first of China's new \$400 million Russian destroyers, the 8,000-ton, 500-foot-long Sovremenny Class, HANGZHOU, with its supersonic guided missile, the Raduga SS-N-22 Sunburn.

But the HANGZHOU was not there to engage in surface-to-surface warfare. Her mission was strictly clandestine. She would lead her three frigates on the 6,000-mile journey to Hormuz, essentially to carry 40 more mines, but also because in the event of a confrontation she was best equipped to fight the little fleet out of trouble—though she would be no match for a determined U.S. commanding officer in a big cruiser.

Their voyage would take them down the South China Sea, up through the Malacca Strait into the Bay of Bengal, where they would immediately rendezvous with the 37,000-ton Chinese tanker NANCANG, operating out of their new Navy base on Haing Gyi Island, at the mouth of Burma's Bassein River, across the wide, flat, rice-growing delta, west of Rangoon.

Haing Gyi Island had occupied many a sleepless night for the American President's National Security Adviser, Admiral Morgan, who was suspicious of Chinese motives at the best of times. The creation of a big Chinese fueling base, and Naval dockyard in Burmese national home waters, sent a shiver right through him. Particularly since the Chinese had constructed a railroad from Kunming, the

2,000-year-old capital of Yunnan Province, straight across the Burmese border to the railhead city of Lashio, from where heavy military hardware could easily join the rest of the \$1.4 billion worth of weaponry China had already shipped into Burma.

Back on the rainswept dock at Zhanjiang, Admiral Zhang pulled his greatcoat around him and stepped out to watch the Shantou heading out toward the black shape of the harbor wall, and beyond to the South China Sea.

“Don’t you get a thrill from this, Jicai? Just seeing our great modern Blue Water Navy moving into action on this dark night, bound for a major foreign adventure, the first for more than five hundred years?”

“I suppose so, Yushu. I’ll let you know more when we discover how seriously infuriated the Americans are by the exercise.”

But even the wise and experienced Jicai looked quizzical at the non sequitur that served as a reply from his lifelong friend.

“A mere diversion, my Jicai. The merest diversion.”

1200 (local). March 13.

The White House. Washington, D.C.

“Now where the hell are they going?” demanded Admiral Morgan, staring at the grainy, poor-quality satellite photographs taken through the rain clouds above the Chinese coast. “Looks like three frigates and a Sovremenny destroyer, going south. What the hell for? And how far? And who the hell’s going to refuel ’em? Answer that.”

“I’m afraid I’m not really qualified to do that,” said Kathy O’Brien sweetly.

“Well... er... you ought to be. Ought to be general knowledge for anyone in Washington...”

“Oh... I hadn’t realized.”

“How far do you think they’re going, then?”

“How could I possibly know?”

“I know you don’t know. I’m just asking for guidance. Is that too much?”

“Well for all I know, they’re just going on a picnic,” she replied.

“Well, I wouldn’t care about that... nice basket of chop suey in the pouring rain on the South China Sea. But that may not be what’s happening. What I’m interested in is whether they are going on a long voyage, maybe to visit their friends in Iran. And if they are, those frigates are gonna get refueled from that damned new base of theirs on that frigging Burmese island.”

“Which Burmese island?”

“Haing Gyi Island, their first serious Navy base of operations outside of China—EVER,” the Admiral thundered. “Right now we’re returning to the goddamned fifteenth century, when their fleets dominated the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

“And another thing,” he yelled. “What the hell happened to all those sea mines from Russia...the ones we saw getting unloaded at Zhanjiang? Where the hell are they? And why isn’t anyone keeping me up to speed on this? Where the hell’s George Morris?”

“As you well know, my darling, he has cancer of his right lung.”

“Serves him right for smoking so much,” grunted the Admiral, puffing away on his cigar. “Where is he right now?”

“He’s undergoing intensive chemotherapy, as you also well know. Since that awful treatment has been making him extremely ill, I imagine he’s asleep.”

“Well, have someone wake him up.”

“Honey, please,” said the best-looking redhead in Washington with a sigh.

**Two weeks later. March 27.
Fort Meade, Maryland.**

Lieutenant Ramshawe was sifting methodically through a pile of satellite photographs. He had singled out a dozen shots, and he was trying to fit them together into a montage, trying to see if the three submarines were actually forming some kind of a small convoy, out there in the Arabian Sea.

He had a couple of VLCCs (giant tankers, Very Large Crude Carriers) in focus to help him, and the conclusion he reached was the submarines were all together, moving on the calm blue surface about a mile apart, heading north. More important, they were Russian Kilo-Class boats, the deadly little diesel-electric attack submarines, currently being exported by the old Soviet Navy to anyone with a big enough checkbook to buy them, especially the Chinese, the Indians and the Iranians.

Lieutenant Ramshawe was in the process of identifying the nationality of these particular ships. And now he was more or less certain. He had located all three of Iran’s Kilos, one in Bandar Abbas, two in their submarine base at Chah Behar, outside the gulf on the north shore of the Gulf of Oman.

So far as he could tell, the Indians had no submarines at sea, which meant, almost certainly, the three Kilos were Chinese and they were headed directly to Chah Behar.

This was mildly unusual but not earth-shattering. Chinese warships were no longer rare in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. They were occasional visitors to the Gulf of Hormuz, and just today there were new satellite pictures of a four-ship Chinese flotilla, including their big Sovremenny destroyer, heading across the Bay of Bengal toward the southern headland of the Indian continent.

“Wouldn’t be that surprised if the whole bloody lot of ’em were going up to Hormuz,” pondered Jimmy. “What with that new refinery and Christ knows what else up there.”

Lieutenant Ramshawe was thoughtful. The four surface ships had been steaming very publicly all the way from the South China Sea. “No worries,” he muttered. But the Kilos had been much more secretive. No one had spotted them since they had left their base, since they’d mostly been deep, only snorkeling for short periods. But here they were now, large as life, making their way up to their close friends on the southernmost Iranian coast.

“That’s seven Chinese vessels, possibly going in the same bloody direction to the same bloody place,” murmured the Lieutenant, reaching for the latest edition of *Jane’s Fighting Ships*, the bible of the world’s navies.

Now let me have a look here... right... Jianghu frigates... they can hold sixty sea mines apiece... and that destroyer has rails for forty more... now... how about the Kilos... What's it say here? They can carry twenty-four torpedoes or twenty-four mines... not both. So if those little bastards were carrying mines, that'd be seventy-two, plus the two hundred twenty in the surface ships... that's close to three hundred... My oath, you could cause a lot of trouble with that little lot.

The Lieutenant knew he was just trying to connect two separate mysteries. The first: What the bloody hell happened to all those sea mines that ended up in Zhanjiang? Second: What the hell are all these bloody Chinese warships doing in the Indian and Arabian Seas?

He had of course not the slightest shred of evidence there was one single solitary mine on board any of the ships. Certainly nothing that showed on the satellite photos, except for the big covers.

But still, he considered it his duty to alert his immediate superior, Admiral Borden, as to the possibility, even if it did mean rejection. So he drafted a short memorandum and sent it in.

Fifteen minutes later he was summoned to the Acting Director's office, knocked firmly on the door and waited to be instructed to enter.

"Lieutenant, I appreciate your diligence in these matters, but I heard earlier this morning from Langley the Iranians are staging some kind of a forty-eight-hour military hooley with the Chinese Navy down there in Bandar Abbas. Bands, parades, red carpets, dinners, speeches, television, the whole nine yards. Apparently the surface ships are scheduled to arrive there next Monday.

"So I'm very afraid your theory of a large traveling minefield is out. Thank you for your efforts, though... but do remember, I did warn you to forget about it... If someone's laying a minefield, we'll see them... all in good time. That's all."

"Sir," said Lt. Ramshawe, making his exit, muttering, "Supercilious prick. Serve him right if the bloody hooley was just a cover-up and the whole U.S. tanker fleet was blown up."

**2015. Tuesday, April 3.
Navy Base. Bandar Abbas.**

The festivities were over for the evening. The last of the Iranian public were driving home out of the dockyard and the great arc lights that had floodlit the magnificent parade were finally switched off. The huge fluttering national standards of the Islamic State of Iran and the People's Republic of China had been lowered.

A 60-strong guard of honor from the People's Liberation Army, resplendent in their olive green dress uniforms, hard flat-top caps with the wide red band, were retiring back to their quarters in the HANGZHOU. The lines of electric bulbs that had floodlit the masts and upper works of both nations' warships were methodically being extinguished.

But as yet, no air of calm had settled over the fleet. They were running down the flags, but turbines were humming, senior officers were on the bridge, lines were being cast off. It was a curious time to arrange a night exercise after such an

exhausting day of preparation and celebration. But that, ostensibly, was precisely what was happening.

The three Chinese frigates were already moving, slowly, line astern, led by SHANTOU, out through the Naval basin into the main channel, now dredged to a low-tide depth of 33 feet. Thirty minutes later, China's 6,000-ton Sovremenny-class destroyer, the largest ship ever to enter this harbor, was escorted out by two 90-foot harbor tugs, the ARVAND and the HANGAM.

Astern of the destroyer, a 900-ton twin-shafted Iranian Navy Corvette, the BAYANDOR, almost 40 years old, originally built in Texas, followed, still flying the green, white and red national flag despite the late hour of the evening. Her sister ship, NAGHDI, also armed with modern Bofors and Oerlikon guns, awaited the flotilla one mile southeast of the harbor, ready to guide them around the long shallow outer reaches of the shelving Bostanu East Bank.

Their 65-mile journey would take them past the great sand-swept island of Qeshm and on into the deeper waters of the Hormuz Strait. Forty miles farther on, east of the jutting Omani headland of Ra's Qabr al Hindi, they would make their rendezvous, at 26.19N 56.40E. Admiral Mohammed Badr himself was on the bridge of the HANGZHOU, accompanying the Chinese Commanding Officer, Colonel Weidong Gao (Chinese Navy COs are all three-star Colonels).

Under clear skies they pushed on southeast through light swells and a warm 20-knot breeze out of the west. Finally at 56.40E Colonel Weidong ordered a course change to one-eight-zero, and running over sandy depths of around 300 feet they headed due south for the final six miles.

Gradually the little flotilla reduced speed until the sonar room of the big destroyer picked up the unmissable signal of the Chinese Kilos, patrolling silently at periscope depth in the pitch-dark waters off the jagged coast of Oman.

The plan had been finely honed several weeks before. The Kilos would take the southerly six miles of the designated area where the water was now 360 feet deep. Each of the three submarines would make a course of zero-nine-eight starting from the deep trough off Ra's Qabr al Hindi. They would thus move easterly a half mile apart, launching out of their torpedo tubes a one-ton Russian-made PLT-3 contact sea mine every 500 yards—the ones made at the Rosvoorouzhnie factory in Moscow: the same ones that had so vexed young Jimmy Ramshawe on their top-secret journey all the way across Asia to the South China Sea.

At the conclusion of these three death-trapped parallel lines, six miles long, the minefield would make a 10-degree swing north, and then run for 24 miles dead straight, all the way across the Strait of Hormuz to the inshore waters of the Iranian coastline, at a point 29 miles due south of the new Sino-Iranian refinery outside the little town of Kuhestak.

And right now the three Chinese mine-laying frigates were moving into position. SHANTOU, KANGDING and ZIGONG, a half mile apart, heading east-northeast, slowly in the darkness, the soft thrum of their big diesel engines interrupted only by the splash, every 500 yards, as they sowed their treacherous seed in a barrier across the world's most important oil sea-lanes.

The 60 mines on board each frigate would last for 17 miles. The final coastal area would be handled by the destroyer, and they would designate a sizable three-mile gap through which Chinese and Iranian tankers could pass, principally

because they would be the only tankers informed of the position of the safe passage.

Meanwhile the newly laid mines sat at the bottom of the ocean secure on their anchors, awaiting the moment when they would be activated electronically, released on their wires to rise up toward the surface and then hang there in the water, 12 feet below the waves, until an unsuspecting tanker man came barreling along and slammed it out of the way, obliterating his ship in the process.

It was a two-and-a-half-hour journey back to Bandar Abbas and the surface convoy set off at 0400, leaving the Kilos to make their own way back to Chah Behar, running at periscope depth (PD). There was time to spare because the big U.S. satellite did not pass overhead until 0800.

The frigates and their 6,000-ton bodyguard docked in Bandar Abbas at 0630, when the next stage of Admiral Zhang's plan went into operation. The HANGZHOU was immediately reloaded with 40 PLT-3 contact mines, plainly visible, as her original cargo had been the previous evening. When "Big Bird" took her photographs a few minutes after 0800, the fully laden Chinese destroyer would look precisely the same as she had on the last daylight satellite pass, just before the grand parade yesterday evening.

The signal back to Zhanjiang was as agreed, in the event of a successful mission: *DRAGONFLY*.

1130 (local). Tuesday, April 3. Fort Meade, Maryland.

There is an irritating eight-and-a-half-hour time difference between the East Coast of America and Iran. This is caused by a time zone that runs bang through the middle of the country near Tehran. Instead of one half of the nation being four hours in front of GMT, and the other half only three, they compromised and put the whole place three and a half hours ahead of London, which is of course five in front of New York.

Thus satellite pictures taken at 1930 (Iran) were shot at 1100 (Fort Meade) the same day. And this particular set of pictures of Bandar Abbas Dockyard landed on Lt. Ramshawe's desk just as he arrived a half hour early for work.

Before him, in sharp focus, was the major event Admiral Borden had mentioned. Jimmy could see civilian cars parked in the dockyard with the joint Sino-Iranian fleet lit up brightly in the gathering darkness for the public to see. He guessed he would receive new pictures, intermittently, throughout the day, showing more or less what was happening in Iran's Navy Headquarters.

Still allowing the issue of the Russian mines to burn away at the back of his brain, Lt. Ramshawe searched the decks of the Chinese frigates, under a powerful glass, to see if there was a sign of them. But there was none. Not so the destroyer. All 40 of the mines she carried could now be seen on her rails, though they had plainly been covered during her journey from China.

A new set of pictures arrived midafternoon that actually caught the little fleet on the move. It was very dark in the gulf now, and the photographs were not of the same quality. But this hardly mattered. What did matter was the sight of three

Chinese frigates, one destroyer and two Iranian Corvettes heading off on a mission in the middle of the night.

For all he knew, they were off to attack Iraq or Oman, "or some other godforsaken place," and Jimmy Ramshawe hit the button to the Director's office, from where he was given his usual short shrift.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Lieutenant, if I were you... they're probably going to conduct a night exercise together... not unusual at one of these international junkets between two navies..."

"Yessir. But I can see a full load of mines on the destroyer..."

"I expect they'll still be there in the morning, Lieutenant. That's all."

Jimmy Ramshawe put the phone down slowly. And the same question he had asked himself a thousand times popped into his mind: *Why had the Chinese plainly ordered an extremely expensive consignment of specialist contact mines from Russia if they weren't planning to lay out a bloody minefield somewhere?*

He also considered it a slice of blind luck that the Andropov freighter had been spotted taking off from Moscow, and then again at secretive Baykonur. No one ever traced its second refueling stop, and in Lt. Ramshawe's opinion it was entirely possible there had been a second trans-Asian flight of the giant aircraft. That would have brought the total mines carried to 240, sufficient to fill all four surface ships with their combined quota of 220. He had not given the three Kilos much thought since they had not been seen for a few days. But he could not get those mines out of his mind.

It was all very well Admiral Borden saying it was best to forget the whole thing until something more definite emerged, but, streuth! What if those crazy bastards were out there right now planting a minefield in the middle of the strait? What then?

Lieutenant Ramshawe wandered off in search of a cup of coffee, reasoning to himself that if the satellite pass was made at 0800 over Bandar Abbas, which he knew for certain, then he might see some good pictures of the ships back in harbor sometime after midnight Fort Meade time.

Anyway, he was going nowhere until he had seen those pictures. And he knew this was a state of affairs guaranteed not to thrill his girlfriend, the dark-haired Jane Peacock, daughter of the Australian ambassador to Washington. The Peacocks and the Ramshawes were lifelong friends, and it was widely assumed that Jimmy and Jane would ultimately marry.

Right now he looked forward to telephoning Jane even less than he dreaded calling his boss. *The pair of them could probably run a contest to see who could give me the hardest bloody time.*

He was right, too. "Jimmy, for crying out loud, why this sudden interest in an Arab Navy?"

"They're not Arabs," he corrected her. "They're Persian. That's different."

"*I don't care if they're bloody Martians!*" she yelled. "We were supposed to have supper with Julie in Georgetown, and you're hopeless... I'm not going by myself."

"Janie, listen. I believe this is really important. Like maybe a life-and-death matter."

"Well, there must be more important people than you to deal with it."

“There isn’t anyone more important than me who even believes it, never mind wants to deal with it.”

“Well, leave it alone, then, until someone instructs you to do something.”

“I can’t, Janie. I have to stay. But I’ll pick you up early tomorrow and we’ll have breakfast before you go to your class—I’m free till eleven-thirty, same time you have to be in Georgetown.”

“Okay,” she grumbled. “Nine at the embassy...but you’re still a bloody nightmare... Even your own mother thinks that.”

Jimmy chuckled. He adored his beautiful, clever fiancée, and he hated letting her down. But in his own mind, he alone stood between world order and possible world chaos. *Well, something like that. I just don’t trust the bastards. That’s all.*

The night passed slowly. And he spent the hours before midnight reading a book about international terrorism, a fundamentally depressing read, citing samples of inordinate stupidity by the Intelligence services of various Western governments.

Jesus, a whole lot of this crap could have been avoided if people were just that little bit sharper... Even at the business end of the Intelligence game there are still people more intent on protecting their own jobs, rather than concentrating on getting it right, at all costs.

Jimmy Ramshawe was still young enough to own those ideals. Just. But he would not want to work too long for a conservative cynic like David Borden, whose pension beckoned, and who preferred to pass the buck than start a high-profile scare over nothing.

Midnight came and went. It was a half hour since the morning satellite shots had been taken again, high above the harbor of Bandar Abbas.

Nothing arrived until 0040. And the young Lieutenant shuffled the new photos from the National Reconnaissance Office, searching for a shot of the Chinese destroyer. And here it was...fully laden with its mines, just as it had been before the midnight naval exercises in the gulf. The frigates too were back at their Iranian jetties, the tarpaulins that covered their cargo still in place.

There were also the standard daily shots of Chah Behar, and they showed empty spaces where the three Chinese Kilos had been last Saturday night. “Christ knows where they are,” muttered Jimmy.

And he picked up his jacket and made his way out of the office, walking through the main doors of the building and across to the dimly lit parking lot where two Marine guards saluted him.

He climbed into the driver’s seat and drove to the main gates, showed his pass to the duty guards and gunned his 10-year-old black Jaguar out to the exit road and on down to the Washington-Baltimore Parkway. It was a fast ride at this time of night, and he let the speedometer hover around 75 as he cruised down to the Beltway for the 10-mile run to Exit 33, Connecticut Avenue, which would take him straight into the center of the capital.

He made a right at Dupont Circle, skirted the campus of George Washington University, and ran on down to the Watergate complex where his parents had owned an apartment for the better part of 30 years. Naturally they rarely, if ever, used it, since they lived mostly in New York. Which was excellent news for Jimmy, who thus had a millionaire’s residence for free.

He drove into his underground parking space and turned off the engine. It was almost 2 A.M., and he was almost too tired to get out of the car. But he still wished Jane could have been there waiting for him. And he thought again of how much easier life had been when Admiral George Morris had been in charge at the NSA.

The thing about George was, he was damned confident, and he had the ear of the Big Man in the White House. No one was closer to Arnold Morgan than George, and the two of them always consulted. Admiral Morris was thus a fabulous guy to work for. He always listened. He always weighed all the eventualities, and all the possibilities. Never tried to second-guess his staff. He worked on the theory that if one of his chosen men thought something should be investigated, then that was probably correct. Not like this bloody Boredom character.

Jimmy sat there in the driver's seat for a moment, pondering his dreary task tomorrow when he had to talk to Admiral Borden and admit the Chinese destroyer was still fully laden with her sea mines, as she had been the previous night.

He could hear the world-weary old bastard right now: "Well, Lieutenant, what a great surprise that must be to you...but don't say I didn't warn you..."

"Just as long as he doesn't tempt me to tell him another unlikely truth," muttered Jimmy to himself. "That the bloody morning mines might be different ones from those we saw last night. He'll say that's bollocks. Probably paranoid bollocks. But it isn't. Because that's what I'd do myself if I wanted to lay a minefield in the Strait of Hormuz."

He climbed out of the car and locked it. Wandering over to the elevator, still muttering, "...replace the mines on deck before the zero-eight-hundred satellite pass, right? Put the stupid Americans off the trail."

Chapter 2

On Saturday morning, April 7, at first light, the Chinese warships sailed, apparently, for home. At least two of them did, the HANGZHOU and the SHANTOU. The other two stayed right where they were at the jetties in Bandar Abbas harbor. Three hours later, shortly before 0950 (local time), the three Chinese Kilos pushed out of Chah Behar into the Hormuz Strait and made their way south toward the Arabian Sea.

The U.S. satellites picked up the entire scenario on bright sunlit waters, and back in Fort Meade, Lieutenant Ramshawe wrote a short memorandum to the NSA's Acting Director, detailing the ship movements.

Two days later a report came in from the Middle Eastern desk at Langley that Iran was moving heavy Sunburn missiles, plus launchers, plus anti-aircraft artillery, to a point along their southeastern coast on the Gulf of Oman.

Langley's man did not know precisely where the hardware was headed, but Fort Meade made a slight adjustment in the satellite's photographic direction, and from way up in the stratosphere the massive U.S. camera snapped off two shots of the

big Sunburns being maneuvered into position facing out to sea, 29 miles south of the coastal town of Kuhestak.

Lieutenant Ramshawe marked up his wide chart, 26.23N 57.05E. He automatically glanced across to see the nearest point of land, but there really was nothing. If the missiles were fired westerly at 90 degrees to the coast, they would head straight out to sea. A slightly more southerly course would aim them at the northern headland of the Iranians' friends, the Omanis.

That headland, the outermost point of the barren Musadam Peninsula, scarcely had a town or a village on it. The only name marked on Jimmy Ramshawe's chart, way out on the jutting eastern coast, was Ra's Qabr al Hindi.

"Christ," he muttered. "What kind of a bloody name's that? Imagine coming from there, and traveling to the States... *er, Place of residence, sir? Ra's Qabr al Hindi.* Jeez, they'd probably lock you up on principle... heh heh heh!"

In any event, the Lieutenant drafted a report confirming they now had a firm position for the Iranian missiles. And then he returned to his consistent preoccupation, the two remaining Chinese warships in Bandar Abbas, the KANGDING and the ZIGONG. The photographs that had just arrived showed both ships now flying Iran's national flag.

And Jimmy Ramshawe stared at them for a long time. *What if they had laid a secret minefield somewhere out there last week... What if the two frigates had been left behind in readiness to go out and activate the mines?*

He knew that such a theory would be ridiculed by Admiral Borden, who had of course ridiculed his every thought about the mines. And thus far had been proved right. Nonetheless, Lieutenant Ramshawe elected to go and see his leader, and present his worst fears.

The veteran Admiral smiled, with a jaded, indulgent air.

"James," he said. "May I call you James?"

"Jimmy, sir, actually. No one's ever called me James. I'd think you were talking to someone else."

The Admiral blinked at the Australian's forthrightness, which always caught him off guard.

"Right, Jimmy. Now listen to me... Do you know why the two frigates are now flying the flag of Iran?"

"Not really, sir. But it could be some kind of a Chinese cover-up, while they're getting ready either to lay mines or activate them."

"No, Jimmy," he said with heavy emphasis. "That is not the reason. They are flying the Iranian flag because Iran has just bought the two Chinese frigates. That was the objective of the big dockyard junket. It was a Chinese sales tour... You don't think they'd come all that way for nothing, do you?... Not the Chinese. They like money a lot more than they like anything else.

"It was a goodwill sales visit. No doubt in my mind. They conducted a fleet exercise together, exchanged information, and at the conclusion of the festivities, Iran agreed to purchase the two ships. The first two guided-missile frigates they've ever owned."

"Well, sir, if that's your opinion... I'll have to agree."

"Do you have a different opinion?"

“Well, sir. I have been wondering about the mines. And I’m still not sure the Chinese haven’t made some kind of a devious move with a view to laying them.”

“Ah, that’s your prerogative as an Intelligence officer, Jimmy. But it’s been your prerogative for weeks, months, and nothing has happened, as I told you it wouldn’t.”

“Righto, boss. I’ll buy that. Maybe they did just want to store up some Russian mines for some future mission. Anyway, if you’re right, they just paid for them, with the frigate money. Good on ’em, right?”

The Admiral smiled. “You’re learning, Jimmy. In this business, it’s very easy to spend your life chasing your tail... seeing spooks, plots and schemes around every corner. Just stay focused, and keep a weather eye out for the really big stuff, when you’ve got real evidence. That’s all.”

The young Lieutenant left, returning to his office, and gazing once more at his wide, marked chart of the Strait of Hormuz. He stared at it for several minutes, and muttered to himself, “I just wonder what’s sitting down there on the seabed, right offshore of those new missile placements.”

**Two weeks later. April 24.
China’s Southern Fleet HQ. Zhanjiang.**

Admiral Zu Jicai, now C-in-C of the entire Navy, was back in his old office, and he opened up the secure line to Beijing, waiting quietly for Zhang Yushu to come to the phone.

When the great man finally spoke on the line from the Chinese capital, the conversation was unusually brief for two such old friends.

“Nothing on any foreign networks re DRAGONFLY.”

“No suspicion anywhere?”

“None. Shall I activate the field in the next two days?”

“Affirmative.”

“Good-bye, sir.”

“Good-bye, Jicai.”

**Three days later. April 27.
The Strait of Hormuz.**

Hardly a ripple disturbed the flat blue calm of the southern waters of the strait. It was one of those sultry Arabian mornings, in which the livid heat of the desert sun makes life on land almost unbearable, and life on board any ship not a whole lot better.

Six miles northeast of the Musandam Peninsula, the waters were almost oily to look at, as the tide began to turn inward from the Arabian Sea. There was no ocean swell, no little eddying cats’ paws on the surface, no movement in the hot, still air.

But ripples were on the way. Giant ripples, from the big white bow wave of the 80,000-ton black-hulled gas carrier GLOBAL BRONCO, making a stately 18 knots,

southeasterly through the water. The 900-foot carrier was laden down with 135,000 cubic meters of liquefied natural gas, frozen to *minus* 160 degrees centigrade. In more comprehensive stats, that's 3,645,000 cubic feet, or, a 100-foot-high building, 200 feet long by 200 feet wide. Which is a lot of frozen gas, and it forms, by general consensus, the most potentially lethal cargo on all the world's oceans.

Unlike crude oil, which does not instantly combust, liquid natural gas is hugely volatile, compressed as it is 600 times from normal gas. Tanker corporations are near-paranoid about safety regulations for its transportation around the world. Layer upon layer of fail-safe backup systems are built into every LNG carrier. They are not the biggest tankers on the ocean, but then, neither is the nuclear-headed torpedo the biggest bomb. In any event, the worldwide industry of transporting liquid gas has never once suffered a fire, never mind an explosion.

Up on the bridge, almost 100 feet above the water, the obsessively careful Commodore Don McGhee stared out over the four bronze-colored holding domes, which each rose 60 feet above the scarlet-painted deck. The bow of the GLOBAL BRONCO was nearly 300 yards in front of him, and the veteran Master from the southeast Texas gulf port of Houston had a view straight down the massive gantry that ran as a steel catwalk clean across the top of each dome, all the way down to the foredeck.

Right now the ship was making its way well outside the Omani inshore traffic zone, with the local Navy's firing practice area 10 miles astern. Ahead of them was the narrowest part of the Hormuz Strait, and in this clear weather they would see plainly the Omani headlands of Jazirat Musandam, and two miles farther south, Ra's Qabr al Hindi. They were too far away to catch a glimpse on the horizon of the glowering shores of Iran on the eastern side of the crescent-shaped 30-mile-wide seaway.

Commodore McGhee was in conference with Chief Engineer Andre Waugh. And up ahead of them they could still see a Liberian-registered British tanker, a 300,000-ton VLCC bound for the North Atlantic. They had been catching her slowly all the way down from the new gas-loading terminal off Qatar, right around the Emirates peninsula, past Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and now they were less than 50 miles from the open waters of the Arabian Sea. All tanker captains were glad to get out of the gulf, and McGhee was no exception.

There was always a menace about patrolling Iranian warships, a menace compounded in the past few months by yet another Iranian militant threat to lay a minefield directly off its coast at the choke point of the entrance.

Both tanker officers knew there had been for several weeks a worldwide unease about China's warships currently moored in the Ayatollah's Navy base at Bandar Abbas. And they knew also of the tensions caused by the opening of the brand-new Sino-Iranian refinery at the end of the Chinese-built pipeline, which ran 1,000 miles, out of the Kazakhstan oil fields, across Turkmenistan, and clean through the sweltering Iranian Plateaux to the coast. Everyone in the Western oil business knew this pipeline gave China something close to a "lock" on the second-largest easy-access oil deposits on earth.

One more threat by Iran's increasingly noisy anti-West politicians to bottle up the entrance to the gulf would probably send the Pentagon into a collective dance

of death. It was all politics, threat and counterthreat, but to men like Commodore McGhee, masters of the big crude-oil and gas carriers working the north end of the Arabian Sea, those politics had an edge of grim reality.

“This darned place always gives me the creeps,” he said. “I’ll just be glad to make the open ocean.”

“I know what you mean,” replied Chief Andre Waugh. “So do the British by the look of it... that’s a Royal Navy helicopter up ahead, checking that big tanker out of the area. Right now they’re checking every British ship in and out of the gulf. Guess they don’t like the political situation, right?”

No ships in the entire history of navigation have been more political than the big tankers, upon whose safe passage half the world depends in order to keep moving. The fate and prosperity of nations literally hang in the balance as these great leviathans carry the principal source of world energy from where it is to where it is needed.

Commodore McGhee, a tanker man for thirty years, had never once entered Iranian waters, always keeping well over on the Omani side. Back home in Texas, in the Houston control room, on the thirty-second floor of the Travis Street headquarters of Texas Global Ships, Inc., Robert J. Heseltine III, the president, had issued specific instructions: Stay well clear of the Ayatollahs and their Navy. Don McGhee did not need reminding.

Texas Global ran six ships, but GLOBAL BRONCO was the only LNG carrier. Heseltine was right proud of his Texan roots, and he had named the other five ships GLOBAL STAR, GLOBAL ROSE, GLOBAL BRAND, GLOBAL STEER and GLOBAL RANGE. They were all 300,000-ton VLCCs, which normally plied among the Gulf of Iran, southern Africa, the northeast tanker ports of the USA, and Europe.

BRONCO usually worked in the east, steaming between the gas-rich gulf ports of Qatar and Abu Dhabi, and Tokyo Bay, where Japanese Electric unloads millions of cubic meters of natural gas every week. This particular voyage, however, was shorter—just as far as the southern Taiwan port of Yung-An. The massive liquid-gas cargo would be used almost exclusively for electric power generation.

Robert J. Heseltine III had not laid eyes on one of his ships for three years, and probably wouldn’t for another three years. Giant tankers cost \$100,000 a day to operate and they have to keep working, roaming the world picking up cargo and unloading it. There never was a reason for any of the ships to return to home base in Texas, and both crew and supplies were ferried out to them, by commercial airlines, and then by helicopter, while the great energy ships kept right on moving, thousands of miles from home. No merchantmen since the days of sail, indeed since the clipper ships, had ever undertaken such vast and endless transworld journeys.

Commodore McGhee was now traveling a couple of knots faster than the VLCC up ahead, and he positioned himself accordingly, preparing to run past, a half mile off the tanker’s port beam, a couple of hours from now.

The sun beat down on the scarlet deck as the GLOBAL BRONCO crossed the 26.20-degree line of latitude right on 56.38 north. They were eight miles off Ra’s Qabr al Hindi, and the captain could just make out the headland through his

glasses. He ordered a steward to bring him up a cup of coffee, and a ham-and-cheese sandwich, and the 80,000-tonner ran on due south for another mile.

It was 12.10 P.M. precisely, in glaring sunshine on a still-calm sea, when the GLOBAL BRONCO nudged into Admiral Zhang Yushu's Russian PLT-3 contact mine. The one-ton steel container of compressed high explosives, riding high on its anchor line, detonated with savage force. The massive forward inertia of the ship carried her on for just a few yards before the echoing underwater blast blew a huge hole in her hull, starboard side of the keel, right behind the bow.

All the for'ard plates along the starboard side buckled back with a tearing of metal showering a hailstorm of sparks inside the hull. The for'ard liquid gas tank, reinforced aluminum, held, then ruptured, and nearly 20,000 tons of one of the world's most volatile liquid gasses, its content bolstered by both methane and propane, began to flood out of its refrigerated environment. It hit an atmosphere almost 200 degrees centigrade warmer, and it flashed instantly into vaporized gas, exploding with a near-deafening *WHOOOOOOOSSSSH!* Consider the sound made by a cupful of gasoline on a bonfire just before you toss a lighted match into it—and then multiply that sound by around 40 million. That's loud.

The destruction to the entire front section of the ship was staggering. The liquid gas was, after all, just a highly compressed version of regular gas, and everyone has seen photographs of houses being obliterated by occasional explosions from this stuff. The sheer volume of LNG contained in the vast holding tanks of the GLOBAL BRONCO caused a monumental blast, and the blast from Tank Four somehow smashed a hole in Tank Three, and seconds later the 20,000 tons of liquid fuel in there also blew.

The great ship shuddered. Flames leaped a hundred feet into the sky. Against all odds, Tanks Two and One held. But thousands of tons of fuel from the for'ard tanks poured through the fractured hull plates on the smashed starboard side of the ship, below the waterline, and into the waters of the Hormuz Strait, rising rapidly to the surface.

Commodore McGhee and his Chief Engineer were still on the bridge, almost in shock at what they had seen erupt 250 yards in front of them. Heat from the for'ard inferno was already melting the metal. They could see the white-hot bow end of the high gantry sagging like strips of putty. But the still-powerful forward motion of the BRONCO was allowing her to leave a wide, unexploded slipstream lake of liquid gas in the water, which was evaporating at a diabolical rate, rising up off the water.

Don McGhee realized the danger. The gas, decompressed, and now in contact with the atmosphere, would evaporate over a relatively short period of time. But the danger of ignition was tantamount. Miraculously the great diesel engines were still running, and the Captain ordered, "ALL STOP!"

The bow of the ship was now dipping deep and the fires were reducing. The glowing-hot foredeck sent clouds of steam into the air as the waters of the strait washed over. But the gas continued to gush into the ocean, 20 feet below the surface. Don McGhee did not think his strongly compartmentalized ship would go down, and he did think the fires would reduce as the bow went lower. It was the unseen gas cloud he knew was rising rapidly up off the surface that worried him. Both he and Andre Waugh could smell it, light and carbonized on the air.

Members of the crew were racing toward the bridge, terrified, uncertain what to do. Astonishingly, no one had been for'ard at the time the ship hit, and no one was hurt. The problem was how to get off. There was no chance of jumping over the side into the toxic lake of liquid gas, and Commodore McGhee knew it would be lethal for a helicopter to try to reach them, since a tiny spark from the engine could ignite the gas cloud into a mountainous pillar of fire that would climb thousands of feet into the air, the heat almost certainly vaporizing the ship and the final two 20,000-ton tanks of liquid gas.

The roar of the for'ard fire way down the deck was like a 50-foot-high gas cooker, blasting out blue flame, too loud, too intimidating, to allow any question of trying to control it. Commodore McGhee ordered: "*ABANDON SHIP! MAN THE LIFEBOATS PORT SIDE.*"

The crew charged off the bridge. The radio operator shouted, "*I'll transmit a MAYDAY! before we go.*" The rest of them made for the three big orange Zodiacs moored on their davits along the deck rails. And then Commodore McGhee saw it—the Royal Navy's helicopter clattering toward them, low over the surface, totally unaware of the gas cloud rising up along the BRONCO's aft starboard side and stern.

The tanker's master ordered his radio operator to open up the VHF on 16 and stop the chopper's advance at all costs. Then he opened the door to the viewing catwalk, a white-walkway jutting over the main deck. And he raced out onto it, jumping up and down, waving his arms, yelling to the pilot at the top of his lungs in futile desperation... "*STOP... FOR GOD'S SAKE STOP... PLEASE STOP... TURN AROUND...*"

Inside the helicopter both the pilot and his navigator saw the Captain's frenzied signal. The Navigator just had time to say, "Take a turn to the left here... this guy's waving us off... I'll try the radio..."

But it was too late. The Royal Navy's Sea King Mk 4, making just over 60 knots, flew bang into the middle of the rising gas-cloud, which ignited like a nuclear bomb, causing a gigantic blowtorch to rear up from off the surface of the water, roaring a black, scarlet and blue tower of fire 5,000 feet into the air.

The Navy helicopter was incinerated instantly. The GLOBAL BRONCO and her crew perished in a split second, when the entire after end of the ship was enveloped by the searing near-2,000-degree-centigrade petrochemical blaze. Two minutes later there was just a blistered, white-hot steel-and-aluminum hulk, sizzling in the water, where once the mighty tanker had been. And the flames on board were dying. There was *nothing* left to burn, not even a coat of paint, not even an electric wire.

By some fluke of science and nature, Tank Two had held, but the aluminum of Tank One had melted and 20,000 more tons of liquid gas exploded in another deafening fireball. And the gas in the bottom third of the tank just poured out into the water, feeding the gas inferno, fueling the 200-yard-wide column of raging fire, which fought its way higher and higher as the liquid fuel flashed off into the atmosphere. Furiously hot now, sucking in oxygen and nitrogen like a tornado, it rose up thousands of feet into the clear skies. It was as if Satan himself were attempting to communicate with God.

0800. Friday, April 27.
Office of Admiral Arnold Morgan.
The White House. Washington. D.C.

Arnold Morgan was watching CNN news with rapt concentration. The destruction of a big U.S.-owned tanker, with no survivors, deep in the Gulf of Hormuz, was the lead item. Despite being six miles from Oman, and at least 40 from Bandar Abbas, the Global Bronco had very quickly become public property. Right now CNN was showing graphic pictures of the burning hulk, and its accompanying column of fire. The reporter was mentioning the overall problem, that Tank Two might suddenly blow, and for that reason no one was taking the risk of going closer.

Because the ship was well over on the Omani side of the strait, news-gathering operations were being conducted with a friendly nation, and most broadcasters and media organizations had offices and satellite facilities in nearby Dubai. Two clattering helicopters were already prowling the shore, trying to take pictures, but unable to fly in close.

The Omani Navy had two 1,450-ton guided-missile Corvettes circling the area, warning ships off, and CNN had close-up pictures of these two British-built bodyguards. There were also two Chinese-built guided-missile frigates, flying the flag of Iran, within 10 miles of the disaster.

The dimension of the story outshone the limited coverage possible at this time. And the 24-hour news station was already off-line, reporting, wrongly, the GLOBAL BRONCO was still burning. It wasn't the tanker on fire. It was the released gas in the water.

They interviewed a Royal Navy Lieutenant Commander serving with a patrol out of Dubai, who speculated it might be necessary to bang a torpedo right into the hull, starboard of Tank Two, in order to blow up the remaining liquid gas. Either that or shell the giant on-deck holding dome. "It cannot," he said, "just be left out there, ultimately to sink and take its twenty-thousand-ton cargo with it."

Arnold Morgan sipped his black coffee, and listened, nodding slowly, and pondering. "Now who the hell are Texas Global Ships. And what do they have to say for themselves? Come on, guys. Get some reporters on this... gimme the only information worth having... What do the owners think of the destruction of their ship... accident? I suppose so. But if so, how? I don't think there's ever been a major explosion and fire on one of those gas ships...except for one in Tokyo Bay nearly twenty years ago."

He switched off the channel, and walked over to his desk. "I wish I knew a little more about gas carriers," he said. "They must have the best possible safety systems... *hmmmm*... I suppose there's no chance the goddamned towelheads whacked it with a torpedo, or the Iranians planted a minefield out in the exit lanes from the gulf. No. I guess not. There seems to be no suggestion of that. Still I better get Fort Meade onto it. I'd just like to know a little more about the GLOBAL BRONCO.

"KATHY!" he yelled, scorning as ever the delicate little green telephone on his desk, which would have connected him to anyone in the world, including the lady

right outside the door, the spectacular redhead Kathy O'Brien, who for three years had refused to marry him until he retired.

The wide wooden door opened, and she came in, shaking her head, saying she understood he would rather have a ship's tannoy system so he could bellow at everyone at the same time, but this was the twenty-first century and normal telephones were becoming quite acceptable, and would he ever consider using one. "Darling rude pig," she added.

"Could I have a little more coffee?" he asked, smiling. "And then I've got a little task for you."

"I'm not here to do little tasks," she replied. "Don't you have any big ones?"

The Big Man chuckled, all five feet eight and a half inches of him. He ignored her request, and asked if she had been watching the news.

"No, but I heard on the radio about the tanker that just blew up in the gulf. Soon as they mentioned it, I guessed it would be right up there on the priority list."

"Well, Kathy, it's a volatile area, and we always have to guard against lunatic action by the locals... Anyway, the ship was owned by an outfit called Texas Global Ships. I want you to locate them, and get their president on the line."

"You have an address?"

"No. But try Information in the Houston-Galveston area. It's bound to be down there in the gulf oil ports... you'll find it."

Five minutes later, she returned to tell the Admiral that she'd found it, but had spoken only to a security guard since the place was not yet open.

"What's the name of the president?"

"Robert J. Heseltine III."

"Call the guard back, and tell him to have the boss call the White House, right away. Give him the main switchboard number and have him put through here immediately."

Kathy retreated, full of optimism. She knew the galvanizing effect a call from the White House can have on any American, and she was right about the guard.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Right away."

Three minutes and fifteen seconds later, she answered her phone and a deep Texan voice said, "Morning. This is Bob Heseltine."

She switched him through to the Admiral, who commiserated briefly about the ship, and then asked him, "Bob, do you have any reason to think the GLOBAL BRONCO might have run into some form of Naval hardware down there... a mine or a torpedo or something?"

"Well, every tanker man worries about the strait, but it's always been safe on the Omani side... We didn't hardly get a warning from the ship... apparently, according to the Royal Navy, our operator just had time to call 'MAYDAY!' twice, before the line went dead."

"So whatever happened happened pretty damned quickly," replied the Admiral.

"Yessir. I do believe so."

"Any idea what might have caused the explosion?"

"Not really, Admiral. We do have some kind of an eyewitness report from a Liberian-registered crude-oil tanker about two miles ahead of the BRONCO. Just

said the for'ard holding dome definitely blew first. Then they saw the one next to it go up as well."

"I guess that would confirm the possibility of a mine... all ships hit them bow first. A torpedo would have been much more likely to come in amidships."

"Yessir. But I really don't think we ran into a minefield. On the other hand, it's hard for me to think of one reason why the almost-brand-new gas-holding tank, way up for'ard, two hundred yards away from hot machinery, or even people, should suddenly have ruptured and exploded."

"That's really my main question, Bob. How could it have ruptured, then blown up?"

"No reason I can think of, sir. 'Cept sabotage. But I can't imagine anyone wanting to blow up the ship they were in. Suicide sabotage's pretty rare."

Arnold Morgan persisted. "What causes natural gas to ignite?"

"Well, it's gotta be a flame or a spark of some kind. It's the gas, flashing off from the liquid that burns. Beats the hell out of me, a) how that gas started to leak, and b) what blew it."

"Well, keep your ear to the ground, willya, Bob? Anything shakes loose, lemme know right away. Just call the number here, and they'll find me."

"Glad to, sir. Nice talking to you." The last words were somewhat lost because the Admiral had already rung off. Bob Heseltine was not yet aware of the National Security Adviser's habit of never saying "good-bye" to anyone, just banging down the phone. He even did it to the President. These days, especially to the President.

"*KATHY!*" he yelled. "*GET FORT MEADE ON THE LINE.*"

Admiral David Borden jumped to it, front and center, as he prepared to take his first call from the Big Man.

"Admiral?"

"Morning, David. Got that job under tight control?"

"Trying to, sir."

"Good. Start off by telling me all you know about that tanker just went sky-high in Hormuz."

"Well, sir. I only just received a preliminary report."

"You did? Well it's zero-eight-four-five now, and the tanker blew at right after zero-three-three-zero. What are you using for comms, satellites or pigeons?"

Admiral Borden gulped. "Sir, I only just got here."

"You mean you're not only operating some kind of Dark Ages communication system, you're also late for work."

It had been awhile since anyone had addressed David Borden in quite such a manner, but he knew Arnold Morgan's fearsome reputation. He also knew that his bite was a lot worse than his bark. And this conversation was headed south, in a significant way.

"Sir, will you give me a half hour to get right on this?"

"Yes. But please remember the following: Anytime there's an explosion as big as this one right in the middle of the Strait of Hormuz, or indeed anywhere near the Strait of Hormuz, you better get on it real quick. Right here we have a major incident involving a U.S. freighter being destroyed, forty miles from Bandar Abbas. We got goddamned Iranian missile ships circling her. We may have a fucking minefield out there.

“Admiral Borden, I don’t actually give a flying fuck what you’ve been doing. I don’t care if you have to turn up in your office in a goddamned nightshirt and jockstrap at three A.M. But when something goes off bang anywhere near the Ayatollahs, I want Fort Meade on it like a starving wolf chasing a pork chop. Do you hear me, Admiral?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Then get your ass in gear, sailor. And get your best men moving. And don’t bother chasing the ship owner. I dealt with him while you were still eating your fucking cornflakes.” *CRASH.* Down phone.

Admiral Borden was visibly shaken, as many an occupant of Fort Meade had been before him. He actually debated putting in a written complaint to the President about the “unforgivably disrespectful” manner in which he had been treated by the National Security Adviser.

He went as far as to call his old friend in the White House, Harcourt Travis, the Secretary of State, who laughed and told him, “That would be, I am afraid, a suicide note. Arnold Morgan would probably have both you and the President out of here in an hour. Arnie’s the Big Man on Campus right now. Don’t even think of taking him on.”

Admiral Borden retreated, but in his mind he was planning to play this whole incident right down, which he believed would exact him a quiet, dignified revenge: that of military intellect over a blowhard.

As plans went, that one was dead moderate. If David Borden did but know it, career-threatening moderate.

At that moment there was a knock on the Director’s door. He called to enter, and was not especially pleased to see the frowning face of Lieutenant Ramshawe.

“Morning, sir. I got in here soon as I could when I heard about the tanker, but it didn’t get on the news till 0500 so I guess I was a bit late. Anyhow, my conclusions are that we really do need to examine the possibility of a Chinese-backed Iranian minefield right out there in the strait.”

“But I believe the tanker exploded off the coast of Oman, miles and miles from Iranian waters.”

“I know that, sir. But there’s still got to be a suspicion. We know the Chinese ordered a ton of mines from Moscow, and we know they could easily have brought them to Iran. We also know they were groping about in the strait with four warships, and possibly three submarines, all mine layers, at least one night, and possibly more. We simply cannot dismiss the issue.”

“The Omanis appear to have done so. There’s not a word from them to cast any suspicion on the Iranians whatsoever.”

“That’s because they don’t know their ass from their elbow.”

“Very possibly. Nonetheless in the absence of one shred of proof, one floating mine, one whisper of skul-duggery from any of our people in Beijing or Tehran... Jimmy, I cannot instigate anything without being in possession of at least some evidence.”

“But I have some evidence. First of all, the bloody mines, maybe several hundred, were delivered under top-secret circumstances, and have essentially disappeared. Then we had a fairly large flotilla of ships sail from Chinese bases,

direct to Iran. Then we have these night exercises, during which they could easily have laid a minefield out there in the strait.

“Then we have a very strange situation. You know, and I know, you can lay a minefield and not activate it electronically till you’re good and ready. Now, the Chinks bugger off toward the Bay of Bengal, leaving behind two mine layers, the frigates KANGDING and ZIGONG. And what are the first ships to be seen after the bang? Those two frigates, out there in the strait, flying the Iranian flag. In my view they were out there activating just *some* of the mines.

“But here’s what’s really important... Remember a couple of weeks ago we picked up pictures of the Iranian missiles being established way down the coast, twenty-nine miles south of Kuhestak? ... Well, I marked the point hard on my big chart of Hormuz. The GLOBAL BRONCO went up in a near-dead-straight line from there, about twenty-four miles west sou’west.”

“Jimmy, you can make a dead straight line from any one point to any other. You need three to show evidence of a straight line.”

“Well, sir, at least the proximity of the missiles must be significant.”

“Not necessarily so, Jimmy. I am afraid that all the *evidence* is very circumstantial. By which I mean we know nothing. The mines China ordered may well still be in Zhanjiang. Their trip to Iran may easily have been to sell the two frigates. GLOBAL BRONCO was carrying eighty thousand tons of the world’s most volatile petrochemical. Anything could have set it off. I would be sympathetic if you could locate for me one indisputable fact. Leave it for now, Jimmy. Until we get hard evidence.”

The Lieutenant stood up, and he looked Admiral Borden square in the eye. “I just have a damned weird feeling that when the next evidence turns up, we’re not gonna love it.”

Admiral Borden shook his head, and called back Arnold Morgan. “Sir,” he said, “I simply do not have one single piece of Intelligence that points to anything but a bad accident on that tanker, which caused it to explode.”

“I do not doubt that, Admiral. The issue is whether you should be raising heaven and hell to find some.”

“Sir, sometimes there is simply nothing to find.”

“The fact that you can’t find it does not mean it doesn’t exist.” Arnold Morgan was beginning to dislike the Acting Director at Fort Meade, and that was bad news for the Acting Director. But Admiral Morgan was receiving a distinct impression that David Borden did not *want* to find anything.

“If I were you, David, I would be damned careful about taking a negative view, because if you delay us, put us behind the eight ball, I shall be forced to HAVE YOUR ASS, RIGHT?” Click. Down phone.

“KATHY!”

The door opened once again. And Ms. O’Brien entered, smiling sweetly. Too sweetly. “Would it make you any happier, my darling,” she said, “if I went out and bought a ship’s Klaxon so I could signal back to you? I expect people would get used to it... ‘KAAAAA-THEEEEE!... BAHAA... BAHAAA...’ Two blasts for positive, one for negative, three for panic...”

The Admiral burst into laughter, despite his rising irritation at the attitude of David Borden.

“Kathy, upon whom the sun rises and sets for me, I wanna let you into a deep and, thus far, unspoken secret. Right here I suspect I’m dealing with a total asshole in the chair of the good George Morris at the NSA.”

“Oh, how very depressing.”

“Possibly more than you know. Book us a table at the restaurant in Georgetown tonight, will you? Between you, and Monsieur Pierre, and my old friend Billy Beychevelle, perhaps you can raise my spirits.”

“Why, sir...” she replied, putting on a southern accent even more firmly than her own far-lost Alabama drawl, “ah sure would be deeply honored to bring y’all raaht back into the world of good cheer and fahn manners.”

Arnold watched her strut out, shook his head, smiling, and turned CNN back on.

Meanwhile, back at his desk in Fort Meade, Jimmy Ramshawe, surrounded by ocean charts, was glaring at the one that mapped the Bassein River on the Bengal Bay coast of Burma, or, as it is now known, Myanmar.

“Crazy bastards,” he muttered. “Like changing the bloody name of Australia to Michelob.”

He picked up the telephone and called the embassy, trying to catch Jane before she left for Georgetown. He just made it.

“Just a quick question,” he said. “Can I meet you at home tonight instead of in the bar?”

“You mean my home?”

“Right.”

“Okay. What time?”

“Six. I got a little project you might want to help me with.”

“No worries. I’ll be waiting.”

The day passed without further drama, or knowledge as to what happened to the GLOBAL BRONCO. The great tower of fire alongside the ship raged on into the heavens until the evaporating gas had burned off, and when it finally died it left the starboard side of the BRONCO shimmering white hot. The huge tanker was wallowing in the water, bow down, the waves now washing right up to the still-intact Tank Two, which sat full of liquid gas, poised between the devil of the melting aft quarter of the ship and the ripped-metal destruction in the deep blue sea up for’ard.

CNN, and the rest of the media, could elaborate no further. Bob Heseltine had called Admiral Morgan to inform him that Texas Global was sending its own investigators immediately to Dubai. He also mentioned he had been in conference with his technical advisers all day and no one could come up with one single reason how the for’ard tank could possibly have exploded, short of being blown apart by a mine or a torpedo.

When Arnold replaced the receiver, he was so thoughtful, so concerned, he had actually found time to say good-bye to the helpful Texan on the wire from Travis Street, Houston.

Lieutenant Ramshawe spent the day studying satellite photographs and charts of the strait. He also talked to the CIA’s Middle East desk, searching for any clue as to whether Iran might have decided to lock the rest of the world out of the almost-landlocked sea they regarded, historically, as their own.

Satellite photographs showed the two Chinese warships, HANGZHOU and SHANTOU, now moored alongside, in China's new Burmese Naval dockyard on Haing Gyi Island, which sits north of a wide six-mile shoal, surrounded almost entirely by sea marshes, but with a short easterly coastline facing a surprisingly deep trench with varying low-water depths of well over 40 feet.

In a massive building program in recent years, China had converted a stretch of this two-mile coastline into a concrete haven for its warships far from home. The island was strategically perfect, on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, at the mouth of the 12-mile-wide estuary of the Bassein River. It was equipped with long jetties and standard shipyard equipment, cranes, loading facilities, refueling pumps, 16 big concrete holding tanks, and sprawling lines of ships' stores. It was the first fully equipped overseas Naval base China had possessed for more than 500 years, 7,500 sea miles from Shanghai.

Jimmy Ramshawe did not like it. The two Chinese warships, even in a long-range satellite photograph, looked a lot too comfortable at the Burmese jetties, just around the coast from a foreign ocean. "Like someone parking a couple of Iraqi frigates outside the Opera House by Sydney Harbor Bridge," he muttered. "Seriously out of place... I just wish I bloody knew what the Orientals were at—maybe I'll get my last name changed to Rickshawe and get in there as a spy and find out."

Tickled by his own groan-inspiring humor, the Lieutenant made out a brief report, detailing the information that the Chinese frigate and destroyer were now refueling for the journey home. He made a note that the three Kilos were not in residence in Burma and presumed they had taken a more southerly route to avoid the Malacca Strait, through which they would have been forced to travel on the surface. "It looks rather as if they do not wish to be seen," he wrote. "For reasons unspecified. For good measure he added the words "as yet."

He then returned to his big chart of the Hormuz Strait, published by the U.S. Navy and likely to be extremely accurate. He took a long ruler and drew a line from the new Iranian missile position at 26.23N 57.05E. The line was precisely 14 inches long. The chart's scale was one inch: 125,000. So he divided 125,000 by 36 to give him yards, then that number by 1,760 to give him miles. The calculator told him that on this chart one inch equaled 1.97 miles. Which meant the tanker had exploded in 360 feet of water, 27.58 miles from the missiles, right along his straight line at 26.18N 56.38E.

He noted that from the point of the explosion the water stayed very deep west toward the Omani coast. Heading east it began to shelve up steadily all the way back along his line, growing a regular 30 or 40 feet shallower every few miles. Absentmindedly he muttered to himself, "If there really is a minefield out there, I'd say they used those Kilos to lay 'em in the deep water over on the Omani side and the surface ships where it gets shallower... I wonder."

His shift ended officially at 1600, but he'd been in the office since before 0600, and he was still there at 1700, wrestling with his decision. It was a drastic step, he knew, and may very easily cost him his career. But he was going for it.

Jimmy Ramshawe folded up his chart and took it with him when he left his desk. A minute later he was aiming the Jaguar toward the highway that would take him to the Australian Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue. The traffic was

“the usual bloody awful,” and he drove in through the gates just before 6 P.M. Jane Peacock and her mother were chatting in the parking lot, and they killed a few minutes discussing the spectacular spring weather, blossoms and associated flora, before Jane and Jimmy headed back into the embassy, to the ambassador’s private quarters.

She ordered tea, and then sat down next to him on a large sofa and told him to spill the beans. “Come on, Jimmy, what’s happening?”

“Well, it’s like this... I am planning to speak to the President’s National Security Adviser, Admiral Arnold Morgan.”

“You don’t have to tell me his bloody name, sweetness. Everyone knows his name.”

“Yeah, but everyone isn’t about to call him on his private line.”

“You have that number?”

“No, actually, I don’t.”

“Well, how’re you going to get it?”

“You’re going to get it for me.”

“ME?”

“Right. The thing is this... I’m going over the heads of all my superiors, including the Acting Director. If anyone finds out, I’m probably dead in the Navy.”

“Wow! What would you do?”

“Well, I was thinking of changing my name to Rickshawe and becoming a Chinese spy.”

Jane laughed, which pleased him. He’d thought it was a good joke earlier, but there was nothing like testing it on a live audience.

“Jimmy, may I ask why you are doing this, and how you expect me to find a number that is probably private to the President of the United States.”

“No it’s not that private. The switchboard here could get it, on behalf of the ambassador. At least they’d get patched through by the main White House operator.”

“You want me to use Dad’s name?”

“No. I’ll talk. But I want to make the call from here, and then verify it, by having them call back on your dad’s private line, which will be on record at the White House. They have a direct line to all major Washington ambassadors. That way I’ll get patched through to the Admiral.”

“Well... I suppose so. Doesn’t seem much harm. And if there is, the only one in trouble is going to be you. You better have something pretty important to say—that bloody Admiral’s supposed to be a tiger.”

“Yeah, I know. My dad knew him a bit when he was in the Navy.”

“Anyway, you picked a good night. Both my parents are going out.”

“I know that, too. You told me. Dinner at the British Embassy, right?”

“Yup. They’ll both be gone by seven o’clock.”

“That’s good. I want to call around eight. Because that way I’ll know he’s settled wherever he’s going to be. Hopefully at home. I don’t want to have to go through this rigmarole twice, or even three times. And that’s what’ll happen if I make the call while he’s in transit somewhere.”

“Can I know what you want him for?”

“Not really. But since I can’t make the call without you, certainly not from my office, I have to tell you. Janie, I think the Chinese and the Iranians, between ’em, have put some kind of a minefield across the Strait of Hormuz. That tanker blew up this morning... no accident. And I think there might bloody easily be more.”

“Jesus. I read about that... but why doesn’t Fort Meade get onto it?”

“Because Admiral Borden, the Acting Director, doesn’t believe it. Doesn’t want to do anything until he has some proof.”

“Well, why do you think Admiral Morgan will be any more interested than Admiral Borden?”

“I don’t have a reason. Just a gut feeling, that’s all.”

“Pretty expensive gut feeling, if you’re wrong and he goes to Borden and tells him he’s got some kind of a nutter on his staff.”

“Yeah. I know. What a ripper. But I don’t think he will...”

“Anyway, let’s go and watch the news in Dad’s study, see if they’ve blown any more ships... then you can get started on blowing your entire career... Want some more tea?”

The 90 minutes passed quickly, Ambassador John Peacock came in for a brief chat, then went off to meet his wife. At eight o’clock sharp, Lt. Ramshawe went and sat behind the big desk in the study, picked up the blue phone and dialed the main number of the White House.

Jimmy, his Aussie accent undiminished, said, “Good evening. I’m calling from the office of the Australian ambassador, and he would like to speak immediately to Admiral Arnold Morgan... You probably want to verify this call, so get back to me right away would you?”

“Yessir, we’ll check the private number for the Australian ambassador and come right back.”

Thirty seconds later, the phone rang... *“Ambassador Peacock’s office?”*

“Correct.”

“Sir, I’m afraid the National Security Adviser is not in right now... If it’s urgent, we can locate him.”

“Please do.”

“Hold a moment...”

Three full minutes went by, mostly taken up by Le Bec Fin’s maître d’, Pierre, asking the White House to wait while he connected a telephone to the private booth occupied by Admiral Morgan and Kathy. He’d done this a few times before, and he placed it right next to the bottle of 1995 Château Beychevelle, which was “breathing,” as yet untouched, in the middle of the table.

Arnold Morgan thanked him, and picked up the phone. “Morgan... Speak.” His telephone manner never varied, but Kathy still giggled.

“Just a moment, sir... connecting you to the Australian ambassador...”

“Sir, is that Admiral Morgan?”

“In person, Ambassador Peacock. And I guess this is pretty important? I’m just sitting down to dinner.”

“Sir, this is not actually Ambassador Peacock. My name is Lieutenant Jimmy Ramshawe, and I work in surveillance at Fort Meade, and I’m calling you under what you might think are somewhat dishonest circumstances.”

Arnold Morgan's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Fraud phone call from an Aussie, right before a little dish of grilled prawns... Jesus, what's the place coming to?"

"But, sir, it is important."

"I guess it must be. You've gone to a lot of trouble to interrupt my goddamned dinner. What did you say your name was... Jimmy Ramshawe?"

"Yessir. Surveillance."

"Okay, Jimmy. Shoot. And hurry... Wait a minute... (*aside*) Kathy, tell Pierre to put the prawns on hold for five minutes, and lemme have a glass of that Bordeaux... I have a feeling I'm gonna need it... Go, Jimmy."

"I don't know, sir, how well up-to-date you are on the Global Bronco situation?"

"Well, I haven't spoken to the tanker's owner for at least four hours."

"Sorry, sir... Anyway, I was the operator who tracked, or tried to track, all those sea mines China bought from Moscow three months ago."

Arnold Morgan's antennae flew up like lightning rods. But he stayed calm... "Aha."

"Well, sir, they transported them under terrific secrecy... then we had that little convoy of surface ships, three frigates and a Sovremenny destroyer make a special journey all the way from the South China Sea to Iran. Then I picked up three Chinese Kilo-Class submarines making their way north up the Arabian Sea; they ended up in Chah Behar. All seven of the ships, as you know, have mine-laying capacity.

"Then we had night exercises with the Iranians. We picked up very little, but they were out there all night off the Omani coast. Then we picked up a missile movement, Sunburn S-As on the southeast coast. And suddenly, a couple of weeks later, a damn great tanker explodes, twenty-seven miles in a straight line from those missile launchers. And what's the first thing we see? Two of those Chinese frigates, now flying the Iranian flag, just five miles from the explosion, forty miles from their jetties in Bandar Abbas."

Admiral Morgan was listening.

"Sir, I think they may have been out there activating the mines, and it is my opinion that there may be a serious minefield out there, maybe running from the Omani coast, place called Ra's Qabr al Hindi, right across to Iran. And I think we ought to find out."

"Jimmy, I assume you have reported all this to Admiral Borden?"

"Of course, sir. But he doesn't want to know. Keeps asking for evidence. Well, I don't have any bloody evidence, but I've got enough clues to warrant a damned careful look."

Arnold Morgan thought carefully, and then he said, "I suppose you've considered the consequences of a phone call like this. Bypassing the regular channels of command?"

"Yessir."

"But you decided to take the risk anyway?"

"Yessir."

"Now, I'm going to be very formal with you. Lieutenant Ramshawe, it is entirely out of order for you to have taken this action. You must return to Fort Meade and place the entire matter with Admiral Borden. It is essential you use our regular

channels of information. Neither the Navy nor the Intelligence services can afford this kind of undisciplined and unorthodox method of operation. Kindly see that it does not happen again.” At which point he put down the phone.

“Kathy,” he said, “that was rather an interesting phone call. It confirmed what I have unfortunately suspected... that the man sitting in George Morris’s chair is a total asshole.”

Back in the Australian Embassy, Jimmy Ramshawe was perplexed. “He listened carefully to all I had to say,” he told Jane. “Then he gave me a right choking off for not going through Admiral Borden... Jesus, I was only calling him because I *could not* go through Admiral Borden.”

“Well, I’m sure he understood that,” said Jane. “Even I understood that, and I only heard one half of the conversation.”

“Right. But it still puts me in a no-win situation. If Admiral Morgan believed me, he’ll probably call and report me to the Director, and use the information to give him a right bollocking. If he didn’t believe me, he’ll probably call anyway and recommend I be removed from any position of trust. The ole bastard never even gave me a chance to ask him to keep it confidential.”

“Jimmy, Arnold Morgan did not get where he is by being stupid. I’m sure he plugged right into the situation and will very likely be grateful for the call, may even act on it. He’ll appreciate what you did, and I don’t think he’ll betray you.”

“Christ, I hope you’re right... Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Jimmy and Jane did not dine as well as Arnold Morgan and Kathy, nor in such opulent surroundings as Le Bec Fin. But they were not far away in a bar in Georgetown, eating a couple of cheeseburgers and drinking Budweiser instead of grilled prawns, veal marsala and Château Beycheville.

The Lieutenant was on duty at 0600, so he dropped Jane off at home sometime before midnight and headed back to the Watergate, a distance of less than two miles. Inside the apartment he kicked off his shoes, put the kettle on, checked his messages (none) and switched on the television, CNN automatically, muttering to himself, “Just better make sure no one’s declared war.”

No one had. The news, he thought, was unfathomably dreary, lightweight... health care, second-rate pop star getting divorced, famine in Africa, all-star third baseman dying of drugs. Blah-blah-blah, grumbled Jimmy to himself. *These guys ought to be called The Four Newsmen of the Apocalypse: Conquest, Slaughter, Famine and Death. Especially Death, on his pale horse. That’s all they bloody think about.*

But then he stopped dead in his tracks as he headed back to the kitchen, half listening to some other late report from the newscaster:

“Reports are coming in of a major oil spill in the Gulf of Iran. A giant crude-oil tanker is currently listing off the coast of Oman, with an apparently damaged bow section. According to Dubai shipping sources, oil is pouring out of her for’ard tanks.”

“HOLY SHIT!” The Lieutenant charged right back into the living room, but the item was over. They were back on the President’s forthcoming visit to India. Jimmy picked up the phone, dialed Fort Meade, spoke immediately to Lt. Ray Carpenter... *“You got anything on a tanker leaking oil in the gulf?”*

“Come on, Jimmy. What do you think this is? Greenpeace? Nothing right now.”

Despite himself, Lt. Ramshawe laughed. Then he called CNN news headquarters in Atlanta and asked if they had an accurate fix on where the tanker was. He announced himself as a director of Texas Gas Transport, told them he was afraid it might be one of his ships. In return he'd keep them posted if it was.

The CNN foreign desk was not much help but said he was more than welcome to call their man in Dubai, since it was already almost nine o'clock the following morning in the Middle East.

He thanked them profusely, dialed the number in Dubai and spoke to the reporter, David Alidai.

"Sorry, pal. I'm dealing with the Omani Navy's public affairs office. The only person in there's called Hassam, but he doesn't know much. I think he's been told to shut up until they assess the damage to the environment. But if you guys own the ship, he might be a bit more forthcoming. I'll give you his number... Good luck."

Jimmy hit the dial buttons to Oman, and was put through to the aforementioned Hassam.

"I'm sorry. I cannot tell you anything. We know very little ourselves."

"Listen, Hassam, this may be our ship. We had a VLCC right in that area... I'm just asking for a position... Surely you can provide us with that... Please try, otherwise I'll have to speak to the Admiral."

Jimmy had no idea what Admiral he was going to speak to, and Hassam could not have cared less, kept him waiting on the line for five minutes. Then he came back and said, "Mr. Haig, the damaged ship is positioned at latitude 26.19 north, 56.49 east. She's in 250 feet of water."

"Hassam, I'm grateful. But I don't think that's us. It's a bit too far south. Do you know if there are any other ships in the area?"

"Well, we have two Qahir Corvettes out there trying to keep order. The strait is very busy. All tankers are being brought to a halt right now... I believe there are two Iranian frigates out there also, but I can tell you no more."

Jimmy hung up and sprinted out of the apartment, willing the elevator to take him instantly down to the parking lot. He unlocked the Jaguar and retrieved the chart that he had left in the leather side pocket. He relocked and sprinted back to the elevator, which had not yet resumed its upward journey.

Inside the apartment he spread the chart on the dining table, scrabbled around for a ruler and measured. The stricken VLCC in the Hormuz Strait was only nine inches from the missile site, a fraction less than 18 miles. It was six inches from the Global Bronco, just less than 12 miles.

And it was pretty much on the line that joined the Iranian missile site and the spot where the Bronco had exploded yesterday.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," breathed Jimmy. "The bastards have mined the strait. And it's dollars to doughnuts the VLCC hit one of 'em with its bow."

He reached into his pocket and found the scrap of paper with the White House phone number. He checked his watch and saw it was 12.45 A.M. "Well, I didn't manage to get fired five hours ago, but I'm damn sure certain I'm going to pull it off now."

And he dialed the main switchboard of the White House. When they answered, he said, "This is Lieutenant Jimmy Ramshawe, Chief Surveillance Officer Middle

and Far East, National Security Agency, Fort Meade. I need to speak to Admiral Arnold Morgan on a matter of extreme urgency. He WILL take the call. Please make it and then patch me through.”

For the second time that evening, the White House interrupted the fearsome Security Chief. He and Kathy were home, sipping a glass of their favorite sauternes, a sweet, silky 1995 dessert wine from the Gironde, before going to bed, when the phone rang.

“Sir, this is the White House main switchboard. We have a Lieutenant Jimmy Ramshawe on the line, who would like to be connected to you.”

Admiral Morgan raised his eyes heavenward. But he took the call. “Jimmy,” he rasped. “This better be awfully important.”

“It is, sir. There’s a second big tanker crippled in the Hormuz Strait. I just heard a flash on CNN. But I called Dubai, then the Omani Navy, and I got a position on the ship. It’s eighteen miles from the missile site I mentioned, and it’s twelve miles from the GLOBAL BRONCO. More important, it’s on a *dead-straight line* linking the two ships and the missiles. The odds against that have gotta be a zillion to one. They’ve mined it, sir. Of that I am now very sure.”

Arnold Morgan hissed his breath inward. His thoughts raged through his mind. “Jimmy, where are you?”

“I’m in my apartment, sir. The Watergate.”

“You are? Hell, I used to know an Australian Admiral who lived in there. You any relation?”

“My father, sir. Naval attaché here a few years back.”

“Jesus. This is getting worse and worse. Your dad and I had a few times together. Lives in New York now, right? With Qantas?”

“That’s him, sir.”

“Okay. Now listen. I want you to meet me in my office in the White House in twenty minutes. I’m leaving right now. I’ll have an escort for you at the West Executive Avenue entrance. You know where that is?”

“Yessir.”

“And, Jimmy, speak to no one. Not a sentence. Not a phone call. This is very important. Believe me.”

“Yessir.”

“And, Jimmy, make sure you bring your working chart with you.”

“Yessir.”

Arnold Morgan stood up and walked to the top of the basement stairs in Kathy’s large Chevy Chase home. He yelled instructions to his Secret Service detail, organizing Lt. Ramshawe’s escort at the White House. He kissed Kathy good night, pulled on his coat and headed outside where his car and two agents were waiting.

“Straight to the factory, sir?”

“You gottit.”

It was almost 1 A.M. when the black White House staff car came barreling over the Taft Avenue Bridge, driving swiftly down Connecticut Avenue. It was raining now, and the city was quiet. They crossed Dupont Circle and made their way to Seventeenth Street, swinging into West Executive Avenue from where they could see a Jaguar already being waved through to the West Wing.

Admiral Morgan met Lt. Ramshawe right outside the door, while four duty agents attended to his visitor's pass and parked his car.

The Admiral stuck out his hand, smiled, and said, "Hello, Lieutenant. Arnold Morgan."

Jimmy Ramshawe had met a few major men in his life, but this was different. The Admiral exuded power. He was all of seven inches shorter than Jimmy but his gaze was dead straight, his eyes bright blue and his grip strong. The Admiral's dark gray suit had been tailored somewhere in heaven, and his black lace-up shoes were gleaming. The perfectly knotted tie was that of the Naval Academy, Annapolis, a place and experience that Arnold Morgan had never forgotten, and never would. He made Jimmy Ramshawe feel like a little boy.

And in response to the Admiral's curt but warm greeting, he just managed, "Sir." He'd used up all his daring and bravado for one night, making two unauthorized calls on the private line to the right-hand man of the President of the United States.

"Follow me," said the Admiral, to anyone who might be listening, which included the two Secret Service agents who were with him at all times, four White House agents, and Jimmy. And, line astern, they set off in the wake of the Admiral, who never walked; he kind of pounded along the carpet, chin out, shoulders back, dead upright. If a regular wall had suddenly appeared in front of him, he would have crashed right through it, like a Disney cartoon, leaving just the outline of his silhouette. He conducted the business of the United States of America along very similar lines.

At the big wooden door to his office he came to a halt, and his commands were sharp... "Get me a competent secretary to sit in Mrs. O'Brien's chair right now. Tell someone to bring us coffee.... You hungry, Jimmy?"

"Yessir."

"Chicken sandwiches for the Lieutenant... and make sure someone's attending to my phone exclusively at all times... Aside from that, my regular agents take up positions right here...and have the hot line to the President on high alert... I may have to speak to him in a major hurry."

Everyone nodded. Admiral Morgan glared; turning to one of his regular agents, he barked, "No bullshit, right, Bobby?"

Bobby snapped to attention. "No bullshit. Sir, nossir."

It was a well-practiced routine, and everyone laughed.

"Okay, gentlemen, that's it. Lieutenant, let's get to work...and tell 'em to hurry up with the coffee in case we both fall asleep."

Inside the office, Jimmy spread his chart out on the Admiral's big desk. Arnold Morgan stared hard as the key spots were pointed out to him... the missiles, the GLOBAL BRONCO, the stricken VLCC, currently pumping oil into the strait.

"Okay, Lieutenant, first things first. I want to know what the master of that ship actually saw. I guess if they slammed into a mine...What was it, a contact PLT-3 from Russia?"

"That was what the Chinese ordered, sir. So I'm assuming that."

"So'm I. Well, they make a pretty big bang in the water. The Captain must have heard something."

"I agree, sir. But the guy I spoke to in the Omani public affairs office was giving nothing away. It took me all my time to get him to tell me where the ship was."

"Well, if that's the case, I may have to kick a little ass. Hard. Do we know the name or the nationality of the ship?"

"Nossir."

"Okay. Well, the news guys will have that very soon. Meantime I'm gonna get the Royal Navy in London to do our work. The Brits are well in with the Omanis, have been for years. Just about every warship they own is British."

He picked up the telephone and ordered the new secretary, "Get me Admiral Sir Richard Birley on the line in Northwood, England. The numbers are in my big blue book, top right-hand drawer... He'll be at home, right near the base. He's head of the Royal Navy's submarine service."

Less than two minutes later, the Admiral's old friend from London was on the line. The two men exchanged greetings, and the English submarine chief instantly agreed to have someone call the Omanis and find out precisely what was going on, who owned the ship and what the Captain had to say.

"I'll be back inside the hour, Arnie... By the way, may I ask why you're treating this so urgently?"

"Not right now you can't."

"Well, you always have to wonder in those waters, *hmmmm?*"

"You always have to wonder. Talk to you later, Dick."

The Admiral turned back to Jimmy Ramshawe, and he said quietly, "Lieutenant, I want you to listen very carefully. Only two people in this country believe the Iranians and the Chinese may have put a minefield across the strait. That's you and I.

"We may be wrong. But I think not. Your straight line on that chart is just too much of a coincidence. And I would not be that shocked if another ship blew before we're much older.

"But this is what I want you to understand: If this turns out to be true, we're going to be sitting on a colossal world oil crisis. The gulf will have to be shut down while we sweep and clear it, which is going to take weeks. Oil prices will go through the roof. The entire global economy could go berserk. Japan could come to a complete halt. A gallon of gas could go to six bucks right here in the U.S... and what I'm trying to do right here is avoid a national panic, if that is at all possible."

"Yessir."

The chicken sandwiches arrived, a large plateful. Jimmy Ramshawe attacked them, and the Admiral had one himself while they waited for the English Admiral to call back.

He was on the line before 0200. "Arnold, the ship is Greek, Liberian registered. Only two years old. It's huge, three hundred thousand tons deadweight. Loaded with Saudi crude. The Captain and the crew are still on board. The ship is not sinking but it's ten degrees bow down, and it's currently belching seventy thousand cubic meters of oil from its for'ard tank."

"Any word from the Captain?"

“Yes, he made a statement to the Omani coast guard. Says there was a massive explosion, for no reason, way up at the bow. It completely ruptured one of the five holding tanks.”

“Was she double hulled, Dick?”

“Oh, yes. Very heavily built in the Daewoo Shipyard, South Korea. Compartmentalized, too, throughout the hull. She’d be just about unsinkable... I expect you know, but she’s only twelve miles away from the GLOBAL BRONCO, which blew up yesterday.”

“Yeah. We do know that. And right now I’d have to say that this, Sir Richard, ole buddy, is not good.”

“This, Admiral Arnie, old chap, is becoming deeply unattractive.”

Chapter 3

April 28. The White House. Washington, D.C.

With Lieutenant Ramshawe on his way home now, sworn to total silence, Admiral Morgan stood alone in his office at 0230. It was a situation not entirely unfamiliar to him, even on a Saturday morning. He yelled through the door for someone to bring him some fresh HOT coffee, and debated whether or not to call the President.

“Maybe not,” he muttered. “It won’t do any good. And as soon as the President knows, everyone knows. I think we need a little more time before the crap really hits the fan.”

The first thing to do was to get a couple of minesweepers into the strait and take a closer look. Jimmy Ramshawe was to spend the morning screening all satellite pictures to check whether any tankers were making a successful through-passage. Arnold Morgan suspected any big fuel-oil carriers that did make it through would be either Chinese or Iranian. And that their cargo would either be direct from the refinery just east of Bandar Abbas, or from the new Chinese refinery farther down the coast. But Lieutenant Ramshawe would find that out.

The problem was minesweepers, the little specialist warships that locate the mines by towing a sweep wire through the water until it hits and cuts the mine’s cable. The USA had some extremely effective sonar mine hunters in the Avenger Class, but they were mostly based along the Texas coast, and made only 13 knots. “Damn things would take forever to get there,” the Admiral grumbled.

He pondered the Brits, wondering about the Royal Navy’s excellent Hunt Class minesweepers. But again, the same problem... *slow, and half a world away from Hormuz*. No. He had to get someone much nearer, which meant, essentially, the Indians... *What the hell time is it in Bombay?*

The question was rhetorical. Arnold Morgan knew more or less what time it was *everywhere*. And right now in the great Indian city of Bombay it was somewhere around midday. He picked up the telephone and asked his night-duty secretary,

whom he'd never even seen, to connect him immediately to the Indian Embassy in Washington.

When the duty officer answered, the Admiral said simply, "This is Arnold Morgan, National Security Adviser to the President of the United States. I'm in the White House. Take down the following phone number, and have the Naval Attaché call me in the next four minutes... Thanks. And hurry up." Click.

Three minutes and 22 seconds later, the telephone rang on his private line.

"This is Vice Admiral Prenjit Lal speaking. I believe you wanted me?"

"Hey, thanks for calling. I do appreciate it's the middle of the night, but my request is easy. I would like Admiral Kumar, your Chief of Naval Staff, to call the White House immediately and ask for me. I guess he's in Bombay?"

"Yes, Admiral. Today he is. I'll contact him right away."

"Stress that it's extremely urgent, will you?"

"The hour of the night tells me of the urgency, Admiral. I'll do it personally and immediately."

It took eight minutes. Admiral Kumar came on the line, insisting that he would be honored to provide any assistance he could to India's very great friends in the White House.

Arnold Morgan, however, knew this was only half true. What the mannered and apparently pliable Indian officer had not said was "Just so long as it will not damage our relations with our neighbors or allies, and so long as the U.S. would assist with whatever the cost might be." Unspoken hurdles.

Admiral Morgan elected to lay out the facts as swiftly and brutally as he could. He pulled no punches. And he went very carefully over the iron-clad fact of Jimmy Ramshawe's Straight Line. And he ended his little speech by saying: "I'm afraid all of the world's oil consumers are in this together. But yours is the nation with the most easily accessible minesweepers... Admiral Kumar, you will have the full backing of the USA. I'll have two destroyers there to meet you, and you may assume all costs will be met by the big oil consumers, the U.S., the U.K., Japan, France, Germany, everyone.

"I'm sure you can appreciate the urgency... we simply cannot just sit here and wait for another tanker to blow up... we have to get in there, check it out and if necessary sweep a safe channel... and your Pondicherry Class minesweepers are the nearest."

"Admiral Morgan," replied the Indian Navy Chief, "I am indeed grateful for your call and your trust. If the Iranian Gulf was closed for even three weeks, my country would be in the most terrible trouble...aside from the regular petrol supplies, almost all of our propane gas for cooking comes from there. My country could come to a complete halt.

"Obviously we had noted the two tanker accidents. But no one had any idea it might be a concerted plot by the Iranians and the damnable Chinese. You may assume we will sail six of the Pondicherrys in the next twenty-four hours. You think we should take a tanker?"

"Yes I do. And escorts. Admiral Kumar, we do not yet know precisely what we are dealing with here. But I can assure you of massive U.S. protection once your ships arrive at the strait.... One squeak out of the Chinese or the Iranians, and we'll put 'em on the bottom of the ocean. That's a promise."

“Excellent, Admiral. My attaché in Washington will be in contact in a few hours to give you times of sailing, an ETA, and further details of our escort. It’s one thousand miles to the strait from Bombay, but the Pondicherrys make sixteen knots. We’ll aim to sail at first light tomorrow morning, which should put us in the strait before dark on Tuesday.”

“Thank you, Admiral Kumar. We look forward to working with you. I just wish the circumstances were less serious.”

Arnold Morgan replaced the telephone, checked his watch at 0320 and opened up his private line to the Pentagon. He told the duty officer in the Navy Department to get the CNO on the line right away.

Sixty seconds later, Admiral Alan Dixon, former Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet, betrayed no sign that he had been called in the small hours of the morning. The new Chief of Naval Operations said crisply, “Morning, sir. Sorry if I kept you waiting.”

“Not a bit, Alan. But what I have to say is rather long and complicated. Can you come to the White House right away? Where are you, in the Yard?”

“Yessir. Give me thirty.”

“See you then. West Executive Avenue entrance.”

The minutes ticked by slowly for the National Security Adviser. He debated the rather appealing possibility of waking “that stuffed shirt, Borden,” but decided there was nothing to gain from such a malicious act. So he waited. Sipped his coffee, thought of Kathy. And waited.

At 0348 sharp, Admiral Dixon was escorted into the office, and for the second time that night, to a second slightly incredulous Navy chief, Admiral Morgan went over the whole scenario in the Strait of Hormuz.

Alan Dixon, a veteran destroyer CO from the Gulf War, nodded gravely. “I guess two sinkings in much the same place are beyond the bounds of likely coincidence, almost impossible we could be mistaken—I haven’t heard the theory before... I suppose that’s your day’s work, eh?”

“Not so, Alan. One of the brighter sparks on George Morris’s staff. I’d like to support it, though.”

“An interesting bit of deduction. And to tell the truth, sir, the Pentagon had not yet received a position on the second tanker when I left the office.”

“No. Neither had anyone else. This young Lieutenant bamboozled his way into the public affairs office of the Omani Navy and pried it out of them.”

“Good job! Love to hear it. Anyway, sir, what now?”

“Well, the Indian Navy is going to work with us sweeping the strait. We obviously have to start a major mine-clearance operation ASAP. I hope on Tuesday evening. They’ll have a half dozen of those Russian-built Pondicherrys working, with an escort of their own. But I want to get a couple of our destroyers in there, and a CVBG as soon as we can.”

Admiral Dixon pulled out a personal notebook, which detailed all of the five currently operational U.S. Carrier Battle Groups. The 55 ships that surrounded the huge carriers were just a little too much to commit to memory. And the highly methodical Boston-born Alan Dixon never went anywhere without that little notebook.

“Okay, sir,” he said. “We’re pretty well placed. The CONSTELLATION Group’s stationed up at the north end of the Gulf off Iraq. We got JOHN C. STENNIS with nine guided-missile ships and two nuclear boats exercising in the Arabian Sea, probably a day and a half from the strait.

“HARRY S TRUMAN’s battle ready at Diego Garcia. She’s got a full complement of escorts, one cruiser, two destroyers, six frigates, two nuclear submarines, an LA and a Sturgeon, plus a complete Under Way Replenishment Group. JOHN F. KENNEDY has a full operational group just about ready to leave from Pearl at any time, certainly in the next three days.

“Back in San Diego the RONALD REAGAN’s almost finished a major overhaul. Her Group can be ready inside two months, if we need it.”

“That’s great, Alan. I guess we ought to have one right in the southern approaches to the strait and one inside the gulf, spread across the exit, with a lotta muscle concentrated south of Bandar Abbas. There’s been a couple of pretty heavy Chinese destroyers prowling around there these past few weeks. Once the Indian minesweepers get in there, we’ll get the President to issue a private warning to the Iranians... any ship attempting any kind of interference will be sunk. By us. No bullshit. Right?”

“Right, sir. Meantime I’ll order the CONSTELLATION Group to proceed south toward Bandar, and the STENNIS to close the strait. We’ll put the HARRY TRUMAN on twenty-four hours battle notice to sail north from DG. It’s getting pretty damned hot out there right now, and it’s hard to keep guys out there on station for more than a couple of months without sending ’em all crazy.

“If I order the KENNEDY to leave Pearl in the next couple of days, she can go straight to DG. That’ll give us a four-group *roulement*, keeping two of them comfortably on station all the time. We can keep that up for a year if we have to.”

“Good. How’s the KENNEDY doing? Christ, Alan, she’s damn near forty years old.”

“No problem, sir. She had that complete complex overhaul in 1995, made her just about brand-new. There’s nothing wrong with her. No, sir. Old number sixty-seven, a little smaller than the Nimitz-Class boats, but she still holds nearly six thousand tons of aviation fuel. Seen a lot of service. She’s like Senator Ted—indestructible. And just as bloody-minded when she feels like it.”

Admiral Morgan chuckled. The language of the Navy. He still loved it. Still felt pride swell in his chest when the big U.S. ships prepared to flex their muscles. He’d felt it during his first nuclear submarine command more than 20 years ago, and the feeling had never diminished. Arnold Morgan’s soul was essentially held together with dark blue cord, and gold braid.

**Monday morning. April 30.
Officers’ Mess. U.S. Naval Base.
Diego Garcia, Indian Ocean.**

Lieutenant Commander Dan Headley was just one tour of duty short of promotion to Commander in the U.S. Navy’s Pacific Submarine Fleet. At age 35, he was very proud of that. Right now he was generally regarded as one of the best

submarine Executive Officers in the entire Navy. Experienced, a lifelong submariner, weapons and sonar expert, he had just flown to Diego Garcia to take up the number-two spot on the aging Sturgeon-Class nuclear boat, USS SHARK.

This was one of the Navy's underwater warhorses, probably on her last tour of duty, since she had been due for decommission in 2005. SHARK was the newest of the Navy's four Sturgeon attack submarines, and probably the best. The 5,000-tonner could make 30 knots through the water dived, she carried 23 weapons, Harpoon and Tomahawk missiles, plus torpedoes. On her deck, forward of the sail, there were two twin dry-deck shelters designed for the transport of a deep-submergence rescue vehicle (DSRV), an Advanced Swimmer Delivery Vehicle (ASDV) or a dry garage for three, even four, high-powered outboard inflatables.

SHARK was quiet, extensively fitted with acoustic tiles, with anechoic coatings. She had the capacity to fire nuclear-warhead weapons, and she was capable of operating under the ice, though Dan Headley doubted that would be needed on her next journey.

He had been at the base for only three hours when word began to spread that there was something happening up in the Strait of Hormuz. Everyone knew the CVBGs of USS CONSTITUTION and JOHN C. STENNIS were already in the area. The issue was, how soon would the massive 100,000-ton Nimitz-Class HARRY TRUMAN and her consorts head north to join them in the narrow waters that guard Arabia's landlocked Sea of Oil?

No one knew that, but senior officers considered it more likely to be hours than days. It was 2,600 miles up to Bandar Abbas, and the TRUMAN Group could steam at 30 knots, making 700 miles a day. If they cleared DG by first light tomorrow (Tuesday), they'd be in the area before dark on Friday afternoon.

Lieutenant Commander Headley had a lot of people to meet in the next 24 hours, and from each of them he had a minor secret to conceal. SUBPAC was not really happy with the veteran Commander Donald Reid, SHARK's commanding officer, and they had specifically appointed Dan Headley to assist him in every way possible.

As far as Dan was concerned it was just a wink and a nudge, because no one would tell him what, if anything, was wrong with Commander Reid, only that he was, well, "kinda eccentric." No one actually said "weird." But he'd been in the submarine service a lot of years and according to observers had shown "very occasional signs of stress."

In the modern Navy these matters are taken extremely seriously, unlike in the past when any sign of weakness or wavering was put down immediately as "shell shock" or "cowardice." It was not unusual for the offender to be cashiered, or, for the latter transgression, in the Royal Navy on one occasion, shot.

Dan Headley was looking forward to meeting the boss with rather mixed anticipation. But before he met anyone he had a letter to write, so he parked himself in a corner of the mess with a cup of coffee, and, following the habit of a lifetime, addressed the envelope before he wrote the letter: *Commander Rick Hunter, U.S. Navy Pacific Command, Coronado, California 92118.*

Dear Rick,

Just a short note to congratulate you on your promotion. Well deserved, I'm sure, even in that crazy outfit that employs you. All those years ago, when we set off together for Annapolis, I always thought we'd both end up commanding U.S. warships—rather than just me (I hope!), while you roll around in the mud with a dagger between your teeth and a pocketful of explosives.

Anyway I'm here in Diego Garcia waiting to take up my new position as XO on USS SHARK. My last, I'm told, before they make me up to Commander. Sometime in the next 24 hours we're due to sail north, to guess where? Anyway, by the time you read this the Kentucky Derby will be over. Hey, what a blast if White Rajah wins it. I guess your dad will forever regret selling him as a yearling, and my dad will forever keep reminding him that he told him not to! Still, victory would be sweet, since Bart still owns the dam, and two full sisters. That would be a real lock on a major American classic family—make you guys even richer.

Funny, isn't it, to look back at that wicked old bastard Red Rajah, and think he might be the grandsire of a Derby winner, rather than an automatic selection for a lead role in Natural Born Killers. Jeez, every time I think about him, my arm hurts!

I have to go now, meet my new crew, hope to catch a glimpse of you, certainly at Christmas, if not before.

*Best always and love to Bart,
Danny*

He folded the letter and sealed the envelope. Then he walked out to the front desk and asked the security guard to mail it. It was only a short walk over to the submarine jetties where the SHARK awaited him.

**Same morning. Monday, April 30.
Southern Fleet HQ. Zhanjiang.**

“Yushu, you are very disappointed. I can see that.”

“Well, Jicai, you would have thought the Western press would have been much more alert to the consequences of two shattered oil tankers within a few miles of each other in the middle of the Strait of Hormuz.”

“Yes, I agree. But the time difference made it awkward.”

“How?”

“Well, the *Washington Post* ran a piece on Saturday morning covering the big fire in the liquid-gas tanker. So did several other American newspapers, but no pictures. I suppose the cameras were just too far away. But when the second tanker was damaged, it was too late for their editions. And it was a much smaller story...just an oil spill in the gulf.”

“You've studied the media more than I, Jicai. Has anyone made a connection?”

“Only the Sunday edition of the *Dallas Morning News* in Texas. They have an interview with the owner of the GLOBAL BRONCO, and right underneath it, they run a story about the oil spill. But they're not making a major point about the closeness of the two 'accidents.'”

“Then, my Jicai, we will quickly have to persuade them otherwise.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will prove too much of a problem...we are extremely well organized.”

**0900 (local). Same morning.
Washington, D.C.**

Arnold Morgan had just issued a severe roasting to the Acting Director of the National Security Agency. And Admiral David Borden, frankly afraid now for his future, had gone straight to the office of Lt. Ramshawe, full of quasi-indignation that he had not been kept up to speed on the Hormuz investigation.

Jimmy Ramshawe debated the possibility of telling his boss to knock before he barged in, but decided against it. Nonetheless he detected that the Acting Director had been on the wrong end of the Big Man’s wrath, and that was not a great place to be.

“It is essential you keep me up to date,” he told the Lieutenant. “I am the person who must answer to Admiral Morgan, and it is most inconvenient when he knows more than I do.”

Again Lt. Ramshawe exercised discretion, resisting the overpowering temptation to tell Borden that everyone knew more than he did.

Instead he said simply, “Sir, I was under the impression that you wanted the whole subject ignored until there was hard evidence. That’s what you told me.”

“Correct. But when the second tanker was damaged, surely you knew I must be informed of your investigation, the fact that the ships were so close.”

“Sir, I wrote up my report and handed it to your duty officer on Saturday morning. I came in especially.”

“Well, it did not reach me. Which put me at a tremendous disadvantage, because Arnold Morgan had worked it out precisely as you did.”

The Ramshawe discretion vanished. “Sir, it is beyond my imagination that anyone could work it out any other way. The bloody towelheads and the Chinks have mined the bloody strait. I’ve been telling you that for a month. We even know where the bastards got the mines. I’ve also been telling you that for weeks. And if you still want my advice, I’m also telling you there’s more to come on this.”

Admiral Borden retreated, saying as he left, “Just make sure I’m kept up to speed on this. It is essential that I’m on precisely the same knowledge level as Admiral Morgan.”

David Borden shut the door noisily, missing Jimmy Ramshawe’s “That’ll be the bloody day.”

More importantly he had forgotten to ask what further developments there were, even though he could see the pile of satellite photographs on the young surveillance officer’s desk.

Big mistake. Jimmy Ramshawe had pictures of four tankers, three Iranian, one Chinese, making passage out of the gulf on the Iran side of Hormuz. They had all crossed the line of the minefield, exiting through an area less than three miles wide, four and a half miles offshore at the nearest point.

“That’s it,” he murmured. “They’re still transporting Iranian crude, and Chinese refined oil from Kazakhstan, right through that gap, while the rest of the world sits and waits for clearance from the Omanis to continue on. And they’re not going to get it. The strait is going to become a giant tanker park, while the Ayatollahs and the Chinese get rich.”

He picked up the secure telephone and dialed the main White House switchboard, from where he was put straight through to Admiral Morgan, as instructed. “It’s between fifty-six-fifty-six and fifty-six-fifty-nine-east, sir,” he said. “Four ships so far, three Iran, one China.”

“Thanks, Jimmy. Go tell your boss, while I tell mine.”

The afternoon newspapers came up, and still no one was making any kind of speculation that something was drastically wrong in the Strait of Hormuz. Arnold Morgan paced his office, wracking his brains, waiting for the inevitable. Jimmy Ramshawe stayed at his desk long after his shift was over, staring at the satellite photographs, occasionally talking to the CIA’s Middle Eastern desk at Langley. But there was nothing. Just the shattering coincidence of two ships damaged in the same stretch of water in the strait.

The President had listened to Admiral Morgan’s suspicions with equanimity. The relationship between the two men was at a very low point. Eight months previously Arnold Morgan had threatened to quit, and to take the President with him. Everyone knew he could have done so. The grotesque scandal and cover-up over the incident last year in the South China Sea were like a loaded revolver at the Chief Executive’s head. John Clarke would sit out his final months in the Oval Office, courtesy of his National Security Adviser.

And he was not a man to relish this. Thus he treated any warning from his supposed right-hand man with suspicion and a negative turn of mind. He had been receptive to the idea of moving heavy Naval muscle up into the strait, because he recognized the lethal consequences of being wrong. He stated curtly that such matters were what the Admiral was paid to do, and to proceed as he thought fit.

He later sent a memorandum to Admiral Morgan outlining the gist of their conversation, and absolving himself of any blame whatsoever if this thing blew up in everyone’s face, with the entire Navy on the move at huge expense, for nothing.

Arnold Morgan screwed up the memo and tossed it, dismissing its contents as the ramblings of a disarranged mind, if not those of a “total asshole.”

1900 (local). April 30. The Strait of Hormuz.

The American-owned crude carrier GALVESTON STAR was, without question, the biggest VLCC currently operating in the Gulf. She had a deadweight of 420,000 tons, and her six cargo tanks were fully laden with 450,000 cubic meters of oil, loaded from the man-made steel island at Mina al Ahmadi off the Kuwaiti coast. She was bound for the Gulf of Mexico, and making 20 knots, just about due east now, through Hormuz.

Her comms room had picked up the warning from the Omani Navy that temporary restrictions were in operation and that there was no clear seaway out to the Arabian Sea at this time. The restricted area ran in a line from Ra's Qabr al Hindi on the northern Omani coast right across to the Iranian shore more than 30 miles away at position 25.23N, 57.05E. No explanation was offered, save for the fact that a LNG carrier had burned out three days ago, and a damaged VLCC was still leaking oil a dozen miles farther east.

Captain Tex Packard was unimpressed. His tanker took almost four miles to come to a halt traveling at this speed. He was late, after a pump problem at al Ahmadi where he had spent almost 34 hours loading, instead of the scheduled 21. And it was hotter than hell. All he wanted to do was "drive this baby the fuck out of this godawful place and get home to the Gulf Coast of the USA," where, incidentally, it was also hotter than hell.

Captain Tex was not just a dyed-in-the-wool, lifelong tanker man. He was a copper-bottomed purist, even among the men who drive these technological atrocities along the world's oceans. His ship was almost a quarter of a mile long, and he knew every inch of her.

He was a great blond-haired bull of a man from the Panhandle plains of northwest Texas, where, he constantly reminded his shipmates, a man could still make a living on the back of a horse, riding the vast cattle ranches. Why, his own family had been doing so for generations, and he was the very first of the Packard cowboys to leave those wide-open spaces for a different kind of wilderness.

At the age of 47, Captain Tex still spoke fondly of the Panhandle city of Lubbock, where he had attended Texas Tech University in the hometown of the legendary rocker Buddy Holly. In fact Buddy had died the year before Tex was born, but the big sea captain spoke of him as if they had been fast friends "back home in Lubbock."

And there were still sweltering evenings in the Iranian Gulf when the distant cries of the mullahs summoning the faithful on the echoing loudspeakers above the mosques mingled out on the calm water with the unmistakable sounds of *Peggy Sue*, *Maybe Baby*, and *Oh Boy!* drifting out from the bridge of the gigantic GALVESTON STAR.

First thing Captain Tex did when he welcomed a new crew was to make sure they could join in the chorus of *Peggy Sue*, and to make equally certain the cook knew precisely how to make the fabled Texas dish of chicken-fried steak (CFS). He showed them how to pulverize the beef to within an inch of its life with a kitchen mallet, then hand-dip it in egg batter, double-dredged in seasoned flour, before dropping it into searing-hot oil in an iron skillet.

"That's CFS, boy," he would rumble in his deep baritone drawl. "Cook that raht, and you'll get a place on the highest honor role in mah home state. Ain't but a few cooks can git it just raht, and I want you to *join* that golden group, hear me?"

There was, however, nothing of the buffoon about Tex Packard. He was a superb navigator, and supremely confident in his own unique ability to handle his city-sized vessel, probably the biggest ship there had ever been, and just about indestructible, with her double hull and watertight compartments. As he frequently reminded his crew, "Fifty years ago the British and French landed an army at Suez with nothing else to do 'cept keep the crude-oil carriers moving."

He knew the history of the world of tankers, understood that normal life, for millions and millions of people, rested entirely on the free and unimpeded passage of these monster ships.

It was thus a surprise to no one when Captain Tex Packard told his Chief Engineer, his Cargo Officer and his Chief Officer he had no intention of stopping for the goddamned Omani Navy, whatever their problem was. "Christ, you could lose their entire country in West Texas... We'll keep steering zero-nine-zero, and make our southerly turn when we're just out of Oman's national water, but not far enough into the Iranian side. Right then we're going straight through. Next stop, the Texas Gulf Coast, and no more bullshit.

"Hold this easterly course," he ordered. "And maintain speed."

The Chief Engineer, Jeb Duross, from south Louisiana, said routinely, "This course is gonna take us clear across the incoming tanker lanes. We'd better keep a good watch and a lot of radar."

"According to the Omanis, 'most every ship's stopped, waiting for clearance," replied the Captain. "So I don't guess we're gonna get a whole lot of tonnage coming across our bows. Anyway, we'll pick 'em up miles away. No problem."

The GALVESTON STAR plowed forward. Twenty knots was a good speed for a VLCC, but she was already late, and at this time Captain Packard was prepared to sacrifice fuel for speed. His ship had a range of over 12,000 miles, and up on the bridge, 100 feet above the surface of the water, Buddy Holly was about to rock the high command of the tanker down toward the Iranian end of Jimmy Ramshawe's Straight Line.

By now there were several "paints" on the radar, showing tankers making some kind of a holding pattern inside the gulf in the northeastern national waters of Oman. The far side of the tanker lanes, incoming, seemed more or less deserted. There was a depth of 180 feet below the keel, and, in clear seas on longitude 56.44E, Captain Packard made a southeasterly turn, selecting a course that would take him five miles north of the stricken Greek tanker, before he turned due south and went for the Line.

Of course, only Admiral Morgan and Lt. Ramshawe were certain of the existence of the regular three-line minefield, the PLT-3-moored sea mines every 500 yards. The laying of mines in the dark is an inexact science, but in general terms, this meant there was a mine in the path of any ship separated by a maximum distance of around 170 yards.

It also meant that if a ship slid by the first one, missing it by, say, 10 yards to starboard, the next one would come up 160 yards to port, and the next two after that 340 yards to port, and 170 to starboard. It was thus possible to miss them altogether, as many ships had. But it was still the maddest game of Russian roulette ever invented, especially for this particular tanker. The giant GALVESTON STAR was 75 yards wide.

Three miles short of the first line, Captain Packard received a formal warning from one of the Omani Navy Corvettes that it was dangerous to proceed. No one was yet admitting there may be a minefield, and the warning thus had no teeth so far as big Tex Packard was concerned. "Screw 'em," he confirmed. "We're outta here."

Up ahead the seas were clear. At least they were on the surface, and the GALVESTON STAR came barreling down the strait in a freshly developed high wind off the Arabian desert, an early harbinger of the evolving southwest monsoon.

This part of the gulf was a wind-convergence zone, where, in the late spring, the northeasters out of the central Chinese desert, which prevail all winter, gave way to the southwesterly winds from Africa. This year they were early. And strong gusty breezes can catch the massive hull of a VLCC and cause a significant leeway.

The GALVESTON STAR was thus sliding infinitesimally east as she stood fair down the strait, plowing through the short surface waves, having completed her long gentle turn toward the south.

In fact, she missed the first of Admiral Zhang's mines by at least 150 yards to starboard. But the good news on Line One was almost certainly going to put her bows awfully close to the PLT-3 moored on Line Two.

On she ran for another 600 yards, still drifting very slightly east, closing the gap between her own course and the murderous one-ton, steel-encased hunk of TNT that bobbed on its wire mooring 12 feet below the surface.

The massive bows of the GALVESTON STAR actually missed it completely, and the wash of the widening hull pushed the mine away on its wire. However, it swung back inward, hard and fast, crashing into the port side of the hull, 300 feet from the point of the bow.

At four minutes past 8 P.M. it detonated with awesome force, blowing the plates apart, right through both layers of the hull, blasting a massive hole in Cargo Tank Four. And Buddy Holly was still singing as the onrushing crude oil blew up in a raging fireball above the ocean.

"Stars appear and shadows a-falling... you can hear my heart a-calling... Oh boy!"

Tex Packard could not believe his eyes. And the 420,000-tonner shuddered in its death throes as her colossal weight began to tear the entire hull apart. It was the biggest shipwreck in history, and it was only four miles from the Greek tanker that had been pouring out oil since Saturday. The GALVESTON STAR was wallowing bang on Jimmy Ramshaw's Straight Line, 12 miles off the coast of Iran.

Captain Packard knew a career-blowing decision when he saw one. And he'd just made it.

"What are you going to do, sir?" asked Jeb Duross, anxiety written all over his face.

"Probably buy a cattle ranch," replied Big Tex, thoughtfully.

"Actually, I meant right now."

"Send out a *MAYDAY!* Radio Oman and Dubai, see if we can salvage any of the cargo, which I doubt. At least not yet, till we can get a couple of big ships out here to start pumping. Meanwhile we just gotta watch the fires. Crude sometimes doesn't burn, but ours is doing just that, and once it gets started, it's likely to go on for a long time."

"Looks like the fire's inside the ship, and that might be real dangerous," said Jeb.

“Sure might. She gets much hotter, we’ll have to abandon. Sure hate to leave her, but this stuff can really burn gets hot enough. I’m not planning to be the hero, least not the dead hero... Have the lifeboats ready, Jeb, and have someone turn off the music, willya?... Just don’t want Buddy singing in a death ship. ’Sides I wanna get mah CDs home to Texas... Buddy wouldn’t wanna be singing to no towelheads.”

All mah life I been a-waiting...tonight there’ll be no hesitatin’... Oh boy!

Midday (local). Fort Meade, Maryland.

Lieutenant Ramshawe had his small office television turned on several minutes early for CNN’s 12 o’clock bulletin, and when he heard the lead item there was no longer any doubt in his or anyone else’s mind.

“We are receiving reports that one of the biggest oil tankers in the world, the four-hundred-twenty-thousand-ton Galveston Star out of the Texas Gulf port of Houston, is currently on fire and breaking up in the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

“The cause of the accident is at present unknown, but the Captain and his crew are believed to be preparing to abandon her. Fires are reported raging over one hundred feet into the skies.

“This is the third major shipping accident in the strait in the past four days, following the inferno of the liquid-gas carrier Global Bronco of Houston, on Friday, and the explosion in the Greek crude carrier Olympus 2004 on Saturday.”

The newscaster ended the report by stating the U.S. Navy would be issuing a statement later in the afternoon, but as yet there was no suggestion that any nation had elected to place sea mines in the strait to endanger world oil-shipping routes.

Right at that moment Jimmy’s phone rang, and he heard the gruff and distinct tones of Admiral Morgan. “Okay, Jimmy, I guess that does it. Go keep your boss up to speed, but keep me personally alerted to any information you get off the overheads.”

The phone went down before Lt. Ramshawe could even answer. And before he could gather his wits, his other phone went, and Jane was on the line, telling him how clever he was, and would he be able to have dinner tonight with her, and her parents, at the embassy.

“You seen the television?” he asked her.

“Darned right I did. I was watching it with my dad. He said immediately the Iranians had mined the area, just as they’d been threatening to do.

“I told him that was my considered opinion, too. Told him I’d suspected something like that since the Bronco went up last Friday... He gave me a real old-fashioned look.”

“I should think he did. But he doesn’t know about the phone call, does he—the one from his private line?”

“No. At least he hasn’t said anything. Anyway, are you coming tonight? He’s got some Aussie sailors coming, yachtsmen, America’s Cup guys. Might be fun.”

“Yup. I’ll be there. ’Bout seven.”

1300. Same day. The Oval Office.

Admiral Morgan recounted the events in the gulf swiftly and with no elaboration.

The President sat impassively, and asked curtly, “Your recommendations?”

“Sir, I have already ordered the CONSTELLATION CVBG south from the Iraqi coast, and the JOHN C. STENNIS Group is closing the strait immediately from the Arabian Sea. Our third Group in the area, the HARRY S TRUMAN’s, should clear Diego Garcia by tomorrow morning and head north. I’ve arranged for the Indian Navy to begin a hunt-and-sweep operation with their Pondicherrys as soon as they can get there. Right now they’re on their way from Bombay, probably be in Hormuz waters by tomorrow morning our time... I had them leave on Sunday.”

“Do you think there could be full-scale hostilities, Admiral? I don’t want to get drawn into an unpopular war with Iran. Dead American sailors don’t play well politically.”

“Sir, this is probably the height of our national interest. Do you have any idea what might happen if the gulf had to be closed off for a month?”

“I cannot say I have given it deep thought, Admiral. But I am much more concerned about sitting in this chair being universally blamed for death, destruction and burned Americans. Because that’s what happens when you start flexing the muscles of big warships.”

“If we don’t start flexing them, sir, the entire world oil supply could go right up the chute. And if the lights went out in the USA, you’d get yourself a very special place in history. Especially if you had refused to act in the Persian Gulf in the face of hostility and threats from Iran and their buddies in Beijing.”

“As usual, Admiral, you have my best interests at heart.” There was an edge of sarcasm in the President’s voice.

“Perhaps not, sir. But I always have the best interests of this nation at heart.”

“Then proceed as you think fit, Admiral. You always do, anyway... Just let me know if I need to make a speech, will you? And perhaps Harcourt should make some kind of diplomatic overtures to the Chinese and the Iranians?”

“Two reasons not to, sir. One, it will alert the entire world to a crisis we may be able to strangle at birth. Two, they’ll just deny everything anyway, and probably be very amused at our concern. ’Specially if they’ve done it, which I already know they have.”

Arnold Morgan did not wait for a reply. He just turned on his heel and left, muttering to himself, “What a lightweight. What a goddamned lightweight. In five years he’s gone from being a damned good president to a self-serving wimp.”

By late afternoon every evening newspaper in the country was speculating about the possibility of a minefield in the Strait of Hormuz. The longtime threat of the Ayatollahs was uppermost in the mind of every defense correspondent in every corner of the media.

Television networks waited with scarcely contained excitement for the statement from the U.S. Navy. But when it came it was stark and noncommittal, precisely the way Arnold Morgan had instructed.

The CNO had declined a press conference and issued his written statement, deliberately late, at 21.30, through the main wire services, carefully avoiding anything that would suggest panic to either the Chinese or the Iranians.

It read: *"The United States Navy has noted the three tanker incidents in the Strait of Hormuz during the last four days. In particular we noted that two of them burned, and one suffered an apparent explosion that released large quantities of oil into the sea. In addition, we noted that all three incidents occurred in a narrow seaway between the countries of Oman and Iran.*

"We have been in contact with our major allies in the area and have agreed to support them in their efforts to ascertain the causes of these incidents, and to discover whether there might be a link between them.

"However, it is too early to arrive at any conclusions. We expect at least one of our aircraft carriers and her escorts to arrive on station in the strait in the next 24 hours. Another U.S. CVBG is currently steaming toward the strait from the Arabian Sea.

"In company with several other industrial nations, we are extremely concerned to ensure the continued free passage of the world's fuel tankers through the strait both into, and out of, the Gulf of Iran.

"We have assured our allies of our continued assistance, should it become necessary to rectify any wrongdoing by any nation in these peaceful trading waters upon which so many countries depend."

It was signed, *"Admiral Alan Dixon, Chief of United States Naval Operations."*

It was good, but not good enough. Four East Coast tabloid dailies were already setting headlines like: MINEFIELD TERROR IN THE GULF... TANKERS BLOWN UP IN GULF MINEFIELD. IRAN'S MINES BLAST U.S. TANKERS.

All through the evening the television networks developed their stories, bringing in experts to discourse on the dangers in that part of the Middle East; recounting Iranian threats over the years; debating the possible involvement of China; discussing the consequences of an oil blockade.

By midnight, the President had called an emergency cabinet meeting in President Reagan's old Situation Room in the West Wing. And there the major brains in the Administration attempted to walk the tightrope between being prepared militarily and creating mass panic at the gas pumps.

Arnold Morgan, whose voice would be heard the loudest, since he had been effectively on the case since Friday, was, uncharacteristically, urging caution. He wanted the CVBG in the strait to protect and assist the Indian Navy's minesweepers. However, he saw no real advantage in making overt threats to either the Iranian or Chinese navies, save to make them absolutely aware that if any of their warships attempted to interfere, they would be sunk forthwith by U.S. Naval firepower.

As far as the National Security Adviser was concerned, the U.S. Navy had the matter well in hand. And with the strait now well and truly off-limits to all world shipping, there seemed little point in looking for trouble until the Indians' Pondicherrys had begun work clearing the mines. In order to clear a three-mile-wide safe passage on the Omani side, Admiral Morgan estimated they might have

to sweep 40 of them, which might take several days beginning Tuesday night (local time).

Minesweeping was a thoroughly dangerous business, and it had to be conducted and executed with extreme care. The President wanted to know how it was done, and Arnold Morgan suggested that Admiral Dixon enlighten everyone.

"Sir," said the CNO, "when you locate the mine, it's going to be ten or twelve feet below the surface, attached by its cable to a mooring on the floor of the ocean. Basically it's buoyant, and it's trying to float up to the surface, but is held down by its own cable.

"Well, you sweep them by towing cutting cables from the minesweeper, pulled down to the right depth and out from the side by an otter board. When the sweeper's cable snags a mine's mooring line, it keeps moving until both cable and line are taut. Then the cutter severs the line, allowing the mine to float to the surface. There it can be detonated by small-arms fire from a safe distance. They're easy when they're on the surface, but of course impossible when you can't see them. However many times you've done it, you're always astounded by the size of the explosion."

"Hey, that's pretty neat," said the President.

"And pretty time-consuming," replied the Admiral.

"How many sweepers are the Indians bringing?"

"Six," replied Admiral Morgan. "That'll help speed things up."

"Cost?" asked the Secretary of Defense, Bob MacPherson, predictably.

"I told the Indian Navy Chief that we would arrange for all affected nations to share the costs. Between us, the U.K., the Japanese, Germans, France and some of the Middle East exporters, it'll come out as peanuts."

"No problem," said MacPherson.

"Look, Arnold," said the President, using his adviser's first name for the first time in months, "I know you want to play this down right now. But I'm not sure we shouldn't go straight into Beijing and demand to know if they have played any part in this whatsoever."

"Sir, they will simply deny any knowledge, whatever we say... and that brings me to a very serious point."

"It does?"

"Yessir. From our observations it looks very much as if the mines were transported to Iran in Chinese warships. And now we have a situation where, for the next couple of weeks, the Iranians are going to get pretty rich. And to an extent so are the Chinese. They seem to have a way through the minefield, in Iranian national waters, and the price of oil futures is probably going to forty dollars a barrel for West Texas Intermediate on NYMEX and the same for Brent Crude on the London market.

"However, I completely fail to see what the Chinese are doing. How could it possibly be worth it?"

"Maybe they just want to show us they can be real world players in the oil game with their new Kazakhstan pipeline," offered Harcourt Travis.

"Maybe," replied Arnold Morgan. "But that's a hell of a dangerous card to play for such a slim moral victory. Christ, for all they know, we might get seriously pissed off with 'em. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

“Well, Admiral, perhaps the political minds at the table can offer something that may have escaped you?”

“Beats me, sir,” said Harcourt.

“All I know is this,” said the National Security Adviser. “The Chinese are very devious, very patient and utterly insincere when it suits them. What they are not is very stupid. And, so far, everything in the Strait of Hormuz is plain stupid. What the hell are they doing getting mixed up in something like this?”

“I guess they have their reasons,” said the President. “But even more worrisome is what the hell are the Iranians playing at? I know they believe the Gulf of Iran is, by its very name, theirs by rights, and that the West has no real business in there at all. But they also know that if they attempt a blockade of the gulf, we’ll dismantle it, and probably them with it. They’re not stupid, so what are they doing?”

“Six weeks ago, I could not have answered that question, sir,” said Arnold Morgan. “But things are coming to light. And again we are seeing a new rise in Muslim fundamentalism. Again the balance of political opinion is swaying against the West, and every damn time that happens you get a new militant resurgence in Iran. All those pictures we got from Tehran a month ago... the street riots... the new calls for elections. They were all shouting for the same thing—total separation from the West, the right to their own oil, the right to make the gulf private...the enduring vision of Islamic world domination.

“It’s a phase, but it’s a problem. Meanwhile, the present blockade of the Iranian Gulf is a giant-sized PITA... pain-in-the-ass, that is. We gotta get it cleared or we’re looking at world economic chaos.”

**Tuesday morning. May 1.
PLAN HQ. Beijing.**

Admiral Zhang Yushu had just walked into his new office, where his Navy C-in-C, Admiral Zu Jicai, was already waiting.

“And what do the satellites tell us today?” he asked.

“Excellent news all around, Yushu. Two American CVBGs are closing the strait. The HARRY TRUMAN is plainly preparing to leave Diego Garcia today, and the U.S. carrier JOHN F. KENNEDY is under way, heading west out of Pearl Harbor.”

“That leaves just the RONALD REAGAN Group still in San Diego, correct?”

“Yessir, and all the signs are that she is accelerating her overhaul, planning to leave in the next few weeks. There is truly the most thunderous commotion in the United States—every newspaper, every television network. They’re becoming hysterical about this threat to their national interest in the Strait of Hormuz.”

“Perhaps we should offer to sell them some very fine Russian oil, direct from our refinery in Iran... very cheap... fifty dollars a barrel... ha ha ha!”

“Yushu, you are a hard man. Although I admit the prospect has great appeal, I would counsel silence. Say nothing. Do nothing. See nothing.”

“Meanwhile, to more important matters, Jicai. Are these military estimates accurate? We still have sea-lift capacity for only twelve thousand troops? And two hundred fifty main battle tanks?”

“Yessir. But the turnaround time for our amphibians will be short.”

“Are the ships on their way back from the Indian Ocean?”

“Yessir.”

“Excellent. That’s the three guided-missile frigates, plus two Kilos?”

“Correct. They’re all on their way home, sir. And as you know, the destroyer is making its way back toward Bandar Abbas, just as a warning to the USA... that we don’t want them to attack our friends in Iran, under any circumstances.”

“Ah, but it’s a mission well achieved. Eh, my Jicai?”

“In the ancient tradition of the great Admiral Zheng He, sir. Just as you always dreamed.”

“And such a dream, my Jicai. Remember the words we all learned, the words written by the immortal Admiral five hundred years ago... *And we have set eyes on Barbarian regions far away... while our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds, day and night, continued their course as rapidly as a star, traversing those savage waves...*”

Zhang paused for just a moment. And then he said quietly, “That’s our tradition...and it’s only been dormant. Not dead. We will rise to rule those seas again.”

**0955 (local). Tuesday, May 1.
The International Petroleum Exchange.
London, England.**

No day in the entire 26-year history of Europe’s principal oil futures trading floor had ever been awaited with more dread, trepidation and alarm. Here in the shadow of the Tower of London, bounded by streets with echoing names like Thomas More, hard by the waters of historic St. Katherine’s Dock, the industrial world’s fate hung in the balance.

Five hours before New York’s NYMEX oil trading gets under way on Wall Street, the London Exchange opens for business, setting the world’s pricing benchmark for the day, maybe the month. The commodity is Brent Crude Futures, and the price per barrel of North Sea oil is the one upon which the major international traders and investors are prepared to speculate.

If the traders think there’s likely to be a glut of oil in the foreseeable future, the price may go below \$15, trading narrowly, varying by just a few cents either way. Any sign of a shortage, and the price may rise to around \$30. A serious shortage can cause this swerving, volatile market to lose all sense of caution. When Iraq invaded Kuwait back in 1990, everyone thought the roof had caved in, and on one lunatic day at the International Petroleum Exchange (IPE), Brent Crude hit \$70 a barrel.

Today the atmosphere was fraught. Captain Tex Packard’s ship was still on fire in the strait, and in London nervous representatives of the big oil producers, refiners, shippers, distributors and marketers mingled with other major users. Brokers representing the power generators, airlines, truck fleet operators, chemical companies and even supermarkets were on tenterhooks. The world’s most eminent money men from houses like Morgan Stanley were massed along

with everyone else on the packed hexagonal-shaped trading floor, with its tiered pits, video surveillance and colossal security.

The previous night, Brent Crude had closed at \$28 a barrel, up three bucks. And West Texas Intermediate in New York was tagged at a few cents below. Today cell phones were running up massive bills connecting the U.S. traders with London, long before the opening bell at NYMEX. What mattered right now was the opening bell in London, and the traders, wearing their identifying colored jackets, red, yellow, green or blue, thronged above the pits as the clock ticked on to 10 o'clock.

Bang on time it rang, signaling the floor was open for business, trading at first in natural-gas futures, the prices for which would explode before this day was done.

One minute went by, and then the clock hit 10:02 and the second opening bell rang sharp and loud, for the initial trades of Brent Crude Futures, the world pricing benchmark; at which point, on this day, the entire system of international oil commodity trading went berserk.

Pandemonium broke out as buyers yelled "PLUS TWO... PLUS TWO!" But these weren't cents, as in the regular cries of "*BRENT PLUS TWO!*" These were whole dollars. Thirty, then \$32, then \$35, then \$40. Bedrock prices for a barrel of oil had jumped 33 percent in nine minutes.

"Mother of God!" breathed the broker for Shell. And the trader for a New York Bank roared "PLUS FIVE... PLUS FIVE FOR 500,000..." Which pegged the price of Brent Crude Futures at an astounding \$45 a barrel.

Dealers left behind in the stampede for the best prices surged forward as a rumor swept the pits that the price was going to \$70. Brokers for the big finance houses huddled together, uncertain whether to chase the price up further, or whether to wait for the retreat some thought might not come. At least not on this day.

Snatches of conversation fired the desperate atmosphere. Yelling, classless British voices from London, interspersed with louder American tones... "*Jesus H. Christ! This can't last... Bullshit it can't... they've just closed the fucking Gulf of Iran... It's only three ships, for chrissakes! It doesn't matter a flying fuck if it's only one... right here we're talking fucking minefields! That's one step from global war... the U.S. Navy's moving THREE aircraft carriers into the strait... you think this market's fake? Forget it. There might be no more oil out of the gulf for six months.*"

Five minutes later the price hit \$50 when a Rotterdam trader bid on a precious cargo of Shell crude currently on its way to Scandinavia. For a brief four minutes the price hung and then faltered at around \$50. Then a rumor swept the floor that a major fleet of minesweepers from the Indian Navy was under escort moving up the Arabian Sea to the strait.

The price of Brent Crude Futures hit \$55 in 42 seconds. And by now it was impossible to hear anything above the thunder of the pits as the traders piled in, bellowing bids for any available crude oil already free of the confines of the Gulf of Iran. On a normal trading day, 50 million barrels changes hands in this room. In today's uproar, almost 30 million were traded in the first 45 minutes. There was only one thing worse than paying through the nose for oil, and that was not having any.

“PLUS TWO... PLUS FOUR... PLUS WHATEVER IT TAKES.”

By 11 o'clock that morning the price of world fuel oil had doubled. By the close of trade it stood at \$72. Up over 150 percent. No one in the International Petroleum Exchange had ever seen anything like it. In New York, West Texas Intermediate had *opened* at \$60 a barrel. Gas oil futures had gone through the roof, and Natural Gas futures, thanks to the exploded GLOBAL BRONCO, were even higher.

**1630 (local). Tuesday, May 1.
The White House.**

Admiral Morgan stared at the pile of data before him. The minesweepers were in action in Hormuz, and there was no doubt the field was composed entirely of Russian-made PLT-3s. So far as the Indian commanding officers were concerned, they were looking at three lines, less than half a mile apart. Inshore on the Omani side, they were in deep water, and it looked as though the same three lines stretched clean across the strait to the Iranians' Sunburn missile site. Lieutenant Ramshawe had thus far been correct in all of his assumptions.

But now the tasks facing Fort Meade were different. Question One was Where is China now deploying the warships? The Kilos appeared to have disappeared from the face of the earth, but the two frigates that had been flying the national flag of Iran had been picked up by the overheads traveling toward China's Burmese base in the Bassein River. The Shantou had already left there and was making her way toward the Malacca Strait. But of China's big Sovremenny destroyer there was no sign.

Quite frankly, the Chinese completely baffled the President's National Security Adviser. For a start, he had no idea what they hoped to achieve by providing the hardware for the Ayatollahs to mine the Strait of Hormuz. Nonetheless they had plainly done it, and the Western world along with Japan and Taiwan, and to an extent South Korea, was presently in deep trouble. The world would run out of oil in a matter of weeks if the Gulf of Iran was not opened up very quickly.

The Chinese obviously thought they were immune to this chaos, and in Arnold Morgan's opinion they must be taught a very sharp lesson. It might be possible to tweak and irritate the United States, but when you start tampering with the national interest of the world's one superpower, you might very well end up in deadly serious trouble. Nonetheless Admiral Morgan was determined not to overreact until he could ascertain what the men in Beijing were doing.

Not so the President. He went into a complete dither as world oil prices went into some kind of meltdown, or rather a meltup. Constantly on the line to his Energy Secretary, Jack Smith, he kept asking, over and over, "But what's this going to mean for the average American at the gas pump?"

As early as midafternoon, answers were coming in fast and furious. And they were all the same. Up, up, and up again, as the big gas-station chains found themselves paying fortunes for every barrel of crude oil on either side of the Atlantic. West Texas Intermediate looked set to close even higher than Brent Crude Futures. And still Big Tex Packard's mighty tanker blazed alone out in the

strait, lighting up the waters. When the gusting wind swung back around to the northeast, it sent a gigantic black oil cloud into the night skies above Arabia.

In a week when gas prices could very easily hit three dollars a gallon at the pump, or even three-fifty, President Clarke faced rampaging inflation on a scale that would send the Federal Reserve into shock. Every commodity and product in the USA was going to suffer because of drastic increases in transport costs. Taxis, buses, diesel freight trains, interstate trucks, airlines, especially airlines, anything that moved was going to be hit.

And that was not the worst of it. President Clarke had a vision of the ultimate national uproar. The United States starting to run out of oil, with no time to tap its own deep reserves. High gas prices were one thing. No gas at any price was entirely another. If the country ground to a halt, his name would surely be remembered as one of the most ineffective Presidents in the entire history of the nation. And what the hell was his oh-so-brilliant National Security Adviser doing about it? As far as he could see, a big fat zero.

He picked up his phone and asked a secretary to have Admiral Morgan report to him instantly. Two minutes later, Arnold came growling in through the open door to the Oval Office.

“You wanted me, sir?”

“Admiral, what the hell are we doing about this standoff in the gulf?”

“Sir, we got a minefield across the Strait of Hormuz, as I explained. The gulf is now shut. The Iranians are saying nothing, admitting nothing and they sure as hell aren’t about to clear it. Neither are their buddies in Beijing.

“That means we have to clear the minefield ourselves, and the Indian Navy, working on our behalf, began that process several hours ago. They have six minesweepers, under our protection, locating and exploding the mines. But it’s slow, and there’s a lot of them. I understand they have attended to three so far, and my guess is forty still to go, in order to secure safe passage for essentially defenseless tankers. There’s already an environmental nightmare of spilled oil in the strait.”

“Well, what are we doing about the goddamned Iranians? That’s your area, Arnold.”

“Sir, you want me to declare war on ’em? Or at least advise you to do so?”

“I don’t know, Arnold.” The President’s voice was rising. “I just know this could be a major national crisis. And we seem powerless.”

“Well, we’re not that, sir. However, I do not want to make any kind of extravagant move until we clear the mines, quietly, and with as little rancor as possible. A hot war raging around the minesweepers would clearly be absurd. However, when the field is cleared, I’ll be happy to station a lot of muscle in the strait and warn both Iran and China that one false move means we’ll sink ’em.”

“Well, why not issue that warning right now?”

“I just did, sir. Three hours ago.”

“You told ’em we’d sink them?”

“Sir, I just sent a joint communiqué to Tehran and Beijing informing them of our anger at their conduct, and our intention to eliminate any warship from any nation that tries to interfere with the removal of the sea mines.”

“And what about the future, Arnold? The future. That’s what my job is all about. What about the damned future? How do we know the Chinese might not mastermind this kind of stunt again?”

“Sir, as you know, they have a very large petrochemical and oil refinery on the southern Iranian coast. And it’s tapped right into the heart of the oil fields of Kazakhstan. I was proposing to recommend its elimination.”

“It’s WHAT?”

“*Destruction*, sir. A better word altogether. I agree.”

“You mean bomb it?”

“Sir. Please? Let’s not be crude, like the oil.”

“Well, what are you saying?”

“I’m proposing an insertion of Special Forces, to put that refinery out of action forever.”

“You mean the SEALs?”

“Yessir.”

“Can we get them in? And out again?”

“Sure we can. We can do anything.”

“But surely everyone will know it’s us?”

“Same as we know who mined the gulf. But no one’s saying anything, at least not in a confrontational way. We make no accusations, at least not publicly. They make no admissions. We just do what we do.”

“But surely the goddamned Chinese would go bananas if we blew up their refinery?”

“Nossir. They’d feel like going bananas. But they’d get a very quiet message from us... *You guys want to start fucking around with America’s oil supplies? We’ll show you how to REALLY fuck around.*”

“Arnold, your brutality occasionally takes my breath away. But I like it. Makes me feel safe in this big chair.”

“My job, sir, is to make every American feel safe, no matter how big or small his or her chair may be.”

“Should I now conclude this strategy meeting?”

“Mr. President, this is not strategy. This is direct action. Clear the strait. Protect the sweepers. And then guard the strait with all the menace we can. By that I mean four CVBGs on station between the area inside the gulf, and our base on Diego Garcia. Any foreign warship moves in that area without our express permission, that warship’s history.”

“Arnold, please go ahead as you think fit.”

“That’s not quite all, sir.”

“It’s not? What else? You planning to conquer Russia or something?”

“No, sir. But I am distressed by China’s plain and obvious Naval expansion. It’s no secret they want a blue-water navy for the first time in more than five hundred years. And it’s no secret they are expanding at a rapid and apparently sustainable rate. In the past few years they’ve created a new submarine fleet. They’ve bought two aircraft carriers, three Russian destroyers and a ton of hardware from the old Soviet missile outfits. They’re reaching out, sir. And we really don’t like it.”

“We don’t?”

“Sir, we are staring a major problem bang in the face. China is on the move. They have cozied up to us for a lot of years. And they’ll go on doing so for as long as it suits them. But when they feel they’re good and ready to challenge us, to dominate the East and to swing the balance of power their way... that’s when you’ll see the real face of China. Trust me.”

“Well, what do you plan to do about that?”

“I plan to stop that global expansion dead in its tracks. I want that damned great Navy of theirs back in the China Seas.”

“But how do we do that without starting a shooting war?”

“Sir, how do we keep our own global presence? How do we keep our own Navy roaming the world’s oceans making sure no one steps out of line? Right here the world enjoys *Pax Americana*. Just as it once enjoyed *Pax Romana*. That was peace on the terms of the Romans. Now it’s peace on the terms of the Americans.

“And we do it by ensuring we have a succession of U.S. bases all over the place...in the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, in the Japanese Islands, with our buddies from London in the Atlantic. That’s the only way. A chain of supplies and allies. That’s what China does not have. Yet. Except for one place. Burma.”

“You mean that new base of theirs in the swamps west of Rangoon?”

“That’s the one, sir. The one on the island in the Bassein River. It’s huge. Massive facilities for servicing and refueling warships of all sizes, including submarines. The Chinese once dominated the entire Indian Ocean and my instinct is they want to do so again, because that would give ’em control of the main eastbound oil route through the Malacca Strait. Right now that narrow, shallow freeway, with its goddamned granite bottom, is just too far from China to allow them any influence over its tanker traffic.”

“Well, how do you propose to discourage them from using their new Burmese base?”

Arnold Morgan smiled. “Not too hasty right now, sir. We got bigger problems. But if you’ve got any shares in China’s Naval operation on Haing Gyi Island in the Bassein River... sell.”

Chapter 4

020330MAY07. USS SHARK. The Indian Ocean. Speed 30. Depth 400.

By the start of the final half hour of the midnight watch, Lt. Commander Headley was already mobile, moving quietly through the 30-year-old, 5,000-ton nuclear boat, a half hour before he was due to take over the control room from Commander Reid.

He had already been down to the main propulsion room where Lt. Commander Paul Flynn was watching a very minor seal leak on the main shaft. Right now the pumps were operating efficiently and dealing with the incoming fine spray with relative ease.

“Damn thing wouldn’t want to get any worse, though,” said the dark-haired engineering officer from south Boston. “Still, the rest of the stuff’s looking good—reactor’s smooth, shaft’s steady. At twenty-nine knots she feels like she’s cruisin’. No problems, sir.”

Dan Headley made his way up to the Navigation Officer’s corner of the ops room. He had only just met young Lt. Shawn Pearson, but he knew he had been rescued with the crew of SEAWOLF when that massive nuclear attack boat had been lost the previous year in the South China Sea.

“Hi, Shawn,” he said, leaning on the big table and staring down at the chart. “What are we? ’Bout seven hundred nor’nor-west of DG?”

“Accurate, sir. Accurate. I like that in an XO... gives me confidence... I just sent for coffee. Want some, sir?”

The Lieutenant Commander had immediately liked Shawn Pearson because he was sharp, amusing and never lacked respect for more senior officers. Whatever his part had been in the SEAWOLF debacle, he had been highly decorated for it—an honor Dan Headley assumed must have been well deserved.

“Good idea, Lieutenant,” he said. “Keep me awake for the next four hours.”

“Right now I have us five degrees north of the equator, on line of longitude six-five-zero-zero. As a matter of fact, we’re running fast beneath about a zillion square miles of absolutely nothing. Maybe five hundred miles west of the Maldives, still way short of the most southerly latitude of the Indian Continent... but we’re gettin’ there, sir.”

“Any ships around?”

“No, sir. Just our immediate escort, the frigate VANDEGRIFT. She’s steaming about three miles off our starboard beam, sir, same course... three-five-two. We’re just about five miles off the carrier’s port bow, and she’s got a destroyer off each beam—MASON to port, HOWARD to starboard.”

“How about CHEYENNE?”

“She’s way off the carrier’s starboard bow, maybe four miles east of us. Same depth.”

Dan Headley sipped his coffee. “Mind if I take this with me?” he asked companionably.

“Not at all, sir. It’ll keep you sharp, while I’m sleeping gently.”

“Well, remember you’ve still got fifteen to go. So long, Lieutenant... don’t get us lost now.”

“Nossir. I am right on top of this.”

And as he wandered toward the control room, Dan Headley thought again of the reality of the situation—this huge jet-black steel tube, forging north through the Indian Ocean, hundreds of feet below the surface, in complete secret, a lethal weapon of war, terminally deadly to any opponent. The *esprit de corps* in an attack submarine was like no other feeling in any other ship. He felt that he and Shawn Pearson were somehow friends for life, after an acquaintance of just a few hours.

U.S. Navy submarines do that. They fling people together, causing them to see only the best points in one another.

Dan Headley was proud to serve on this old ship, and so far he had been impressed with every one of his crew. He especially liked the Chief of the Boat, a big blond former center fielder from the University of Georgia, Drew Fisher. The

Master Chief Petty Officer had dropped out of college to try his luck at professional baseball, but failed to make it through a chronic ankle injury.

He had ended up with no university degree, no money, and no career, in or out of sports. "Sir, I didn't even have a bat," he had told Dan Headley. "So I just joined the Navy, and kept right on going."

Drew had risen steadily up through the ranks, and in Lt. Commander Headley's opinion was not finished yet. It was widely rumored that the former Georgia Bulldogs left-hander was on the verge of accepting a commission, and that a full command might not be that far away.

Drew was only 36 years old, and in addition to his onerous duties on board, he had pushed himself through course after course, gaining qualifications in navigation, weapons, hydrology, electronics, marine engineering. Right now he was working on combat systems and spent a lot of time with Lt. Commander Jack Cressend from New Orleans, SHARK's CS Officer.

In fact the two men were together outside the control room directly up ahead of Dan, and both men greeted him cheerfully. The Master Chief, like Dan, was early for his watch and had already ascertained that SHARK's new XO was some kind of an expert on thoroughbred horses. Right now, in the small hours of the morning, running hard above the towering underwater mountains of the Mid-Indian Ridge, he wanted to know precisely which colt was going to win the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs this Saturday.

Four hours ago Dan Headley had been noncommittal on the big field, four of which in his opinion held live chances. This was not good enough for Drew, who wanted heavy inside information in fine detail, so he asked the SHARK's second-in-command again.

"Come on, sir. Give me your real, true selection."

"Well, Drew. My daddy raised one of the runners from a foal, big gray colt named White Rajah, trained in New York for Mr. Phipps."

"Can he run?"

"Course he can run. Otherwise he wouldn't be entered for the Derby, would he?"

"What did he win?"

"Three races as a two-year-old. Got beat by a nose in the Hopeful at Saratoga. But he improved over the winter. They sent him down to South Carolina for a spell, then he came out and damned nearly won the Florida Derby off a bad draw."

"That his last race?"

"Hell, no. He came back to New York, won the Wood Memorial over nine furlongs. That's the best Derby trial in my view: been won by some of the greats, Count Fleet, Assault, Native Dancer, Nashua, Bold Ruler, Damascus, Seattle Slew. The real big guns of the horse game. Christ, Secretariat got beat in it before his Triple Crown."

"Jeez, sir. You really know that horse stuff, right?"

"Guess so. It's in my blood. My family been raisin' racers out in the bluegrass for about five generations."

"Ah, but you still ain't told me one bit of real sensitive information about White Rajah."

"Oh, that's easy," replied Lt. Commander Headley. "His granddaddy damned near bit my right arm off when I was a kid. Vicious sonofabitch."

“Seriously? Jeez, I didn’t know thoroughbred horses were savage.”

“This particular bloodline is very difficult. Got a lot of temperament in there.”

“Then why do people breed to it?”

“Because the suckers can run, that’s why. And a lot of ’em can *really* run. Like the Rajah.”

“Well that settles it. I’m bettin’ him.”

“You think they got an OTB in the Arabian Sea?”

“Hell, I forgot about that... Do you think I could borrow the satellite link to San Diego?”

“Oh, sure. We’re heading for the front line, in the middle of a world oil crisis, and our overhead link is somehow out of action because the Chief of the Boat is trying to back White Rajah in the Kentucky Derby.”

“Shit, it’s a cruel world, sir.”

“Crueler if he wins, Chief... and you’re not on.”

All three men laughed. There was no doubt. Lieutenant Commander Headley was already extremely well liked, and now he strolled into the control room, wished the commanding officer “Good morning,” and added, “Ready to take over whenever you say, sir.”

Commander Reid looked at his watch. “Seven more minutes, XO. I like to serve a full four hours.”

“Fine, sir. I’ll be right here. No change in the satellite contact, sir? Zero six hundred as scheduled?”

“As scheduled, XO. That’s the way I like it.”

Dan Headley continued to familiarize himself with the control room, which was smaller than he was used to. His last tour had been, fortuitously, on the USS KENTUCKY, one of the huge Ohio-Class Trident strategic missile submarines. And he had been under the impression he might be awarded a full command on one of those 19,000-ton nuclear giants. But, quite suddenly, he had been posted to the USS SHARK, on positively her final tour of duty, to assist Commander Reid, on his last tour of duty. Dan assumed this was because of the rising unrest in the Iranian Gulf area, and there was plainly some concern about the mental steadfastness of the veteran CO.

Thus far Dan had found Commander Reid to be reserved, polite, a little rigid in his thoughts for a submarine commander. And punctilious in the extreme. But he could work with that. So long as they did not come under serious pressure.

At 0400 precisely, Commander Reid handed over the control room. “You have the ship, XO,” he said formally.

“Aye, sir. I have the ship.”

Lt. Commander Headley checked SHARK’s speed, course and position. He checked with comms the 0600 satellite contact, and ordered, “Maintain speed twenty-nine, depth four hundred. Course three-five-two.” Then he picked up his telephone and checked in with the propulsion engineer.

The leak on the shaft was no worse. The pumps still were coping easily and the big Westinghouse PWR was running sweetly. The sonar room was quiet. Lieutenant Commander Josh Gandy reported no new contacts of any kind, not that this was likely at such speed.

All through the night, they ran north toward the Arabian Sea, until dawn began to break over the eastern waters, way off their starboard beam. Lieutenant Commander Headley ordered them to periscope depth and accessed the satellite. There was no change in their orders... *Proceed to the eastern waters of the Strait of Hormuz in company with the aircraft carrier HARRY S TRUMAN. Then replace on station the JOHN C. STENNIS Group when it clears the area and runs back south to Diego Garcia.*

Both Lt. Commander Josh Gandy and Master Chief Fisher were with the XO when he checked the orders.

“Sorry, Chief,” Dan muttered. “Nothing from OTB. Guess the Rajah’s gonna run without your money to handicap him.”

That was the last joke of the watch, and the rest of it passed slowly, as did the next two days. By 0400 on Friday morning, May 4, the Shark was almost at the gateway to the Gulf of Oman, which leads to the narrow waters of Hormuz. They had crossed the 24-degree northern line of latitude and were currently running 100 feet below the surface with another 250 feet of water under the keel. It would be light in a couple of hours, and, presumably, with the gulf closed, except for Iranian ships and very occasionally Chinese, the seas would be empty, with an inbound queue of empty tankers way over to the west.

1730 (local time). Thursday, May 3. Fort Meade, Maryland.

The first night pictures from the overheads that passed over the Arabian Sea, and southern Iran, arrived on Lt. Ramshawe’s desk from late on the previous afternoon. Unsurprisingly they were packed with information, starting with a myriad of shots showing the Indian Navy’s Pondicherrys still working across the line of the minefield. They were making slow progress, just five knots with long GKT-2 contact sweeps, still with their 5,600-ton landing ship MAGAR, which was acting as “mother ship” to all six of them.

An Indian Navy tanker was also in attendance, plus two 6,700-ton Delhi-Class guided-missile destroyers, built in Bombay, and sent on by Admiral Kumar to guard his precious Pondicherrys. Warships from the CONSTELLATION Carrier Battle Group were in the area, patrolling somewhat menacingly along the line of the minefield inside the strait.

Out on the outside edge of the line, U.S. frigates rotated patrols, under orders from the carrier JOHN C. STENNIS, which was calling the shots from 10 miles astern of the picket line. No six ships were ever more thoroughly guarded than those six Pondicherrys, and they swept the line assiduously, trying to free up an area three to five miles wide to open up the seaway on the Omani side to the world’s oil tankers.

And every few hours, the waters of the strait erupted to a shuddering explosion, as they located, cut and blew one of the PLT-3 Russian-built mines. More than 11,000 miles away, Lieutenant Ramshawe studied the strange unfolding scene, making detailed notes, writing up his reports, blowing up photographs, extracting

details, laying it all out for the thoroughly discredited Admiral Borden, who now had a great deal in common with Commander Tex Packard, careerwise.

He put copies on the network to the Pentagon, attention CNO. Other copies were made for electronic transfer to Pacific Fleet Command in San Diego, from where they were scanned via satellite to Pearl Harbor and then Diego Garcia. By private, secure telephone, Jimmy Ramshawe kept Arnold Morgan up to speed on every possible development. So far, to the satisfaction of both men, the Iranians had not dared send so much as a secondhand felucca into the waters beyond Bandar Abbas.

It was 1830 when two grainy, poor-quality satellite pictures of the inshore waters of southeastern Iran suddenly caught the eagle eye of Jimmy Ramshawe, because there, like a ghost ship in the fog, was the unmistakable outline of some kind of warship.

He reached for his glass and peered at the image. He could see a little more, but not enough. The ship was running north toward the coast of Iran in 300 feet of water. According to the grid, the ship had just crossed 25.10N and was thus 60-odd miles short of the minefield Line. The lines of latitude suggested it was moving slowly, just seven miles in the half hour between the two images. Jimmy hit a button, summoning a staff member from the developing room, and requesting an immediate blowup of the top left-hand corner of the first green-tinted night photograph.

When it came back, 12 minutes later, the quality was not better, just bigger, and again Lt. Ramshawe peered through his magnifying glass. He could tell from the forward and aft guns the scale of the ship, which he calculated was in excess of 7,000 tons. If it was that big, it was a destroyer, and if it was a destroyer, the range of countries that might own it was relatively small. It wasn't American because he knew precisely where all the U.S. destroyers were in the area. It wasn't British, and it certainly wasn't Russian. The Iranians did not own a destroyer, nor did the Egyptians, nor the Omanis. The Indians had two working in the area, and five more Russian-built Rajput Class were all accounted for.

Could it possibly be the Chinese Sovremenny, the mine-laying HANGZHOU, now returning for whatever reason to Bandar Abbas? Jimmy Ramshawe looked again, pulled up the Sovremenny pattern on his computer. The helicopter was in the right position for a start. He could see that. It was parked way forward, and higher than the aft deck, right above the ASW mortars. He could also make out the distinctive gap between the fire control front dome (F-Band) and the air-search radar top plate.

"If I'm not very much mistaken," muttered Jimmy, "the bloody Chinks are back, and the bloody HANGZHOU is creeping up the coast toward the gap in the minefield... I wonder what the hell their game is?"

He checked the pattern over and over. The quad launchers for the Sunburn missiles, the two aft-mounted Gadfly surface-to-air launchers. All in the right places. This was her, no doubt about that, the most capable warship in China's new Blue-Water Fleet, HANGZHOU, built brand-new in the cold Baltic, North Yard, Saint Petersburg. And here she was again, in much warmer waters, returning to the scene of her plain and obvious mine-laying crimes.

Lieutenant Jimmy Ramshawe did not like it. This was a heavily armed warship that would make a fair match for anyone. He could not see the point of talking to Admiral Borden, who would probably remind him of her right to be in Iran's waters, if that was okay with Iran.

But it was not okay with Jimmy Ramshawe. *Bloody oath, it wasn't.* And he picked up the secure line to Admiral Morgan in the White House.

"How sure are you, Lieutenant?"

"Certain, sir. This is the HANGZHOU, and no bloody error. Looks like she's headed back to Bandar Abbas."

Arnold Morgan was, for a change, hesitant. He had already ensured that the U.S. Navy had issued a formal warning to all countries not to interfere with the minesweeping, but he had not been prepared for the sudden arrival of the most important warship in the Chinese Navy, the one that had helped lay the mines in the first place.

"When do we get new pictures, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Probably in three hours, sir."

"God knows where she'll be by then. She's fast, and she's dangerous. Leave it with me. And don't forget to get a decent report in to your boss."

The President's National Security Adviser was concerned. And he paced his office, pondering the intent of the Commanding Officer of the HANGZHOU. If she was there merely as an observer, the United States might have to put up with that. But she was so big and powerful, she would simply have to be warned off while the Pondicherrys were working.

Arnold Morgan knew the two Admirals commanding the CONSTELLATION and JOHN C. STENNIS Groups would be flying off their decks F-14 Tomcats, and the FA-18E Super Hornets. That's what they did on patrol. That's what they were there for, to intimidate any enemy. And these supersonic strike fighters found no difficulty in doing that.

The Admiral had not yet asked for details, but he was certain the Tomcats would be making their presence felt. What the Navy did not need was a large Chinese warship prowling around in those waters with its massive anti-aircraft capability—the two aft-mounted SA-N-7 Gadfly SAMs. Not to mention its two twin 130mm guns, and its four 30mm/65 AK 630 guns—the ones that fire a withering 3,000 rounds a minute.

No. The U.S. Navy and its fliers could not put up with that. Particularly since the HANGZHOU also sported two twin heavyweight 533mm torpedo tubes, right below the fire-control radars for the Gadfly missiles. She was also equipped with a strong antisubmarine capability, two 6-barrel RNU 1,000 ASW mortars. Her principal surface-to-surface weapon was the SS-N-22 Sunburn (Moskit 3M-80E), a supersonic Raduga, fired from port/starboard quad launchers. Range: 60 nautical miles, at Mach 2.5.

She was a formidable ship, no doubt about that. And Arnold Morgan guessed she had been detailed to escort the original mine-laying Chinese frigates, and possibly even the Kilos, out of harm's way. He also guessed, correctly, that she had been refueled from a tanker out of the Bassein River, which he found, frankly, infuriating.

“And now, where the hell’s she going?” he growled to the empty room. “It had better be far away from any of our current operations. I don’t expect the Indians will be too pleased to see her, either.”

The question was, What to do? “I guess we can’t just sink the biggest ship in the Chinese Navy without risking a world-class uproar, which will send gasoline prices even higher,” he pondered. “But she has to leave the area. That’s for sure. Before someone gets trigger-happy.”

He picked up his secure line to Admiral Dixon and outlined the problem.

“Sir, I do agree. She cannot be allowed to remain in our area of operations. I have warned the Chinese, and everyone else to that effect. I think we have to take the view that the Chinese and the Iranians, in the absence of any denials, are plainly in breach of every world peace convention in mining the strait. I propose to issue one more formal warning, directly to Beijing. Either they get that destroyer out of the area, or we’ll do it for them.”

“You saying sink it, Alan?”

“Nossir. I’m saying cripple it. With minimum loss of life.”

“Using?”

“A submarine, sir. Stick one of those MK 48s right into her stern. Blow the shaft, steering and propulsion all in one hit. Probably take out her missile launchers too with a couple of shells. Then let their friends from Iran come out and tow her in. That way we hold on to world opinion, with very few casualties, and a well-deserved warning to China to stay the hell out of the strait.”

“What if she returns fire?”

“Sink her, sir. Instantly.”

“Good call, Alan. Let’s go.”

**040500MAY07. USS SHARK. 24.40N 50.55E.
Speed 25. Depth 100. Course 352.**

Lieutenant Commander Dan Headley, his early watch just one hour old, called for a transcript of the new orders just in from the carrier. “Hard copy twice, Jack,” he called down to comms. “One for the CO.”

Five minutes later he read the instructions, to the USS SHARK, ordering them to locate and track a Sovremenny-Class destroyer, probably flying the flag of the People’s Liberation Army/Navy. It had been picked up by the overheads moving slowly up the southernmost coast of Iran, course approximately two-seven-zero. According to Fort Meade, right now at 0530 it should be somewhere to their nor’noreast, maybe 27 miles up ahead.

SHARK’s sonar room had already located a ship right in that area, and the ESM had reported an occasionally transmitting Russian radar. The flag was correct. She was going slowly. The Sturgeon-Class American submarine would catch her inside 90 minutes. Their orders were simply to get in contact with the destroyer, track her silently and await further instructions.

Lieutenant Commander Headley ordered flank speed, course three-six-zero, which should put him in the correct position sometime before 0700. He had someone awaken the CO to apprise him of the situation and was mildly surprised

when Commander Reid did not show up in the control room anytime in the next 45 minutes. “Guess he trusts me,” thought the XO. “Even though he has known me for only five days.”

In any event they rushed on north, remaining just below periscope depth, leaving a wake on the surface, which no one was around to see. At 0640, Lt. Commander Headley slowed down to come to PD and took an all-around look at the surface picture. Sure enough, out on the horizon, right on their one o'clock, was a large warship. Dan Headley had already memorized the profile of the Sovremenny, and this was her, large as life, steaming on six miles off the coast of Iran, as if she owned the place. The engine lines on the 8,000-ton double-shafted destroyer matched the GTZA-674 turbines on the computer model.

He went back below the surface, dictated a signal to the flag and had it transmitted, announcing he was in contact and was proposing to track the destroyer two miles astern pending further orders.

Dan ordered a course change... “*Come right seven degrees... down all masts.*” At which point a frisson of excitement ran through the submarine, as it always does when any potential quarry is sighted, even in exercises. Now, with the most dangerous warship in the Chinese Navy in their sights, USS SHARK came unmistakably to life.

At 0700 the Commander came into the control room. He talked to his XO for a few minutes, bringing himself into the picture. But he did not assume command. Rather he left “to find some breakfast,” and asked Dan to let him know if anything important occurred.

By now they were running line astern to the destroyer, four miles behind. But the Chinese ship was moving faster now, still heading northwest along the Iranian coast. As far as Dan could tell she was not transmitting and did not even have her sonars switched on, which the Kentucky-born officer thought was “kinda eccentric.” *Given she’s just mined the Strait of Hormuz and the business half of the planet Earth is seriously pissed off with the ship and all who are sailing on her.*

Nonetheless, the HANGZHOU ran on at a steady 20-knot speed, which again Dan Headley thought was ridiculous. By varying her rate of knots between say four and 25, it would have been much more difficult for a submarine to track her. Alternatively, at her quiet, low speed, she might have actually heard the submarine, charging along astern, trying to catch up, making a noise like a freight train. *Beats the shit out of me where they train these guys. Some Chinese laundry, I guess.*

And so the SHARK slipped into a classic sprint-and-drift pursuit, running as deep as she dared in the 50-fathom waters along the coastline for fifteen minutes, then coming up for another visual setup, to update the operations plot for the Fire Controller, just in case they should be ordered into action. Naturally, every time they came up they lost speed, “drifting” quietly forward at five knots, losing ground all the time.

Six miles short of the minefield, the HANGZHOU made a course change, swinging more westerly, as if to run along the line of the minefield. It was light now, and Lt. Commander Headley immediately accessed the flag to inform them of the change in direction.

Admiral Bert Harman, in the group ops room high in the island of the HARRY S TRUMAN, was uncertain, although his orders were clear. He instructed his comms room to alert the destroyer she was straying into a prohibited area where U.S. warships were supervising a mine-clearing operation. She was to be warned in no uncertain terms to leave forthwith, to resume her course to Bandar Abbas and to remain in harbor right there until further notice.

But the Chinese Commanding Officer had been instructed to observe proceedings, and to bow to no threats from the U.S. Navy or any other Navy. The CO, Colonel Yang Xi, thought this might have been perfectly feasible from a desk in Beijing, but out here it looked very different. He could see U.S. Navy ships out on the horizon, steaming along the line of the minefield, in which he'd just seen a sizable explosion.

He decided to ignore the warning, since he considered the Americans were unlikely to open fire. Rather he would slow down and go in closer for two more miles. He was now in international waters, and he could take his time with his turn. Meanwhile he would place his surface-to-surface Sunburn missiles on full alert.

The carrier ops room observed the Chinese CO make no attempt to obey their warning. Admiral Harman picked up his orders and read them carefully... *"Should any warship of any nation insist in straying into our prohibited area, you will order the tracking submarine to disable her, not sink her but put her out of commission."*

There was nothing ambiguous about that, and the Hangzhou was a hugely dangerous enemy to both U.S. ships and aircraft. Admiral Harman thus sent his signal to USS SHARK, instructing the submarine to disable the Chinese warship should she fail to turn around.

Lieutenant Commander Headley read the signal, and ordered the conn to take a long left-hand swing at flank speed in order to come up on the port side of the Chinese warship. He planned to fire one torpedo, well aft of her beam from range two thousand yards. This meant, essentially, that the MK 48 would strike the stern and cripple the propulsion of the ship leaving her helpless in the water until assistance arrived.

He sent an immediate message to the Captain, who arrived in the control room at 0745. He seemed agitated, uncomfortable with the decisions, not at all eager to open fire on a major Chinese warship. He questioned the intelligence of the orders, wondering if they might not have been changed. If there had been some mistake.

Lieutenant Commander Headley brought Shark to PD once again and requested the CO take a look for himself. "The Chinese CO has ignored our warnings, no doubt about that," said the XO. "And these orders make our duty clear. We are to cripple it, put it out of action with minimum loss of life."

"Yes, I understand that," said Commander Reid, declining the periscope. "But the HANGZHOU is not doing anyone any harm right now, maybe just taking a look." He repeated, absentmindedly, "Maybe just taking a look."

"These orders don't tell us to speculate, sir," replied Dan. "They tell us to hit the destroyer hard when we are told to do so. And this piece of paper right here says right now."

The Captain of USS SHARK looked unenthusiastic. "It doesn't say how long we give it to turn around," he said. "I think we might check that with the flag, XO."

“As you wish, sir. But I would prefer you do it, because in my view these orders are specific. The Chinese ship has been warned, it has not turned around, and I have a piece of paper here ordering us to open fire.”

“This is your watch, XO. I would like the writer to record my unease and my wish for a second opinion on the orders. But if you are certain as to the orders, you have my permission to proceed as you see fit.”

“Thank you, sir... *Now...torpedo room—XO, prepare tubes one and two... MK 48s...*”

Lieutenant Commander Headley turned to Master Chief Drew Fisher, who had materialized at his side. “Check that out, Chief, will you? I’m only preparing a second tube in case of malfunction. I intend to fire just one.”

“Aye, sir.”

Inside the sonar room, the operators could still hear the steady beat of the HANGZHOU’s propellers, rising and falling in the ocean swell, making the same soft *chuff-chuff-chuff* sound in the water, now less than 2,000 yards away, dead ahead.

Dan Headley grabbed for the periscope handles at knee level as the “eyes” of the submarine rose up out of the deck of the control room. He scanned the ocean, called out bearing, then range... “*Zero-seven-zero... twenty-one thirty yards... down all masts... make your depth one hundred.*”

Seconds passed, and then the sonar room operator called it... “*XO—sonar... track three four... bearing zero-six-zero... range two thousand.*”

Down in the torpedo room, both tubes were loaded, and the guidance officer was in direct contact with Lt. Commander Headley, speaking quietly into his slim-line microphone.

Dan Headley ordered the Officer of the Deck, Lt. Matt Singer, to take the conn... “*Hold your speed at three knots.*”

The sonar team checked the approach, calling out the details softly to the XO. The rest of the ship was stone silent as they crept forward, preparing to fire the shot that would most certainly be heard in the Great Hall of the People.

Lieutenant Commander Headley took another fast look at the screen. Then he ordered, “*STAND BY ONE... stand by to fire by sonar...*”

“*Bearing zero-six-zero... range two thousand yards... computer set.*”

“*SHOOT!*” snapped Dan Headley.

And everyone felt the faint shudder as the big MK 48 swept out into the ocean, making a beeline toward the Chinese destroyer.

“*Weapon under guidance, sir.*”

At 40 knots, the torpedo would run for less than two minutes before hitting the utterly unprepared Sovremenny-Class destroyer. And it hit in the precise spot Dan Headley had specified, bang on the stern.

It slammed into the long, low aft section and detonated, blowing the main shaft into three pieces, the propeller into the deep water and the rudder into a split and twisted mess of steel. The HANGZHOU could no longer maneuver, couldn’t steer, couldn’t move. As the pall of smoke began to clear away from her stern area, she looked more or less normal, but in truth she was powerless.

Her crew could hear the ship's tannoy blaring instructions, and the medical teams were already making their way aft to tend the wounded, but by the standards of torpedoed warships there was relatively little bloodshed.

The communications room was still intact, and the ops room was unharmed. In fury, Colonel Yang Xi was thrashing around looking for a target at which to lash back. But he could see nothing short range for well over two miles. He had missiles, shells and torpedoes, but nothing close at which to aim any of them specifically. Nor could he see what had hit his ship, if indeed anything. For all he knew, it was just an explosion. But he knew that was stretching the realms of coincidence.

Three minutes after the impact, he received yet another signal from the American carrier, again ordering him out of the area, but offering to request assistance from the Iranians if the destroyer's comms were down.

The Colonel did not answer. Neither did he consider it prudent to open fire with his missiles, because if he did the Americans would surely sink him. In his present situation he was the epitome of a sitting duck. Instead he relayed a signal to the Iranian Naval Command at Bandar Abbas requesting assistance.

Meanwhile Lt. Commander Headley turned USS SHARK around and returned to his position on station 20 miles off the port bow of the HARRY S TRUMAN.

0100. Friday, May 4. The White House.

Admiral Morgan sat alone in his office in the West Wing. He had promised Kathy he would be home by 11 P.M., but that was before the SHARK had planted a torpedo in the stern of the HANGZHOU. He had been on the line to the CNO almost every moment since.

Right now the JOHN F. KENNEDY Battle Group was five days out of Pearl Harbor and making a swing to the south from her normal route up to the coast of Taiwan. Admiral Dixon had ordered her straight to Diego Garcia.

The increased tension in the Hormuz area had also caused the CNO to tell the Atlantic Commander-in-Chief to move the sixth operational U.S. CVBG, that of the THEODORE ROOSEVELT, out of the Mediterranean and on to the Indian Ocean.

Like Admiral Morgan, he had no idea what the Chinese were up to, and he had a bad feeling about that new Chinese base on the Bassein River. Within a few days they would have four carrier groups conducting a *roulement* between Diego Garcia and the Hormuz Strait, with the ROOSEVELT free to roam the Indian Ocean, with her consorts, anywhere it looked as though the Chinese might cause more trouble.

As far as Arnold Morgan was concerned, he had seen enough. Always completely mistrustful of the men from the Orient, he now believed their true colors were being shown. They had cold-bloodedly caused a massive world oil crisis, they had caused scenes of chaos in the Gulf of Iran and right now no one dared to bring a big tanker across Jimmy Ramshawe's line, which defined the essential contour of the minefield.

The oil market frenzy had abated slightly thanks to soothing words from the American President that free-and-clear passage through the Strait of Hormuz

would soon be resumed. But Americans were paying three dollars and fifty cents a gallon at the pumps, and Texaco, along with three other U.S.-based corporations, was threatening to put the price up to four dollars next week.

The President was at his wit's end, demanding the strait be reopened immediately, apparently unable to grasp the consequences of another tanker being blown up, and the global uproar that would surely follow if the USA had declared the route safe to resume trade.

The weekend passed more or less uneventfully. White Rajah was made the hot favorite, before losing by a half length at Churchill Downs after closing on the winner all the way down the stretch. But at 0530 (local time) on Monday morning, May 7, at the northern end of the Malacca Strait, an even more unexpected event happened. A 300,000-ton, virtually empty Japanese-registered crude carrier literally blew itself to pieces: went up in a colossal fireball right off the northern headland of Sumatra, within a few miles of the open ocean.

Like Hormuz, this is a very busy oil route, the seagoing highway to the Far East, the route of almost every tanker coming out of the Gulf of Iran, or even from the oil fields of Africa—straight across the Indian Ocean toward the Nicobar Islands, then through the Great Channel into the Malacca Strait, which divides Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula.

The strait is close to 600 miles long, and the tankers use it for their outward and inward journeys. Almost 100 percent of all the fuel oil and gas requirements in the Far East are carried on the big tankers through that narrowing seaway, the shortcut to the South China Sea.

It saves over a thousand wasteful miles, for without the strait, ships would have to travel right around the outside of the old East Indies.

Arnold Morgan heard the news with an undisguised groan as he and Kathy sat down to dinner on Sunday night, 12 time zones back. "This," he grated, "is getting goddamned serious."

No word of complaint had been heard from the Chinese since their destroyer was damaged. Nor, of course, had there been any word of admission for their part in mining Hormuz in the first place.

Ms. O'Brien had actually heard the report on the news while Arnold was grilling some pork chops. They had been out all day, sailing along the Potomac on a friend's yacht, and for some reason there had been only drinks and potato chips on board. The President's National Security Adviser rarely, if ever, touched alcohol during the day, and both he and Kathy had concluded the voyage, cold after the sun went down, and hungry *in extremis*, as the Admiral put it.

They declined going to a restaurant with the other guests and sped home in Arnold's staff car. With heavy sweaters on, and glasses of wine from the Loire Valley, they had fired up the grill and were just moving into Arnold's favorite part of the day, when Kathy reported the demise of the giant VLCC.

"Now how the hell did that happen?" he asked Kathy's Labrador, Freddie, who made no reply but continued to look, with eyes like lasers, at the pork chops.

Kathy returned with the wine bottle but little information. "They just said the tanker was unladen," she said. "No information was available about how the accident happened. They did draw a parallel with the ships that blew up in

Hormuz last week, and the newscaster mentioned that there seemed to be a jinx on the shipping of heavy crude oil these days.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “A jinx wearing a goddamned lampshade on its head and eating its dinner with a couple of painted sticks.”

Kathy laughed. No one had ever made her laugh like Arnold Morgan, especially when he was being sardonic. She threw her arms around him, and kissed him softly and slowly. No one that agonizingly beautiful had ever kissed Arnold Morgan. Certainly not like that.

“If it wasn’t for about a billion tons of shipping blazing away in the Far East threatening to cause an end to civilization as we know it,” he said, “I could get very involved with that kissing business.”

“Well, you should think about it more often,” she said. “Get a kind of rotation system going... you know, save the world... make love to Kathy... save the world... kiss Kathy for a few hours... then save the world again. If necessary. Meantime, I’ll take you just as you are.”

“Thank you,” he said, grinning. “How about... eat the chops... make love to Kathy... drink the Meursault... kiss Kathy?”

“I’ll buy that,” she said. “But how about saving the world?”

“Screw the world,” he said, putting his arm around her. “Can’t the goddamned world see when I’m too busy?”

The Admiral removed the chops from the grill with a pair of long silver tongs. One of them broke, and the meaty part fell to the flagstone patio. Freddie dove at it as if he had not been fed during this century, and retreated sneakily into the bushes.

“Has that greedy little character got any Chinese blood?” he asked.

Kathy giggled, took the plate of chops from the Admiral and told him, “Sure he has. Freddie, honored grandson of the Dalai Lama.”

“That’s Tibet, dingbat,” he said.

“Same thing, if you ask the People’s Republic,” she said.

It took only a few more moments for them to turn off the new gas grill and move inside to where the Admiral had lit a log fire in the study. This was a rather grand house, and Kathy had been awarded it, amicably, by her husband in the divorce settlement. He had been a fairly rich man, and his pride and joy had been his book-lined study, which was situated through a beamed arch from the dining room. Kathy assumed he had another such setup in his new house in Normandy, France, where he now lived with his French wife.

A studious diplomat, with a family grain business in the Midwest, he was always described by Kathy as kind, and lovely, totally preoccupied with the problems of the world and “about as much fun as a tree.” He had been much older than she, as Arnold was. But the laughter she shared with Arnold, his willingness always to talk to her and the sheer joy of their being together made up for any age differential. They were as devoted as it was possible to be. And one day she would marry him. When he retired.

Meanwhile, she served the pork chops, salad and the french loaf, sat down and asked him, “How do big ships burn, when there’s nothing in them? What’s to burn? The newscaster said it was returning unladen to the gulf.”

“Well, I didn’t really hear it, but that sounds right. You see, those big tankers never really get rid of that crude oil when they unload at the terminal. I’m not sure what’s left, but in a vast holding tank, there’s probably several inches still slopping around after the pumps are turned off.

“Now then, it’s not the actual crude oil, which is like a black sludge, that burns. It’s the gases rising up from it. So you can very easily have a situation where a fully loaded tanker is a lot less inflammable than an empty one. Because the holding tanks in the empty one are full of gases, and those babies will go up real fast.

“It’s the same with gasoline. If you could somehow plunge a lighted match into the gasoline without igniting the gases that are evaporating, the liquid would put the flame out, like water. You probably won’t remember, but twenty-five years ago when the Brits fought the Argentinians for the Falkland Islands, a bomb came right into a ship—actually I think it came in low, and traveled right through and out the other side.

“Anyway, it started a minor fire, but hit a big diesel-gas tank on the way through and tons of ice-cold fuel cascaded out and extinguished the fire. That’s how it works. And that’s what caused the explosion in this latest tanker. The gases going up with a major bang.”

“Thank you, sir. Nicely explained. What do you think caused it?”

“I’m afraid to think about that right now. But I know one thing: It’s not another minefield. Both Singapore and Sumatra get rich on the pilotage fees through the Malacca. They’re high and getting higher. Last thing they want is a blockade. The Chinese would get no help from them. That means we’re looking for something else. But not tonight. We’re having a quiet dinner... then I’m not going to save the world, and we’ll go to bed quietly together.

“Tomorrow will be different. I’ll be in the office early. So will you. And Admiral Borden wants to fasten his goddamned safety belt.”

“I’m just beginning to feel a teeny bit sorry for the poor Admiral.”

“Well, don’t be. He’s a negative guy. Which is bad in Intelligence. In Fort Meade, you gotta stay right on top of the game. Also Borden’s obviously been very awkward with the excellent Lieutenant Ramshawe. I don’t like that. Young men that sharp ought to be encouraged—not made to feel frustrated, so they have to phone the goddamned White House in order to get someone to pay attention.”

“Well, you were pretty short with him when he did make the call.”

“Kathy, there are formalities of command in the United States Navy, and they have to be observed at all times. And quite often they soothe troubled waters, even soften the truth. What they never do, however, is *hide* the truth. Jimmy Ramshawe knew that when he called. He probably knew I’d be kinda dismissive. But he also knew I’d hear him. That’s why he called. He never had to tell me his boss was being pigheaded stupid. He didn’t have to. He knew I’d get it. And he was right... more goddamned right than even he knew at that point.”

“I guess it was pretty impressive how he got onto the Chinese involvement?”

“Sure was. He was a couple of jumps ahead of me, and we were running on the same track. I’m not real used to that.”

“Do you feel a little resentful... someone that young?”

“Hell, no. I was pleased. Saved me a lot of thinking time. That boy just laid it right out...almost.”

“What d’you mean, ‘almost’?”

The Admiral leaned back in his chair, and took a deep sip of Meursault. “Kathy,” he said, “there’s something real strange about this whole damned thing. Lemme ask you a question. What’s the first thing any halfway decent detective wants to know about a murder?”

“Whodunit?”

The Admiral chuckled, leaned over, took her hand and told her he loved her. Then he stopped smiling and said, “Motive, Mrs. O’Brien. Motive. Why was this crime committed?”

“Okay, Sherlock, go for it.”

“Kathy, I cannot go for it. Because I cannot for the life of me see one motive the Chinese may have had for getting heavily involved in a blockade of the Gulf of Iran. I have wracked my brains, and every time we make a big move to protect the mine clearance, I get a damned funny feeling about the entire scenario.”

“You do?”

“Well, we got a Navy that has to protect the Indians’ ships. But right now we got battle groups standing by to relieve battle groups. We’ve even got battle groups coming out of the Med in order to get into the Arabian Sea.

“Kathy, do you know how many ships that is—in the five U.S. battle groups?”

“What are they, a dozen each? So I guess around sixty?”

“Kathy, that’s enough Naval hardware to conquer the world about three times over. That’s more U.S. warships grouped together than there’ve been since World War Two. So what the hell’s going on? There’s no hostile threat. The mines that blew three tankers are essentially passive, just sitting there in the water, and the Pondicherrys are quite steadily getting rid of them.

“Neither China, nor Iran, has opened fire on anyone. Christ, we just banged a hole in China’s most important destroyer and they never even fired back, never even protested.

“I just got an awkward feeling I might be missing the big picture right here. Seems to me we got too much Naval hardware in one place. And I know that’s because we’ve also got a President whose only real concern is the price of gasoline at the American pumps.

“And I’m wondering if we’re overreacting to the oil threat to civilization. Could someone be very seriously yanking our chain?”

1700. Monday, May 7.

Headquarters, Eastern Fleet.

Ningbo, Zhejiang Province.

The streets were always crowded at this time in the ancient harbor town that lies 120 miles due south of Shanghai across the great Bay of Hangzhou. Ningbo traces its roots back to the Tang Dynasty, through more than a thousand years of trading, and every day in the early evening a commercial stampede seems to break out, as if the entire population was racing, to sail before the tide.

Throngs surged across the old Xinjiang Bridge in the main port area. Traders bought and sold all along the old central thoroughway of Zhongshan Lu. And yet, it was a curious place to see a senior Naval Officer, in uniform, hurrying through one of the oldest parts of town, along Changchun Lu.

Nonetheless, moving swiftly between the merchant houses along the crowded sidewalks was the tall, lean, still-upright figure of the Commander-in-Chief of the Peoples' Liberation Navy, Admiral Zu Jicai. He was no stranger to this city. He had been born here more than 60 years ago, and his Naval career had begun in the dockyards of Zhejiang Province and ultimately, before he was thirty years old, in Shanghai.

Following him closely among the shoppers were four uniformed Navy guards, with sidearms. Even for a mission as unorthodox as this, Admiral Zu was not permitted to travel so far from the dockyard without protection.

He reached a building on the left-hand side of the street, and paused briefly to confer with his guards, instructing them to wait outside, and to have a staff car ready in 45 minutes.

Then he walked up the steps, and entered through one of the wide, folded wooden screen doors of the Tianyige, the oldest private library in all of China, dating back to the sixteenth century, at the height of Ningbo's prosperity during the Ming Dynasty. A member of the family bowed formally to him, and the Admiral returned the courtesy, before he was led through the book-filled, paneled main room into a smaller inner sanctum, dimly lit and plainly designed for thought and as a home for reference books.

There was one single table in the room, and it stood beneath a deep, paneled, beamed ceiling, divided into wide squares, each one decorated with intricate inlays of light wood and ivory, each one of an entirely different pattern. Seated at the table, in the shadows beneath this great mosaic of ancient Chinese art, was the powerful figure of Admiral Zhang Yushu, senior Vice Chairman of the PLAN's Council.

"Ah, Yushu, you found my childhood hideaway," said Admiral Zu.

"Hello, Jicai. You were right. One of the most secretive rooms in China. We can talk here. But we must be swift and careful...and so, quickly, what can you tell me about the destroyer?..."

"Very little. The Americans warned her away from the area of the minefield, which she ignored, as agreed. And then one of the American ships opened fire and essentially crippled her. Blew both shafts, both props and rudder. There was no way of returning fire, and in any event she could not really see her assailant. Which makes me think they may have hit her from a submarine."

"Yes. Precisely. But the loss amounts to very little. Are the Iranians towing her in?"

"Yessir."

"And the tanker at the end of the Malacca Strait?"

"Our Kilo hit it with a torpedo and vanished. Apparently it was a good choice. Nice and big, and nice and empty."

"Excellent. Have the Americans panicked?"

"I'm not certain, sir. But they just diverted yet another CVBG toward the Indian Ocean. It's on its way through Suez now."

“And the carrier JFK?”

“Plainly on its way to Diego Garcia, taking a southerly route—a long way south from its normal route up to the Japanese Islands and Taiwan.”

“Which leaves them where?”

“With FIVE carrier battle groups either in, or heading for, the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia or Hormuz.”

“And the RONALD REAGAN Group? Still in San Diego?”

“Yessir and nonoperational for a good two months yet. My guess is they’ll call the JFK back for Taiwan.”

“Then we’ll have to deal with her, I suppose. But I don’t think that will be beyond us. Not with our Kilos.”

“Nossir.”

It was a very Chinese relationship. Formal to a degree when the subject involved the Navy’s business, Commander-in-Chief to the biggest chief. But when the conversation slipped from report to discussion and opinion, it instantly lapsed into the kind and understanding conversation of two lifelong and beloved friends.

“And now, Jicai, do we see any improvement in our amphibians’ capacity?”

“Not really, sir. I think we have to accept eleven thousand.”

“And are we ready?”

“Nossir. But we are preparing every day.”

“Where do you see our critical paths?”

“Certainly the Kilos, sir. We will have them routinely overhauled and ready. Most other ships are on standby. Airborne troops I understand are training with some success but with more to learn. The infantry commanders have forgotten nothing. Tanks are ready. In the air, I fear, it will be costly.”

“Do we have a date?”

“I’m looking at ten days, sir.”

“A feint to the outer island first?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Are you confident, my friend?”

“With great reservations, sir.”

“That’s good, my Jicai. All commanders must be a little bit afraid.”

And with that Admiral Zu walked to the door of the little room, and he called softly to his friend, a member of the twentieth generation of the family to own this library.

And moments later, the librarian returned and handed each of his guests a small porcelain cup, containing sweet, heavy Shaoxing red wine, served warm.

“A toast, Jicai,” said Admiral Zhang. “To the immortal memory of the ruler of all the seas, Admiral Zheng He.”

1100 (local). Monday, May 7.

The White House.

Arnold Morgan wanted answers. And he wasn’t getting any. At least not from Admiral David Borden. The Acting Director of the NSA was unable to grasp how

urgently the Big Man in the White House wanted to know who had hit the tanker in the Malacca, and with what.

Admiral Borden actually said, “Sir, we do not I believe have any proof the tanker was hit at all.” Which was tantamount to telling Evander Holyfield that nobody had just bitten a hole in his ear.

And Admiral Morgan was furious. He banged down the phone, just as news came in that Brent Crude had gone to \$78 a barrel in London, on rumors of a worldwide strike by the masters of the big tankers. Right now America was looking at \$5 for a gallon of gasoline at the pumps. Worse yet, if things did not shake loose very quickly, there could be shutdowns at some of the nation’s major electricity generators, which ran on fuel oil, or natural gas.

“KATHY!?”

She came in through the open door, closing it hastily in case someone else heard the anger of the President’s top military adviser.

“Get George Morris on the phone right now.”

“Arnold, he had surgery early this morning. You know that. He must be asleep.”

“Well, wake him up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We can’t wake him up. He’s very sick.”

“He’ll be a whole lot sicker if the goddamned lights go out and his iron lung shuts down.”

“Arnold, they do not use iron lungs in modern surgery anymore.”

“Try not to bore me with this high-tech crap. Electricity is the lifeblood of all hospitals, including George’s. Okay... okay... don’t wake him up till later, but tell him to get into Fort Meade tomorrow and kick that asshole Borden out of his office.”

“Arnold, I guess you could arrange to bomb Shanghai, but you cannot instruct the head of surgery at the Naval Hospital in Bethesda to discharge probably his most important patient.”

“Kathy, forget all that I’ve just said. But please ensure I speak to George the moment he regains his senses. Because this clown in Fort Meade is unlikely ever to regain his.”

“Yessir. Meanwhile, anything I can do right now?”

“Yes. Get that good boy, Jimmy Ramshawe, on my private secure line. And hop to it—don’t tell me he’s asleep or anything.”

“Of course I may murder you one day, my darling,” she said, stalking out of the room, head high, trying not to laugh.

**National Security Agency.
Fort Meade, Maryland.**

Lieutenant Ramshawe’s phone rang angrily, reflecting precisely the general demeanor of the caller.

“Hello, sir. Yup, this is Jimmy... Sir, I’ve been on it since I got here at three this morning. You want my opinion?”

“I think the Chinese fired a torpedo into that tanker from one of those Kilo-Class submarines.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Sir, I’ve had full coverage of those coastal waters, all the way down from the Rangoon Delta to the northern headland of Sumatra, right down from the Nicobar islands. And I’m here to tell you there’s not been a warship in sight in those waters all through the weekend, and then suddenly... *BAM!* Another tanker goes up at six-thirty local time. And where does it go up? I have it at six-ten-north, ninety-four-fifty-east. That’s six miles southeast of Point Pygmalion, the southern headland of Great Nicobar.

“It’s also six hundred miles south of the Chinese Navy base in the Bassein River—I’d say less than three days running for a Kilo moving at twelve knots through waters without a serious Naval presence. At least nothing that’s looking for them. They don’t even have to be careful.

“Anyway, sir. That’s not all.”

“Go on.”

“Sir, I got two satellite shots right here showing a Russian-built Kilo on the surface, heading right for the Mergui Archipelago... that’s right off the Burmese coast...”

“I know where the hell the goddamned Merguis are, for Christ’s sake... Keep going...”

“Yessir.”

Arnold Morgan smiled to himself.

“She’s about one hundred eighty miles from the burning tanker, and that’s fifteen hours from the hit. So she could have done it, but they don’t seem to care too much who knows.”

“Very strange, Jimmy. What do you make of it?”

“Not a great deal, sir. I can’t see the point of it, except to cause chaos. All I know is, this does not look like casual maritime vandalism.”

“Keep thinking, Jimmy. Write your reports, and keep me right in the game.”

Ten minutes later, Admiral Morgan was standing in the Oval Office informing the President of the United States that the Chinese had, without question, been responsible for yet another tanker explosion, the fourth. And as far as he could tell, there was no reasonable motive for harming any of them. Except to cause a massive hike in world oil prices, which would damn nearly bankrupt Japan and knock the hell out of the USA’s burgeoning economy.

“As for Europe, with their North Sea Oil beginning to run out, sitting there with virtually no resources except a lot of damned expensive people, and welfare programs big enough to stop the Earth on its axis, well, hell, God knows what’s going to happen to them without Arab oil.”

“Arnold, I have to make a move. I have to do something. I cannot let this all go unremarked on by the United States. Do we have the gulf under control?”

“It’s under control but not yet safe. We got enough forces in there to conquer anything up to World War Three, including the sun, the moon and the planet of the fucking apes.”

The President laughed, but his concern overrode any humor there may have been in his mood. “Arnold,” he said, “we gotta show a major presence. We gotta frighten everyone to death, show ’em we mean what we say.”

“Sir, we could show ’em we mean what we say with one CVBG. Christ, they carry eighty fighter aircraft and right now we don’t have a damn thing to shoot at. And we’ve got five carriers either in or on their way in. If the oil starts flowing again, those warships could almost suck the place dry.”

“Arnold, there has to be something very odd about this Sino-Iranian pact. I just cannot tell what they’re up to. I only know we cannot drop our guard.”

“Maybe. But I have a feeling there’s a goddamned hidden agenda right here that we are not tuned in to. There simply is no obvious motive for this action by the Chinese. But I do still think there is one thing we must do: lock ’em right out of the Indian Ocean.”

“You mean what we discussed before?”

“Yessir. We’ve gotta get rid of that oil refinery they just built. And then get rid of that Navy base on the Bassein River. Send the little bastards home, right back to the South China Sea.”

“Arnold, I think to do that, we will need the support of at least one ally, and I don’t know where that might come from.”

“Jesus, that’s an easy one. We don’t even need to frown over that.”

“We don’t?”

“Nossir. The Indian Navy would give their eyeteeth to get China out of the Bay of Bengal and all points west of there. Remember that old animosity is as ingrained as that between Iraq and Iran. The Indians do not want the Chinese Navy prowling around in their backyard... Remember, too, India is very nearly bigger than China in terms of population, and richer. I have thought for years they should be our best friends in the East.”

“*Hmmmmm*. You think they’ll support us kicking some Chinese ass?”

“Basically I think we tell no one what we’re about to do, except to tip off Admiral Kumar about our approximate plans. He’s gonna love it. So’s his Prime Minister.”

“You still favor the actions of your favorite troops, the cutthroats of the Navy SEALs using their world-famous techniques of solving all problems with high explosives.”

“Those are my methods of choice, sir. Mainly because no one quite knows what’s happened. And yet they can’t fail to know it must have been us.”

“Well, Arnold, since I’ve been in this chair, I’ve allowed you to unleash these guys on several targets, and I’m obliged to say they always bring home the bacon, some of it nicely fried.”

“This time it’s gonna be stir-fried. I’m sick to death of this Chinese crap.”

“Okay, Arnold, do your duty as you see it. Send ’em in, the silent destroyers.”

“That’s the way, sir. Maximum effect, minimum blame. We’ll give ’em seventy-eight bucks a barrel. Crazy pricks.”

He turned away from the Chief Executive and walked slowly out of the Oval Office. And his thoughts cascaded in on him, as his rich imagination took him into the hot, dark recesses of the sprawling refinery on the Strait of Hormuz.

And he thought of the guys, coming in hard and silent, out of the sea, moving across the sand, watching for armed sentries. And in his mind he felt their fear, and their strength, and their patriotism.

And he walked right by Kathy O’Brien’s desk without stopping, snapping out briskly just one command as he opened his office door:

“Get me Admiral John Bergstrom on the line. SPECWARCOM, Coronado Beach. Secure line. Encrypted. We’re talking Black Ops, Kathy. Usual procedures.”

Chapter 5

**1330. Monday. May 7.
The White House.**

Admiral Morgan’s call to SPECWARCOM was essentially a request to Admiral John Bergstrom to put two teams of Navy SEALs on 24-hour notice in Coronado, prepared to embark immediately for Diego Garcia. That conversation took less than four minutes.

“Just one thing... Degree of danger?”

“High. But your guys probably won’t work up a sweat.”

The next call was likely to be more complex, since even Arnold Morgan could not take the United States to war all on his own. He asked his sole serving noncommissioned officer, Kathy O’Brien, to secure President Reagan’s old Situation Room on the lower floor of the West Wing.

Then he ordered her to summon the Secretary of State, the Defense Secretary, the Energy Secretary, the Chief of Naval Ops and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to a meeting, top priority, classified, 90 minutes from then. He excluded the President, since he already had verbal Oval Office clearance to mount whatever military operation he saw fit. He assumed this particular President would deny all knowledge if the operation went wrong, which it had better not.

It was 1500 when General Tim Scannell came hurrying through the big wooden doors flanked by two saluting U.S. Marine guards. The door was closed firmly behind him, and he walked to his place at the head of the big table, at Admiral Morgan’s right hand. “I’m sorry to hold you up, gentlemen,” he said politely. “It’s just that we’ve got more going on in the Middle East than we’ve had since Saddam got above himself seventeen years ago. We’ve got more ships out there, too.”

To the left of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs sat the Secretary of State, the steel-haired veteran diplomat Harcourt Travis, and the Energy Secretary, Jack Smith, probably the best CEO General Motors ever had. Opposite them were the recently appointed CNO, Admiral Alan Dixon, former Commander-in-Chief Atlantic Fleet, and the Defense Secretary, Robert MacPherson.

And because the meeting was convened and chaired by Admiral Morgan himself, the seating of the military men always placed them in some kind of ascendancy. *Civilians have their place, of course, but when you need to get stuff assessed and then acted upon, in a serious hurry, the military leave ’em standing.* The Admiral’s view on that subject was both uncompromising and generally accepted, since he was unlikely to change his mind.

“Gentlemen,” he growled, frowning deeply, “right here we got a major shit fight on our hands.”

Jack Smith, attending his first effective war cabinet, smiled at the Admiral's poetically worded appreciation of the situation, and added formally, "There're reports of four-dollars-a-gallon gasoline in the Midwest."

"Jesus Christ," said Admiral Morgan.

He shook his head, and muttered, "If we're not damned careful, this could get right out of hand."

He then called the meeting to order and proceeded to outline the standoff in the gulf, and approximately what he proposed they should do about it.

"You all know roughly what's happened. The Iranians and the Chinese between them have constructed a deep, we think three-line, minefield, clean across the Strait of Hormuz, distance of about twenty miles. So far three tankers have been hit and burned. We have the Indian Navy in there sweeping the field, trying to open up a seven-mile-wide freeway for the world's tankers to start entering and leaving the gulf. But it's slow and somewhat perilous.

"Right now we have five U.S. CVBGs either deep in the area or on their way. That's essentially to protect the Indians, and make those seas safe again for the continued orderly conduct of the world's oil and gas trade. By now, most of that's routine and under control. However, in the early hours of this morning there was a development that I did not like. An unladen Japanese-registered tanker suddenly blew up at the north end of the Malacca Strait. I have reason to believe it was hit by a torpedo from a Chinese Kilo-Class submarine.

"I believe that Kilo was refueled at the new Chinese Navy Base in Burma on the Bassein River Delta. I further believe it's on its way back there right now. But that's just a sideshow.

"The real problem is China. Her intentions. The depth of her involvement in the mining of the strait, and her ambitions in the Arabian Sea, the gulf area, the Indian Ocean and in particular the Bay of Bengal..."

He paused, and no one spoke. "Gentlemen," he said, "I am quite certain that if we do not chase China out of those oceans, we will live to regret it. Remember, they have been passive in terms of sea power for more than five hundred years, just running a coastal Navy to protect their own shores.

"But not anymore. They're plainly in an expansionist mode, acquiring submarines, destroyers and a couple of aircraft carriers from the Russians. They're building a new ICBM submarine platform, and they are pushing westward. That new oil refinery of theirs south of Bandar Abbas gives them an excuse to send protective warships into the Arabian Sea. And that new base in Burma has given them a home port from which they could essentially control the oil routes through the Malacca Strait. That's all the oil routes to the west and north Pacific."

Admiral Morgan paused again. And then he growled, "Gentlemen, these guys are not just stepping lightly on our toes. They're running us over with a fleet of fucking rickshaws, and I'm not having it."

Jack Smith and General Scannell both smiled, and Harcourt Travis laughed out loud. "Arnold," he said, "you have such a way with words. You really should have considered the diplomatic service."

Everyone in the room knew the suave Secretary of State was not entirely enamored of the President's crusty National Security Adviser. And, some thought, the diplomat's calm, thoughtful intellect was a very good foil for the irascible ex-

nuclear submarine commander. But the Admiral's mind was invariably superior, and he had won almost every one of their exchanges down through the years, even if he did occasionally sound like a Master Sergeant in an ugly mood.

"Hey, Harcourt, old buddy. Glad to hear you're still sharp, because right now I want you to give me an assessment. If you wanted to chase the Chinese out of the Indian and Arabian Seas, what action would you consider taking?"

"You mean as an American?"

"Christ, no. As an Ethiopian."

This was too much for both Jack Smith and General Scannell, who both burst out laughing. Bob MacPherson and Admiral Dixon tried to restrain themselves. And even Harcourt permitted himself a deep chuckle—restrained, of course.

"You see, Harcourt," Arnold Morgan said, smiling, "that's the trouble with you Foreign Service guys... you're always looking for the extra half sentence, to give yourselves an extra few seconds to think... it's just a habit... Yes, Harcourt, as an American. You got it the first time."

"Well, first of all, I'd go and pray at the tomb of my former Emperor Haile Selassie, the Lion of Judah. Then I guess I'd come right back and advise you to blow the bastards right out of the water. Is that sufficiently primitive?"

"Harcourt," replied the Admiral, unsmiling, his bright blue eyes narrowing dangerously, "I like it."

At which point everyone laughed some more, but it was edged with nervousness, like telling a joke before an oncoming disaster. The Navy are good at that. In World War II no U.S. ship was ever blasted by bombs or torpedoes without one of the survivors observing, "Guess you shouldn't have joined if you can't take a joke."

The Admiral quickly regained his stride. "I'm talking politically... You know our problems—the Iranian Naval base at Bandar Abbas, the new Iranian refinery, right there next to the warships, the Sino-Iranian refinery, effectively owned by the Chinese, just along the coast, and the new Chinese Naval Base and refueling docks on the Bassein River. All four of those installations represent a giant pain in the ass, not just for us, but for all nations that require oil and gas..."

Harcourt Travis nodded, an air of caution written right across his face. "Arnold," he said, "I do not think we could just cold-bloodedly take out the Iranian base at Bandar Abbas. However covertly we moved, everyone would know it was us, and I think it would be construed as a blatant act of war. However, I think we would hold on to world opinion if we hit any warship we judged to be a threat to the free passage of shipping through the gulf."

"Uh-huh. And how about the Iranian refinery?"

"Bad idea. If the situation in the gulf turned really ugly, we might just need the oil out of that refinery. We might even need to seize it. Let's not destroy it, however pissed off we might be at the Ayatollahs."

"And the new Chinese refinery?"

"That's different. Because that refinery gives the People's Liberation Army-Navy a reason to be operational at the western end of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. I'm not saying we go in and blast the place to smithereens, probably starting World War Three. But if that refinery was to... er... become dysfunctional after some kind of... er... problem, well, I guess a lot of people would be pretty relieved."

“And the base on the Bassein River?”

“That,” said Harcourt, flatly, “has gotta go.”

“Any drift on the state of mind of the Burmese government? Or Myanmar, or whatever the hell they call it?”

“Well, you know it’s a military junta, Arnie. It’s in power regardless of the results of democratic elections. And recently they appear to have become much less friendly toward the Chinese. But the Big Dragon sits right against their back door, and the Big Dragon has built roads and even railroads right through the country to the port cities on the Bay of Bengal. The Chinese have armed the Burmese military, sold them God knows how much hardware on long lines of credit. I’m afraid the Burmese are in too deep to get out. We’ll get no help from them. You want to get rid of that Chinese base, you’re on your own. But you’d have some cheerleaders in India.”

“They still pissed off about the tracking station on Great Cocos Island?”

“Very, very pissed off. The Chinese installed it with extreme cunning and furtiveness. Then they put an airstrip in there. Now they can pry deep behind India’s eastern coastline. Myanmar says the Seventy-fifth AF Radar Squadron is theirs, but everyone knows it’s Chinese. They probe straight across the Bay of Bengal and record all takeoffs from Calcutta Airport and any military airport along the coast. The Indians call them the Chinese Checkers.”

Bob MacPherson, another veteran of this Republican administration, interjected here in support of the Secretary of State. “There’s more trouble in that region than even we realize. The Chinese have spy ships all over the Bay of Bengal, and that’s thanks largely to their base on Haing Gyi Island. It would be a hell of a lot more difficult for them if it wasn’t there.”

“Trouble is,” said Harcourt, “that Burmese coastline is so damned strategic. The Cocos Islands are only just in Burmese waters, right on the Cocos Channel, the main seaway for every merchant ship bound for eastern Indian ports and Bangladesh.

“Immediately to the south, around ten miles, we have the northernmost island of the Indian archipelago... you know, the Andamans and the Nicobars, stretching five hundred miles to the south toward the Malacca Strait. No one in the area feels safe, with Chinese warships constantly on patrol there.”

“I’ll tell you something else,” added Jack Smith. “On average there are three hundred ships passing through the Bay of Bengal every day. A lot of them are tankers to and from the east. There’re some new economic projections which suggest that in the next twenty years, fifty percent of all world trade will center on the Pacific-Asian countries. God knows how many more ships that will mean.”

“And China sees itself as the great controller of those seaways,” said Bob MacPherson. “But the elimination of the base on the Bassein River would set them back a quarter of a century.”

“So what are our priorities?” asked Admiral Morgan.

“I think we make it plain to the Chinese that we will sink any of their warships in the clearance zone in the Strait of Hormuz. We then quietly mastermind a problem in their refinery in Iran, and cause it essentially...er...not to work. That gets them out of the western waters of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The oil issue is irrelevant because it’s from Kazakhstan and the Chinese are going to

get it anyway, probably via a pipeline into their western territories, and on to Shanghai.”

“Christ,” said Admiral Morgan. “That’s, what, five thousand miles or something? They can’t do that.”

“With respect, Honorable National Adviser,” said Harcourt in his best Cantonese accent. “They built a very long, very high wall. They’ll probably manage to dig a fucking hole.”

Arnold Morgan chuckled. But he was very preoccupied. “And our next priority?” he asked.

“I think you know the answer to that. Let’s chase them out of the Bassein River. Somewhat secretly. And probably earn the thanks of many millions of people.”

Admiral Morgan sat thoughtfully. He and Harcourt Travis had been through a few run-ins, but, despite everything, he liked the Secretary of State. And he liked him for one overriding reason... *smooth sonofabitch really knows his stuff... he’s a scholar, a realist and a cynic. A guy you can count on for important opinions.*

“Harcourt,” he said. “I thank you. I thank all of you. Civilians may consider the meeting concluded. CNO, Tim, I’d like a half hour more to discuss tactics.” He stood and shook hands with the departing chiefs of Foreign Policy, Defense and Energy.

“I scarcely need to remind you of the hugely classified nature of the matters we have discussed,” he added. “There is no one who needs to know, save ourselves.”

Then he walked to the end of the room where Kathy had pinned up a large chart of the Strait of Hormuz, showing the coastline all the way from Bandar Abbas to the desert town of Kuhestak, way over on the long, near-barren eastern shore, forty-eight miles south of the Iranian Navy HQ.

“Come up here and take a look at this,” he said. “You see this place right here, Kuhestak? The Chinese refinery is situated right here, two miles along the coast to the south. It’s big. There’s a massive pipeline system running in here, all the way from the oil fields in Kazakhstan, one thousand miles, right across the heart of Iran.

“This precious Iranian seaport is soon going to give China its energy from the heart of the second-largest oil producer on earth. Because it can run tankers in here of virtually unlimited size, and then drive out straight across the Indian Ocean, through the Malacca Strait and into the South China Sea.

“In my view, that’s basically what the trouble is all about. That is precisely why China wants this growing military presence in the region...and precisely why we cannot allow it.

“You just heard the assessments of Harcourt and Bob. Now I want you to tell me how a dozen SEALs can take out that refinery. I say a dozen because the water’s shallow and well patrolled. We’re going to need an SDV, I’m certain of that. And we only have one in the area—the one stowed on the deck of the good old SHARK. The good news is it does not take a whole lot of high explosives to blow up an oil refinery. Sonsabitches are apt to blow themselves up if you give ’em a head start.”

“Guess you’re referring to the Big Bang in Texas City back in 1947, eh?” said General Scannell. “I had an uncle lived somewhere out near Galveston. He told me when I was just a kid you coulda heard that explosion from one hundred fifty miles away.”

"I was about three years old at the time, and we didn't live that far from the disaster," said Arnold. "I remember my daddy told me the ship that blew it exploded with such force its one-and-a-half ton anchor was flung two miles and embedded itself ten feet into the ground at the Pan American refinery."

The recollection of the Texas City disaster reminded all three men of the enormous problems involved in taking out a major refinery, with its attendant sites of sprawling petrochemical plants; just about every square foot of such industrial time bombs is filled with highly volatile, flammable materials, including vast pressurized storage tanks for natural gas. And the new Chinese installation at Kuhestak had all that, and more.

Hundreds were killed, thousands injured in Texas City, buildings all over town were blasted beyond recognition. And the devastation was not restricted to the waterfront, or to the refining towers and storage areas. It just about ripped the entire town apart. A radio announcer simply yelled, "Texas City just blew up!" The mushroom cloud rose 2,000 feet into the air. Massive, white-hot steel parts from the French merchant ship SS GRANDCAMP were hurled into the holding tanks hundreds of yards away, setting off secondary explosions, which in turn caused immense damage.

The burning GRANDCAMP with its heavy cargo of ammonium nitrate fertilizer was responsible for what remains the worst industrial catastrophe in U.S. history. At the time, so soon after World War II, there were few modern safety precautions in place. And of course there was none of the grim voyeurism of late-twentieth-century television, with its voracious, insatiable appetite for agony, heartbreak and disaster, which it finds so helpful in its endless, somewhat childlike, quest for drama and action.

Texas City 1947 remains a milestone in U.S. industrial calamity. And Admiral Arnold Morgan, a native-born Texan himself, had no wish to involve civilian casualties in the little Iranian town of Kuhestak, even though he gave not one jot for the lives of the Chinese technicians at the refinery... *You guys wanna fuck around with the free passage of world oil and gas... guess you should have thought about that real deeply before ordering those mines from Moscow.*

In any event, the Chinese refinery had to go. The remaining questions were how quickly and how to get the SEALs out before the whole shooting match went up in smoke and took our guys with it.

Meanwhile, Admiral Dixon stared at the little numbers on the chart, checking out the water depth, turning over in his mind the equation... *SHARK can't operate in depths of less than one hundred fifty feet... How near can she go before the guys have to leave in the little electric SDV, running until she touches the sand, and then unloading the SEALs to swim in the rest of the way?*

"What d'ya think, Admiral?" Arnold Morgan was stepping aside to allow the CNO some space.

"SHARK's gonna need passageway through the minefield... then she's got a twenty-mile submerged run nor'nor'east up to this point right here... 'bout twelve miles off the Iranian coast... She'll be in at least one hundred eighty feet of water all the way there, say 26.36N, right on 56.49E."

"That's precisely where I had the rendezvous point, Alan... Great minds, right?"

“Realistic minds, at least, sir... SHARK wouldn't want to move inshore any farther. She starts leaving a wake—that's asking for trouble. Iran's got a few fast attack craft with ASW mortars. We wanna stay real silent.”

“How many guys does the SDV hold?”

“Well, the old ones carried only ten. That's the one on MENDEL RIVERS... crew of two and eight SEALs. This new one holds fourteen, so we got twelve active SEAL demolition guys. We're just lucky the SDV is on the deck of SHARK, otherwise we'd be all over the damned place. Still, I guess we're due for a bit of luck. Haven't had much for a while, and I gotta real gut feeling about getting Beijing out of Arabia.”

“You and me. What d'you say, General?”

Tim Scannell looked thoughtful. “I was just thinking: Something goes wrong, say the submarine gets hit and crippled, any thoughts on backup? You need a carrier in the area to frighten everyone away, or you want me to order up some fighter aircraft we can deploy out of Oman, with the Brits' help?”

“Good call, General. Anything hits our submarine, I mean a surface ship, we vaporize it, right?”

“Yessir, Arnie. But how about an Iranian or Chinese Kilo-Class submarine in the area? Both nations have 'em, and as you know they're little bastards under the water.”

Admiral Dixon responded immediately: “I'll order a coupla LA-Class nuclear boats to ride shotgun on SHARK while she goes in. They'll pick up a Kilo if it's close enough.”

“And then?” Arnold Morgan looked quizzical.

“If it's under the surface, we sink it. No questions asked.”

“Thank you, CNO. That's my language you're talking, right there. You can only fuck around with these towelheads and Orientals for just so long, right?”

“Right, sir.”

“No bullshit,” added Admiral Morgan, by way of emphasis.

“Matter of fact, sir,” said Alan Dixon, “I'd say our biggest worry is getting the guys in, once they leave the SDV... You see, the twenty-meter depth line is all of five miles offshore... the ten-meter line's only about a half mile farther in... then they got a coupla miles in about four feet of water on flat sand... Terrain's fine, but there is a risk of detection... and it's a long way back to deep water and safety.”

“A long way for you and me, Alan. But not these guys... they'll slide through those warm shallows like a shoal of Florida bonefish—fast, sleek, unpredictable and likely to fight like hell.” Arnold Morgan made a curving forward motion with the palm of his left hand... “*Death to the Chinese oilers, right?*”

“Actually, I'm more worried about pursuit than anything else, Arnie, especially if they keep a fleet of helicopters at the refinery.”

“Alan, if that place goes up the way I think it will, there's not going to be anything even resembling pursuit. Bergstrom has the charts, and his top instructors will be involved in the planning. I expect Commander Rick Hunter will lead the squad, but I'm not sure if he'll go into Iran or Burma. Not both.”

“You have real faith in those SEALs, don't you?”

“Yes. If they can’t do it, it can’t be done. And I know that a group of the most highly trained demolition killers on this planet can blow up a goddamned oil refinery. Gimme a book o’matches, and I’ll blow the fucker up myself.”

Both Alan Dixon and Tim Scannell laughed at the President’s top military adviser: always just the right combination of steel and intellect, respect and contempt, fortitude and laughter. Arnold Morgan really was anyone’s idea of the perfect keeper of America’s front line.

Both the Admiral and General now stood back and watched as Morgan once more stepped up to the chart, this time holding a grainy black-and-white photograph in his left hand while making a tiny drawing on the chart, a small pencil line five miles offshore right on the 20-meter depth line.

“See that?” he said. “That’s the loading dock. Just completed construction. That’s where the big Chinese VLCCs will be landing. The pipeline’s already in, but we have no evidence of trade yet. Pity the sonofabitch is so far from shore, otherwise we could just hit some combustible merchant ship and give ’em Texas City Two. But, as the proprietors of the refinery might put it, *no can do*. So we’ll just have to slam the fucker, bang in the middle of the plant. Then maybe take out the loading dock on the way back, if there’re ships at it.”

“Okay, sir. Sounds good, if a bit tricky. You wanna talk some about the Bassein River hit?”

“Not now, Tim. I’m judging that to be a lot more complicated. We’ll have John Bergstrom in before we finalize. And possibly a couple of his commanders—maybe forty-eight hours. Wednesday morning.”

He saw the two service chiefs out, and then walked slowly back to the chart of the Strait of Hormuz. And he muttered to himself, “They must know that goddamned refinery is vulnerable. They must know there will be some form of retribution if the U.S. finds out they helped lay that minefield. Or maybe they figure we’ll never find out for certain...”

He paused for a full minute. And then he muttered, “Nah, they’re just not that stupid. They must *know* we’ll find out...”

And if that’s the case, he pondered, there’s only one question left: What in the name of Christ are they up to?

072200MAY07.

Flight Deck, USS CONSTELLATION. Strait of Hormuz.

26.30N 56.50E. Speed 30. Course 225.

She was turned along the southwesterly run of the minefield now, the U.S. Navy’s beloved forty-year-old “CONNIE,” plowing forward into the hot wind of this sweltering Arabian night. Right now she was about five miles north of the field, and the area seemed quiet as the Indian Pondicherrys moved steadily about their hazardous business, cutting the mines free and then blowing them on the surface.

But still the howling F-14D Tomcats, courtesy of U.S. fighter wing VF 2—the fabled Bounty Hunters—gunned their aircraft off CONNIE’s 1,000-foot-long flight deck, up and into the black skies that now blanketed the most lethal stretch of ocean in the entire world.

Each pilot wore on his right sleeve the Bounty Hunters' triangular emblem, the yellow delta-winged fighter-bomber on red-white-and-blue stripes. Most of them also sported the jaunty gunslinger patch, the cowboy tomcat leaning on a big D, with the new stitched lettering, *Anytime, Pal*.

And they flew right out on the edge of the envelope, banking in hard over the Iranian coastline and then back out to sea. This really was *Anytime, Pal*, because right now the U.S. Navy meant business, and everyone knew it. One squeak out of an Iranian anti-aircraft battery, one illumination, one suggestion, and that battery would be obliterated by a phalanx of missiles with an accuracy record of around 100 percent.

Navy pilots are used to being accused of "U.S. bullying." But they were not bullies tonight, while the whole world awaited the reopening of the gulf to oil tankers.

Tonight the Navy fliers were the fearless White Knights of the Skies, the way they mostly saw themselves anyhow. And they hurled their Tomcats through the high darkness of Islam, the single most threatening airborne cavalry ever assembled, on a mission to shut down the menace of a known aggressor. *Anytime, Pal*. The patches said it all.

Back on CONNIE's flight deck in the controlled chaos of a hectic night's flying the 22-ton Tomcats were slamming down in batches, because the carrier has to keep making ground downwind, altering course, between landings and takeoffs. Swarms of flight-deck personnel surrounded each aircraft as it thundered in, a team ever ready to rush forward and ram the Sidewinder safety pins into the pylon firing mechanisms. The hot swirling air, stinking of JP-4, burned rubber, searing hot metal and salt water, assaulted everyone's senses as the air boss snapped out commands through the 88,000-ton ship's tannoy system. This was CONNIE's last tour of duty.

Out on the stern, oblivious to the earsplitting shriek of the incoming jets, the duty arresting gear officer, a lieutenant junior grade, sweating in his big fluorescent yellow jacket, was in contact with the hydraulic operators one deck below. The wires were ready to withstand the 75,000-pound force of the Tomcat hitting the deck at 160 knots, the pilot's hand still hard on the throttle just in case the hook missed.

The 28-year-old Lieutenant, Bobby Myers from Ohio, could feel his voice rising now as he snapped down commands to the hydraulic men... "*Stand by for Tomcat one-zero-seven... two minutes.*"

He looked back over the stern, 90 feet above the water, straining to catch the lights of the fighter-bomber. He knew the pilot personally, and, as it did every single time, his chest began to tighten, and his heart was racing. Nothing ever dismisses the nerve-twisting tension that grips the arresting gear officer when a fighter-bomber is on its final flight path. Every arresting gear officer who ever lived, that is.

Bobby had him now, five miles out, and he checked the wires again, checked on his radio phone that the huge hydraulic piston was ready to take the strain in the forthcoming controlled collision between deck and plane.

"*GROOVE!*" he shouted into the phone, the code word for "*She's close, STAND BY!*"

Two miles out now, bucking along in the warm erratic air currents of the gulf, the Tomcat pilot fought to hold her steady, watching the landing lights, always watching the balls of light, an iron grip on the stick. He could see the carrier's stern rise slightly on the swell, and the precision required for the high-speed landing would be measured in inches rather than feet. Every pilot knows he is a split second from death during every carrier landing he makes. One in five Navy pilots dies in the first nine years of his service.

Seconds later Bobby Myers snapped, "*SHORT*"—the critical command for everyone to stand right back away from the machinery.

And now Bobby saw the Tomcat right above, screaming in.

"*RAMP!*" he bellowed, and every single eye on the flight deck was lasered in on the hook stretched out behind. The blast from the jets shimmered in the night air. The ear-shattering din of the jet engines made speech impossible. One mistake now and it would not be just the pilot who died. A pileup on the flight deck could spark a jet-fuel fire that could put the entire ship out of action.

And hundreds of battle-hardened flight-deck technicians, already swarming forward, silently breathed *Thank God*, as the hook swung, and then grabbed the wire, hauling the Tomcat to a standstill. Just as they would all breathe *Thank God* again, one minute from now, as they coaxed yet another F-14D out of the sky to safety, refueled her and prepared her to go again.

So it is, out with the frontline steel fist of the U.S. Navy, where men face danger every minute, where they operate in harm's way every single day, always under orders, always working for the cause. Their rewards are modest, at least financially. But in a sense they have the biggest paychecks of all: not written out on some bank transfer. Written out on their own hearts.

And meanwhile 200 million citizens back home grouse and moan about the rising price of gasoline.

"*Tomcat one-zero-six... one minute... STAND BY!*"

**080600MAY07. USS John F. KENNEDY.
10.00S 137E. Speed 30. Course 270.**

The 88,000-ton carrier was halfway between Pearl Harbor and Diego Garcia, steaming at flank speed through the Arafura Sea south of the Indonesian archipelago, heading for the near-bottomless waters above the Java Trench. They were well through the narrows of the Torres Strait, there was almost no wind off Australia's Northern Territory and it was hotter than hell. BIG JOHN's 280,000-horsepower Westinghouse turbines were working. The giant four-shafter was fully laden with more than 40 fighter-attack F-14A Tomcats, F/A-18C Hornets and a dozen more radar-spotter aircraft, prowlers and ASW squadrons.

The flight wing patches worn by the aviators bore the names of legendary U.S. Navy outfits: the *Black Aces*; old Fighting 14; the *Top Hatters*; and VFA-87, the *Golden Warriors*. There might not yet be a full-scale war raging in the Gulf of Iran, but you'd never have known it watching BIG JOHN, armed to the teeth, driving forward on the second half of her 10,000-mile mission to Jimmy Ramshawe's minefield.

And now 5,000 miles of the Indian Ocean stretched before them. They would be the fifth U.S. CVBG to arrive on station, almost certainly to move north from Diego Garcia immediately, up to the gulf to relieve the CONSTELLATION Group.

On the bridge of the carrier, Rear Admiral Daylan Holt was studying the plot of his group, one cruiser, two destroyers, five frigates, two nuclear submarines and a fleet tanker. At this speed they were burning up fuel, fast. But his orders were clear: *Make all speed to DG and stand by for gulf patrol.*

That was one way to send someone on a 10,000-mile journey across the world. But Admiral Holt was prepared, even though it was difficult to get a handle on how serious things really were in the Strait of Hormuz.

He sipped black coffee in company with his Combat Systems Officer, Lt. Commander Chris Russ, as the sun began to rise blood red out of the ocean over the stern of the massive warship. There was an air of apprehension throughout the carrier, had been since they had cleared Pearl a week ago. The pilots were predictably gung-ho. A bit too gung-ho. And now, for the first time, Lt. Commander Russ posed the question to the Admiral.

“Do you think we might actually have to fight this, sir? I mean, a proper hot war?”

“I think it’s possible but unlikely, Chris. Look at our perceived enemies—Iran, who put down the minefield, and China, who made it possible. Well, for a start, Iran’s not going to fire a shot in anger. They know we could ice their entire country in about twenty minutes. They have not fired yet, and in my opinion will not fire at all.”

“How about the Chinese?”

“They might attack if the action were in the South China Sea where they have their main fleet and we have many, many fewer ships. But they won’t attack in the gulf. They’re too far from home, and anyway they know we’d wipe out their ships in about twenty minutes.”

“That’s a kinda busy twenty minutes, sir,” replied the Lieutenant Commander, grinning.

“That’s a lot better than a kinda dead twenty minutes,” replied the Admiral, not grinning.

**0600. Tuesday, May 8.
HQ SPECWARCOM. Coronado Beach.
San Diego, California.**

Commander Russell Bennett, one of the most highly decorated U.S. Navy SEALs ever to serve in the squadron, was relishing his new job as the senior instructor for combat-ready men.

The ex-Maine lobsterman, lionized in Coronado for his daredevil role as forward commander in a sensational attack on a Chinese jail last year, was back home on the beach, running through the cold surf, driving his men ever onward, before the sun had fought its way above the cliffs.

They’d been out there since 0430 now and some of the newer guys, fresh out of their BUDs course, were finding it tough going. Rusty’s methods were brutal in the

extreme. He parked six Zodiacs a half mile offshore and ordered all 50 of the men into the surf to swim out and get on board. Then he had them drive forward with their paddles, beach the big rubber landing craft, turn it around, and then fight it back out through the crashing breakers, again using paddles only.

One half mile later they all jumped back into the freezing water wearing only swimming shorts and fought their way back to the beach, leaving only the six boat drivers behind. Tired, freezing, still in the dark, the men were then ordered to run four more miles back along the beach to a point where the Zodiacs were again waiting a half mile offshore.

They'd done the exercise twice now, and all they heard was Commander Bennett's voice urging them onward: "*Keep going, son. I'm probably saving your life.*" They were precisely the same words Rusty's own instructors had yelled at him 15 years before. More important, they had been prophetically correct, which was, essentially, why the hickory-tough Rusty Bennett was still breathing, after an operational career that had six times seen him square up and stare down the Grim Reaper. The carrot-haired ex-SEAL combat team leader was just a bit too tough to die. And today he was making sure that also applied to the men he was now training. Every last one of them.

Three times in the past 15 minutes, young SEALs had fallen flat down in the sand, too cold, too exhausted to care. And each time Rusty Bennett had stood above each man and roared abuse, swearing to God he'd blow his head off if he didn't *GET UP AND MOVE FORWARD*.

Two of the men were almost unconscious. One of them was sobbing. But all three of them reached down again, and found more, and then got up and moved forward in a combination of agony and defiance. At the end of the exercise, Commander Bennett took each of them aside and told him quietly, "That's what it's all about, hanging in there when you have nothing left. That's a great job you did right there. I'm proud of you."

Back in the SEALs' headquarters, Commander Bennett was summoned to the office of the SEAL Chief, Admiral John Bergstrom.

"Morning, Rusty," he said. "How do they look?"

"Good, sir. Very good. Six of the veterans are already excellent leaders, and some of the new guys have terrific potential. We got great swimmers, good radio technicians, demolition guys and marksmen. Plus a few obvious hard men."

"Can we get two teams of twelve out of the group for a couple of critical missions?"

"I'm sure we can, sir. I really like what I'm seeing from them. But I wouldn't mind knowing roughly where we're going."

"Well, you and I are leaving for Washington shortly after midnight for a final briefing. We'll be there all day. I guess we'll know then."

"Are we seeing the Big Man, sir?"

"In person."

"Jesus. Are you sure I'm ready for this?"

"You're ready. Just as long as you remember his bark's bad, but his bite's worse... Just kidding. The Admiral loves SEALs. Thinks we're the most important guys in the U.S. armed services. Anyway it's pretty obvious where we're going, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. Middle East. But I just wonder what we're supposed to be doing."

"Probably not public relations. If Arnold Morgan wants us, he wants something either flattened or just plain obliterated. Trust me."

"Hell. I hope it's not the big Iranian Naval yard down on the gulf. It's swarming with military personnel."

"Of course, you're an expert, eh, Rusty?"

"Yessir. A very fair description. Damn place gives me the creeps."

"If I had to guess, I would say it's certainly not Bandar Abbas the Admiral wants to talk about."

"Why not, sir? He said to have two teams of twelve on twenty-four hours battle notice. That's two targets. Separate. Even Arnold Morgan could not possibly think twelve SEALs could take out an entire Naval base, with several thousand men on duty."

"We might have a shot if we went at night!" said Rusty, grinning. "But I agree. He's got something more passive in mind."

John Bergstrom walked across the room to a largescale electronic chart of the ocean along Iran's southeastern coast. He stood staring at it as if checking reference points. And then he muttered, almost inaudibly, "*What about that damn Chinese refinery?*"

"Sorry, sir. I didn't quite get that."

"Oh nothing, Rusty. Just a thought. Let's wait until tomorrow. See you right here tonight zero-zero-thirty. Civilian suit. We're meeting Commander Hunter at the White House."

"Aye, sir."

0859. Wednesday, May 9.

The White House Lawn.

Admiral Morgan turned his head sideways to the wind and stared into the skies to the southeast, searching like an air traffic controller for the big Navy helicopter bringing John Bergstrom and Rusty Bennett in from Andrews Air Base.

He checked his watch, one minute before touchdown, and no sign yet of the U.S. Marines' Super Cobra clattering across the eastern bank of the Potomac.

"If I could see the sonofabitch right now, they'd still be a minute late," he muttered. "Standing out here on the grass like some fucking rose pruner. Goddamned disorganized sailors. Where the hell are they?"

He had to wait only two more minutes. And then he spotted the Marine guided-missile gunship, with its brand-new four-bladed rotor, bearing down on the White House. The pilot swung over the building, banked the helicopter to its port side and dropped gently down onto the landing pad.

Seconds later the loadmaster had opened the passenger door and the U.S. Navy's Emperor SEAL, Admiral John Bergstrom, stepped down into a bright spring morning in the capital. Behind him, dressed in a dark gray suit, with gleaming black shoes, came the powerful figure of Commander Bennett. He wore a white shirt with a dark blue tie. His principal distinguishing feature was pinned on his

left lapel, the combat SEAL's gleaming golden trident. Rusty Bennett's colleagues swear he pinned it on his pajamas each night without fail.

Arnold Morgan walked toward them with a welcoming smile. "Hello, John," he said. "Good to see you again." And he shook the hand of the Commander-in-Chief of SPECWARCOM. And then he turned to the junior officer, who was hanging back in the presence of a legend, and he just said solemnly, "Come and take me by the hand, Commander Bennett. This is a moment to which I have looked forward for a long time."

Rusty walked forward and said quietly, "Admiral Morgan, it's my pleasure to meet you."

And as their hands clasped, the Admiral found his imagination roaming out of control. Before him stood a clean-cut well-presented Naval officer, but in his mind Arnold Morgan saw a warrior, face blackened, machine gun cocked, leading his men out of the water, up the beach, face-to-face with unimaginable danger. He saw in Rusty's deep blue eyes the icy glance of a born leader, a veteran of three brutal SEAL missions, a tiger among men, and he shook his head and said, "Commander, I don't often get a chance to shake the hand of a real hero. I just want you to know I regard it as a great privilege."

Rusty nodded, and said without emphasis, "Thank you, sir. Thank you very much indeed." And in the background he could see the White House, the very citadel of American power, and he wished with all his heart that his widowed father, Jeb Bennett, the Maine lobsterman from Mount Desert, could have seen him right now. Just for a few seconds.

They walked companionably toward the main door to the West Wing, and the agents handed both SEALs special passes before they set off down the corridor to Admiral Morgan's lair. Kathy O'Brien greeted them as they arrived and informed the Admiral that Alan Dixon and General Scannell were waiting inside. She had just received a signal from the base at Quantico that Commander Hunter was in the area and that his helicopter would put down on the White House pad in five minutes, direct from the SEALs' east coast h.q. at Little Creek, Virginia, home of Teams Two, Four and Eight.

Inside the office the introductions were made, principally for the benefit of Rusty. The rest of the officers knew one another. Kathy ordered coffee for everyone but returned almost immediately to announce the arrival of Commander Rick Hunter, the SEAL team leader who had operated under deep cover in a murderous attack on Russian Naval hardware in the late Joe Stalin's northern canals; and who had been in overall command of the attack on the Chinese jail the previous year.

He walked through the door, a tall, hard-muscled warrior, standing 6 feet 4 inches tall and tipping the scales at a zero-body-fat 220 pounds. He was dressed like Rusty in a dark gray suit, with a white shirt and highly polished shoes. Like Rusty, he wore the gleaming golden trident of the combat SEAL on his left lapel.

Admiral Morgan vacated the big chair behind his desk and walked across the room to meet the battle-hardened SEAL leader from the Bluegrass State. He told him, as he had told Rusty, that it was an honor finally to talk to him.

"Sir," said Rick Hunter, "I had no idea you had even heard of me."

“Rick,” said Arnold Morgan, “for me to refer to you as one of the finest combat commanders our Special Forces ever had would be to damn with faint praise. I know who you are, and I know what you have done. Please go over and sit in my chair, behind my desk, and allow me to bring you a cup of probably disgusting coffee. It’s the best I can do.”

Everyone laughed. And the big SEAL went and sat in the Admiral’s chair.

“If you only knew, Commander, how many hours I’ve sat right there, wondering about you, and your missions, and whether you could possibly succeed... Well, you ought to feel right at home, right there. That’s my Rick Hunter worry-myself-to-death seat.”

Admiral Morgan poured coffee for everyone, then directed their attention to the electronic chart he had pulled up on a big screen at the end of the room. It showed the southeast coast of Iran and it was highlighted by three dotted lines, close together, joining the Omani coastal town of Ra’s Qabr al Hindi to a point 20 miles east on the Iranian shore. It stretched like a wall across the strait.

“That the minefield, Arnie?” asked Admiral Bergstrom.

“That’s it. And we should have a pretty-good-size seaway through it in a few more days. The Indian sweepers have done well. We’re looking for a cleared gateway of three or four miles.”

“Tankers start moving this week?”

“We’re not that clear.”

“Okay, boss,” said the SEAL chief. “Lay it on me. What do we hit?”

“Up here, John. Twenty-nine miles to the north. See where it says *Kuhestak*? The new Chinese oil and petrochemical refinery is right there, two miles south of that little town. It’s huge.”

“You want it put out of action?”

“Uh-uh. I want it vaporized.”

“Jesus,” said Rick Hunter.

“What’s the water depth inshore?” asked Rusty Bennett.

“Damn shallow,” replied Admiral Morgan. “We got about five miles under nine feet, the last two miles are under four.”

“Can we get a submarine in close?”

“Probably seventeen miles, then an ASDV into the shallows. The last five miles you have to swim, walk or wallow. Water’s warm. No military presence that we know of. A deserted coastline.”

Commander Hunter nodded. “We got the new ASDV, the one that holds fourteen guys?”

“You have. It’s on board SHARK right now. Two-man crew, twelve SEALs.”

“Range?”

“Sixteen hours at six knots.”

“Will it wait, using zero power? Or come back for the guys later?”

“It’ll wait.”

Commander Hunter nodded again. He turned to Admiral Bergstrom. “Am I going in, sir?”

“Not this time. You’re leading Mission Two. That’s two weeks later. If you agree. You’ve served your time on active duty, as you well know. I’m not ordering you in. But I’d be grateful if you’d answer in the affirmative.”

“But I don’t know the nature of the attack.”

“It’s on a Chinese Naval base in the Bassein River in Burma,” interjected Arnold Morgan. “It’s going to be dangerous, but highly organized. Failure is unthinkable.”

“Well, sir, I’m not too bad at wiping out Chinese military.”

“You’re also the best team leader the SEALs have had since Vietnam, according to John. Except of course for the now-retired Rusty, here. Quite honestly, Commander, I’d be real unhappy with anyone else in charge.”

“Will it be my last active mission, sir?”

“It will. And it will guarantee you make Admiral in the shortest possible time. Admiral Dixon, here, will give you that personal guarantee... Ask him, John.”

“Commander Hunter, will you accept command of Mission Two, the forthcoming attack on the Chinese base in the Bassein River?”

No hesitation. “Affirmative, sir.”

The three Admirals nodded curtly in the time-honored Naval code of recognizing a big decision, well made. And then they turned back to the screen, where John Bergstrom was pointing at the course Shark would steer up to the ops area. Arnold Morgan had already coded in the rendezvous point at 26.36N 56.49E, where the submarine would wait in 180 feet of water, 17 miles southwest of the Chinese refinery.

By now Commander Bennett was assiduously taking notes. Two big blue, yellow-and-white charts had been provided for him and John Bergstrom to take back to Coronado. Rusty had drawn in the lines of the minefield and was now marking water depths.

“That’s a darned long way in those shallows,” he said. “Is there any radar down there?”

“Not that we can see. Certainly no Chinese radar. We detect no military presence whatsoever by the Chinese. Nearest radar is down by the missile sites at the end of the minefield. That’s around thirty miles away. If the guys are kicking in along the surface, even in three feet, there’s no way they’d get picked up.”

“It’s the last coupla miles I’m concerned about,” said Rusty. “Water’s just about ankle deep, then a kinda swamp area, then flat rough sandy terrain. No cover.”

“SEALs can move across that in under twelve minutes,” replied Admiral Morgan. “It’s gotta be ten thousand to one against a towelhead with a radar screen picking anyone up thirty miles away while the guys are going in.”

“It wasn’t that I was so much worried about, sir.”

“Sorry, Commander. How do you mean?”

“My guys can get in,” said Rusty. “I’m more worried about getting them out.”

“Okay, Commander. I have given this thought,” said Admiral Morgan. “Let’s take a worst case. The refinery blows before your guys are clear. Let’s say you did not hit the control tower hard enough, and the nonmilitary guards hit the buttons to their Iranian Navy buddies at Bandar Abbas. That’s nearly fifty miles away. Too far for a patrol boat. Their only shot at catching you is helicopters, and by the time they’ve saddled a couple of them up, that’s twenty minutes. Flight time at one hundred seventy knots is, say, fifteen minutes. By which time you’ve had thirty-five minutes to get into deepish water. It’s pitch-dark, and they gotta find you.

“Right out there I got two guided-missile frigates. Your guys have radios. Those fucking choppers get too close, I’m gonna have them blown right outta the sky and

blame the goddamned refinery explosion. Matter of fact, I might blow 'em right out of the sky on takeoff. Fucking towelheads."

"How about they happen to have a helicopter or two down by the minefield missile sites?"

"Anything moves into the sky anywhere near that minefield, it's toast," growled the Admiral. "Remember, right now the U.S. of A is in sole Naval control of the gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Northern Arabian Sea. No one moves there unless we say so. *NO ONE.*"

"Thank you, sir," said Commander Bennett.

"Anytime, Commander. Glad to be of help." Arnold Morgan smiled, thinly. He was loving this. Talking to real fighting men. Guys who knew something. Proper people.

He gazed at the SEAL, a veteran of more dangerous situations than most people could even imagine. Rusty stood there, still looking at the chart, still writing in his notebook, his bearing upright, his dark moustache perfectly trimmed, his gaze steady.

Arnold Morgan could have talked to him for a week. And at this moment he suddenly asked the SEAL from the coast of Maine, "Commander, may I ask you a question? A rather personal question?"

"Of course, sir."

"When you hit the island in the South China Sea, at the head of your team last year, were you ever afraid?"

"Yessir."

"Did your fear subside once you got into action?"

"Nossir. I was afraid all the time."

"Did any of your men realize that?"

"Nossir."

"Were they afraid?"

"Yessir."

"Did anyone give in to his worst fears?"

"Nossir."

"How do you know?"

"Because they all wear the trident, sir. We don't give in to anything."

Arnold Morgan just nodded and said, "Of course."

It was plain that the Admiral was quite moved by the short conversation, and John Bergstrom stepped in and said, "Rusty, you will be going on the mission, I believe? Not into combat, but you are going to be there?"

"Yessir. I was unclear before what it entailed. I would like overall command, until they go in. Then I'll hand over to the Team Leader. I'll go with them in the submarine as far as the rendezvous point. That way I'll be close if something should...well...happen. Something... er... unexpected, I mean. I'd like your permission for that, sir."

"You have it, Commander."

Admiral Morgan said now that he considered that the insertion of the SEALs, plus the getaway, was clear to everyone and that it was time to take a look at the refinery itself. He clicked off the electronic chart and replaced it with an excellent

color transparency, 30 inches by 24, taken by satellite of China's vast new petrochemical plant on the Iranian coast.

He told them it had cost close to \$2 billion to build and would generate product worth more than \$10 million a day. It refined petrol, kerosene, jet fuel, heavy fuel oil, liquefied petroleum gas, tar and sulphur. After just a couple of months operational, it was refining 250,000 barrels a day.

"You guys hit this hard, there's gonna be a lot of very, very angry Chinamen running around. It's a big place with a lot of pipes and towers and valves. However, it's no good just blowing holes in things. Busted pipes and bent towers can be shut off and repaired, with little lasting harm done. And that's not our objective. We intend to blow this place sky-high, and right here I'm looking for ignition, right? Pure combustion."

"No bullshit," said Admiral Dixon, in an undisguised parody of Arnold Morgan's favorite phrase.

"Precisely, CNO," confirmed the National Security Chief. "No bullshit."

He walked back to his desk, picked up his 36-inch-long steel ruler and came back to the screen. "Right," he said. "I'm going to stand off to the side here so you can all see the area I'm referring to. That way Rusty, here, can use a yellow marker on one of these prints I had done."

"Okay, now I'm assuming you are not all experts on refining, and I'm going to explain what you are looking for. By the way, twenty-four hours ago I knew none of this, but I do now because I had Jack Smith come down and explain it to me."

"I have had notes on this prepared for everyone to take back and study, but I do want to go over it. For a start, we should be clear: a refinery converts crude oil—in this case from Kazakhstan—into a whole range of products. The crude is really just a combination of hydrocarbons that are separated inside the refinery into various groups, or fractions. It's actually called *separation, conversion and chemical treatment*. The stuff basically gets distilled, but it's complicated because some fractions vaporize, or boil, at very different temperatures—gasoline at seventy-five Fahrenheit, some heavy fuel oils at six hundred Fahrenheit. They also condense at different temperatures."

"What happens is the crude gets pumped via pipes, through a furnace, which heats it to maybe seven hundred twenty-five Fahrenheit. The resulting mixture of gas and liquids then passes into a vertical steel cylinder, called a fractioning tower, or a bubbling tower."

"This little bastard is what we're after. Because inside that tower we got a lot of shit happening—the heavy fuels condense in the lower section, light fractions like gasoline and kerosene condense in the middle and upper sections. The liquids, all highly inflammable, are collected in trays and drawn by pipes along the sides of the tower. Some fractions never even cool enough to condense, and these get passed out through the top of the tower into a vapor recovery unit."

"Right here I'm talking high-test incendiary. One of these towers goes up because of a bomb stuck on its lower casing, can you imagine? It blows the heavy fuel oil into a blizzard of fire that hits gasoline, kerosene and then liquefied gas in the vapor unit. That tower, as far as you're concerned, is potentially one of the world's biggest fireworks."

He rapped the screen with his ruler... "See this group here at the north end? There're ten towers... as far as I can see, the biggest maybe a hundred feet high... We wanna bomb this one... this one... and this one, out here on the right by these holding tanks. According to Jack, they're full of gasoline. I'd say if the towers blow, they'll take the storage tanks with 'em. They might even take the entire local landscape, so I'd prefer you guys to be well clear before you detonate."

He paused for effect. But no one spoke. So he pressed on. "This tall building here," said Admiral Morgan, "is the control center. It is essential that you hit this. And hit it hard. Because in there they can turn off the flow of oil through literally miles of pipeline. We don't want that. We want that stuff flowing in, feeding the fire, keeping it raging."

"And finally we come to this group of holding tanks. Jack says this is where they store thousands of tons of deep-frozen liquefied natural gas. Looks like there're around thirty of them, and they are strategically well placed from our point of view. They are nowhere near the towers, and far from the control center, so we're not wasting any of our explosive assets. You can see from this picture the tanks are huge, maybe fifty feet high and forty feet in diameter. I'd guess if we hit five of them, that'd send the rest of them up. It would also give us a triangle of fire and explosions, the towers, the control center and the holding tanks, which will certainly take out this middle storage area that lies between them."

He looked at his audience and noticed that he still had their attention. "Gentlemen," he said, "out here on the northwest of the plant you can see yet another large grouping of tanks. Jack thinks this is the chemical area, maybe a lot of ammonium nitrate for fertilizer. I realize that you are going to be shorthanded, only twelve of you can go in... but if you found yourselves with some spare time, with a little spare explosives, you could do a lot of damage out there with the stuff that once blew up Texas City."

"Arnold," interrupted Admiral Bergstrom, "were you proposing to nail down the entire plan here for us to go away and...er...well, refine?"

"Absolutely not, John. I'm done. I just wanted us to be singing from the same hymnbook for the seaward insertion and getaway. And for the extent of the mission, the amount of TNT required and the main targets you must attack. The number of SEALs going in is dictated by the size of the ASDV. The rest is up to you, how and when you break through this high wire fence to get in, how you deal with possible alarms and guards. I'll have any and all information from Fort Meade fed into Coronado at all times during the next few days. And the Navy will be ordered to supply *anything* requested by either Commander Hunter or Commander Bennett during the missions. By that I mean, of course, heavy backup firepower. Whatever it takes."

"Okay, Arnold. Now, how about the Bassein River? Mission Two?"

"I'm in the process of taking some heavy-duty advice on that, John. But I have prepared charts for you and Rick to take back to California. I've also got a few godawful black-and-white pictures of the place, but NRO are working on some better, clearer stuff, which I'll get to you."

"This whole operation is strictly Navy. That's why Alan Dixon is taking overall command of it personally. Especially during this extremely classified stage. He and I will be in constant communication, but I'd prefer that you two work directly

together. Depending on the advice we get, we may have to change tactics. I just don't want to get into anything that might be obsolete next Thursday."

"Understood, sir."

By 1145 the meeting was over. The three SEALs declined lunch and left to board their helicopter immediately: White House lawn to Andrews Air Base—Andrews direct to San Diego. Military aircraft. As Admiral Morgan would have phrased it, "No bullshit."

**1000 (local). Thursday, May 10.
Headquarters, Eastern Fleet.
Ningbo, Zhejiang Province.**

Admiral Zhang was puzzled. Here was the United States with the biggest concentration of Naval power assembled since the war with Iraq seventeen years ago, and they had made absolutely no communication with either of the nations that laid down the minefield in the first place.

"You think they may not know who the culprits were?" he asked the C-in-C, Admiral Zu Jicai.

"They know," he replied. "They saw our warships down there. Indeed, they just crippled our leading destroyer. At least I think they did. No proof, of course."

"Well, if that's the case we have a rather strange silent war going on, wouldn't you say? Two of the most powerful nations, plus the guardians of the old Persian Gulf, grappling in some three-way sumo headlock without one word being spoken by the protagonists."

"And, unhappily, no referee," said Admiral Zu.

"It's bizarre. The Americans have uttered no formal protest about the minefield. But they have moved a staggering lineup of Naval power into the area, and it's standing there like that ridiculous ape they all admire so much... What's his name? Hong Kong?... No, Emperor Kong... King Kong, that's him... fists flailing, but no one to strike."

Admiral Zu chuckled. "The trouble with the Americans is they always have a hidden agenda. We cannot drop our guard. And we don't want our warships anywhere near them."

"You think they have an agenda for striking back at us? We have, after all, been responsible for the total destruction of four extremely expensive oil tankers."

"It's hard to know, Jicai. I don't think they would come after us and attack one of our cities, or even a Naval base. So what's left?"

"Well, we do have a very large oil refinery in Iran."

"Oh, yes. But the Americans won't attack that. They revere money too much, and oil is currently the world's most precious commodity. They might one day try to buy shares in it, but they wouldn't destroy it. That would just turn them into reckless cowboys like Saddam Hussein, ignoring the ecology of the region, not to mention a lot of civilian deaths."

"Nonetheless, Yushu, I think we should strengthen the guard at the refinery, perhaps borrow some of those attack dogs the Navy has at Bandar Abbas."

“It certainly could not be harmful, Jicai. And I agree with you. We ought not to underestimate the innate viciousness of those men in the Pentagon.”

“Even if, for the moment, their actual agenda remains hidden, Yushu.”

“As indeed does ours, my Jicai.”

Chapter 6

101200MAY07. USS JOHN F. KENNEDY. 10.40S 146E.

On the face of it, BIG JOHN was not making much progress. The giant carrier was back in warm waters 200 miles off the Australian state of Queensland, having passed once more through the narrows of the Torres Strait. There was still no wind, they were still running at flank speed and it was still hotter than hell. The only difference from one week ago was they were heading east, rather than west. BIG JOHN had been diverted.

No one had given a reason. There was just a terse signal from the Third Fleet HQ in San Diego to come about and head right back the way they had come. Forget Diego Garcia. Make instead for the Pacific, steer east of New Guinea and head on north, taking up station off the east coast of Taiwan.

There was a widespread suspicion on board that China must as usual have been prowling around too close to the independent island in which the USA had such a major investment, and for which she was pledged to fight, very nearly, to the death.

However, the truth was more mundane. The Nimitz-Class carrier RONALD REAGAN, just out of major overhaul in the San Diego yards, was simply judged to be in need of a considerably longer workup period than one week.

And with CONSTELLATION, TRUMAN, STENNIS and ROOSEVELT all in the Hormuz area, it was decided the REAGAN ought to take the proper time to get into front-line shape, and that the JFK could perfectly easily swing around and make the Taiwan patrol, leaving the other four CVBGs to take care of the oil problems at the gateway to the gulf.

Those four battle groups packed enough of a punch to deal with any problem in the entire history of the planet. The mere presence of CONSTELLATION and TRUMAN had frightened away the Iranians, the Chinese and anyone else wandering around trying to make a buck.

Which still left BIG JOHN thundering along toward the Coral Sea, with everyone sweating themselves half to death, wondering what the hell the Chinese had done, and what indeed the hell they had done to deserve making this lunatic circular route south of Indonesia, in seas that were of no interest to anyone.

**0800. Thursday, May 10.
U.S. Navy Base, Coronado.**

Even in the shadowy, unlit inner sanctum of SPECWARCOM, this was as secret as it gets. Deep in one of Coronado's underground ops rooms, behind locked doors and armed guards, twenty-four handpicked Navy SEALs were undergoing a two-day briefing by three of the toughest men who ever wore combat boots: Admiral John Bergstrom, Commander Rick Hunter and Commander Rusty Bennett.

The task before them was relatively compact by SEAL standards—the destruction of two foreign installations, one of them loosely guarded. But the overall intent of the operation was Herculean... to drive the Republic of China out of the Gulf of Iran, the Strait of Hormuz, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and, in particular, the Bay of Bengal. In that precise order.

Twenty-four members of America's most elite, ruthless Special Forces, against the collective will and determination of 1.3 billion Chinese citizens, and their 300,000-strong Navy. The odds, by any standards, were not in any way promising. For the Chinese, that is.

In fact there was a total of 28 battle-ready SEALs in the ops room, counting four "spares" should anyone be injured. Commander Hunter himself was one of the main group, and would personally lead in his team of 12 on Mission Two.

Right now Commander Bennett was going over the initial insertion of troops, the final four or five miles that Assault Team One would swim/wade, en route to the sprawling Chinese refinery on the shores of Hormuz. Before him was the chart of the shallow waters all along the beaches.

"Well, guys," he said, in the SEALs' usual informal method of command, "you can all see these depths... if you're lucky, the ASDV will get in to within four miles, but this damn chart is obviously not reliable... if the submarine can make it right in here to the ten-meter line, that's about the best you can hope for... that'll be a three-mile swim in warm water not more than nine feet deep.

"Then it looks like you may have to wade the last mile. But the good news is there is no formal military surveillance. We've swept and surveyed it thoroughly and found nothing. The nearest foreign military is thirty miles away. Also you have tremendous cover right offshore, a U.S. Navy presence that for the past couple of weeks has plainly frightened everyone else to death."

Rusty paused and asked for questions. There were none. And now he flicked off the chart of the seaward approaches and zoomed in on the Chinese refinery. "Right here I want you to start taking notes," he said. "Each of you will be provided with a clear ten-by-eight print of the objective you see on the screen. And obviously you will make your approach from the west, through this marshy area, up the beach and across these sand dunes. You'll see from the satellite shots, there is cover in here, within four hundred yards of the perimeter fence, and that's important.

"Because we want you to make two separate entries. First night, you'll reach the perimeter fence at around midnight. I want you to cut it cleanly on three sides, a gap big enough for two men at a time to go through. I want a team of four, each armed with ordnance, to go to work right away on this near group of storage tanks."

He pointed at what looked like a cluster of 28 giant white tin cans, 30 feet high, 60 feet in diameter. "I want you to place the explosives at the base of three of these," he said. "They're made of cast concrete, with steel casing on the outside.

Each one is full of just-refined petroleum—see this pipeline? ... You can follow it due west and then pick it up out near the new offshore loading bay. It's gotta be gasoline, which, as you know, burns up pretty good.

"This is not a time-consuming task. I'm talking twenty minutes' work, maximum, from the time you get in through the wire. Of course, if you should be caught or attacked, the entire mission is canceled."

Rusty paused again, took a long swig of iced water, and proceeded. "Three more of you will take care of cutting the wire on the outer fence, and then folding and clipping it back into position at the conclusion of the first night ops. That team will also be responsible for observing and avoiding guard patrols. For obvious reasons we do not want to be detected, because our main assault will be on the following night... Questions?"

"How many bombs do we carry in, sir?"

"Six for the holding tanks, three for each of the two groups. Three for the towers, which could be overkill since I suspect one would blow the hell out of ten square miles of oil pipelines. And three more for the control center, two ground level, one higher up if possible. If there's time you'll need another couple for the petrochemical area, but I realize there may not be. That's a total of fourteen—one each for most of you. However, three mines go in through the wire the first night, eleven the second.

"I know that's a lot to do, with your own personal weapons, plus the Draegers, the attack boards and the detonation kit, but it's not that bad, except for the long wade-in through the shallows."

"Are we taking in any heavy weapons, in case we get into real trouble?"

"No. Nothing real big. If anything unexpected happens, you're one radio shout from help. We'll have helicopters ready to take off from CONSTELLATION at one minute's notice, get you the hell outta there."

"How about the goddamned Iranians get helos up if we're detected?"

"Anything takes off from any Iranian military or Navy base, we take it out instantly. As far as I'm concerned, your safety is not an issue. You're protected by the heaviest front-line muscle we have... Danny, it's secrecy we're interested in. Just don't get detected."

"Okay, sir," replied Lt. Dan Conway, another decorated veteran of the South China Sea operation last year. "Softly softly, catchee Chinese monkey."

"Never mind Chinese monkey, sir. How about Chinese woofers—attack dogs? If they've got Dobermans or shepherds, we'd have to shoot them or they'll try to tear us to pieces... we'd be into a goddamned uproar at best."

"Right now we've seen no evidence of any guard dogs in the refinery. In fact, we've not even located formal guard patrols. Langley tells us there are no guard dogs. However, I agree we should consider the matter, because one damned dog going berserk and barking like hell could wreck the secrecy of the operation. Which would not be fatal, because our main objective is destruction. But we would very much like to get in, and out, unseen and unknown."

"If we shoot any dogs, they gotta know we're in there, right?"

"Correct. But we might find a way to silence a couple of Dobermans without killing them, if we were unlucky enough to run into a couple on the first night. Second night doesn't matter so much, since I don't plan any survivors."

The intricate details of the SEAL attacks wore on through the whole of that Thursday, and, after dinner, into the night. They reconvened on Friday morning, and concluded late in the afternoon, each man now fully acquainted with his task and how to carry it out to the letter. No one ever suggested it was going to be easy.

0930. Saturday, May 12.
200 miles west of San Diego.
30,000 feet altitude.

The huge U.S. Navy Galaxy, which carried the SEAL assault teams, was making 400 knots above the Pacific, bound for Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. After a short refueling stop there and the unloading of several tons of marine spares, the remainder of the 13,000-mile journey to America's Indian Ocean base at Diego Garcia would be nonstop.

The SEALs sat together in the rear of the aircraft, their personal gear stowed in packing cases with the rest of the combat equipment they would haul into the Chinese oil refinery. Each man had carefully packed his flexible, custom-made neoprene wet suit. His big SEAL flippers, for extra speed, were also custom-made. On the instep of each one was the lifetime identification number awarded to him after passing the BUD/S course.

All of them had packed two modern scuba-diver's masks, the bright Day-Glo colors for amateurs carefully obscured by jet-black water-resistant tape. The attack boards, which the lead swimmers would use on the swim-in, had been carefully stowed. To a marauding SEAL, this piece of equipment represents almost certain life or death.

The leader holds it with both hands out in front of him, his eyes constantly flicking between compass and small clock, neither of which betrays even a glint. No SEAL ever goes into the water wearing a watch, for fear a shaft of light off its bright metal casing might reflect back and alert a sentry or a harbor-wall lookout.

Thus the leader goes forward, kicking with his big flippers, counting between each forward thrust—KICK-TWO-THREE-FOUR-FIVE... KICK-TWO-THREE-FOUR-FIVE. Five-second intervals, 10 feet of distance covered every time, 100 feet in 50 seconds, 1,000 feet in a little over eight minutes, 1,000 yards in 25 minutes, a mile in 45 minutes, three miles in two and a quarter hours.

It was plainly critical that they get the ASDV as close inshore as possible. A two-hour-plus swim, even at a quiet steady pace, even by the iron men from Coronado, is a strength-sapping exercise, and they would need high-energy food, water and a half-hour rest before moving in to their target.

There were a dozen SEALs among the group with combat experience. Several of these men had made a swim-in before. They all knew the feeling of tiredness in the water. But they all knew they could dig deep and overcome that. The new ground for all of them would be the last mile, when it was too shallow to swim, possibly too tiring to wade fast carrying a lot of gear, including the flippers.

The twelve-man assault team for the attack on the refinery was essentially one and a half SEAL squads, from Group One, Coronado, the numbers being governed by the number of men who could fit into the ASDV. They would be led by the near-

legendary combat SEAL Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer, from the seaport of Marblehead, Massachusetts. Ray had taken part in two of the most lethal peacetime SEAL missions ever mounted, a submarine attack deep in the interior of northern Russia and the harrowing assault on the Chinese jail the previous year, for which he had been highly decorated.

In SEAL tradition, he was not required to accept another order to go into combat. But there was no need for any order. Lieutenant Commander Schaeffer not only volunteered; he insisted, and his old boss Rick Hunter was delighted to have him aboard. The attack on the refinery would be Ray's first, and last, overall field command, before he returned to the East Coast as a senior BUD/S instructor at Little Creek, Virginia.

Ray was eminently qualified for this command. Aside from his experience both under fire and undercover, he was a superb navigator and an expert seaman and yachtsman. He was the son of a sea captain and former platoon middleweight boxing champion.

He was not as big as Rick Hunter, nor as brute-force strong. But then neither was anyone else. But Ray Schaeffer was an ice-cold operator, ruthless with a knife, deadly with any firearm and, under attack, a trained, merciless killer. His men would follow him into hell.

His 2 I/C would be Lt. Dan Conway, from Connecticut, who had performed with highest distinction in the attack on the Chinese jail. He was thirty now, a tall dark-haired demolition expert from the submarine base town of New London. He'd finished in first place after the BUD/S "Hell Week," the murderous SEAL indoctrination that breaks one in two of the applicants.

A superb athlete, Dan had very nearly gone for a career in professional baseball, but Annapolis beat out Fen-way Park for his services, and the ex-college all-star catcher had never looked back. Everyone knew he was destined for high office in the Navy SEALs, and his promotion to Lt. Commander after this mission in the Hormuz Strait was a foregone conclusion.

One other Lieutenant would be included in the first group, the 28-year-old Virginian John Nathan, serving on his first combat mission. John, the son of a prosperous Richmond travel agent, had elected to become a SEAL specialist in high explosives and their various detonators. He was thus in overall charge of the eleven limpet mines, now stowed in the hold of the giant Navy freighter. Six of them, with specially aimed charges, would be attached to the massive holding tanks in the gasoline and petrochemical areas—another three to the bases of the 100-foot-high steel bubble towers that separated the crude. All eleven were fitted with backpack straps for the swim-in, and large magnets to grip the target surface.

John Nathan had sat in on the meeting with Admiral Bergstrom and Commanders Bennett and Hunter while they discussed tactics to take out the Control Center. At first the Admiral had toyed with a plan to hit the center with Mk 138 satchel bombs: just hurl them through the windows and run like hell for the fence, right at the last minute, leaving the Chinese to deal with the chaos for a couple of hours before the main charges went off and, hopefully, blew the place to pieces. The destruction of the Control Center would, of course, render it nearly

impossible to turn off the valves and isolators that regulated the flow of crude oil through the main pipelines.

But Rusty was skeptical of this strategy. The SEAL leader from Maine thought the explosion in the Control Center would cause the Chinese instantly to summon assistance from the Iranian base at Bandar Abbas to conduct a thorough search of the entire refinery. It would be, said Rusty, a search that would surely reveal the limpet mines on the tanks and towers. "They'd only need to find one," he said, "and they'd go through the place, searching every square inch until they found the rest."

In his opinion, that would be "kinda silly."

No, the Control Center would have to go off bang with all the other stuff, using a delayed charge of a couple of hours to give the SEALs time to get clear, out into the deep water. John Nathan recommended the plastic explosive C4, which looks like modeling clay and can be made into any shape. It works off an M-60 time fuse lighter, which burns through regular green plastic cord loaded with gunpowder at around one foot per 40 seconds. John preferred this fuse because it's a spring-loaded pin like a shotgun, no matches, no bright light, and extremely quiet, just a dull thud. Also there was a new timing device that could delay it several hours, and in John Nathan's experience it was just about 100 percent reliable.

Final details for the second SEAL mission, to the Bassein Delta, were not yet finalized, but all the necessary fuses, plastic explosives, mines and detonators were loaded into the Galaxy for storage at Diego Garcia. There was enough C4 alone in the hold to "blow up half the world," according to John Nathan, who carried with him the complete list of ordnance throughout the long flight.

"Something combustible hits this baby," he said, in his deep Virginian drawl, "guess we'd wobble the goddamned rings of Saturn."

Nathan had started off his Navy career as a navigation officer in a frigate, and still liked to pontificate about astronomy, the universe and the solar system. The heavy-set, fair-haired southerner answered to the nickname of Clouds, which everyone thought was hysterical, given its obvious proximity to his present field of expertise, with a progression to the word *mushroom*.

Sitting right next to Clouds, on the rear bench, was another southerner, Petty Officer Ryan Combs, from North Carolina. He was a tall, athletic outdoorsman, expert with a hunting gun and a fishing rod. Ryan was only 26, but he was a tremendous swimmer and as good with a machine gun as anyone on the Coronado Base. He could handle the 500-rounds-a-minute M-60E4 single-handedly, and he would carry it under the wire into the Chinese refinery. Commander Bennett had personally requested his appointment to the SEAL combat mission on the shores of Iran. It would be Ryan's first.

Rusty had also requested personally the big, beefy Pennsylvanian Rob Cafiero, the platoon's heavyweight boxing champion, who was as big and almost as strong as Commander Hunter himself. Rob was a mild-mannered giant, with dark, close-cut hair and not an ounce of fat on his 220-pound frame. At 32 he had made Chief Petty Officer, but Rob was ambitious and was studying to take a commission as soon as possible. Like Lt. Nathan, he was an expert in high explosives, but his best field of expertise was unarmed combat. He was a veteran of the conflict in the mountains of Kosovo.

These were the five key players in the 12-man assault force that would slide into the warm shallows along the coast of Iran fewer than five days from then.

**111600MAY07. USS SHARK with HARRY S. TRUMAN CVBG.
South of the Hormuz minefield.**

Lieutenant Commander Dan Headley could not make up his mind whether he was being trivial or not. The new orders had arrived that Friday night, while he and the CO had been together in the control room. Dan had read them out to the Commander, whose comment had been, at best, vague.

The orders specified a critical new mission, the insertion of a SEAL team, a precision task that always heightens tension on a submarine. But Commander Reid had merely said, "I really must take my shoes off." And then had proceeded to do so.

Lieutenant Commander Headley had thus found himself for the first time in his life next to a commanding officer who was standing in the control room in his socks.

It wasn't much. But it was new. And Dan Headley did not really do new. He was a devotee of the tried-and-tested ways of the United States Navy. He liked and expected his fellow officers to act in a predictable, cautious, but determined way: though sometimes with an added dash of daring, the way most senior warship officers are trained to view an often hostile world.

He particularly liked his commanding officer to react in a calculated manner. *I really must take my shoes off.*

"Jesus Christ," muttered Dan.

The trouble was, he could not get it out of his mind, though he knew it to be insignificant. The CO had swiftly returned to normal, even suggested they have a private talk about the insertion later in the afternoon. But he had left without really acknowledging the seriousness of the forthcoming Black Op the following Tuesday night.

Dan Headley found it curiously disconcerting. And now, as the submarine cruised slowly at periscope depth, 20 miles off the port bow of the HARRY S TRUMAN, he made his way down to the confined privacy of the Commander's personal cabin and tapped on the door.

"Come in, XO," called the CO. "I've got us some coffee. Let me pour you a cup."

"Thank you, sir," said Dan, heading for the second chair at the little desk, and noticing for the first time a small framed print hung on the wall, a portrait really, just a head and shoulders of someone who was obviously an eighteenth-century nobleman.

While the CO splashed the hot, black coffee into their mugs, Dan Headley leaned over and took a closer look at the little portrait. The gentleman wore a tricorne hat, with a sash across his chest. Beneath the picture were the words *L'Amiral, le Comte de Villeneuve.*

Dan found that unusual, and he said cheerfully, "Nice little picture, sir. But why a French admiral?"

“Oh, you noticed that? It belonged to my grandmother. She was French, you know... my mother’s mother. Lived in a little town called Grasse in the south of France, up in the hills behind Cannes... I went there a coupla times as a kid. Pretty part of the world.”

“Yessir. I was in Nice once, just along the coast. It was crowded, but kinda warm and cheerful... my dad and I went together, trying to buy a racehorse...little provincial meet down there in the spring....”

“I didn’t know that was horse-racing country.”

“It’s not really, sir. But they have a meeting down there before the weather gets warm farther north in Paris. We went especially to buy back a mare we’d sold as a yearling. She’d won about four races, one at Longchamp.”

“Long way to go to buy a horse.”

“Yessir. But she was from a family that’d been real fast back in Kentucky. My daddy’s the senior stud groom on a very big farm out there, and the owner just wanted her back as a broodmare.”

“Did you get her?”

“Yeah, we got her. Probably paid too much, what with the shipping and all. But when Mr. Bart Hunter—that’s my daddy’s boss—wants a mare, he’ll usually pay the price.”

“Was she worth it?”

“Not really. She never bred a stakes horse. But one of her daughters was very good, produced a couple of hotshot milers in New York. Then her next foal, by a top stallion called Storm Cat, fetched \$3 million at the Keeneland sales. He couldn’t run worth a damn, but I guess that sale probably quadrupled ole Bart’s money in the end.”

“I find that very interesting, Dan. The way the talent of a fine family just keeps coming back, sometimes skipping a generation, but still hanging in there, ready to surface.”

“That’s the way it’s always been in the horse-breeding business, sir.”

“And it’s not a whole lot different with people, if I’m any judge,” replied Commander Reid.

“I’m not sure that’s altogether politically correct, sir...breeding people’s a tricky subject—aren’t we all supposed to be born equal?”

“Believe that, XO, and you’ll believe anything.”

“You got any hotshot ancestors yourself, sir?”

“Well, we never really delved into it, but I certainly have some deep connections with the French Navy. Very deep.”

“Not Admiral Villeneuve?”

“*Non.*” Commander Reid paused, almost theatrically raising his head. “We have a connection to the man who effectively won the American Revolution, Comte François-Joseph de Grasse, victor of the Battle of the Chesapeake.”

Commander Reid dipped his head, as if in deference to the memory of the French Admiral who had held off the British fleet at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay on September 5, 1781.

“Hey, that’s really something, sir,” said Dan. “Was your grandma named de Grasse?”

“Oh no, the family of François-Joseph merely adopted that title, and named themselves after the town.”

“Good idea, eh, sir? We get those SEALs in, and then out of Iran, I might do the same. How about Lieutenant Commander Dan of Lexington?”

Commander Reid never even cracked a smile. Le Comte de Grasse was plainly a man about whom he did not make jokes.

And this Friday afternoon was plainly a time when he did not make plans. The two men finished their coffee more or less in silence, and the CO suggested a more formal planning meeting at 1100 the next day.

The new XO left with two unimportant, but nagging, questions in his mind. One, what was this “*NON*” crap all about? And, two, what the hell was the CO of a U.S. attack submarine doing with a picture of the ludicrous Admiral Villeneuve on the wall? This was a man who had narrowly escaped the annihilation of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile, and then commanded the new fleet at the absolute catastrophe of the Battle of Trafalgar, where he was taken prisoner, escorted to England and six months later committed suicide.

Dan Headley walked back to the control room confirming to himself that he was a loyal XO, resolved to support his immediate boss under any and all circumstances. But in his deepest, most private, thoughts it occurred to him that *this Reid weirdo might be a half-dozen cannonballs short of a broadside.*

**0400. Monday, May 14.
U.S. Navy Base. Diego Garcia.
Indian Ocean.**

The Galaxy freighter came thundering onto the runway in the small hours of the morning, 34 hours after having left the North Island Air Base in San Diego. Most of the men had slept during the second half of the journey, from Pearl Harbor, but they were all tired, in need of a stretch; and the stifling heat of the island, only 400 miles south of the equator, took them by surprise.

Unlike most arriving passengers after a trans-Pacific journey, the SEALs had to supervise their own cargo. Crates that were accompanying them on the next leg of their journey, up to the flight deck of the HARRY S TRUMAN, 2,600 miles to the north, had to be carefully separated for reloading, while the rest of the explosives, which would ultimately be used at the far eastern end of the Indian Ocean, were taken on fork-lift loaders to the main storage area.

Lieutenant John Nathan and Commander Hunter took care of this task, and Rusty Bennett checked off the matériel being reloaded into a much smaller aircraft for that afternoon’s flight up to the carrier.

They were escorted to specially prepared quarters, 15 small rooms set aside for the men who were going to work in Iran, 14 more for those who were waiting in Diego Garcia for their orders to embark for the Bassein River.

The SEALs hung around for only a half hour, during which time they demolished ham, cheese and chicken sandwiches and several gallons of sweet decaffeinated coffee. By 0600 they were all asleep, and would remain so until 1300, when they would eat a major lunch of New York sirloin steak, eggs and

spinach, as much protein as they could pile in, before boarding the aircraft for the northern Arabian Sea.

That journey was of almost seven hours' duration, and the Navy pilot put down on the TRUMAN's deck in a light subtropical sou'wester just before 2200 on that same Monday night.

The carrier was busy that evening, and the howling Tomcats were coming in, in clusters every two minutes. The Admiral had ordered a separate crew to disembark the Special Forces fast and then move their gear down to the hangar for storage, before it would be ferried with the SEALs by helicopter to USS Shark, which would be waiting a half mile off their port beam at 1600 the next day, Tuesday, May 15.

Their ranks were thinned out now. Commander Bennett and Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer supervised the opening of the crates and removing of the personal kit each SEAL would require before the short 30-mile submarine run up to the rendezvous point. Lieutenant John Nathan took care of the separate interior boxes that contained the weapons, breathing apparatus and attack boards, before carefully marking the containers of high explosives that would take down the Chinese oil refinery.

Forty minutes later, the three officers joined their colleagues in a corner of the huge ship's dining room for what carrier men call MIDRATS (midwatch rations). Tonight they ate specially prepared Spanish omelettes, french fries and salad, and they all ate together, no separation of officers and men. SEALs always ignore this distinction, particularly on the eve of a truly lethal operation, such as this one might very well become.

They retired to bed soon after midnight, but for most of them it was a fitful night. The first four hours of sleep were easy because of general tiredness after the endless journey. But by 0400 the SEALs were awake, each man wondering what the next 24 hours would hold for him. The younger first-mission SEALs would not sleep again this night, and even the veteran Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer was anxious. He climbed out of bed and walked around his room, flexing his muscles, as if taking comfort from his enormous strength. But the mission weighed heavily upon him, and he could not take his mind off the warm shallows through which he must lead his men in the darkness of the following night.

Commander Bennett was sharing a bigger cabin with Lt. John Nathan, and the younger man was unable to sleep. Three times he stood up and walked over to the door, finally pulling on a sweater, waking Rusty and leaving to find a cup of coffee. Fortunately a big carrier never sleeps, and the dining room was full, mostly of Navy fliers. By some bush telegraph they seemed to know that the broad-shouldered young stranger in the corner nursing coffee in a plastic cup was one of the SEALs going in later that day.

None of them were strangers to fear and daring, but there is a certain aura surrounding a combat SEAL on the brink of a mission, and no one approached him. No one, that is, until a cheerful 24-year-old pilot from Florida, still in his flying jacket, showed up. He collected a tall glass of ice-cold milk and walked straight over to Lt. Nathan's table, stuck out his hand and announced, "Hey, how you doin'? I'm Steve Ghutzman."

The SEAL explosives chief looked up and nodded. He shook hands and said, "Hi, Clouds Nathan."

He felt awkward, sitting there in the middle of the night with this robust stranger, but in truth he was glad of the company. Steve swiftly regaled him with details of the hot, gusting southwest wind out there. "You don't wanna take your eye off the ball tonight, I'm telling you. The air's like a goddamned switchback coming in... it wouldn't be no trouble to slam one of them Tomcats bang into the ass of this fucking airfield. Gotta stay right on top of it, yessir."

Steve was unable to distinguish the rank and station of his new companion, and he was talking fast, in the slightly high-adrenaline way Navy pilots do after a tense landing on a flight deck. But he was a nice guy, born a mile from the runway at the Navy air base in Pensacola, a flier all his career, just like his father before him.

He inhaled the milk, got up to get another glass and brought back another cup of coffee for his new buddy. Winding down a little, he asked finally, "What's that first name of yours? I didn't quite catch it."

"Oh it's just a nickname. The guys all call me Clouds because I'm interested in astronomy. I used to be a navigator. I got kinda used to it."

"Hey, that's cool. Clouds... I love it. You just arrived? Didn't see you around before."

"Yeah, I'm pretty new. Got in a while before midnight. And we'll be gone by fifteen hundred."

Steve Ghutzman hesitated. Then he dropped his lower jaw in mock astonishment. "*H-O-L-E-E-E SHIT!*" he said. "You're one of 'em, right?"

"Guess so," said Lt. Nathan, smiling. "Guess I'm one of 'em."

The pilot knew better than to ask details of a classified SEAL mission, but like most of the 6,000-strong crew of the gigantic Nimitz-Class carrier, he knew there was a SEAL team on board for less than 24 hours, and that they were going into Iran later that day. He knew nothing of the mission, the objective or when they were due to return—just that they were "going in," God help them.

Throughout every corner of the U.S. Navy the SEALs were regarded as men apart. *And, Jesus Christ, I'm sitting here with one of 'em, right now.* Steve Ghutzman was hugely impressed, and he did not know quite what to say. This was a condition to which he was utterly unused, and he just muttered, "You having a little trouble sleeping tonight?"

The SEAL nodded. "Some," he said. "This is my first mission. Guess it's on my mind."

"You been in the platoon awhile?"

"Oh, yeah. Five years now. And I've done a lot of training...but you always think of this day... the day you're going in. And for me that's today... right now... and I can't sleep worth a damn."

Steve nodded. "They tell you a lot about it before you go?"

"Everything there is to know. I've never even been to the Middle East, but I know what I'm headed for. I know every hill, and every rock. I know how warm the water is and where to be careful. But it doesn't stop you from thinking about it. Can't get it off your mind, really."

"You think it takes courage, or is it just the training?"

“Well, I guess it’s mostly the training. But in my case it’s gonna take courage. I don’t really know about the others.”

“Shit, Clouds, you scared?”

“Damn right, I’m scared. Wouldn’t you be?”

“Damn straight I would. But you guys are the best. What do they say, one SEAL, five enemy, that’s fair odds, right?”

“Seven.”

Steve laughed. “Hey, you guys are indestructible.”

“Not quite. We bleed. And we hurt like everyone else. We’re just a bit tougher to get at.”

Steve Ghutzman drained his glass. “I gotta go. I’m back up there at zero-eight-hundred.” He stood up, stuck out his hand and said, “Hey, it was good to talk to you, buddy. Good luck tonight, wherever the hell you’re going.”

“Thanks, Steve. We’re staying the hell out of Hell, that’s for sure.”

1500. Tuesday, May 15.

The Flight Deck. USS HARRY S TRUMAN.

For the short run out to USS SHARK, the 15-strong SEAL team embarked in one of the last of the Navy’s old warhorses, the HH-46D support/assault Sea Knight helicopter. The explosives and other gear had been airlifted in a cargo net four hours previously, and now Rusty Bennett stood at the loading door and saw each of his men aboard.

They all wore just light pants and olive green T-shirts. They carried their heavy-duty welder’s gloves for the hot-rope drop to the deck of the submarine. It was too hot for them to wear wet suits, and an area had been set aside in the submarine for them to change and prepare for the swim-in during the final hour of the journey up through the partially cleared minefield.

There were, as ever, the flight-deck crews on the takeoff area as the two rotors on the big white U.S. Marines Sea Knight roared into life. The SEALs had already blackened their faces with waterproof greasepaint, and were just about unrecognizable.

Among the crowd was Steve Ghutzman, and he just yelled a solitary, “GO, CLOUDS, BABY!” And his voice rang out in the general serious hush that surrounded this departure. But big Lt. Nathan heard him, and he half raised his right hand in response, smiling to himself at his new 20-minute friendship with the Navy Tomcat pilot. For all he knew, he might need Steve’s fighter-attack aircraft not too long from now. The Navy had mounted rescue attacks for missions a lot less dangerous than this one.

They flew low, out over the calm blue water, toward the waiting submarine. It took less than 15 minutes, and as the Sea Knight hovered above the deck, they all saw the thick rope unravel downward to a point in front of the sail, right behind the long deck shelter on the right, where the miniature submarine awaited them. One by one the SEALs grabbed the rope and dropped fast, away from the aircraft, sliding down 30 feet, before gripping hard with the big rough leather gloves, their brakes, and coming in to land gently on the casing of the SHARK.

Lieutenant Commander Schaeffer led the way, followed by Lt. Dan Conway, then Lt. Nathan, then Petty Officer Combs, then the big Chief Petty Officer Rob Cafiero. The next seven combat rookies came sliding in right behind them, with Commander Rusty Bennett bringing up the rear.

They were greeted by the Officer of the Deck, Lt. Matt Singer, who hustled them quickly through the door at the base of the sail, and on down the ladder. The hatches were slammed shut and clipped behind them, and Commander Reid ordered SHARK to periscope depth heading north.

“Steer course three-six-zero... make your speed one-five for fifteen miles, then stand by for course change to zero-seven-zero.”

They all felt the submarine’s gentle turn to due north, settling on a course that would allow them to cleave right through the middle of the now-three-mile-wide “gateway” through the minefield, and then on up the strait until she turned in toward the shore of Iran.

Lieutenant Commander Dan Headley led them down to a more-or-less empty area in which they could prepare for the mission. He fell into conversation with Rusty Bennett, and mentioned he had a good friend in the squadron...“Guy named Rick Hunter... Commander Hunter now, I believe. He and I grew up together.”

“Hey, you gotta be from Kentucky, right?” said Commander Bennett. “Rick’s a real good friend of mine. Just left him, matter of fact, down at DG.”

“That right? I didn’t know he was anywhere near here.”

“Oh, just Rick and about seven-eighths of the entire United States Navy,” Rusty replied with a chuckle. “I’m telling you, someone in the Pentagon’s awful jumpy about whatever the hell’s going on in the gulf.”

“Guess so. All we know is what everyone else knows. The Iranians somehow mined the Strait of Hormuz and shut down most of the world’s oil supply.”

“Big minefield, I understand. That’s gotta be a major worry.”

“It ought to be,” replied Dan Headley, smiling. “Specially for you. We’re just about in the middle of it right now.”

“Shit,” said Rusty. “I knew I shouldn’t have come. Your CO any good?”

“I don’t really know him well enough to say. But I don’t think he’s hit anything recently.”

“God forbid he starts now.”

Both officers laughed. And SHARK’s XO asked what Rusty’s men needed between now and the 1900 ETD.

“They had lunch, steak and eggs, at fourteen hundred,” said the SEAL Commander. “Maybe you could fix a few sandwiches, slices of pizza or something. Just in case anyone’s hungry. But I don’t think many of them will be. They’ll need a lot of cold water, though. They got a two-hour journey in the ASDV, then a long swim... don’t want them to get dehydrated.”

“Okay. I’ll get that organized. By the way, you’re not going yourself, are you, sir?” The XO paid due deference to Rusty’s higher rank.

“Not this time. But I’m gonna help your boys get the ASDV moving, if you think I could help. I’ve done it a few times in my life. And this is a very big vehicle.”

“I’m sure my crew would appreciate that, sir. The damn things are always difficult. And this one’s the biggest we’ve ever had.”

“Anyhow, right now I want to talk to the guys while they’re getting ready—so we’ll catch up in a little while.”

“Good enough, sir. My watch starts in a few minutes. I’ll be in the control room, you need to find me.”

By now the twelve combat SEALs were sorting out their gear. Each man had his own custom-made wet suit and numbered flippers. Each of them had a Draeger oxygen supply, the special SEAL air bottle that leaves no telltale bubbles on the surface. Each man would carry a knife and Heckler and Koch’s superb light submachine gun, the MP-5, a close-quarters weapon, best inside 25 yards, but perfect for an assault on a nonmilitary establishment. Only Petty Officer Ryan Combs would carry in a bigger weapon, the lethal M-60E4 machine gun. They would carry in, between them, 14 ammunition belts, each containing 100 rounds. Ryan himself would carry the gun, plus two belts, to give him a total weight of 40 pounds to carry. The gun would be used only in a dire emergency if they had to fight their way out of the refinery.

Ryan would also carry on his back a limpet mine, which he could manage just fine. It was the walk through the shallows that was so worrying. The Draeger is just about weightless in the water, but it weighs 30 pounds in the air, and that gave Ryan Combs very nearly 100 pounds in weight to haul to the beach, which would probably prove too much after a quarter of a mile.

Rusty Bennett had ordered big Rob Cafiero to step up and share the load of the gun and ammunition if Ryan could not cope. All the SEALs were heavily laden, a bomb or mine for 11 of them. Two for three of them. The fusing wire and detonation devices would be carried by John Nathan. Between them, the SEALs would also haul camouflaged groundsheets, two shovels, wirecutters, clips, plus night binoculars, the lightest possible radio for emergency only, water, high-protein bars and medical supplies. The return journey would be one hell of a lot easier.

In Rusty’s final briefing back on the carrier, they had debated making a request for the crewman of the ASDV, not the driver, to accompany them in, strictly as a beast of burden, until they reached dry land. But that ASDV was priceless, the only one of its kind, and the CO of the Shark probably would wish to take no chances, leaving it in the hands of just one operator.

However, if push came to shove, Rusty would insist, and no CO wants to go against the express wishes of a SEAL commander on the edge of a dangerous mission, probably on orders directly from the White House.

And so they prepared for their final talk together. Spread out before them were the chart and the map. As they pulled on their wet suits in a temperature deliberately turned right down to 50 degrees Fahrenheit, they listened to Rusty, who was saying that the ASDV driver would take the vehicle in as far as possible, until the keel touched the sand.

“Right then we’ll move into the dry hatch, one at a time; as soon as it floods, each man will drop straight through. The man with the attack board goes first, then his partner drops through and they move immediately, swimming east, bearing zero-nine-zero, until the water gets too shallow to swim comfortably. The six two-man teams rendezvous in the shallows. They should be around five minutes apart. After that, you know what to do.”

For forty minutes more the SEALs made their final preparations, and at 1750 they began to embark the ASDV, dragging in the gear, each man slipping expertly up through the hatch, finding his allotted seat and placing his equipment in the tight overhead space. The loading took all of half an hour as the SEALs struggled to find a reasonably comfortable position for the two-hour ride inshore in this sturdy 65-foot-long electric submarine.

Down in the control room Lt. Commander Headley had the ship, assisted by the Sonar Officer, Lt. Commander Josh Gandy, and the Navigator, Lt. Shawn Pearson.

“Right now I have us at our destination, sir. That’s 26.36N 56.49E on the GPS.”

“Okay, Lieutenant. Depth?”

“I was just coming to that, sir. We’ve still got plenty of water. I’m showing ninety feet below the keel, and we’re sixty-five feet below the surface right now. You wanna save the battery on the ASDV, I’m certain we could run in maybe another three miles. This chart’s kinda pessimistic about depth.”

“You agree with that, sonar?”

“Yessir. I’m showing total depth right here of just over two hundred feet, and Shawn’s chart gives one hundred seventy. We could certainly go on.”

“Okay... *conn-XO. Make your speed eight, steer zero-four-five...depth six five... call out fathometer reading every five feet.*”

“Aye, sir. We just saved the ASDV a half hour’s battery each way.”

“Good call, Navigator.”

At which point Commander Reid entered the control room, looking less than thrilled at the way the submarine was being run.

“Did you just countermand my orders, XO?”

“I adjusted our rendezvous point by three miles northeast, sir, because of clear and obvious discrepancies in the chart. We’re still in deep water, and we can save the battery on the ASDV.”

“The battery on the ASDV is not your concern, Lieutenant Commander. What is your concern is a set of orders, issued to us, by the flag, and signed by me as your Commanding Officer. I do not permit leeway in orders such as those.”

“As you wish, sir.” Dan Headley looked bewildered. But he replied with a calm demeanor.

“XO, turn the ship around and return to 26.36N 56.49E. The rendezvous issued by the flag.”

“Sir, with respect, could we not let the guys out right here, a couple of miles nearer their objective?”

“I think you heard me, Lieutenant Commander. Turn this ship around immediately and return to our correct position. I have no desire to take my ship any nearer to the shores of Iran than is absolutely necessary.”

And with that he turned on his heel and walked out of the control room, leaving all three of the ship’s operational officers speechless.

Shawn Pearson spoke first. “Now that, gentlemen,” he said, “was rather interesting.”

“If you meant that the way I think you meant it, I do not want to hear any more,” replied the XO, somewhat severely.

Lieutenant Commander Gandy just shook his head.

And they all felt the slight lurch as USS SHARK made an underwater U-turn and began to transport Rusty Bennett's SEALs away from their target area.

Nonetheless, within 20 minutes they were back on station at 26.36N 56.49E, facing the right way, 17 miles southeast of the Chinese refinery, and the underwater deck crew was wrestling the ASDV out of the flooded shelter and clear of the big submarine's casing.

Rusty Bennett proved an enormous help to the four-man team, and they shoved the miniature submarine out in near-record time. It was on its way before they blew out the dry-deck shelter, and up in the bow Lt. Brian Sager was conning the little ship in, on instruments only, assisted by his navigator.

Behind them the SEALs were dry but cramped, and they traveled mostly in silence. The journey was made at six knots all the way, and Brian Sager kept on going well beyond their estimated point of departure at 26.45N 56.57E. He pushed on for another mile and a half, just below the surface, until they gently brushed the soft, sandy bottom, less than three miles from the beach. The sonar on the ASDV had picked up no vessel within 10 miles.

It was exactly 1900 and growing dark when Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer, wearing his wet suit, hood up, goggles and flippers on, Draeger connected, attack board in his left hand, slid down into the dry compartment, ready for the flooding. Three minutes later he dropped through the hatch into the warm waters of the Strait of Hormuz.

Ray stared at the compass, breathed steadily and was grateful that his limpet mine, Draeger and weapons seemed to weigh nothing. He tried not to think of the abrupt difference there would be when they hit the shallows.

Moments later, one rookie combat SEAL, Charlie to his colleagues, knifed downward through the water next to him. Breathing carefully, he placed his right hand on Ray's wide shoulder. The Lieutenant Commander from Marblehead swung around until the attack board compass told him EAST, and then the two SEALs kicked toward the oil refinery owned by the Republic of China.

The extra distance covered by Lt. Sager meant the swimmers would essentially run aground inside of two miles. And the two lead SEALs kicked and breathed steadily, swimming about nine feet below the surface, covering 10 feet each time they snapped their flippers. After 30 minutes Ray estimated they had covered 1,200 yards, two-thirds of a mile, and right then nothing was hurting.

Behind them on Attack Board Two came Lt. Dan Conway, guiding another rookie; Clouds Nathan swam powerfully five minutes back; then Rob Cafiero, then two rookies, both ace swimmers. Last of all swam the tall Petty Officer from North Carolina, Ryan Combs, both hands on his attack board, leading his rookie, who dragged the machine gun in a special waterproof container, which made it nearly weightless.

The entire operation would have been a thousand percent easier if they had been able to row inshore in a couple of big eight-man inflatables. But senior management at SPECWARCOM had dismissed that as a possibility out of hand... *one alert Iranian patrol boat moving through its own waters four miles offshore could, legally, have blown the U.S. Navy SEALs to pieces.*

As Admiral Bergstrom had mentioned at the time, “Guess I’d rather have a dozen tired SEALs wallowing around in the surf than twelve dead ones floating faceup in the fucking Strait of Hormuz.”

Ray Schaeffer had sat in on that meeting, and he smiled to himself as he thought of the diabolical difference between planning in an air-conditioned room in Coronado and making a swim like this thousands and thousands of miles from home.

Ray kicked and counted, kicked and counted, keeping his eye on the compass, staying on zero-nine-zero. They’d been going for an hour and a half now, and by Ray’s reckoning that spelled 3,600 yards covered, which was two miles, give or take the length of a submarine. There was a rising moon now, and phosphorescence in the water. He thought he could make out the ocean bottom right below, but he was unsure and he did not want to waste energy, or his precious air, in finding out.

Also he was asking serious questions of his granite-hard body, and there were nagging pains high up in both thighs. His calves and ankles were mercifully fine; that was where the pain usually hit on a long swim. And there had been times when it had hurt like hell.

The kid behind him was only twenty-one years old, and there was no way Ray was going to betray tiredness, so he gritted his teeth, dug ever deeper and forced himself forward, ignoring the lactic acid now flooding into his joints and muscles, making every yard an ordeal.

Seventeen minutes after the two-mile mark, Ray felt his board sliding through sand. Instinctively he straightened up and was surprised to find himself standing up to his chest in about four feet of water, still holding the attack board. Charlie bobbed up right beside him and they both shut down their Draegers, reclining back in the water, resting their aching limbs.

They took their mouthpieces out and stored the air lines neatly. “You all right, sir?” asked Charlie.

“No problem, kid,” replied the Lieutenant Commander. “Let’s take five, then walk forward slowly for another five and wait for Dan to show up.”

“Sounds good... Can you see anything up ahead, sir?”

“I thought I could just then, a dark shoreline directly in front, maybe a half mile. But the moon’s gone behind that cloud, and I can’t see a fucking thing now.”

By now the lead SEALs had removed their flippers. They were walking slowly forward, and they were quickly in less than three feet of water. The Draegers were beginning to weigh heavily; so were the mines. They were comfortable with the rest of their gear.

About 100 yards back, Dan Conway and his teammate broke the surface, and began to walk forward. By the time they caught up with Ray and Charlie, Clouds was in, then the rookies, only two minutes behind. Big Rob Cafiero and his rookie were in next, but they had to wait 10 minutes for Petty Officer Combs, who was of course carrying the M-60 machine gun, which might save all their lives in an emergency.

Ray Schaeffer aimed them all east, and they set off on the stretch they had all been dreading, wading, now in 18 inches of water through the long shallows, each man hauling 80 pounds plus. After 100 yards it was like walking through glue. No

one complained but it was a muscle-throbbing exercise, and there was no efficient way to do it, except to keep pushing forward, lifting their feet just enough to take the real “tug” out of the water.

However, it was pleasantly warm, there was no surf to speak of and up ahead they could see the shore. And that was the good news. This walk could have been a mile and a half. As things looked, it would be only a little more than 1,000 yards. Ray ordered them to fan out and draw their weapons, which made a long line of black-hooded figures 30 yards apart. When they reached the beach, assuming it was deserted, they would close in to Lt. Commander Schaeffer’s central position to check the GPS. The numbers they were looking for were 26.47N 57.01E.

The last 100 yards were easily the worst, and they struggled through a kind of kelp field, knee-deep and clinging. But eventually they walked up onto a completely empty beach of coarse sand and occasional rocks. There was not a light, and certainly not a person, to be seen. The numbers on the GPS were right on, which explained a lot. Nothing on this particular stretch of wasteland had been picked up after a hundred satellite passes carefully logged and studied at the top-secret National Reconnaissance Office in Washington. The even more beady-eyed operators at Fort Meade had found nothing either. One mile dead ahead, across slightly hilly terrain, was the sprawling Chinese crude-oil refinery.

It was 2130, and Lt. Commander Schaeffer ordered the SEALs off the beach and into the rougher ground behind. With exquisite timing the moon came out again, and they could more or less see where they were headed without using night goggles. Up ahead they would be approaching the southwestern corner of the refinery, and somewhere before that they would make the rendezvous point, dumping most of their gear.

Four SEALs only would enter the refinery that night. Two more would cut and fold back the wire, and Petty Officer Combs would ride shotgun over the operation with the big gun, and also join the wire cutters as lookouts. No one knew what to expect in the way of guards, or even lights. They knew only that Ray Schaeffer, Dan Conway and Clouds Nathan were going through the wire perimeter fence, assisted by Charlie, to lay down the pile-driver explosives contained in the limpet mines, which they would attach to the inside-facing walls on the big gasoline holding tanks.

Chief Petty Officer Rob Cafiero would take charge of the base camp, when they found it, unloading groundsheets, setting up the radio, posting sentries, preparing the mass of explosives for the main assault the following night. But it took another hour before they found a three-corner outcrop of warm rocks, five feet above the ground at its highest point. It provided protection from the north and from the seaward side. The SEALs used the wire cutters to cut scrub and cover the camouflage nets. It had to be 1,000 to 1 against anyone stumbling across their “hide,” and from the sea it was totally invisible.

They all removed their wet suits and wore only light camouflage combat trousers and jackets. They pulled on their desert boots, and the warriors going in that night increased the greasepaint on their faces and tied their matching green-and-brown “drive on” rags around their heads, in the style popularized chiefly by Willie Nelson.

They ate a couple of protein bars and drank water. Then shortly after 2300, Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer led Assault Team One forward, a total of seven SEALs, carrying the three limpet mines and all the detonation equipment required to take out the group of holding tanks hard against the fence in the southwest corner of the refinery. No explosions until the next day, but a lot of the groundwork completed, with, hopefully, a thorough knowledge of the defense system the Chinese operated in their new refinery.

“Don’t expect us back before zero-four hundred, Rob. We wanna take a very careful recon of this place. And it will take time.” Lieutenant Commander Schaeffer’s words were almost inaudible, and a light breeze from the ocean scarcely ruffled the poor, rough, brown grass that grew sporadically on this warm moonlike landscape.

They drew their weapons and marched forward, moving softly over the ground. Up ahead there was a glow in the sky, and they all knew what that was. The main surprise as they pushed east away from the ocean was the amount of light there was both inside and around the refinery.

Within 10 minutes they had a clear view of the western perimeter, which Ray Schaeffer knew was two miles long. They could see a line of lights, set high on steel pylons every 200 yards. But they were aimed into the refinery and cast almost no light on the dark wasteland around the outer edge. That was good and bad, because it made their approach easy. But one of the lights was throwing a lot of illumination right into the group of storage tanks toward which they were headed.

They lay flat on the ground, staring at the fence 20 yards in front of them.

“Christ,” said Clouds, “it’s gonna be like the stage of the New York City Ballet in there.”

“Great,” muttered Dan Conway. “We’ll probably get a round of applause.”

“Shut up, comedians,” whispered Lt. Commander Schaeffer. “That light second from the end has gotta go. Guess we could shoot it, but I’d rather cut it.”

“That would sharpen up the guards if they found the cut,” said Dan.

“Yeah, it might,” replied Ray. “But I’ve been looking down the line of lights. There’s one every two hundred yards, but I’m only counting fifteen, not seventeen. That means there’re a couple out already. Those bulbs go all the time, I’d say, and one more isn’t going to put the place on red alert. These guys are civilians. They’ll probably send a couple of electricians out, maybe tomorrow, to replace the bulbs. So we want to make a cut they won’t notice.”

“Okay, sir,” said Charlie. “I’ll do it. I’ll slice down six inches and pull the inside stuff out. One little cut puts the bulb out. Then I’ll fold it back inside the rubber casing. They might not notice it at all.”

“Don’t worry,” said Ray Schaeffer. “I have a little roll of electrician’s tape in my pocket, and we can thank Rusty for that. He told me before we left Coronado, we would almost certainly have to take out a couple of lights, and a little roll of black tape does a lot to cover your tracks.”

“Beautiful,” said Clouds. “Pity about the applause, though.”

They moved in toward the fence, staying low, crawling across the ground on elbows and knees, the time-honored approach of the killer SEAL. Dan Conway and Charlie went to the base of the light pylon, and the two rookies began to cut a hole

in the chain-link fence. There was no sign of guards, no sign of life in this remote part of the refinery in the small hours of the morning. The only sound was the snap of the wire cutters as they carved a doorway through the fence.

At 0017 the big light went out, plunging the storage tanks into darkness. The SEALs lay silently, waiting for a Chinese patrol to show up. But none did, and at 0035, they pulled back the wire and Ray Schaeffer, with Clouds Nathan, wriggled through, followed by Lt. Conway and Charlie. Clouds had the detonator, fuses, time clock and cord, plus one of the shovels. The other three carried the big limpet mines on their backs, and they raced for the cover of the storage tanks, three lines of 10, all owned by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). All now in deep shadow.

It did not look far on the aerial photographs they had been studying for several days, and they all knew the precise route to take. But it was a long 50 yards over flat ground, and they were glad to know that Ryan Combs was right inside the fence with his trigger finger on the machine gun.

Once in among the tanks they worked fast. They made for the middle one in line five, and the two outer ones in line six, which formed a triangle right in the center of the group. Clouds removed the mines from their straps, and clamped the magnets onto the lower inside-facing surfaces of the three tanks. He wired up the detonators and ran cord from each one to a central point at the western edge of the untargeted middle tank in line six. Right there he wired up the clock, which would dictate the time of the explosion of all three mines.

Then he took the shovel and buried the det cord in the soft sand. When he arrived back at the clock, he wrapped it in a plastic bag and buried that, too, without setting it. That would take about one minute on the way out the following night, if their luck held. Right then they were "outta here," and they flew for the fence, unnoticed by anyone, and made their way back through the wire.

It took another 10 minutes to clip the fence back into shape, and the SEALs retreated into the rough ground 20 yards back, from where they would watch whatever movement there was inside the refinery.

It was a long, boring wait. The only sign of life was almost a mile away inside the control center. Occasionally they caught a glimpse through the binoculars of a door opening, and once they saw some kind of a jeep move from the control block up toward the main refining towers, but it was too far to see if anyone got out or in. By 0330 Lt. Commander Schaeffer concluded that the refinery was just about devoid of any security whatsoever, and he declared the recon was at an end. By this time the following night they'd be on their way out to the submarine. God willing.

They arrived back at base camp at 0400, reported on the distinct lack of armed guards, at least in that remote part of the refinery, and drank a lot of water. Lieutenant Commander Schaeffer and his men would sleep first, and Chief Petty Officer Cafiero organized the sentries.

They were all awake by 0800, and they spent the day lying low, under the camouflage, eating very occasionally one of the high-protein bars and studying endlessly the layout of the refinery's interior.

That night there were three targets: the towers, the control center and the middle group of storage tanks. If there was time, Lt. Dan Conway and Clouds

Nathan would also attempt to insert high explosives into the more remote petrochemical compound, but that would be touch and go. It was almost 800 yards from the towers along a well-lit road.

Ray Schaeffer had divided the SEAL squad into three teams of four, one led by himself, one by Lieutenant Conway and one by CPO Rob Cafiero. Lieutenant Nathan would join Ray in the critical attack on the giant separating towers, Dan Conway and Charlie would take the central storage area, while Rob Cafiero and Ryan Combs would place the high explosives on the walls of the control center. Two young SEALs would accompany each team, acting as guards, lookouts and radio operators, should there be a need to communicate. Each time clock would be set to detonate at 0300.

They would all go under the wire together at 2300, and the watchword of the operation was stealth. At least for the first hour it was. Thereafter the SEALs would feel free to fight their way out and down to the beach using whatever means were necessary. Ryan Combs would bring two belts of ammunition and the M60-E4 machine gun with him.

They dug and buried all their surplus gear, including groundsheets. They left the wet suits, flippers, Draegers and attack boards under the camouflage nets. Because of the 12-man limit on the team, they did not have the luxury of leaving anyone in charge, and at 2230 they all set off toward the refinery. It was warm and windless, with no moon. High clouds drifted in from the sea, and they marched in silence, in three lines of four, through the desolate area behind the beach toward the refinery.

The first thing Ray Schaeffer noticed was that the light they had deactivated the previous night was still deactivated. The second thing he noticed was a jeep moving swiftly along the outer perimeter along the narrow blacktop track they had crossed to get to and from the storage tanks.

The vehicle did not stop or slow down in this remote corner of the plant, but there were four people in it, and they were carrying weapons, a direct result of an instruction from the Chinese Navy, received 48 hours previously. The guards were in fact military personnel from the People's Liberation Army and they had been in residence for two months, although they had not found it necessary to mount any form of patrol. The area was, face it, deserted.

The SEALs flattened themselves into the ground as the jeep drove past, but then they moved quickly to the fence and the clips were removed to open their own personal gateway. Once inside, they placed three clips back on the wire to hold it, more or less in place, to attract no attention.

At this point they again checked their synchronized black pocket watches and the time clocks, which would be adjusted as the charges were put in place. Then they fanned out into three groups. They would meet again 90 minutes from then, at 0030, in the dark deserted area of the towers.

The first team on station was Dan Conway's. He and Charlie led the two rookies deep in the shadow of the hot crude-oil pipes, which cleaved a gantry right down the middle of the refinery. They moved slowly, creeping quietly along, directly beneath the great three-foot-diameter pipes. They provided excellent cover all the way to the central storage area. The four SEALs waited for 15 minutes until they were certain they were alone, then they bolted across the flat well-lit ground to the

left and dived into the shadow of the first tank, remaining motionless on the sand for 10 minutes, heads down, but knives drawn.

Meanwhile Lt. Commander Schaeffer and his 2 I/C, Lt. Clouds Nathan, had made it to the tower area. They had crossed two sets of railroad tracks, well to the right of the central pipeline system, and were now crouched in the dark on the south side of a giant holding tank. The towers looked massive, but there were three very close together in the center of the separating plant, and these were the targets.

The problem was four Chinese technicians who had plainly arrived in a parked jeep, testing what looked like a large valve halfway up the biggest tower. "Oh, Jesus," said Ray, "if they're not outta here in thirty minutes, we'll go and place the two mines out in the petrochemical area, and then come back. We can't risk being seen, not yet, not until the stuff's in place."

They waited. So did the technicians. And finally Ray whistled up both of the other teams on the little radio, and announced he was going to the distant chemical area, and would use two of the mines. Dan Conway was instructed to get among the towers as soon as possible with the two extra mines his team was carrying.

They carried out their regular mine placing on the tanks, in precisely the swift, efficient way Clouds had worked the previous night. The time was precisely 2345, and they set the time clock for three hours and fifteen minutes.

Then they rushed back across the open ground into the shadow of the pipeline, and began working their way up to the tower area. Meanwhile, Ray and Clouds were jogging along the eastern perimeter fence, right in the shadow, directly under the lights, headed for the wide area of the plant owned by SINOPEC (China National Petrochemical Corporation).

When they arrived, the place was not only silent; there were also huge dark areas to the west of the tanks, and they worked right in there, shoveling a shallow six-inch trench in which to lay the det cord. By the time they'd finished, it was 0015, and Ray set the clock for two hours and 45 minutes. Then he buried it lightly in a plastic bag.

By the time SEAL Team One was out of the chemical area, Rob Cafiero and Ryan Combs were making steady progress around the control center. They had placed one mighty charge of plastic C4 explosives hard on the wall below the main downstairs window, and they had seen four white-coated technicians enter the building and four come out.

Both SEALs could also see there was a basement in the building, and realized this was the place to set a major C4 charge because it would surely bring the entire construction down, wrecking all the control systems, and allowing the hot crude to keep on flooding through the pipes, feeding the fires, just as it had in Texas City, 60 years previously.

And now they were ready. The center was plainly being staffed by the minimum number of people, and Ryan Combs told the two rookies to take the machine gun and cover them while he and Rob went through the front door, which had been unused for at least 25 minutes.

They raced across the yard, Rob carrying the explosives, detonator and plastic, Ryan now with a silenced, even lighter, machine gun, the regular MP-5, right

behind him. They pushed open the door and moved into the hallway. Right in front of them was a down staircase, and they took the steps four at a time, swinging hard left at the bottom, and going to work under the stairs setting the plastic bomb for a timed detonation.

It was just 2350, and they set the clock for three hours and 10 minutes. They swung back out of the stairwell at exactly 2351, just as two Chinese staff members came out of a lower-floor operations room. The four men stared at each other in total disbelief, and the two refinery workers, confronted with two armed green-and-brown-faced monsters, turned to run back into their room. One of them shouted one word in Chinese before Ryan Combs cut them both down in cold blood with a burst from his MP-5.

Instantly the two SEALs dragged the bodies back under the stairs, before there was too much blood to clean up. They made sure the two victims would not be easily seen, and then they bolted back up to the main hall, opened the front door and raced back to the shadows where the two rookies waited.

“Everything okay, sir?”

“Except for a couple of Chinamen.”

“Christ, did they see you?”

“Not for long.”

Right then the radio light flickered, and Ray Schaeffer was on the wire informing them of the new meeting point at the first tower at 0100. He was also on the line to Dan and Charlie checking their progress. And shortly after midnight the SEAL team leader knew that all their objectives had been achieved, with the exception of the giant towers.

By 0030, Rob and Ryan had placed their third and final plastic bomb right under a nest of incoming electric wires, and the Chief Petty Officer considered that this wrapped up the entire operation very tidily. He set the clock for two hours and 30 minutes, and, safe in the knowledge that this particular control center was not going to control anything after 0300, he led his men back toward the main pipeline for the shadowy 500-yard journey toward the refining towers.

When they arrived there, they found a scene of silent consternation. The Chinese were still there, still up on the tower, still working. At least two of them were. The others had gone.

“There’s no way we can place the mines on that metal without those guys seeing us,” said Ray Schaeffer. “The risk is too great. We’ll have to shoot ’em. And that’s not easy either.”

“Well, they don’t have a phone up there. How about a diversion, something to get ’em down? How about we set fire to their jeep? That’ll do it.”

“Yeah, and it’ll bring a lot of other guys out here as well. Fire in a refinery is a goddamned nightmare.”

“You don’t say.”

And then the SEALs received what looked like a piece of luck. Both the Chinese technicians began to climb down the ladder from the refining tower.

“How about that? They’re going.”

And so they were. They stepped into their jeep and drove off, leaving the entire area to the three teams of U.S. Navy SEALs, who instantly split up and clamped the magnetic mines onto the designated towers and primed the fuses.

Lieutenant Nathan raced between them, playing out the det cord, splicing it into place and then running it out for the three strands to meet at a central point in the shadows of the number-two tower. Behind him two SEALs carefully buried the cord in the sand, and Clouds checked his watch. It was 0150, and he set the timer for one hour and 10 minutes. It was time to leave.

For the SEALs, that is. Not a two-man patrol of Chinese guards hanging on to the leashes of two huge, brown-and-black, straining Doberman pinschers. They were just arriving. And they had been especially briefed, directly from Shanghai, to be on the lookout for U.S. Special Forces inside the refinery. And alert they were. They came around to the edge of the main tower and were confronted with eight big men, two of them with shovels, four of them with MP-5 machine guns, and all of them with hideously camouflaged green-and-brown faces.

At the moment of sighting, there were 40 yards between the forces of China and the U.S. SEALs. The guards reacted strictly in unison, unleashing the dogs at the touch of a button, and both blowing whistles loudly. Dan Conway reacted first, as the lead dog leaped at the throat of Lt. Nathan. He raised his unsilenced MP-5 and almost blew its head off.

The second dog swerved toward Lt. Commander Schaeffer, and Dan Conway almost cut it in half with a short burst into its neck. By now the guards had their hands on their own weapons, but like the dogs they were too late, and Ryan Combs aimed a withering round of fire from the M-60E4 straight at them. Both died instantly, but the whistles had done their job, and all 12 of the SEALs could hear the roar of a jeep heading from the main pipeline straight toward them.

"COVER!" roared Lt. Commander Schaeffer. *"GET RIGHT DOWN... IN THE DARK... RYAN, LET 'EM GET OUT AND THEN LET 'EM HAVE IT."*

The light was poor, but they all saw the lights of the jeep as it came screaming into the clearing between the towers. And they saw the two new guards jump out. Ryan Combs opened up again with the machine gun, and as the guards went down, Ray Schaeffer and Charlie charged forward.

But they did not see a third guard in the back seat who swung his Kalashnikov on them, and shot Ray Schaeffer through the head at point-blank range. His second burst caught Charlie high on the right-hand side of his chest, and both SEALs fell to the ground together.

Again Ryan Combs opened fire, and instantly took out the third guard, leaving just the jeep running noisily, with one dying SEAL on the ground, and another unconscious beside him. There were also five dead Chinese.

Lieutenant Conway took command, ordering the rookie SEALs to get the two wounded men into the jeep. He jumped into the driver's seat himself and told the rest of them to get in or on, anywhere, but to hold tight while he drove for the southwestern perimeter.

Somehow they all hung on, as the ex-Connecticut baseball catcher gunned the jeep forward, slamming it over the railroad tracks, swerving through the sand, going for the dark pylon, second from the end.

Fifty yards from the fence, he rammed on the brakes, and Clouds Nathan scrambled out and bolted into the holding tanks to their right, where he swiftly set the timing clock on the previous night's mines for 61 minutes. At this time an

eerie siren went off loudly in the control center, just as Clouds came charging around the corner and reboarded the jeep.

“*TIME?*” yelled Lt. Conway. “*WHAT THE HELL’S THE TIME?*”

It was just about 0200. The action had taken less than five minutes, and their team leader was down. Dan Conway rammed the jeep right up against the fence, and two more SEALs opened up their private doorway. They piled out and dragged the two wounded men through the gap in the fence. Then the Lieutenant reversed the jeep right against the gap, jumped out and crawled under it to safety on the other side of the wire. Before they left, he tossed their one grenade into the vehicle and blew it to smithereens, covering the gap in the wire with red-hot metal and burning fuel.

And then they set off on their longest journey, carrying their leader and the rookie Charlie between them. They no longer had the mines and the explosives. But their burden was heavy, pursuit was inevitable and their chances of survival were not much better than 60-40.

They reached base camp, administering morphine to the badly wounded Charlie and desperately trying to stop the blood seeping from Lt. Commander Schaeffer’s shattered skull.

But they all knew it was hopeless. Ray was breathing very erratically, and he died in the arms of Lt. Dan Conway, who was unable to stop the tears cascading down his camouflaged face.

The task of carrying the body back out through the ocean was plainly Herculean—and might even result in their capture, if the Chinese had a further squadron of guards. But the SEALs would not leave him. They changed into their wet suits, and big Rob Cafiero hoisted the Lieutenant Commander over his shoulders and began walking steadily to the beach.

Clouds Nathan and Dan Conway carried Charlie, who was losing blood at a serious rate. They were unable to stop the flow, but they got him into a wet suit and just kept going forward.

At the beach, they regrouped. They had no option but to drag the body of Ray Schaeffer into the water and tow it out to the submarine. The time was 0240, and they had to move, and they had to get their big flippers on, and it took too long because of the mild trauma, despite their training in dealing with death.

But they made it to the shallows and Dan Conway led the way, pulling Ray behind them, much lighter now as the water grew deeper.

Twenty minutes later they were in about four feet, a half mile offshore, and they stopped to look back and witness whatever damage they had wrought. For a few moments nothing happened, then an unbelievable explosion ripped into the night air as the big refining towers went up, every last one of them, sending a bright orange-and-purple sheet of flame into the heavens.

Seconds later the ocean seemed to shake as 60 massive gasoline storage tanks blew up like an atomic bomb. They heard the distant rumble as the control center exploded in a crashing, rolling fireball of flame and falling masonry, and the sky seemed to light up as the oil fire took hold, thousands of barrels of prime crude from Kazakhstan thundering into the inferno, fueling a fire that would burn for six days.

They could feel the heat out there in the water, almost two miles away.

“Jesus Christ,” said Ryan Combs. “Whatever they wanted, I guess we’ve done it.”

“But it wasn’t damn well worth it, was it?” said Dan Conway.

“Steady, Dan,” said Rob. “I don’t think Ray would have wanted you to say that.”

The new team leader just nodded. And the two SEALs turned out to sea, to the west, where the ASDV awaited them. And they kept swimming just below the surface, towing the still and silent body of Lt. Commander Schaeffer between them.

Chapter 7

160500MAY07. USS SHARK.

26.36N 56.49E. Gulf of Hormuz.

Speed 3. Racetrack pattern. PD.

The message from the communication room was not very clear.

“XO-comms. We’re getting something on VHF. But it’s kinda shaky. I’d say about twelve miles away, from the ASDV. I guess they’ve surfaced and may be using a hand-held aerial. But they keep breaking up. We’re still trying. Whatever it is, doesn’t sound good.”

“Comms-XO. You’re not dealing with a *MAYDAY*, are you?”

“Nossir. But they’re in some kind of trouble...wait a minute, sir... there’s something right now... oh, Jesus, they’ve lost a man, sir... wait a minute... I’ll be right back... stay on the line, sir.”

Lieutenant Commander Dan Headley could hear the background noise in comms... “*Say again... over... Say again... over...*”

He heard Shark’s radio operator repeat twice... “*You’re saying ‘dead,’ right? D for Delta? Right?... Please say again... over...*”

Three minutes later, the comms chief was back on the line. “As far as I can make out, sir, Lieutenant Commander Ray Schaeffer has been killed, and one of the rookie SEALs, Charlie Mitchell, is very badly wounded... they’re afraid he might die... and they’re asking if we can get the ship in any closer... you know, of course, the ASDV makes only six knots flat out...”

By now Commander Rusty Bennett had materialized in the control room, and Dan Headley repeated to him the bad news.

No one heard the mission commander mutter, “Oh, no. Not Ray.” He just said formally, “Are they sure it’s Ray?”

Dan Headley added, “They were broadcasting from the ASDV. It wasn’t very clear, but I’m afraid we better prepare for the worst.”

“Did they say how badly Charlie Mitchell was hurt?”

“Badly. They’re afraid he might die if he doesn’t get attention soonest. They want us to bring the ship in to meet them. And I’m happy to do so, but you know what happened with the CO last time. He nearly had a heart attack when I changed the orders in even a minor way.”

“Where is he now?”

“I guess asleep.”

“Do we wake him?”

“No. Fuck him. Let’s go get the guys out.”

“*Okay. Down all masts. Conn-XO... make your speed twenty knots... steer zero-three-four... fathometer, report the depth... Navigator-XO... report to me immediately.*”

The submarine surged forward, and everyone who was awake heard the distinct change in the rhythm of the ship. Lieutenant Pearson came hustling through the doorway, holding a chart. “Right here, sir,” he said. “We’re in two hundred feet of water, and we can go at least six miles on this course without even thinking about it.”

“Thanks, Shawn...” But he was cut off from further communication by the sudden appearance in the control room of Captain Reid, wearing his pajama trousers, shoes, socks and a Navy sweater.

“XO, might I ask where precisely you are taking this ship when our orders are perfectly clear to remain on station?”

“Sir, right now we are on a rescue mission. The ASDV just radioed in. The SEAL team leader, Lt. Commander Schaeffer, has been killed, and another of the twelve is badly wounded. They called to request we come in and meet them. They are afraid the second SEAL might also die. We’re going in six miles to a probable depth of one hundred fifty feet. If I have to, we’ll continue on the surface until we find them.”

“Lieutenant Commander Headley, you do of course realize that your orders are directly countermanding both mine and those of the flag?”

“Sir. There are ample provisions in Navy regulations to provide for emergency actions in order to save life. Especially one of our own.”

“*XO. DO NOT REMIND ME OF THE NAVY’S REGULATIONS. I KNOW A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THEM. AND THE ONE I SUGGEST YOU CONSIDER IS THE ONE THAT GIVES THE COMMANDING OFFICER ABSOLUTE POWER ON HIS OWN SHIP.*”

“I am well acquainted with that one, sir.”

“Then, for the second time in as many days, I am ordering you to turn this ship around and return to our correct waiting position at 26.36N 56.49E.”

“Sir,” interrupted Commander Bennett, “as you are well aware, I outrank Lieutenant Commander Headley and it was at my request he agreed to go on a rescue mission, possibly to save the life of one of my most valuable men.”

“Then I must remind you, sir, that you have no rights whatsoever on this ship. And I will not have this interference. What exactly is this? Some kind of damned conspiracy? Well, you’ve picked the wrong man to make a fool of... waiting until I’m asleep and then flagrantly disobeying my orders.”

“Sir, may I just—” But Rusty was cut off in midsentence.

“*N-O-O-O. YOU MAY NOT. TWENTY-SIX THIRTY-SIX NORTH, SIR. FIFTY-SIX FORTY-NINE EAST, SIR. THAT’S OUR CORRECT POSITION. AND THAT’S WHERE WE’RE GOING. YOU CANNOT RUN A NAVY FOR A GUY WHO’S PROBABLY CUT HIS GODDAMNED FINGER... RETURN TO OUR DESIGNATED POSITION. AND THAT’S AN ORDER, XO!*”

Midnight. Wednesday, May 16.
Office of the National Security Adviser.
The White House. Washington, D.C.

Admiral Morgan had been alone for two hours, since Admiral Dixon had returned to the Pentagon. Both men knew the SEAL team had gone into Iran and that the attack on the refinery was scheduled for the small hours of Thursday morning, an eight-and-a-half-hour time difference from Washington.

Both men knew it had already happened from several different sources: the satellites, the CIA, the embassy in Tehran, the Brits via Oman on the other side of the strait and a very sketchy item on CNN. The flight-deck crew and almost everyone else on board USS CONSTELLATION had seen the fireball from 20 miles offshore. The U.S. Navy knew comprehensively, from Diego Garcia to Pearl Harbor, from Coronado to Norfolk, Virginia, that a 12-man team of SEALs had just destroyed the world's biggest and newest Middle Eastern oil refinery.

What no one knew was the fate of the SEALs, and Admiral Morgan paced his office awaiting some news. In his mind he guessed they'd be back in the SHARK by around 0800 their time.

As far as he could tell, that was a half hour ago, and so far he'd heard *NOTHING*. *What the hell's going on?* That was Admiral Morgan's question. He'd kept Kathy on duty, watching her e-mail screen, sitting by the phone, ever ready to bring in the message that everyone was safe. It was a curious trait in his character, since he was now, at least according to his job description, a political adviser. But he was not a political adviser in the place that counted. In his heart, he was still a Navy commanding officer. And that did not permit him to leave the bridge until he knew absolutely that the men were home unscathed.

So why is no one telling me they're safe? Maybe they aren't safe? And if not, why not? Again, what the hell's going on? "KATHY!"

The door opened, and Ms. O'Brien came through it, still quite incredibly glamorous despite the late hour. "I do wish you wouldn't yell like that," she said. "It's so... so... well, uncool."

"Who the hell else would hear me in this goddamned graveyard?" he rasped.

"Only everyone."

"Like who? You think they could hear me in the Oval Office, if the President's still working?"

"My darling, they could hear you in the Rose Garden."

"Oh, of course. I forgot we got that midnight pruning crew in there, snipping away until breakfast."

"Arnold, I am merely suggesting that it might be unnecessary for you to sound like a drill sergeant, in the White House, in the middle of the night. And, by the way, sarcasm does not become you."

"Yes it does. It becomes me better than anyone I ever met. And anyhow, where the hell're my SEALs? Answer that, Miss Decibels 2007."

Before she could answer, with something suitably pithy, the phone rang at her desk outside the main office. Secure line. She walked quickly out through the doorway, and instantly put the call through to the Admiral.

“Yup. Morgan. Speak.”

“Arnie, it’s Alan Dixon. Good news and bad news, I am afraid. The SEALs wiped out the refinery, but only ten of them got back.”

“Are they inside the SHARK right now?”

“They are. But they lost the team leader, Lieutenant Commander Ray Schaeffer. And they lost one of the new guys, young Charlie Mitchell.”

Admiral Morgan was stone silent for at least a half minute while he composed himself. “They didn’t die in the fire, did they?”

“No. There was some kind of battle inside the refinery. The Chinese had a military guard patrol, which we were just not expecting. With attack dogs. The guys were cornered, but they took out all five guards and both dogs, blew up their jeep and then the entire oil plant. Apparently the guards managed to get a couple of bursts out of their old Kalashnikovs. Hit Ray and Charlie at less than twenty feet, point-blank range. They never had a chance.”

“They didn’t leave our guys behind, did they? Not in that godforsaken country?”

“No. They did not. They brought the body of Ray Schaeffer out. At the time Charlie Mitchell was still alive, but he died in the ASDV about fifteen minutes before they got back to the submarine. It was a long journey at only six knots, and they couldn’t save him.”

“Thanks, Alan. Let’s talk in the morning.”

“Good night, sir.”

Arnold stood up from his desk, and he walked to the window. He stared out into the darkness, and before him he saw the half-lit refinery, and he imagined the SEALs, out there alone, trapped in a firefight, and he imagined the gallantry of the young Americans, the terror, the air alive with bullets, Lt. Commander Schaeffer, the leader, charging forward trying to save his men. *Ray Schaeffer. Goddamnit. He went into Russia for me. He went into China for me. And he’s gone into Iran for me. And now he’s dead.*

Admiral Morgan heard Kathy return to the office. But he just stood with his back to her, staring out into the pitch-black of the White House garden, because he could not bear for her to see him this upset.

“I’ve ordered us some coffee,” she said. “How many did they lose?”

“Two.”

“I guessed from your voice it was bad.”

And she saw him wipe the moisture from his eyes with his shirtsleeve before he turned to face her. And she noticed his voice was tight when he said, “Please make sure that both Admiral Dixon and I attend the funeral in Marblehead for Lieutenant Commander Ray Schaeffer.”

“What about the President?”

“I don’t think so. He wouldn’t understand.”

“He’d understand the death of a Navy officer, wouldn’t he?”

“Possibly. But he’d never understand the courage. The duty. The honor. The mind of such a man.”

“Well, I’m sure the people of Marblehead would like to see the Lieutenant Commander given the honor of the President attending his funeral,” replied Kathy. “Couldn’t you explain it to him?”

“That, I am afraid, would be like trying to teach a pig to speak. You would succeed only in irritating the pig... I’m afraid the simple truth of a military officer prepared to lay down his life for his country will forever remain a mystery to men like President Clarke. Because they do not do it for money. It’s not for glory either. Most of them find it impossible even to talk about it. And it’s not for power. It’s for something else. Something very private, to people like Lieutenant Commander Schaeffer. And believe me, there aren’t many of them. And I guess you can see how upset it makes me when we lose one.”

“Yes. Yes I can. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“Guess not many people have. They think of me as some kind of civilian SEAL in a gray suit...but inside I’m like everyone else. So are the SEALs. They get scared, they feel pain, and they bleed from their wounds. Sometimes I guess I bleed for them.”

“Yes, my darling. Don’t you.”

The coffee arrived, and Kathy poured it. The Admiral sat at his desk saying nothing. But suddenly he stood up, and told her, “I’m not paid to sit around worrying about yesterday. I’m paid to start figuring out tomorrow... in my game, you gotta keep going forward or the bastards will trample you to death.”

He came and put his arms around her, but she could still see the sorrow in his face, as he privately mourned the dead SEALs. And she did not think it possible that anyone had ever loved anyone more than she loved Arnold Morgan.

**0900. Thursday, May 17.
Southern Fleet Command HQ.
Zhanjiang, South China.**

News of the total destruction of the Chinese refinery hit Beijing at around 0800 local time. By 0900 the world’s media had put something together on the lines of “*yet another* diabolical oil fire in the Strait of Hormuz—this time a massive refinery.” The world’s oil markets were about to go collectively berserk for the second time in a month.

Admiral Zhang believed, correctly as it happened, that the price per barrel might go right back to \$85, off its weeklong low of \$65, when the major trading market in Tokyo opened.

Surprisingly he remained calm. “Well, Jicai,” he said to his friend, “I suppose we might have expected something like this.”

“You mean you believe someone did this to us, that it was not just an accident in a big refinery?”

“Jicai, the Pentagon just blew up China’s most important oil refinery in revenge for the minefield we helped to create in the Strait of Hormuz.”

“You mean they bombed it, or hit it with a guided missile? Surely not—they would not dare instigate such an act of war so publicly.”

“Jicai, it is entirely possible that no one will ever know what happened to our installation in the Strait of Hormuz. It is also possible that the world’s media will never even consider that such an act could have been perpetrated by the oh-so-high-and-mighty United States. But I shall always know differently.”

“Do the media sense there may be something sinister? Are they linking the other fires?”

“Not so far. But of course they are not tuned in to our involvement in the minefield yet. Though I am quite certain the Americana military knows. That’s why they just blew the refinery.”

“Do we hit back?”

“We cannot. There’s nothing for us to hit in the immediate area of the refinery. Anyway, it would not be in our interest to do so. The Americans would then start to destroy our entire Navy, and I am afraid we could not stop them. I’m rather of the opinion that our days in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Iran are over. For the moment, anyway. The Americans are in charge there now.”

“This is so unlike you, Yushu. So accepting of such terrible events.”

“Well, I did remind you I was half expecting something of this kind to happen. And now I should remind you, the essence of all war throughout our long history has been attrition. We can afford losses, both physically and emotionally. The rule is that we never take our eye off the main objective. And that grows ever nearer. We must let the oil fires burn, and later this morning we will have our own light in the sky.”

Admirals Zu Jicai and Zhang Yushu were now joined by the recently appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Fleet, Vice Admiral Yang Linzhong, a short, stocky ex—frigate captain from Canton.

“Gentlemen,” he said, entering his own office, and bowing his head. “I have just been visiting our sonics laboratory, and they are ready to demonstrate for you their work over the past six months. I think you will be impressed.”

The two senior Admirals in the entire Chinese armed forces rose, and followed Yang out to a waiting Navy staff car, which drove them immediately a distance of less than a mile to domain of Lt. Commander Guangjin Chen, the PLAN’s Mr. Underwater, their great mastermind of deep-sea listening countermeasures.

His rank of Lt. Commander was honorary. Mr. Guangjin was essentially a scientist, more at home in a white laboratory coat than a naval uniform. In fact no one had ever seen him in a uniform, even though it was rumored he was the highest-paid officer in the Chinese Navy, below the rank of rear admiral.

His kingdom was underwater, in the strange, eerie caverns of the oceans. He marched to the orders of the tides, he listened to the evidence of the echoes and he acted on the lingering ping of the sonic pulses. Much of his work had been in the field of decoys, disguising, hiding the beat of the engines of the warships, seeking always to confuse and deceive the enemy.

What very few people knew, however, was that Guangjin Chen had masterminded a private project of such brilliant deception it almost took Admiral Zhang’s breath away. He had heard about it only a year ago while he was still Commander-in-Chief of the Navy. And he had heard about it just by chance. And great was his fury when he found out that Mr. Guangjin had offered the idea to the Navy for development 10 years previously, four years before he even joined the Senior Service. Guangjin had been turned down flat, probably because he was just a civilian.

In any event, Admiral Zhang knew brilliance when he heard it, even if it might not work. And last August he had summoned Mr. Guangjin to his home for dinner, and there he conducted an interrogation, to the great glee of the scientist.

Like all scientists, the lean and earnest Guangjin adored talking about his work, especially a project he had believed to be long dead. And he shyly admitted to the great Chinese Admiral that he had continued working on the project, just at his home, these past several years.

And the night proved to be magical. They had sat outside Admiral Zhang's beautiful summer house on the island of Gulangyu, just across the Lujiang Channel from the South China seaport and Navy base of Xiamen.

The air was warm, a light southwest wind drifting across the great estuary of the Nine Dragon River, and Guangjin in company with the Zhangs sipped fragrant tea out on the stone patio beneath the curved red roof. The scientist was on his feet answering questions and pointing with a cane at the stone squares upon which he walked.

"But where's the carrier now?"

"Right here, sir. In this stone square."

"But where's our Kilo?"

"Right here, sir, in the middle of this paler stone square."

"Is it transmitting?"

"Nossir. Not yet."

"Well, when will it?"

When I tell it to do so."

"But how will you know when?"

"I'll be watching all the time."

"But how?"

"Via the satellites, sir. It's very easy to track a large ship in the open ocean. You can hardly miss it."

"How long is the transmission?"

"Oh, just a few seconds. Long enough to be heard."

"Then what?"

"Well, if the U.S. Admiral has a modicum of sense, he'll bear away and make a more northerly course."

"I suppose he will."

"And he'll keep going until I frighten him again."

The Admiral remembered just shaking his head in amazement, and he had said, "Chen, I am deeply impressed. And I want you to continue your work on this as a priority. Move it to a secure area in your working block, and perfect it. Essentially you will answer only to Admiral Zu, or myself. I regard it as our personal mission, and I'm going to code-name it right away, in memory of this evening. From now on, it's Operation Paving Stone."

Admiral Zhang would never forget the conversation. It had been on his mind for months. This very brilliant person, who had joined the Navy strictly as a sonics expert, was on to something. And now he was going to find out just how big, and whether it would work.

The three Admirals climbed out of the staff car, and two guards escorted them into an inner office of this highly classified laboratory. And there before them stood

Lt. Commander Guangjin, who bowed politely, never having quite mastered the traditional Navy salute.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” he said, “to my humble quarters.” He’d never quite come to grips with the normal greeting of “sir” from a two-and-a-half to an admiral. But great scholarship has a dignity of its own, and no one noticed.

“Yushu,” he said, with an earth-shattering lack of formality to the highest-ranking Admiral in the world’s biggest nation, “it is especially nice to see you again—and I think you will be very pleased with me.”

Admiral Zhang smiled and patted this prodigy on the shoulder. The project belonged of course to the scientist, but Zhang had made it possible, and if it worked, history would judge them both kindly.

Mr. Guangjin walked to the rear of his long, bright work area and led the way into a darkened room, lit only by the backlighting of the computer screens, in almost every respect a replica of a warship’s ops room.

He paused before a screen upon which there was an illuminated grid. “That’s it, Yushu, just as we planned it. Operation Paving Stone, eh? Ha-ha, and now, as you know, we have two test sites ready for us. We have a towed-array frigate way up in the north in the Yellow Sea, and another in the Pacific, six hundred miles off our southern coast. Both ships have in the last hour thrown the device over the side, and are ten miles distant.

“The device is at present passive...and now I am going to activate the one in the Yellow Sea. You, Yushu, will speak personally to the sonar room in the frigate.”

He handed a telephone to the senior Admiral, who spoke into it. “This is Admiral Zhang. Will you please inform me what is happening?”

“This is Lieutenant Chunming, sir. Right now we have nothing on the screen. Just the usual waterfall. Please stay on the line.”

And now, Guangjin moved to the control keyboard that was set before the grid-screen. “Activating now,” he said pressing the keys.

The room was silent, as the electronic pulses flashed to one of two Chinese satellites. And then Admiral Zhang heard down the phone, “Lieutenant Chunming, sir. I’m getting something... and it’s engine lines... transient contact... just seven seconds... but I’m certain it’s a submarine... making a turn... one moment, sir, the computer’s trying to match the lines... it’s coming up, sir, this is a Russian-built Kilo-Class diesel-electric. No doubt. The pattern fits precisely.”

The Admiral replaced the telephone. And he turned to the scientist and held out his hand. “Remarkable,” he said. “Quite, quite remarkable.”

“And now we shall try the second one, way out in the Pacific. Please hold this telephone, and I will attempt to activate...”

Four minutes later, an almost ecstatic Zhang Yushu heard another sonar officer in a distant Chinese frigate say to him, “Here it comes, sir. Right here we’ve caught a transient on a Russian-built Kilo-Class submarine.”

201300MAY07.

USS JOHN F. KENNEDY.

20N 125E. Speed 20. Course 315.

BIG JOHN was steaming over 3,000 fathoms of water. All flying had been canceled for two days because of a severe storm, and the personnel of the Black Aces, Top Hatters and Golden Warriors were bored by the inactivity. Nonetheless the forecast was good, the storm had abated and the carrier was currently in the Philippine Sea, 180 miles northeast of Cape Engano. That put her 270 miles southeast of the Taiwan coast, but just 150 miles short of her ops area.

These were the usual patrol waters of the U.S. Navy, the world's policeman, protecting the rights of the citizens of the nation of Taiwan. The area was a triangle, its shortest side 90 miles long facing the central eastern coastline of the island, around 50 miles off the beaches. The other two sides were each 150 miles long, joining at a point close to the 125-degree line of longitude. Most of the water inside that triangle was 15,000 feet deep.

And the JFK was steaming straight toward it, high, wide and handsome, no secrets, no subtlety, no intent to deceive. Just one thunderous iron fist, the same one that had warned Red China for half a century: *Stay out of our buddies' backyard.*

And now, here they came again, pushing through the long Pacific swells, cleaving through 30-foot waves, 88,000 tons of steel-clad power, daring anyone to raise an objection. The new emblem patch of the Tomcat pilots uttered a thousand words in just two. *Anytime, Pal.*

Five hundred and seventy miles away, on a bright computer screen in the Southern Fleet HQ in Zhanjiang, there was a replica of the op area of the JFK. It showed a line 100 miles long, 50 miles off the eastern seaboard of Taiwan, and it fell back 150 miles into an oblong rather than a triangle. Essentially it represented the guesswork of a dozen ex-Chinese warship commanders, and it was not a bad guess at that. The JFK triangle fitted very neatly into Guangjin's "box," and the positional accuracy of the 100-mile line opposite the Taiwan beaches was nearly uncanny.

It was, of course, the result of years of study of U.S. Navy patrols, and all around the Chinese version of JFK's op area was a 600-mile-long line in the shape of a sloped roof on its side, representing Admiral Zhang Yushu's assessment of the Americans' likely line of approach.

That was the line they were now watching for the carrier, and in precisely three hours from now, BIG JOHN would breach that line at 20.41N 124.18E. And the Chinese Navy satellites would relentlessly track her wherever she went.

Back in Zhanjiang, Lt. Commander Guangjin made another adjustment to his screen, and right over his U.S. op-area chart, there was now a much bigger square, 240 miles long north to south, 240 miles wide west to east. It was divided into grid squares numbered 1 to 6, and A to F. At almost every corner of each of the 36 squares there was a black circle. And every one of the those circles of course had a number, A-5 or C-4, just like any map reference. The U.S. ops area, into which the JFK was headed, was bang in the middle of this computerized grid.

BIG JOHN steamed on, now making just 12 knots since Admiral Daylan Holt had cleared the flight wings to begin operations at 1500. And the deck once more came alive to the howl of the jets and the surge of the deck crews, as the fighter-bombers screamed into the bright skies above the deep Pacific Ocean.

The course of the carrier now became erratic, certainly on the distant Chinese chart in Zhangjiang, because the JFK had to keep changing course to east-southeast, into the wind, for the landings and takeoffs. But her basic northern track up to the ops area remained steady.

She crossed Admiral Zhang's outer line of approach at 1900. And the busy flying evening wore on in the great waterborne fortress of BIG JOHN. The Admiral's ops room was receiving no reports of foreign warships anywhere in the area. Nothing from either of the two nuclear submarines riding shotgun out there off his port and starboard bows. Not a thing from the S-3B Viking ASW aircraft ranging out in front, dropping sonobuoys into the water, seeking any foreign submarine that might be lurking in these deep waters.

Behind this fast, powerful, deep-field ASW screen the rest of CV-67's Battle Group, two destroyers and five frigates, moved safely through seas that had been "swept" by possibly the world's sharpest ears.

At the current low speed, with a lot of course adjustments, BIG JOHN and her men were about eight hours short of their op area. Though Lt. Commander Guangjin did not need them to be in it, just heading up that way. And at 2200 he activated, via the satellites, the Chinese decoy station B-5.

Floating in the water, identifiable only by its ultrathin aerial wire, B-5 was just about invisible at 50 feet. It made one short, sharp transmission from approximately 100 miles northwest of the carrier, and three of the sonobuoys dropped by the Viking picked it up instantly at range 15 miles and under.

Lieutenant (jg) Brain Wright had the signals on the aircraft screen instantly, and he assessed a rough position of a patrolling submarine at 21.20N 122.21E. The engine lines fed into the Viking's onboard computer and moments later Brain Wright was contemplating the presence of a possible Russian-built Kilo-Class diesel-electric, in the water 100 miles from BIG JOHN. He guessed the submarine had just made a "dynamic start" of her engines, probably to charge her batteries. Everyone connected, in any way, with a big carrier is wary of a diesel-electric underwater boat because of its stealth at low speed.

And Lt. Wright punched in his signal to the Admiral's ops room "*...Dynamic start possible kilo Class position 21.20N 122.21E. Transient contact... attempting to localize.*"

The Viking, heading north, banked back hard to the east in search of the "intruder," sweeping the sea with radar, looking for submarine that did not exist. It was just a brilliantly invented transmitter with a slim aerial wire jutting three feet out of the water, almost invisible by day, totally invisible by night. It was being activated at will by Lt. Commander Guangjin Chen 600 miles away in Zhanjiang: activated to transmit the uniquely chilling engine lines of the Kilo-Class Type 636.

Admiral Daylan Holt received the signal from comms at 2220 and instantly ordered a course change.

"Come right as soon as you can to Zero-three-Zero... cancel all flying."

The JFK quickly retrieved two more fighter aircraft and then slewed slowly around in the water, settling thirty degrees east of north. It took the ship a full 15 minutes to make those maneuvers, and five minutes later, the Viking picked up a new transmission from one of the sonobuoys.

Again it was transient. To the sonar operator thundering though the dark skies above the Pacific it looked like a dynamic stop. He could see just a little curl at the base of the tiny bright “paint” near the bottom of his screen. It looked no nearer than the first contact, and he recorded it in essentially the same spot, suggesting in his signal to the flag that it was almost certainly the same contact they had located 20 minutes previously.

And there the minor drama seemed to end. Nothing more was heard from anyone. Flying continued unabated, BIG JOHN continued her zigzagging course for the landings and takeoffs and another 45 miles of water slipped beneath her keel.

But out over that pitch-black water, at 0145 in the morning, another Viking picked up another transient contact off two sonobuoys. And again they judged it to be a Kilo, but no one was certain whether or not it was the same one, because its position was roughly 50 miles northeast of the last one. Which meant it must have been making over 10 knots: unlikely because the American sonar would have picked it up.

For the second time that night a big U.S. Navy Viking banked around again to the east and again never caught a glimmer of anything. At least, not for a half hour, when a different buoy picked up what appeared to be a dynamic start. Neither of the two U.S. submarines, both deploying towed arrays, picked up anything. And the signal from the Viking to the flag was similar to the others... *“Transient contact. Kilo-Class 636. Possibly same as Datum One. Rough position 21.53N 122.45E. Attempting to localize. Prosecuting.”*

Guangjin Chen’s C-4 was proving as elusive as B-5. And now both of these devilish decoys, being instructed from the satellites, remained silent. And the entire U.S. Navy could have set off in pursuit and they would have found precisely nothing.

Nonetheless Admiral Holt was obliged to move his carrier farther east from his northern course, because a Kilo is simply too dangerous a ship to risk going close to, and anyway, easy to sidestep.

And once more the ocean world beyond Taiwan’s east coast went more or less silent. BIG JOHN steamed on approximately toward her ops area, but her present course would carry her right past the triangle, past the point to the east, unless she could turn in. But that seemed very doubtful at present, since there appeared to be at least one and possibly two Chinese submarines somewhere off her port beam, patrolling where BIG JOHN wanted to be. And the U.S. submarines were picking up nothing on the towed arrays.

Then, at 0545, the patrolling Viking tracker picked up the signal again, and this time it was appreciably closer to the carrier. In fact, it was still C-4 transmitting but the JFK was only 75 miles from the decoy now, instead of 100.

Admiral Holt did not like it. And he edged east again away from his op area. He simply could not go in there, if there should be one or more Chinese Kilos awaiting him. Particularly since everyone in the Navy now knew the SEALs had just banged out a \$10 billion Sino investment down in the Strait of Hormuz.

The Admiral pressed on North for another 30 miles, and at 0804 on Monday morning, May 21, Guangjin Chen hit the computer buttons to activate C-3. A new field of U.S. sonobuoys picked up the transmission immediately, and the patrolling

Viking's signal to the flag caused major consternation. They assessed that this was an entirely different Kilo, and it was waiting bang in the center of CV-67's op area.

Admiral Holt had the distinct feeling he was being pushed around by the Chinese Navy, and he was beginning to sense a feeling of rising frustration. Right now he had only one option, to make a swing right around the northeast end of the triangle and try to move in sometime in the next few days when the Kilos had tired of this game of cat and mouse. Nonetheless he could not take any risks, and he ordered a course change to the northeast, with his submarines moving out to his west, and the Viking pilots scanning the ocean with ever more vigilance.

For a long time there was nothing, and then just before midday the Viking picked up a new contact, and again it was a Kilo. It could have been the same one they heard at 0804, but it may very well have been a different one. The Chinese only own four Kilos, and privately Admiral Holt thought there were probably two of them out there. However, at 1200 (local), that was not quite the point. What mattered was that the Viking operator put the transmission only 56 miles off BIG JOHN's port beam, and that was not good. Worse yet, it was continued, but not localized, by either of the SSNs.

In Admiral Holt's opinion, this was becoming quite serious. There was, it seemed, at least one Chinese Kilo possibly as close as 50 miles from the carrier, and it seemed to be extremely elusive. Which was a shuddering thought for a U.S. admiral accustomed to controlling the ocean, on, above and below the surface for 200 miles in any direction wherever he roamed.

No admiral commanding a carrier battle group wants to go anywhere within 300 miles of a foreign, unfriendly, land-based air force, and he certainly wants no part of a marauding submarine. The Chinese ploy to have two Kilos on permanent patrol in the Taiwan Strait is based on the simple assumption that no U.S. admiral would steer a carrier down the Taiwan Strait if this were so. Neither would he.

And now, the steel-haired Daylan Holt, a Texan from Mesquite on the western edge of Dallas, was face-to-face with a brand-new kind of hardball international politics out on the northern edge of his own ops area. Of course he could sink the Kilo if he could catch it below the surface... IF he could find it.

But at that point, no one could find it, or even them, if there were two, despite having flooded the probability areas with radar, ESM and active and passive sonar from his submarines, aircraft and towed-array frigates. And it was beginning to look as though the JFK would have to continue northeast into the deep water at the southern end of the lonely Sakishima Islands, where Japan finally peters out into the Pacific. This is a very remote corner of the ocean, 300 miles southwest of the American base at Okinawa. The Sakishimas stand 120 miles west of Taiwan, 60 miles from the op area of BIG JOHN. Admiral Holt had an uneasy feeling he was being herded away from his objective by the demonic, near-silent Chinese submarines.

And the Chinese not only tracked the Americans all the way, at 1400 they activated E-1, some 80 miles north of the carrier, undetected by the outriding nuclear submarine. The Viking picked it up and signaled the flag. Admiral Holt briefly changed course, and as he did so, Guangjin activated D-2. Just a transient, seven-second transmission, which had the effect of pushing the carrier toward the

waters south of the tiny island chain, to Ishigaki, where the water was deep, and which, by a grand design hatched in distant Zhanjiang, lay neatly in two outer squares of Lt. Commander Guangjin's grid.

Admiral Holt was forced to turn north again, and he reasoned that the Kilo force, however many, was now to his left and right, but falling astern. If they wanted to get at his carrier, they'd have to transit northwest through the massive ASW barrier he'd set up. The decoy Kilo-buoys were indeed on either side of him, but the wily Zhang had stationed two real Kilos just 30 miles ahead of the CVBG. And he'd done it seven days ago.

And now they were almost stationary, transmitting nothing, preparing to launch a copybook attack on the U.S. carrier, identical to that of Commander Ben Adnam when he destroyed the Nimitz-Class carrier USS THOMAS JEFFERSON in the Arabian Sea five years previously.

They had chased and pursued nothing. They had just waited, silently, for the prime moment to fire, when Lt. Commander Guangjin's ingenious invention had done its work. Unlike Ben Adnam they had not needed to assess the wind and the carrier's time of approach. The very occasional transmissions from the floating electronic buoys had "herded" BIG JOHN into the appointed place like so many sheepdogs.

The Chinese submarines were in there, in 600 feet of water, the Kilo-Class hulls 366 and 367, jet-black 3,000-ton diesel-electrics built in Russia's Admiralty Yard at Saint Petersburg. They were each armed with 18 TEST 71/96 wire-guided passive-active torpedoes, homing at 40 knots to 15 kilometers. But the Chinese COs would fire their two torpedoes, with their 205kg nonnuclear warheads, from a lot closer than that.

But Admiral Zhang was not out to create world havoc and mass destruction. He just sought, quietly, to cripple the great U.S. warship, despite all the difficulties that would involve.

And at 2100 that Monday evening, his underwater commanders drew a bead on Big John.

**Same time (0800 local, Monday).
The White House.**

Everything about the *goddamned Chinese* baffled Arnold Morgan. He had no idea why they would have wanted to infuriate the entire Western world, not to mention much of the Eastern world, by assisting the *goddamned towelheads* in mining the Strait of Hormuz.

Maybe just for money. Maybe they really thought they could make a huge financial killing by selling their oil from Khazakhstan at the massive world prices that would follow the blockade of the Gulf of Iran.

Maybe. But maybe not. It made some sense to the President's National Security Adviser. But not enough. Well, the USA had slammed back hard, as China must have known they might. And no one had complained to anyone. Certainly the USA knew there was no point remonstrating with the Chinese over the minefield,

because they would say nothing. Equally the Chinese had said nothing to anyone about the destruction of the oil refinery.

Admiral Morgan knew he was not going to receive any answers to anything. Which was why he had summarily requested the presence of the Chinese ambassador to Washington, the urbane Ling Guofeng. Arnold might not be getting any answers, but he was about to deliver one or two truths.

Kathy O'Brien politely ushered the ambassador into the main office at 0815. The two men knew each other, of course, but it was always a cool relationship. The Admiral had passed one or two withering broadsides across the bow of the Chinese ship of state in the past few years, and Ling Guofeng had frequently been obliged to keep his head well down.

In another life, they might actually have been friends. Both of them knew more about the world than was good for anyone. And both of them knew implicitly where their loyalties were. Arnold Morgan, a natural aggressor, was constantly issuing warnings, making threats and, occasionally, carrying them out. The veteran Ambassador Ling, in his role as China's chief appeaser in Washington, was thus obliged to absorb a substantial amount of grief from the Admiral. But the diplomat from Shanghai knew how to roll with the punches.

"Good morning, Admiral," he said, bowing. "What a very kind invitation. It's been too long."

Arnold Morgan raised his eyes heavenward... *Too long! Never mind the blown-up tankers, never mind the minefield, the world oil crisis, Japan almost going bankrupt because of it. Never mind that the blasted refinery's still spouting flames one hundred feet into the air... Will someone ever save me from this Oriental bullshit? ... "Too long," he says. Jesus Christ.*

"Ambassador, the pleasure is, as always, mine," replied the Admiral. "Please sit down. I have ordered a pot of Lapsang Suchong, your favorite China tea, I believe—at least your favorite in this country."

"Now that is very kind of you, and I hope it will smooth our way during our discussions."

And Arnold slyly congratulated himself on Kathy's call to Ling's secretary on Friday afternoon to establish the subtleties of the ambassador's tastes. He had no recollection that Kathy had made the call without even asking him.

Anyway, the tea was delivered and poured by a polite and attentive waiter, and Arnold Morgan stepped up to the plate.

"Ambassador, there is much that cannot be said at this discussion—much, possibly, that never will be said. I have asked you here because I believe that you and I understand each other."

"I think and hope that we do," replied Ling in his impeccable English accent.

"Well, let me begin by saying that we are very well aware of China's complicity in the placing of the minefield in the Strait of Hormuz."

"Oh, really?" replied Ling. "I have not been so informed."

"And I guess, if I wanted to, I could inform you myself of the origin of the mines, the date they left Moscow, the times of the refueling stops for the Andropov freighter that delivered them, and the date the PLAN assisted the Iranians in laying the fields."

Ambassador Ling said nothing, betrayed nothing, not a flicker of understanding—the precise way all great ambassadors are supposed to operate under this kind of pressure in a foreign capital.

“But there is no need for me to do so, since we both understand the... er... rather heated game we are playing. But I would like to mention the fire that is still raging in the strait at the Chinese refinery. That, ambassador, represents the collective wrath of the entire industrial world. So I would warn you about the danger of writing it off as an accident and blithely rebuilding it.”

“Am I hearing an *admission* that the United States of America actually attacked and destroyed the ten-billion-dollar Chinese refinery in the strait?”

“No more than I am hearing *an admission* that China purchased hundreds of sea mines at vast expense from Moscow, and then tried to shut down the principal power supply of every oil-consuming country in the world. Damn nearly all of them, that is.”

Ambassador Ling said nothing.

And Admiral Morgan continued: “And so, my good friend, Guofeng, I would like to conclude with this piece of advice for you and your government. In our opinion, and in the opinion of all our allies, you have committed a crime of vast proportions in the Strait of Hormuz. And it is a crime that must not be repeated. It is therefore my rather sad duty to advise you”—and here his voice rose to its familiar growling quality—“*to stay the fuck out of the Middle East oil routes.*”

“And if we should insist on our right to trade in any international waters?”

“You would find no objection from us, because your ships are welcome to visit us at any time. But if you continue to put Chinese warships anywhere near the north reaches of the Arabian Sea, inside the Strait of Hormuz or indeed in the Gulf of Iran, we shall have no hesitation if it comes to sinking them. Your nation has committed a terrible crime, for reasons best known to your masters in Beijing. But the rest of the world will not permit you the leeway to repeat that crime. Ling, old buddy, your Navy is on its way right back to the South China Sea.”

“I shall indeed report your views to my government. But do I have your permission to inform them that the United States willfully destroyed the Chinese refinery?”

“No, Ambassador. You do not. You may tell them that the elimination of the refinery was in your opinion an act of retribution against your government for crimes committed by China in the strait. You may also say that the U.S. government was not unsupportive of the action against the Chinese oil. But as to who perpetrated the destruction, that may never be known. But if I had to guess, I’d say you should look to some of those Arabs who are currently unable to sell their oil because it’s all trapped in the gulf.”

“Yes, of course,” replied the ambassador. “How foolish of me not to have identified the culprit at once.”

“Well, for the time being, that would appear to be all. But heed what I say, Ambassador. Because I would not want things to become any more tense between us. And you guys have done quite sufficient damage for one month.”

“And, quite frankly, Admiral, so, might I say, have you.”

**Same time (2145 local).
Off the island of Ishigaki.**

Hardly moving through the water, both Kilos waited silently, 10 miles apart, in the path of the carrier's approach from the southeast. The JFK was clearly identifiable by her noise signature, and at 2215 the westerly Kilo assessed that the Americans would pass within 3,000 yards.

The Chinese prepared to fire, while the easterly Kilo decided to wait, just in case an attack by her consort should cause BIG JOHN to swerve her way. It is almost impossible to coordinate a torpedo attack by two submarines. Only one would open fire, since charging in at high speed would simply give the game away.

The westerly Kilo's two torpedoes would come in from the carrier's stern arcs on predictions from the last-known bearing. The big TEST weapons would be launched quietly at 30 knots, staying passive all the way, which at least gave them a chance of avoiding a full, frontal smash into the hull. The Chinese wanted only the shafts, and there would be nothing BIG JOHN could do. There would be no time.

2150. "Stand by one..."

"Last bearing check."

"SHOOT!"

The Chinese torpedo came powering out of the tube, hesitated for a split second, then whined away into the dark waters.

"Weapon under guidance..." Kilo 636 was right on top of her game.

"Arm the weapon."

"Weapon armed, sir."

Ninety seconds go by. "Weapon now one thousand yards from target, sir."

"Weapon has passive contact."

"Release to auto-home passive."

Moments later, Kilo 636 loosed off a second torpedo, which, like its colleague, was now streaking through the water toward the lights on the stern end of the carrier's flight deck. It was a classic submarine attack, conducted with ruthless professionalism in a manner that would tolerate no comeback. There simply was no time.

Inside the ops room of the carrier, the sonar men picked up the torpedoes. At least they picked up one of them.

"Admiral—sonar. TORPEDO! TORPEDO! TORPEDO! ... bearing Green one-nine-eight—Torpedo HE tight-aft... REAL CLOSE, SIR. REAL CLOSE..."

"Real close" now meant no more than 500 yards. Which put the lead torpedo 30 seconds from impact somewhere on the stern of the carrier. Firing back was out of the question. An 88,000-ton carrier is simply not built for close combat of this type.

Someone yelled: "DECOYS!" But that was about two minutes too late. The Combat Systems Officer alerted all ships that the flag was under attack. But before he could even utter the words "Chinese submarine," the first TEST 71/96 smashed into the port outer propeller, blowing it off and buckling two of the four shafts.

Moments later, the second torpedo, undetected, slammed into the port inner propeller and blew up with staggering force, causing distortion to the starboard inner as well. BIG JOHN, even if she was still floating, was not going anywhere for a while.

The JFK was well compartmentalized, and she would not sink. But with her massive shafts damaged, she was no longer capable of operating aircraft. The great leviathan began to list slightly. Damage-control teams were right at work on the flooding. Engineers stared in horror at the extent of the harm done to the shafts.

The Admiral, still wondering where the next torpedo would come from, recalled the LA-Class submarines from deep water out to the southwest, bringing in one destroyer and a frigate for a close ASW hunt near the carrier.

The signal being sent to Pearl Harbor was as shocking to the communications room as the Japanese attack had been to the Naval staff 66 years previously:

"212155MAY07. Position 24.20N 124.02E. To CINCPACFLT from U.S. carrier JOHN F. KENNEDY. Hit by two torpedoes, passive homing unknown origin. Two explosions in shaft area. Three shafts out of action. One shaft remains serviceable. Max speed available 10 knots. Fixed-wing flying not feasible in less than 25-knot headwind. Initial assessment damage severity: requires early docking."

Same time (0800 local).

Office of the CNO.

The Pentagon.

Admiral Alan Dixon was aghast. But the signal from CINCPACFLT Headquarters left no room for doubt. The Republic of China had unquestionably fired two torpedoes at a U.S. carrier, 125 miles off the east coast of Taiwan. Worse yet, they'd both hit, and the carrier had been powerless to stop them, and, so far, take any form of retaliatory action. Further attacks had to be expected but had not yet materialized.

Admiral Dixon decided that if the Chinese could torpedo the ship, they could also bomb it, and he ordered the immediate evacuation of all aircraft currently stationed on the carrier. Whatever crew could be spared and moved to Okinawa should go, too. All other manpower surplus to the essential running of the crippled ship should be removed to the JFK's accompanying destroyers and frigates.

And now he hit the secure line to Admiral Morgan and broke the news to the incredulous, but thoughtful, National Security Adviser. "The thing is, Arnie, I am going to get the carrier back to Pearl—might have to tow her. Sounds too big for Okinawa. Anyway, she's effectively out of action."

"Yes. That's a big ship to try to fix, so far from a major U.S. base," replied Admiral Morgan. "Anyhow, I guess you better get over here... bring all the information you have and we'll try to decide what the hell to do."

Same time (2300 local).

Southern Fleet HQ.

Zhanjiang.

“Well, Jicai, very satisfactory,” purred Zhang Yushu. “That’s all of them, I believe. The ROOSEVELT, the TRUMAN, the CONSTELLATION, and the JOHN C. STENNIS all so very busy seven thousand miles away in the Strait of Hormuz. The RONALD REAGAN stranded nearly nine thousand miles away in San Diego. The JOHN F. KENNEDY out of action. Which leaves us entirely free to conduct some local business of our own.”

And at 2200 on the clear, moonlit evening of Tuesday, May 22, 2007, deploying the most massive display of military power since the UN’s 1991 advance on Saddam Hussein, the People’s Republic of China attacked Taiwan.

Chapter 8

It was too quick even for STRONG NET, the brand-new multibillion-dollar air defense early-warning network. Taiwan’s Hawk surface-to-air missiles remained in their launchers as the Chinese onslaught came in. And there was not a bleep out of the new ultrasensitive Tien Kung medium-to-long-range system based on the old U.S. Patriot, and deployed around Taipei.

Everything about the attack from the mainland was utterly unexpected. Even the target was essentially way out in right field. But in the small hours of May 22, China was undeniably bombarding, presumably with a view to capture, the picturesque archipelago of the Penghu Islands, which sit 60 miles off Taiwan’s western shores.

Of course, the Penghus are not entirely picturesque. Taiwan maintains a 17,000-strong offshore island command army on Penghu. There is an airport, and outside the city of Makung a big Navy base, home of the 154th Fast Attack Squadron.

Now, at these midocean marks, China was literally hurling short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), launched into the night from the opposite shore from bases in Fujian and Jiangxi Provinces. And high above the Taiwan Strait an armada of China’s newly built B-6/BADGER long-range bomber aircraft, laden with land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), was preparing to strike the Penghu Naval Base.

It was six minutes before Taiwan could respond, by which time the Makung shipyard was ablaze, with two 3,000-ton Knox-Class guided-missile frigates, the CHIN YANG and the NING YANG, burning ferociously alongside the jetties.

Taiwan launched her opening batteries of Tien Kung missiles from the west coast of the main island, straight at the incoming BADGERS and downed nine of them in 15 minutes. But they could not prevent the first wave of SRBMs from screaming into the outskirts of Makung, almost demolishing the entire Hsintien Road to the north of the base, in the process reducing both the Martyrs’ Shrine and the Confucian temple to rubble.

The precision bombardment hit the airfield, blitzed the telephone company at the north end of the main Chungching Road and the main downtown post office.

Within 10 more minutes Taiwan had a squadron of U.S.-built F-16 fighters in the air howling out of the night in pursuit of the BADGERS, which were no match for them, and the U.S.-supplied deadly accurate Sidewinder missile blew eight more of them out of the sky.

Below the opening air battle, a big flotilla of Chinese warships was moving in on the Penghus, led by the second of their Russian-built Sovremenny destroyers, in company with four Jangwei-Class guided-missile frigates and six of the smaller heavily gunned Jianghu Class, which had been conducting regular fleet exercises in the strait for the past five days.

Shortly after midnight they opened fire with a long-range shelling assault on the tiny islands of Paisha and Hsi, obliterating the three-mile-long bridge that joins them. They slammed two missiles into Hsi's spectacular Qing Dynasty Hsitai Fort from which, on a clear day, you can see the mountains of both Taiwan *and* China. Then they turned southwest and battered the islands of Wang'an, Huching and Tongpan.

The Taiwan High Command in Taipei was forced to the opinion that China was in the process of capturing all 64 of the Penghu Islands, with their historic 147 temples, mostly dedicated to Matsu, the goddess of the sea, who would always protect the islanders but who was not having that much effect right now.

The Penghus have been for centuries permanent home mostly to fishermen and farmers. Walls of coral, built to protect large crops of peanuts, sweet potatoes and sorghum, form a unique landscape. The endless beaches and blue waters have made the Penghus one of the great tourist attractions in the East.

However, at this precise moment the beautiful Lintou Beach, on the seaward side of Makung, resembled Dunkirk, 1940, more than anywhere else. Batteries of China's CSS-X7 missiles—a new version of the Russian-designed M-11 with a 500-kilogram warhead—were detonating everywhere. Oceanfront bars and restaurants were flattened, huge spouts of salt water and sand blasted over the city.

In Taipei, the President, in conference with the Premier and his military Chiefs of Staff, ordered an immediate defense of the islands, "before the Chinese attempt a landing."

Lieutenant General Chi-Chiang Gan, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, ordered 25,000 troops from all military bases on the northeast coast to head south by road and rail. At 0200, the government commandeered every fast train on the electrified west coast line, particularly the Ziqiang and Zuguang expresses. The General ordered an airlift of 20,000 troops from the Taipei area to the big southern Navy base at Kaohsiung.

Admiral Feng-Shiang Hu, Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, ordered the 66th Marine Division based in Kaohsiung to embark and sail immediately to reinforce the island garrison at Makung. He put three Newport-Class troop landing ships and a 9,000-ton Cabildo-Class LSD on four hours battle notice. The CHENG HAI docks down three small Japanese-built LSUs, each capable of carrying 300 men right into the beaches.

In the small hours of the morning, the Taiwan High Command desperately signaled the U.S. Seventh Fleet HQ requesting immediate military assistance, informing the United States that Taiwan was under attack from the forces of

mainland China. Admiral Feng-Shiang personally told Admiral Dick Greening, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) in Pearl Harbor, that he feared for his country's existence, that right now an air battle was raging over the Taiwan Strait, and that his pilots were winning it. But on the sea, China had a major flotilla of warships both bombarding and preparing to land on the strategically important Penghu Islands, which everyone knew China had *always* wanted to own.

"We badly need a carrier battle group, anything to get them away." Admiral Feng-Shiang was almost pleading. But there was nothing CINCPACFLT could do. Nothing anyone could do. The United States did not have a CVBG available except in the Middle East, which was nearly two weeks away from the Taiwan Strait. And anyway, it could scarcely be spared.

Powerless in Pearl Harbor, the Admiral knew now why BIG JOHN had been hit in such a brutal and unexplained manner. "Holy shit," breathed Admiral Greening. "The bastards are gonna take Taiwan. And as far as I can see there's not a damn thing we can do about it—we don't even have the hardware to attack China."

He promised to get right back to the distraught Taiwanese Admiral, but right now he had to call Washington and inform Alan Dixon about precisely what was happening.

They patched him through to the White House, where the CNO was with Arnold Morgan. Kathy put the secure call on the conference line, and both Washington-based Admirals listened aghast as Admiral Greening informed them that China had militarily invaded Taiwan. At the conclusion of the call, Admiral Dixon requested 30 minutes to thoroughly appreciate the situation.

But Arnold Morgan stood up, and there was a strange smile on his face. He shook his head, over and over, and kept saying, "Those little bastards... those cunning little pricks."

Finally he turned back to the CNO, and he said, "Alan, old buddy, did you ever hear the term *checkmate*?"

"Guess so."

"Good. Because we're in it."

Every piece of information he had absorbed in the past several months, every twist and turn of the plot in the Gulf of Hormuz, sprang now, miraculously, into place. Right back to that moment when Lt. Ramshawe had called him in the restaurant. Arnold Morgan could remember the young Lieutenant's words verbatim: "*It is my opinion that there may be a serious minefield out there, maybe running from the Omani coast, place called Ra's Qabr al Hindi, right across to Iran. And I think we ought to find out.*"

The Admiral was talking aloud now. "Jimmy was right. And he ought to be promoted for brilliance. Borden is going to be relieved of command at Fort Meade. George Morris is gonna get better in the next twenty minutes or he's fired too, so are all his fucking doctors. And I'm about to admit I've been outwitted by the goddamned Chinese pricks. They never wanted to screw up the oil, never gave a flying fuck about the oil, they just wanted to tie us up, at least tie up the carriers, thousands of miles from the South China Sea.

"I guess we threw 'em a curve when we diverted the JFK back to Taiwan. So by some damn clever means they crippled her. *And then there were none...* Hours

later they attack Taiwan, *knowing* beyond any doubt there is nothing on earth we can do about it, save for starting World War Three with nuclear missiles. And even Taiwan ain't worth that."

"Holy shit," breathed Alan Dixon. "You mean there's nothing we could do to save her?"

"There's plenty we could do. But not in time. Taiwan will fall inside two weeks. That's how long it would take the TRUMAN Group or the ROOSEVELT Group to get there. The fight would be all over before they could get out of the Indian Ocean."

"But so far they've only taken a few shots at the Penghu Islands."

"Alan, that news is gonna be so out of date by tomorrow morning it'll make the Washington Monument look like Stonehenge."

Admiral Morgan checked his watch. It was already 1700 hours—0600 hours the following morning over the Penghu Islands, where, suddenly, the rumble of battle grew steadily more faint, and the surviving Chinese bombers swung back toward the mainland. The flotilla of warships ceased their bombardment but closed rapidly, effecting a complete blockade of the islands. Anyone wanting to get in would have to fight the Chinese Navy.

With half the armed forces of Taiwan already well on their way south, Admiral Zhang, who had assumed command of the entire operation, moved to Phase Two. And as the sun rose bloodred out of the Pacific Ocean, he unleashed the massive missile bombardment of the west coast of Taiwan he had been planning for six months.

It started in the north with Chiang Kai-shek International Airport, the powerful SRBMs blasting craters in the runways, but surprisingly taking out only the air-traffic control tower. The regular passenger terminals were not targeted.

Zhang's ballistic missiles slammed into the road system, blasting huge chunks out of the coastal highway. They hit the town of Chungli, where the main south-running freeway crosses Route 1. They obliterated that junction and took out 400 yards of the railroad track.

They blew apart a freeway road bridge west of Hainchu. They hit the Mingte Dam, west of Miaoli, and three times more they knocked serious hunks out of the south-running roads, freeways and railroads before they reached the majestic bridges that span the estuary of the Choshui River.

And there, with a withering salvo of missiles, the Chinese took out all four of them, blasting steel and masonry into the water, stopping Route 17 in its tracks, ending the long winding path of Route 19, splitting asunder the great north-south freeway, and closing down the south-running railroad.

The entire transportation system that crosses the pancake-flat, rice-growing plains of west-central Taiwan was in ruins. And that was before the Chinese missiles reached the southwestern city of Tainan, Taiwan's provincial capital for more than 200 years until 1885.

Zhang's missiles completely destroyed every runway on the airport. They hammered Routes 17 and 19 north of the river and blasted yet again the main highway south. There were three massive separate hits on the most important road-freight artery in the country as it swept west of the city toward the port of Kaohsiung, 30 miles farther south.

At that point it was just about impossible to move troops or anything else back to the north. Admiral Zhang's brilliant feint to the Penghu Islands had drawn half the Taiwanese army 235 miles away from his main objective, Taipei.

And the Chinese warlord had not even begun. Again he launched his remaining 120 B-6/BADGER aircraft, and they headed out over the coast in three great waves of 40, again loaded with the new land-attack cruise missiles. This time their targets were strictly military, Taiwan's air-defense installations, Air Force runways and Naval bases, places the PLAN had been watching and checking for years.

The BADGERS were accompanied by Air Force fighters, the Q-5B Fantan and more bombers, the newer JH-7s and the SU-30MKKs. Air-superiority aircraft, J-10 and J-11 Flankers, flew sortie after sortie, trying to protect the bomber force and downing several Taiwanese fighter aircraft in a sustained attempt to gain air superiority over the strait.

The opening attacks hit the brand-new, but untried, Modified Air Defense System (MADS), with its super-PATRIOT antiballistic missiles, which had been installed all around the capital. They slammed the airfields of the new Indigenous Defense Fighter aircraft in Taoyuan County and farther south in Yunlin. All along the flat west coastal plain they took out the Tien Kung air-defense systems. They hit the high slopes of the central mountains where the Taiwanese military had major west-facing air-command and-control centers, built especially to deal with a massive incoming attack from the mainland, as this most certainly was.

For years Chinese agents had reported to Beijing every detail of the key Taiwanese logistic centers and the military Intelligence headquarters (C-41). And now the land-attack missiles, launched from the air, were aimed at every one of them, backed up by the huge short-range ballistic missiles that were still thundering into the sky every few minutes from their launchers 100 miles across the strait in Fujian and Jangxi Provinces.

Brave little Taiwan shuddered under the withering onslaught of the Dragon from across the water. But they conceded nothing. Hour after hour, their pilots had fought those F-16s into the sky, attacking the incoming missile bombers. And by midday it was apparent that China had made an error of judgment in not locating Taiwan's mobile short-range air-defense systems, CHAPARRAL, STINGER/ AVENGER and ANTELOPE.

CHAPARRAL consists of four modified AIM-9C Sidewinders mounted on tracked vehicles; the STINGER/ AVENGER SAMS is a pedestal-mounted system with two pods, each one containing four STINGER missiles, mounted on the back of a High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV). ANTELOPE, developed and perfected at Taiwan's Chung Sang Institute of Science and Technology, fires from an HMMWV four Tien Chien-1 missiles with a 14-mile range. A deadly low-flying interceptor, it has an outstanding target acquisition system.

The Taiwanese moved these three systems along their west coastline to lethal effect, launching their missiles doggedly and accurately, from anywhere they found cover. They fired from the rice fields, from behind barns, woods and coral walls. They fired from any of the foothills of the coastal mountains they could reach. And by midafternoon they had devastated the Chinese fleet of BADGER bombers. Of the 120 that came in from the mainland, fewer than 70 made it back.

But they had only stopped the aircraft, not the missiles, and by nightfall Taiwan's entire transportation system in the west was wrecked. The communications systems, both civilian and military, were nonoperational. And their permanent air-defense systems were essentially destroyed. There was nothing left of the much-vaunted SKYGUARD installations. The AIM-7M/SPARROW anti-aircraft missiles had scarcely left the ground.

In the entire history of aerial combat, the monstrous struggle for supremacy above the Taiwan Strait was right up there with the battle of Britain, except that both Admiral Zhang and Taiwan's Air Force C-in-C, General KeChiang Wong, had it all over H. Goering and Adolf.

By nightfall on May 23, China had achieved the destruction of many of its objectives, but somehow Taiwan had fought them off. In addition to the battering of the BADGER fleet, China had lost 10 Fantans, plus 12 more bombers and nine Flankers.

The Taiwanese had lost a total of 43 combat aircraft, which meant, in a sense, they were somehow winning the air battle. But China had 2,200 fully operational fighter and bomber aircraft, while Taiwan had a total of only 400 combat aircraft. As in every war in its long history, China was perfectly prepared to suffer massive attrition in pursuit of her goals, safe in the knowledge that ultimately she had more of everything, especially people, and these days, aircraft and ships.

The fact was, at this rate of killing, China could go on losing this air battle twice as long as Taiwan could go on winning it. The absence of the always-expected heavy U.S. air support was a death blow to the island, which suddenly found itself fighting for its life.

And the situation at sea was, if anything, worse. The Chinese Navy comprised 275,000 personnel, with more than 50 destroyers and frigates, 60 diesel-electric and six nuclear submarines, nearly 50 landing ships, plus several hundred auxiliaries and smaller patrol vessels.

Taiwan had an excellent Navy of 22 destroyers, 22 frigates, 50 fast-attack craft, but only 10 submarines. Their 40 landing ships were plainly not required in a conflict with China.

Unsurprisingly first blood on the water went to China. In the middle of the afternoon a PLA Naval Aviation long-range maritime patrol aircraft, a Y-8X Cub, flying down the center of the strait, picked up the small flotilla carrying the first wave of Taiwanese Marines going in to reinforce the Penghus.

The Cub signaled back to Southern Fleet HQ, and two hours later, two Chinese Kilos moved in and made a fierce underwater attack upon Taiwan's warships. They slammed a torpedo into each of the Newport-Class LSTs and hit the CHENG HAI with two more, leaving the big LSD on fire and listing with more than 400 casualties on board.

And with every hour, more and more Chinese warships arrived on station around the Taiwan coast, securing their sea-lanes, plainly preparing to protect the Chinese landing force, which everyone now knew was inevitable.

**0730 (local). Wednesday, May 23.
The White House. Washington, D.C.**

The atmosphere in the Oval Office was subdued. Indeed an air of melancholy hung over the entire capital, as America's friends, colleagues and partners on the other side of the world fought for survival.

The President was worried, mainly that he might somehow be blamed, and he was beginning to see himself as some kind of Nero figure, fiddling around in Washington while Taiwan burned.

"There must be something we can do," he kept saying. And Bob MacPherson, the Defense Secretary, kept telling him that as far as he could see there was nothing. The Secretary of State, Harcourt Travis, thought the less said to anyone, the better, although he knew the USA was bound to defend Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8.

Arnold Morgan paced the room, wracking his brains for a solution, concentrated now on trying to spell out the situation for the President. And he knew it would be difficult, because this President these days saw the world only in terms of himself, and his reputation at the end of his second term.

Finally, he was prepared, and he said, "Sir, as I have already explained, the Chinese have pulled off a stupendous act of deception, forcing us to put eighty percent of our available sea power into a false, but dangerous, situation in the Strait of Hormuz. In the process they have sunk three VLCCs and caused the death of several seamen, most of them American, inside the Gulf of Iran. They have further hit and sunk a Japanese tanker north of the Malacca Strait and plainly torpedoed a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Pacific. They are now moving ahead and conquering Taiwan, the *only* objective they have ever been interested in."

He paused to allow this catalog of Chinese transgressions to be fully appreciated. And then he continued, "In return, we have smashed their oil production in the gulf area. And I have warned their ambassador that we see no purpose in Chinese warships entering the area of the northern Arabian Sea in the future. Should they ignore this warning, they understand we will not hesitate to hit and sink any and all Chinese ships anywhere near the oil sea-lanes of the Middle East. They have done quite sufficient damage to the world oil market already, and the international community simply will not put up with their presence in the area any longer. The Chinese understand that. I think."

"Arnold, I kinda know all that," said the President. "I want you to deal with Taiwan."

"Very well, sir. But you'll forgive my reminding you that all these matters are very closely connected."

"I'll forgive you. Taiwan."

"Okay," said Admiral Morgan, declining to mention what he actually thought about the conversation—*Some cheek, this fucking ignoramus trying to keep ME on track.*

But he rose above it, more or less effortlessly, and continued on: "Sir, this attack on Taiwan has been very carefully planned. And we thus find ourselves watching a rather ungainly giant swatting and whacking his way to victory. But he is well prepared, he's in his own waters, he doesn't give a damn about the attrition of ships, aircraft or people and he wants the prize of Taiwan more than any Chinaman has ever wanted anything.

“We cannot intervene, mainly because we don’t have anything to intervene with. And even if we did, I’d be inclined to advise against. Because we would find ourselves in a very serious sea battle, and the upshot might be that we could lose three or four major ships, and a couple of thousand American crewmen. They on the other hand might lose twenty ships and ten thousand crewmen. The difference being that they wouldn’t care a fuck, and would just go on fighting. We, on the other hand, could not put up with that.

“We’d have riot conditions at home, you’d be swept from office along with the rest of us and we’d all be accused of deliberately starting a new Vietnam on account of some goddamned no-account Chinese island, which is about a mile and a half from Shanghai anyway. That’s how the public and the press would react.

“It’s all very well our patrolling the waters, as we’ve been doing for years, and frightening everyone to death whenever we had to. But it’s quite another to be prepared to go to war, to send our young men to fight and die, thousands of miles from home. Sir, if we took this country into armed conflict with China over a bunch of fucking pottery makers in this goddamned island right off their coast, you could wind up with another civil war in this country, and I’m not joking.”

“But we always were able to drive the Chinese off before...”

“Yeah, but they were only goofing around then. This is entirely different. This is a nation on a war footing, perfectly happy to fight and die for their belief that Taiwan is a part of China, an offshore province that needs to be brought back into the motherland. On the other hand, we are really prepared only to posture over Taiwan. No president of the USA is going into a real shooting war with China over their goddamned island.

“We’d fight ’em over Middle Eastern oil, if we had to, because that’s in our national interest and the public would understand that. But they would not understand American sailors being blown to pieces over the territorial claim of one Chinaman over another.”

“I guess you can understand the Chinese wanting this offshore island back,” said the President. “Same as they wanted Hong Kong, which was even farther inside their own backyard. I just never understand this obsession. Never understand what they really want.”

“What they *really* want, sir,” replied Admiral Morgan, “is the National Palace Museum of Taipei.”

“The museum?”

“Correct. Because it contains the most priceless collection of Chinese art and history. It is without question the greatest museum in the world, the greatest museum there has ever been.”

“Is that right?”

“That, sir, is right.”

“Well I thought the Chinese regime hated culture. Didn’t Chairman Mao and his wife try to destroy every vestige of their country’s culture, burning books, destroying university libraries and all that?”

“They sure did. And that was a big part of it. The entire heart of China, every ancient book, manuscript, tapestry, sculpture, painting, porcelain, silver, jade, gold, whatever, dating right back to the ancient Shang Kingdom, thousands of

years ago, was contained in one collection. About ten thousand cases of it. Held for five hundred years in the Forbidden City in Beijing.”

“Well, how did it get to Taiwan?”

“Basically Chiang Kai-shek took it.”

“Christ! All of it?”

“Nearly. It was just about the last major act he undertook before he and the Kuomintang were exiled to Formosa. He just felt that Mr. and Mrs. Mao might destroy the entire thing, so he packed it all up and somehow shipped fourteen trainloads of Chinese tradition across the water to his new home.”

“Did anyone care? I mean back on the mainland?”

“Not for a while. But then Formosa had its name changed to Taiwan, and its capital, Taipei, became a world financial power. So Chiang Kai-shek decided to build this fabulous museum in a park to the north of the city... kinda showcase to display this colossal record of the cultural history of China.”

“Don’t tell me, Arnie. Right then the Chinks wanted it all back?”

“That’s right. The museum opened sometime in the mid-sixties, and the Chinese Communists almost immediately started to lay claim to the entire collection, ranting on about the cultural tapestry of China being displayed in this offshore island that somehow claimed to have nothing to do with the mainland.”

“And what did Chiang Kai-shek say to that?”

“Plenty, sir. He said plenty. He told them that in his view they were nothing more than a murderous communist rabble who would probably have burned the history of China and never given it another thought. He told them he, Chiang, was the rightful ruler of China, that Taiwan was the rightful cradle of the Chinese nation, and that one day he and his armies would return and reclaim the mainland, and he’d see ’em all in hell before he’d submit to their barbarism.”

“And the collection of Chinese history?”

“That was even easier to deal with. Old Chiang Kai-shek told ’em to go fuck themselves.”

“And the stuff’s been there in the museum ever since?”

“Right. They even called it the National Palace Museum, after the original in the Forbidden City.”

“And did the stuff survive all this turmoil?”

“By some miracle, not one piece was ever broken. Which, in the opinion of the Taiwanese people, proves that the collection is precisely where it’s supposed to be. And they do have the unanswerable argument that Mao and his wife would most certainly have destroyed it.”

“And what does the modern Chinese regime have to say about that?”

“Nothing. Except to stamp their feet and shout, *WANT TREASURES BACK! WANT TREASURES BACK!*”

Everyone in the room chuckled. They would have laughed out loud if the situation had not been quite so serious.

“Jeez. There must be literally thousands of pieces,” said Bob MacPherson.

“I think there’re more than seven hundred thousand,” said Admiral Morgan. “I went to see it once a few years back. But they can only display fifteen thousand pieces at a time. They rotate every three months. So if you lived in Taiwan and

went there four times in a year, you'd still only see sixty thousand pieces, which is less than ten percent of the collection. It'd take twelve years to see everything."

"But where do they keep all the stuff that's not on display?"

"No one really knows," Arnold continued. "But it's supposed to be hidden in some vast network of vaults in the mountains behind the museum. They say it's all connected by tunnels."

"You'd think with all that stuff they could do some kind of a deal, wouldn't you? Display half of it in Beijing or something." The President slipped automatically into the politician's instinct for compromise.

"The Chinese mind-set does not work like that," said Arnold. "Mainland China wants this irritating little rebel island to hand over the culture of China, which, they say, Chiang Kai-shek stole from the people."

"And the Taiwanese are still telling 'em to go fuck themselves?"

"Exactly," said Admiral Morgan. "And before we're a lot older, I'd say there's going to be a ferocious battle over that museum. And you can bet the Taiwanese have put in some very thorough security systems. Even if Taiwan falls, as it plainly must, there's no guarantee that collection will not be wiped out. The Taiwanese may even use it as a bargaining card."

"You mean, *If we can't have it, nobody's having it?*"

"Possibly. But more likely, *We have the power to destroy it, at the touch of a button... if you go and guarantee to leave us alone forever, you can take it with you. Failing that, no one shall have it.*"

"Meanwhile, gentlemen, what are we going to do about the situation militarily? I ask this in the full knowledge that my National Security Adviser has already spelled out the plain and obvious truths of the matter. There's no possibility that the United States of America is going to all-out war with China over Taiwan. The most we would ever have done would have been to place a lot of very heavy muscle in the area and dare anyone to take us on.

"Today, however, that is not an option. China is, as Arnie has said, already on a war footing, prepared to fight and die for her cause, which she is already doing. We're not going near the place."

"And how do we answer Taiwan's cry for help?" asked Harcourt Travis.

"We offer to negotiate for them," said the President. "We threaten to make China into a pariah in world trade. We threaten to withdraw all trade with anyone who trades with China. We rescind their most-favored-nation status. We ban their exports. Call in their debts. All that and more. But we're not trading missiles, shells and bullets with 'em."

"Nor torpedoes," said Arnold Morgan.

"You mean, really, we just sit back and let the battle play out?" asked Bob MacPherson.

"Fraid so," said Arnold Morgan. "But I am working on a plan to make them pay a very high price for what they have done. And I think we can confine their future activities to the China seas."

"Sounds like a particularly ambitious plan," said Harcourt Travis, "since we're dealing with a nation that has just stood the world on its head, and apparently has no qualms about wrecking economies and then going to war."

“It is an ambitious plan,” said Admiral Morgan. “And it’s a plan that I like a lot for two reasons. First of all, because it involves a large amount of dynamite, and second of all because it will create a multitude of hugely pissed off Chinamen.”

“I like it, too,” said the President. “Don’t know what it is, but I like it.”

The meeting continued for the rest of the morning, and still made no headway with regard to military discouragement of China. It was agreed the State Department would send the most strongly worded communiqué to the Beijing government “deploring in the extreme the vicious military action undertaken this week by China against their peace-loving neighbors, an independent state now recognized by the United Nations.”

Harcourt Travis pointed out that no civilized single country had undertaken any such unprovoked action in the past quarter of a century, save for Serbia, and earlier Argentina against the Falkland Islands. In Harcourt’s opinion the Chinese would do well to take note of the fate that befell the leaders of those countries, and would be advised to *cease and desist* in this totally unwarranted bullying of a small island neighbor.

He did not anticipate a reply, nor did he get one.

Travis had been reluctant to put American threats of any kind into writing, and that afternoon Admiral Morgan had the Chinese ambassador brought in to answer some hard, searching questions. But the ambassador merely stalled and said that China was simply answering a request from the Taiwan government “to stabilize the situation in their country, with a view to normalizing relations with the mainland, which would be in everyone’s interest.”

Arnold Morgan, who by now had pictures of the burning Naval base in the Penghu Islands, produced them and asked if that was China’s way of “stabilizing the situation.”

Somewhat uncharacteristically, Ling Guofeng produced two pictures from his own briefcase and offered them to Arnold, who stared in amazement at the 500-foot-high inferno that was still blazing from the oil refinery in the Strait of Hormuz.

“And might I assume this is your way also?” asked the ambassador.

“You may assume anything that makes you happy,” growled Admiral Morgan. “And I’ll accept, if you like, that persons unknown blew up a few barrels of your oil. But that’s a whole hell of a lot different from going to war with another, much smaller country, killing the civilian population, hitting them with bombs, cruise missiles and your entire Navy. That’s not even comparable. And I want you to express to your government our horror at your actions and to warn them in the strongest possible terms that there will be consequences, which none of you will much enjoy. That’s all.”

Ambassador Ling considered himself lucky not to have been expelled from the United States forthwith, and he wished the National Security Adviser good-bye and hurried from the West Wing of the White House.

All week long such meetings would take place as the USA argued, cajoled and threatened the Republic of China in any way it could. It recruited support from every one of its allies, from Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Canada, Australia and Japan. Canceled China’s most-favored-nation status, banned imports from China, and had its allies do the same.

Meanwhile, on the seas beneath the endless air battles, the Chinese Navy continued to deploy its warships, running them down from the Northern Fleet to form a silent blockade of the great port of Keelung, home of Taiwan's Third Naval District and the northern patrol squadron. The Taiwan Air Force, its airfields and runways severely damaged, half its pilots now dead or missing, spent the nights licking its wounds, repairing airstrips and fueling fighter aircraft ready to face the Dragon again tomorrow.

And all the while, the Chinese warships moved into control positions, dominating the strait, establishing safe lines of communication and supply. Overhead, to the north of the island, Special Forces were packed into aircraft dropping behind Taiwan's beaches to the west of Keelung, the remote area chosen by Admiral Zhang and his senior commanders for the opening beachhead of the conflict.

This Chinese strategic planning had taken many months to finalize, but ultimately the tactics had evolved almost of their own accord. The vast majority of the Taiwanese people live on the coastal plains on the western side of the island, principally in the north around Taipei, and in the major population centers in the south around Tainan and Kaohsiung.

Inland, the country is mountainous and forbidding, and the east coast is guarded by towering cliffs rising up from the sea. Any attempt to attack from the east would have been absurd, and the prospect of serious operations in the mountains would have been daunting to any invader. And China's objectives were clear: to bring about the total surrender of the island without having to fight for every inch of territory or for the outlying islands.

Plainly the objective had to be secured in the shortest possible time, at any cost, to avoid unnecessary collateral damage. The Chinese military had no wish to destroy what they wanted before they even laid hands on it. There was also a determination to avoid excessive casualties on both sides, and an unspoken need to avoid damaging China's world political standing any more than was absolutely necessary.

Nonetheless, they had to get troops in there, and all through the week they landed Special Forces under the cover of darkness by parachute and from the sea. They were delivered by submarine, small merchant vessels, and fishing boats, dropped into the shallows along Taiwan's 1,000 miles of coastline on suitably lonely beaches—made even more lonely by the near-total destruction of the island's military communications systems.

Shortly before midnight on Saturday, May 26, the land attack began. An armada of massive transport aircraft protected by squadrons of jet fighters began roaring over the Taiwan Strait, slightly north of the island itself.

An entire division of China's 15th Airborne Army rumbled eastward, packed into recently acquired Russian-built IL-76MD/CANDIDs, specially configured for airborne operations. Flying right astern of them, low over the ocean, was a fleet of Y-8X/CUB transporters, likewise packed with troops, the entire fleet under the control of their Airborne Command, a gray-painted A-501 Mainstay.

Taiwan's air defenses were all but useless now, and the massed ground forces of the Army, which had been swept to the south in the false panic over the Penghu Islands, was now unable to get back because of the wrecked roads, bridges and

railroads. Which effectively allowed China's first landing force to hit the beaches from out of the night, unchallenged. One by one, the huge low-flying aircraft climbed to an altitude of 1,000 feet and disgorged their live loads into two separate dropping zones seven miles apart, two miles behind the glorious white sands of Chinsan Beach.

This spectacular tourist area is situated 13 miles west of Keelung on the north coast of Taipei County. And tonight hundreds and hundreds of paratroopers came thumping into the soft sand behind the wide shoreline, several miles from the nearest urban districts.

By 0230 there were 3,000 to 4,000 on each landing beach, and the Chinese commanders were rallying the Division quickly and efficiently, ordering the airborne troops to move off as soon as they were formed, heading inland away from the sea, forward of the landing area, for almost a mile.

And here the Chinese began to dig in, establishing, well forward of the beachhead, two crescent-shaped screens, which would become the first line of defense Taiwanese troops would encounter should they attempt to attack the forthcoming amphibious force from the mainland.

Taiwan's problem right now was communication. The military systems were in such bad shape it was nearly impossible to transmit a message, never mind a detailed conversation or report. Certainly there were small units stationed near Taipei that were aware of air activity out on the northern region. And they may even have assumed there were troop drops being made. But they had no forces in contact, no Intelligence, no way of knowing what the invasion force was doing, certainly no way of assessing whether a beach landing was in any way imminent.

Meanwhile the Chinese were thundering forward with their two steel defense perimeters, one astride the road from Taipei, just north of Yangmingshan, the other astride the main approaches to the beach landing areas from Keelung—clean across the road from Feitsuiwan.

They strived in pouring rain all through that Sunday, digging trenches, preparing ammunition, setting up machine guns. The ground mission of China's 15th Airborne Division was to stop a Taiwanese counterattack at any and all cost. And they had to be ready to protect the landing craft of the big Chinese Marine Division when it hit the beaches, complete with its own armor, artillery and air defenses, early on Monday morning, May 28.

And ready they were. While the main forces had been digging in, a small Chinese marine force, similarly trained to the U.S. Navy SEALs or Britain's Special Boat Squadron, had checked out and cleared the landing area, marking the lanes, staking out their own positions to supply local machine-gun cover while they guided the landing craft in.

By 0300, three hours before the sun would clear the distant horizon, the sea was suddenly alive with the unmistakable signs of invasion, tiny black landing craft, packed with armed troops streaming in toward the shallows. And as the sky brightened and long, pink fingers began to form among the predawn rain clouds, the sound of the ramps echoed along the shoreline. Big, clanging ramps, manhandled by shouting troops. And down those ramps came the big tracked vehicles, engines howling, as they drove down the steep gradients and splashed into the surf, driving forward, looking for their lane lines on the beach.

Out beyond the waves in the calmer waters a half mile offshore there was a kind of controlled chaos, as ships maneuvered into position, the hydraulic docks opening up to allow more and more of the landing craft to break cover from the LCDs. This was D-Day Normandy on only a slightly smaller scale, and if any Taiwanese units were watching, they were watching the opening round of an unwinnable fight.

Six hours later, everyone who was going ashore had gone ashore. And the ships were turned back across the strait to reload with thousands and thousands more troops, and this time they would be joined by dozens of civilian ships, all making their way to the northern beachhead out on the Chinsan sands.

Rarely had a capital city the size of Taipei experienced such mass confusion. Its three million inhabitants—and three million more in the surrounding district—knew, of course, their island was under attack from the Republic of China. But the Chinese had thus far gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid harming even one building in the great northern metropolis. They had attacked, exclusively, military installations and military communications, with the exception of the international airport, which they completely disabled but left the passenger terminals untouched.

Thus for the people of Taiwan there was television news bringing hourly reports of the continuing air battles over the central waters of the strait. There were reports of the destruction of the Navy base in the Penghu Islands. And there were further reports of the Taiwanese Navy preparing to defend the shores against a mass invasion from the sea. But nothing was being reported from the beachhead, and there were no signs of bombs, rockets, shells or missiles. The city seemed normal, save for the tension and fear. But there were no sounds of war. It was as if China had decided to shut down the military effectiveness of Taiwan, but possibly nothing further.

Thus Taipei itself continued to function. Shops opened as usual, schools and universities remained active, traffic was its usual hideous mess, but buses ran and people went to work. Hotels stayed open and thousands of tourists trapped in the city booked in for extra weeks. It was impossible to leave Taipei, but equally impossible to travel to Taipei. The major long-distance freeways were virtually deserted, the railroad station was dead, the airport was dead, the runways wrecked. And a curious, uneasy calm enveloped the capital, even though, on the surface, there was the appearance of normality.

The United States had informed the government it would begin an evacuation of its citizens caught in the entanglement of the Chinese invasion, but it quickly became apparent that there was nowhere in the north of the island where a U.S. passenger aircraft could land. And, of course, there were no proper foreign embassies in Taipei, because of the problems of upsetting mainland China. There were just the “pseudo-embassies” where diplomats operated under the cover of the American Institute on the Hsinhyi Road, the British Trade and Cultural Office on the Jenai Road, and the France-Asia Trade Association on the Tunhua Road, none of which had any serious clout with anyone.

And so, as the first waves of Chinese troops splashed ashore 17 miles to the northeast, Taipei continued to function, both citizens and visitors alike, with no option but to await the inevitable arrival of the conquering hordes from the

mainland. There was no escape, and life moved precariously forward for all of them.

Five days later, on Saturday morning, June 2, the National Palace Museum was busier than usual. It was somewhere interesting to go for the new prisoners of the city, and the tourist buses were full, wending their way across the Keelung River, up through the northern suburbs to the Waishunghsi neighborhood at the foot of the Yangming Mountains.

The museum is probably the most imposing building on Taiwan. It is set in elaborate parkland, with tree-lined gardens. The sweeping, extravagant approach leads to a massive flight of wide stone steps, like those at the Capitol building in Washington.

At the top of this giant stairway stands an unmistakable Chinese palace, built in traditional style with white walls and green tiled roofs. Curiously there is never much sign of security in the outer grounds, save for the occasional uniformed guard, and today there was absolutely nothing. The military garrison two miles down the road was almost deserted since three-quarters of its entire force had been swept south along with most of the northern Taiwanese Army.

By 1:30 P.M. there was a line of six buses creeping up to the disembarking area. Five of them carried a normal passenger load of men, women and children, husbands, wives, schoolteachers and tour guides. The sixth bus, a regular number 213, fourth in the line, was transporting only men, 50 of them, each dressed in light civilian clothes. Forty-two of the seats were occupied by bored-looking men reading newspapers. But the eight passengers in the rear of the bus were sitting on ammunition cases in front of the back bench seat, upon which rested the big machine guns and boxes of hand grenades that might very well be required in the next 20 minutes, depending on the level of resistance.

The bus driver, a lean, hard-eyed Chinese agent, had spent all morning rounding up his passengers, collecting them from a series of safe houses in the Sungshan District, where they had been lying low since the first parachute drops of the Special Forces five days previously.

These were the elite of the Chinese Army, supremely trained Oriental SAS men, and now they were poised to strike, each man armed only with a concealed machine pistol or a folding submachine gun, as bus number 213 crept slowly up to the base of the wide stairway to the palace.

It stopped, leaving its engine running, and the doors slid swiftly open. Forty-two men stepped slowly out into the rain, gathering in groups of six, separating on various levels of the steps. Slowly, without urgency, they made their way to the top and walked through the huge doors into a somewhat grim, drab and unspectacular interior main hall, in almost shocking contrast to the grandeur of the exterior. On either side of the hall was a towering wing, filled with spectacular treasures, and the groups of Special Forces, unsuspected, unrecognized, moved up to the ticket office and paid their entrance fee of \$80 new Taiwan dollars, which is around U.S. \$2.50.

In their original groups of six, they dispersed among the crowds into various great rooms, to the left and to the right, and to the upper floor. No one made a move, until the final group moved up to the counter and requested six tickets,

handing over an NT \$500 bill. On it was painted a tiny machine gun, and the young Lieutenant who offered it told the cashier, "Right now, Lee, GO!"

Lee, who had been in place on behalf of the PLAN Intelligence Service for the past five years, swung out of his booth and walked swiftly across the hall to the information desk and disappeared into a door marked EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY.

Still no one betrayed anything. Until, two minutes later, every light in the building went out. Great pictures were no longer illuminated, the glass cases full of treasure went suddenly dull beneath the limited natural light still filtering in through the windows of this dull June day. The National Palace was without electric power, and deep beneath the stone-and-marble floors Major Chiang Lee flew along the underground corridor, a flashlight in his left hand and a hand grenade in his right. He reached the giant automatic generator with just 25 seconds left before it kicked in, and he ripped out the pin and hurled the grenade straight at the big 600-gallon gas tank to the right of the main machinery.

He dove back around the corner of the massively reinforced concrete walls and flung himself to the ground. Four seconds later the thunderous explosion and contained fire ensured that not only was the National Museum without power; it was also going to stay precisely that way for the foreseeable future.

Every secure door both inside the museum itself, inside the labyrinth of underground tunnels and inside the echoing vaults that held the treasures of five thousand years was suddenly useless. If they were open, they would stay open. If they were closed, they would open up easily enough without the power locking devices. Major Chiang Lee, after hundreds of hours of study, a million deceptions and the patience of a Buddha, had done his work.

And now he moved back through the dark passage toward the area where the elevator from the main floor emerged. In the fire-control doorway, right opposite, he retrieved his Kalashnikov machine gun. And he walked back up the emergency stairs into the wide foyer where there were now scenes of some disquiet, though nothing resembling panic. The building had been constructed to such a heavy-duty standard, the rumble of the explosion, 100 yards away deep below ground, had scarcely been detected.

Major Lee fired a short burst from his machine gun, into the information desk, by way of attracting attention. Then he blasted a volley at the six high-security cameras, which he knew would operate for several hours on emergency batteries. Then he ordered everyone to stand back against the walls. He seemed a small, insignificant-looking figure to be issuing such a command, but suddenly he was joined by two groups of six men all leveling smaller, but just as deadly, weapons.

The Taiwanese guards, indoctrinated for years as to the Jihad seriousness of their responsibilities, immediately moved as a trained unit of four men, racing into position behind two huge stone pillars, and opening fire at the aggressors in the lobby. But they were not in time. At the first sign of movement, Admiral Zhang's commandos hit the ground, returning fire toward the pillars. No one hit anyone, but right behind the museum guards there was a team of six Chinese Special Forces, now with their weapons drawn, and, firing from the rear, they cut down the security men in five seconds flat.

And now nine uniformed guards from the upper floors, pistols drawn, raced down the wide interior stairs. And this was like the Saint Valentine's Day

massacre. Women screamed as the Chinese Special Forces, crouching beneath the benches along the walls, opened up with a sustained burst of fire that left no survivors—just nine bodies sprawled on the wide staircase, blood trickling down the gray stone steps.

Up on the overlooking balcony, a further troop of museum guards had seen the appalling situation and retreated into the main exhibition rooms, slamming shut the massive wooden doors and locking them by hand with their six-inch-long master keys. They used mobile phones, desperately trying to raise the military in the nearby garrison. The Taipei Police were on the line swiftly and assured them of assistance within 10 minutes. Down in the tunnels the underground guards, and those who protected the doors into the vaults, gathered in the dark, 23 of them, heavily armed and massively confused.

By now there were several dozen tourists trying to open the outside doors, and Major Chiang Lee and his men began to herd the crowd inside the foyer toward the main entrance, which was guarded by Special Forces. Each visitor to the museum was searched. All mobile phones were confiscated. The double doors were opened just a couple of feet, and each visitor was dispatched out into the crowd with instructions to leave the area immediately.

By now it was obvious the National Palace Museum had been captured, at least temporarily, by a small squadron of Chinese Special Forces. Lines of tourists returned to the waiting buses, and the eight men remaining in number 213 were now outside their bus brandishing Kalashnikovs and ordering the drivers away.

Inside the main foyer another gun battle broke out when guards from the tunnels broke through the emergency exit and began shouting orders to the crowd. Unaware of the gravity of the situation, they never had a prayer when the Special Forces gunned them down at close quarters. Six of them died instantly, the rest retreated back down to the dark tunnels, which was going to pose a substantial problem for the Chinese.

Ricocheting bullets had already injured four American tourists, one of them a very young boy, age around eight. The four-man medical unit that was integrated into the attacking force was attending the wounded, using their own supplies, and as they worked, the large crowd was slowly exiting the building and moving down to the buses.

At this point, the Chinese moved to secure the museum. Two bigger machine guns, plus ammunition, were brought up to the foyer from the waiting buses. All outside doors were locked by hand, and a dozen sentries were posted. The remaining 28 attackers split into three groups of six, and one of 10, the main assault force that would storm the exhibition rooms where there were still armed security guards.

They hit the one on the upper left first, blasting the door open with machine-gun fire and then spraying the room with 50 rounds, calling for total surrender. A stray bullet shattered a glass case and smacked straight through an early-seventeenth-century Qing Dynasty helmet used by a long-dead emperor for reviewing troops. The bullet cracked open the head of one of the three decorative dragons, split a large ruby in half and probably did about a million dollars worth of damage.

But the helmet survived, and it fared better than a black pottery wine jar, fashioned in the shape of a silkworm cocoon, and dating back to around 300 B.C. This shattered on impact with another Kalashnikov bullet, and joined the remnants of a priceless foot-high, jade Kuei tablet from the early Shang Kingdom, more than 1,000 years before Christ.

A line of bullet holes also decorated the upper reaches of one of China's most valuable paintings, *A Literary Gathering*, a massive work exquisitely done in ink on silk for the Emperor Hui-tsung of the eleventh-century northern Sung Dynasty. It still hung, high on the east wall, and might ultimately be restored.

The four cowering guards plainly realized that if the Chinese Special Forces were prepared to inflict millions of dollars' worth of damage on the contents of these rooms, their own lives were not worth four cents. And they came forward, unarmed with their hands high, and as they did so they heard the thunder of the second machine gun as it obliterated the lock on the door that guarded the room across the wide stone corridor on the upper right.

Again the Chinese Special Forces came in low and hard, the machine gun ripping bullets into the room, from a floor-level position. The two central glass cases were blown apart, glass from the tallest one flying everywhere. But the principal casualty was a large carved ivory Dragon Boat from the Qing Dynasty, again early seventeenth century, perfectly created, right down to the eight oars, the 16 pennants, and the deck canopy, all set in a gold-painted lacquer box. The Russian-made bullets hit it broadside on, reducing it to shards of split white ivory: a destruction of history sufficient to reduce any curator of any museum to unashamed tears.

Two paintings, set high on the west wall, above a colossal stone table, also were raked with machine-gun fire. The large one to the left was priceless, a sixteenth-century work by one of the four masters of the Ming Dynasty, Ch'iu Ying. Entitled *Late Return from Spring Outing*, it was a world-acclaimed picture, ink and color on silk, executed by one of the greatest artists of the Emperor's Imperial Painting Academy. The bullets had ripped right across it in two lines, and it would never be restored.

The slightly smaller picture to the left, however, was in ruins, and its demise would be mourned by art historians for years to come. It was a rare and magnificent work by Chao Kan, the tenth-century painter from Nanking, and its title evokes the elegant quality of the landscape: *Early Snow on the River*. It was a masterpiece by a great master who had trained at the Academy of Art of the southern T'ang court. He had used just ink and light color on silk, outlawing any trace of worldliness, as his fisherman worked the icy river, with a small band of travelers wending their way wearily along the windswept bank. Twenty million modern greenbacks would not have bought one half of it.

Two of the security guards, sheltering under the stone table, were hit and killed; the others begged for mercy and were permitted to surrender. And they trooped outside to join their colleagues with their faces to the wall, hands high above their heads, under the scrutiny of the Chinese raiders.

Room by room, the Special Forces took the museum, the staff was taken prisoner, the last tourists ejected from the building and the machine guns placed strategically on front and rear balconies.

At 1445, the sound of helicopters could be heard, out over the surrounding park. The Special Forces commander, in conference with Major Chiang Lee, knew they must be Taiwanese reinforcements, because the signal had not yet been sent back to the beachhead at Chinsan that the museum was secure.

Instantly they ordered all prisoners out onto the steps with instructions to clear the area, and they radioed Bus 213 to open fire at will on the incoming helicopters. Crammed with special police and the remnants of the Army still in the area, the choppers came clattering in over the trees, and immediately flew into a hail of bullets, from the high front balcony and the area to the rear of the bus.

The lead aircraft took the brunt of the heavy fire from the balcony and suddenly exploded, veering over almost in a full somersault and crashing, rotor first, bang into the green tiled roof. The second helicopter was hit from below and its main engine stopped dead, which caused it to drop like a stone from 100 feet, obliterating itself on the stone forecourt and then exploding, killing 15 tourists and injuring 39 others.

The third one banked left across the trees and flew swiftly back to the nearby Army garrison. Meanwhile Major Chiang Lee sent in the signal to the beachhead that the National Palace Museum was safely in Chinese hands for the moment, save for the underground tunnels and vaults, which still contained resisting security forces of an unknown number.

Twenty minutes later, the first of two waves of Chinese airborne battalions came in over the park, the big helicopters and transporters containing two antiaircraft detachments equipped with QW-1 SAMs. This new modified missile with its 35-pound warhead is equipped with a lethal IR homing device accurate to three miles.

The incoming battalion was also equipped with portable antitank weapons and light mortars, and the troops began to jump out into the park, swarming out of the aircraft onto the wet, green grass below, and forming an instant steel ring around the museum. They tied up with the commandos on the Special Forces that had originally taken the museum, and swiftly moved their missile defenses into position.

The museum was not yet completely secure from attack. But it would need a formidable modern force to break through right now. Taiwan had no chance of recapturing the palace, and only a remote shot at destroying it from the air at this point, because its air force was tragically weak and its missile defenses just about spent.

But the treasure trove of the Chinese centuries was firmly under the control of Beijing for the very first time since Chiang Kai-shek's 14 trains, bearing the very soul of his vast country, had rumbled down to the east coast ferries, almost 60 years previously.

Chapter 9

0900. Wednesday, May 30.

The White House. Washington, D.C.

News of China's tightening stranglehold on the island of Taiwan was emerging with leaden slowness. Beijing, unsurprisingly, was releasing nothing. And there had been no time for any of the Western media's Far Eastern correspondents even to reach Taipei before the iron grip of the Chinese military took hold of the region.

Add to this the complete rupture of all Taiwanese military communications, and the West was left with no sources, no information and no prospects of obtaining any. The only news emerging from the island was the occasional sly and undercover dispatch from the pseudo-embassies, and they had access to very few hard facts. The air battles, which had now been fought over several days, had taken place more than 60 miles from mainland news reporters, out of sight, out of earshot, basically out of reach.

And on this Wednesday morning, the mood in the West Wing of the White House was very somber. The hard men of the United States armed forces, Admiral Arnold Morgan, Defense Secretary Bob MacPherson, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Alan Dixon, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Tim Scannell, had been proved powerless to fight two enemies in two separate theaters. They were tied up in the Strait of Hormuz, guarding the world's main oil routes, and China was effectively left to do whatever it liked.

News was trickling in of a very large Chinese force landing on Chinsan Beach. It was already moving southeast to the port of Keelung. It had taken three days to muster, and the Chinese airborne troops had accepted very heavy casualties as the depleted but still determined Taiwanese forces constantly attacked them on the ground.

Nonetheless, the tide of warriors sweeping across the strait from the mainland, by both air and sea, was just too great, too engulfing for the Taiwanese to stop. Tens of thousands of Chinese troops made the beaches from the vast flotilla of civilian boats, merchant freighters and naval ships. This was a mission that had all of China behind it. And all the efforts of the remaining battalions of Taiwan's northern army proved unable to break through the "screen" of Chinese marines who fought doggedly to protect their beachhead from attack.

And now they were on the move, and Admiral Dixon considered they would swiftly attempt to capture the port of Keelung. Early reports, telephoned in secret from the pseudo-embassies, had the Chinese growling along the road, marching behind tanks and armored vehicles. But the Admiral offered a ray of hope here, because there was a major Taiwanese defensive force in this area. It had been formed six years previously with the express purpose of holding off a Chinese attack on Keelung, and the invaders would have to fight for every inch of ground in the port city.

It would perhaps come down to attrition, like most of China's wars. And then there could be only one winner. In Arnold Morgan's opinion, the Taiwanese would be suing for peace within 10 days.

This was Black Wednesday, no doubt. And at 0915 a White House agent entered the office of the National Security Chief to inform all four men that the Navy helicopter taking them to Andrews Air Base was on the lawn.

From there they were flying up to Cape Cod, landing at the sprawling Otis Air Force Base, and then heading on by Navy helicopter to Marblehead,

Massachusetts, 20 miles up the north shore from Boston, for the funeral of Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer. Admiral Morgan himself had insisted that the SEAL Team Leader be awarded, posthumously, the highest possible decoration in the United States Armed Forces, the Medal of Honor. As a SEAL, Ray Schaeffer's award was for many, many services rendered to his country. It would be awarded with no public announcement whatsoever.

Three thousand miles away in California, the funeral of U.S. Navy SEAL Charlie Mitchell was also taking place, and it would be attended by Admiral John Bergstrom and the Pacific Fleet C-in-C, Admiral Dick Greening. CINCPACFLT had personally recommended that the rookie combat SEAL quietly be awarded the Navy Cross.

In Marblehead, there was an air of terrible sadness. The Schaeffer family had lived there for generations, and Ray's wife, Wendy, with their two little boys, Ray, Jr., age nine, and Bobby, six, was returning to live in the old family house down by the water, where Ray's widowed father now lived alone.

The church was packed, with crowds lining the narrow street outside, and General Scannell read a moving eulogy, regretting that the Lieutenant Commander's area of operations was classified to such a degree that no one would ever know precisely where he had served, and with what "unfathomable courage" he had carried out his duties. "I hope," he concluded, "that his Medal of Honor, and the presence here of the senior military figures in America, will offer some testament to the regard in which he was held in the United States Navy."

Eight Naval officers carried the casket bearing the fallen SEAL to his last resting place, and the church bell tolled out over the little seaport as they lowered the body of Ray Schaeffer into the ground.

Admiral Arnold Morgan read the final prayer, offering the sentiment that "ordinary people, like ourselves, may sometimes find it difficult to understand what drives a man like Lieutenant Commander Schaeffer forward, to comprehend that selfless gallantry which is bestowed upon so few. I don't suppose Ray would have been able to explain much, either. And so we will just have to accept that God granted him an inner light, and we now wish him farewell, sure in the knowledge that light will guide him home. Amen."

At the graveside Wendy Schaeffer was erect and brave with her arm around Ray, Jr. But little Bobby wept uncontrollably for his lost father and Admiral Dixon knelt down to comfort him.

The only good news throughout the day was the formation of a Schaeffer family trust, which was begun with a \$100,000 personal donation from the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Boston banking heir, Admiral Scott Dunsmore.

The rest was a catalog of sorrow and remembrance, and the four military chiefs from Washington took their leave as soon as the burial was over. They were back at the White House by 1630, and it quickly became clear that the flight had done nothing to lessen their fury toward the Republic of China.

Back in his office, Admiral Morgan yelled, formally, for Kathy to order them some fresh coffee, with cookies, and answered his telephone as it tinkled.

"Faggot phones," he muttered, snatching it up and growling, "Morgan. Speak. And I am busy. So make it quick."

Kathy's dulcet voice murmured, "Outside desk to home base. Message received about the coffee and cookies. And I have one incoming signal, O rudest of pigs... Admiral George Morris is ready for duty tomorrow."

"Beautiful," replied the Admiral, and turning to Tim Scannell, without breaking stride, he snapped, "Fire Borden. Get him the hell out of there. George is coming back." And then, as if doubting the possibility that his thin, pastel green phone would be man enough to transmit a message, he replaced it and yelled through the door, "KATHY! Make sure that coffee's HOT!"

General Scannell told the Admiral he would indeed arrange to have Admiral Borden transferred to somewhere more amenable with his talents.

"Christ, Tim," he rasped. "Don't do that. We can't have someone of his seniority driving the harbor launch."

The General grinned. "I'll take care of it," he said. "But to return to our subject, you really do intend us to move forward and either destroy or disable that Chinese Navy base in Burma, and then warn them out of the area?"

"In one, Tim, old buddy. That's our plan."

"Timing?"

"I think right now. Give the little bastards something to think about while they're strangling Taiwan."

"Is John Bergstrom up to speed on this, Arnie?"

"As far as he can be. He has the charts, but no decent satellite pictures. And he knows we're moving on it. He has a SEAL team in place in Diego Garcia. And we got the right SSN available with the biggest ASDV we have. Same one we used to get the guys into the refinery."

"So this meeting now constitutes the finalization of the attack?"

"Guess so, Alan. We have to start somewhere. So let's get into it—let's hit these commie bastards hard... one for the Schaeffer, right?"

"One for the Schaeffer it is, Arnie." General Scannell was not smiling.

Admiral Morgan pulled up a big computerized chart on a wide screen at the end of his office... "Come on over here, guys," he said, striding forward. "Let's take a good look at the position."

The chart showed the vast delta area between the port of Rangoon and the coastal mouth of the Bassein River, 125 miles to the west. This is the fabulous rice bowl of Burma, interlaced by rivers, streams, canals and tributaries, which irrigate millions of acres of farmland. Through here the mighty 1,350-mile-long Irrawaddy River (today it's Ayeyarwady) splits and meanders to the ocean, packed with freshwater fish and monsoon waters that originated hundreds of miles to the north toward the Indian and Chinese borders.

It is a sprawling, wet tidal basin, with great promontories of land jutting out between the estuaries of nine rivers, all of which flow into the hot, steamy corner of the Bay of Bengal known as the Gulf of Martaban. The agricultural produce from here feeds much of the nation and much of China, too. The endless paddy fields are interrupted by mango swamps and the occasional monsoon forest, but this land is F-L-A-T.

Admiral Morgan frowned and pointed his ruler at the far left section of the chart. "This last wide stretch of water right here," he said, "is the Bassein River Delta. It's the widest of the south-flowing waters in this area, and you'll see that

this island, the long triangle, here, on the left-hand side of the estuary, is called Haing Gyi. You will also notice that the goddamned place sits in about six inches of water, which is a pretty fucking crazy area to build a Navy base on, even if you happen to be a Chinese prick.”

General Scannell came very close to blowing his coffee clean down his nose, so unexpected was Arnold’s swift turn of phrase. But he moved in closer, and observed the wide area of green swamp that stretched all the way along the northern shoreline of Haing Gyi, almost joining it to the Arakan Peninsula.

“Well, we ain’t going in that way,” he said, unnecessarily. “And what about this light blue area that stretches right across the southern approach?”

“Oh, it’s much better in there,” said the Admiral, sardonically. “There is a maximum of nine feet shelving to about nine inches... and on the face of it, gentlemen, we have to assume the Chinese are nuts.”

But his face relaxed, and he continued, “But nuts they ain’t. This is a very strategic corner of the ocean. As we have discussed before, warships from here have the capability of controlling the Malacca Strait. And if I pull up this chart a bit, get us in closer, you’ll see what the little bastards are up to...”

“Right here, in this central stretch of the island’s east coast, we got water... See? More than forty feet right up to the shore... and it stretches out here into what looks like a natural, but narrow, channel, all the way up from the mouth of the estuary, minimum depth forty feet, maximum fifty-five feet.

“However, if you follow it down here... about four miles, the whole damn place goes shallow again... so if you’re trying to get in from the ocean, you got a ten-mile stretch with only twenty feet of water. Which you’d think would be impossible. Right here we got a deepish water thoroughway into deepish water jetties. But you cannot get a big ship in there.

“But, I know they can... because I happen to have located, on a very poor photograph, a Chinese Kilo-Class submarine, right in there, moored alongside. And that little bastard draws thirty-five feet on the surface, and they didn’t carry the sucker in, did they?”

“Probably not,” replied Admiral Dixon with mock seriousness.

“What they’ve done is dredged a channel, which does not appear on any Navy charts,” said Admiral Morgan. “And what’s more, it isn’t going to appear on any Naval charts, because they’re not about to allow anyone in there. There’s been a major building program by the Chinese on that eastern shore, and they have a very neat little situation—a fully equipped Naval dockyard, right in an area where there are very few other facilities for over-hauling a ship or even refueling. And they got it all to themselves, and they’re going to be an even bigger pain in the ass than usual if we do not, gentlemen, get ’em the fuck out of there ASAP.”

“What do they use for power?” asked the CNO.

“I’m not absolutely certain, but Lieutenant Ramshawe’s on the case. And I appreciate the question. That island is in a remote place, and it’s difficult to see what they are using. But the area is well lit and plainly operational. It’s possible they are using the reactor of a nuclear submarine, but we can’t find it. And the water is not deep enough for it to hide. Ramshawe thinks they have a major power plant, but we can’t yet tell the source. Anyway, when we do, I think we should destroy it... Gentlemen, we have to get them outta there.”

“Do you think China has a major single objective in all of this, Arnie?” Bob MacPherson looked pensive.

“I think it’s pure expansion, Bob. For so many years they’ve restricted themselves to their own area of the world, which ought to be big enough for anyone. But they increasingly see themselves as powerful global players. They are envious of us, and see themselves as our equals. They covet our influence, our allies and, above all, our muscle.

“But what they really covet is the world’s oil supplies. Because as China gets rich, it’s going to require more and more fuel. And most of that fuel is in the Middle East and south central Asia. Of course there’s a ton of it in Siberia, but that means negotiating with Russia, which is not about to trade away one of its very few natural resources.

“Which brings us back to the Malacca Strait, the single great thoroughway of all oil to the Far East. If we allow China to dominate the Malacca, we give them the power to force some tankers right around Indonesia, and that’s going to cost the Japanese a vast amount of money. All their fuel costs will rocket upward, natural gas, propane, jet fuel and gasoline.

“And the key to China’s domination of that strait is their new base in Burma. Without it, they’re damn near helpless, because they simply live too far away. And, gentlemen, right now we have world opinion on our side. We can force them right out of the Bassein River Delta, and no one would support any of their claims of U.S. bullying. That’s what we’re going to do.”

“Anyway, who’s to know what happened if the SEALs pull it off?” asked the CNO.

“China will know, because we’ll fucking tell ’em. But they have made the mistake of striking the first blow against the West with that minefield in Hormuz. And then literally conquering Taiwan. Everyone knows they deserve whatever the hell’s coming to them. And my guess is that if we hit Haing Gyi, the ole Chinks are going to go real quiet for several years.”

“Meanwhile how the hell do we get in there to hit it?” asked Bob MacPherson. “And since we’re going to tell them what we’ve done, what’s wrong with just bombing the sonofabitches?”

“The USA does not bomb people, without a drastic and just reason,” replied Admiral Morgan. “However we may justify an attack on China’s Indian Ocean east base, it is no more than a power play—the superpower bangs the pretender into his rightful place. Second place.

“But it’s so much better that the guy with the busted nose is the only one aware of who’s whacked him. That way it goes quiet. Some accident, on some remote island, in the Bay of Bengal. That’s the way to run the world these days. Keep it quiet, keep it tight, but make it count.”

“Well, you were right about the refinery in Hormuz,” said Admiral Dixon. “We’ve heard nothing from China by way of complaint.”

“That’s because they know,” said Admiral Morgan. “They know and they understand. And quite honestly, I don’t think they care. Their objective was Taiwan, and they were prepared to pay the price for it. I doubt they’ll ever bother to rebuild that refinery. But in the next several months you’re gonna see the start of a trans-Sino pipeline, all the way from Kazakhstan to their eastern seaboard.

It's the Chinese way. They'll build the world's longest ditch, containing the world's longest pipe, just the way they built the world's longest brick wall, and the world's greatest dam at Three Gorges. They have the labor, and they're not afraid to use it. A lot of it, one suspects, slave labor."

"Meanwhile," said Admiral Dixon, "how the hell are we going to get the guys into Haing Gyi, and what are they going to do when they get there?"

"First question, how to get in." Admiral Morgan moved closer to the chart, zooming back a little to show the water depths out in the bay.

"And that's a problem," he said. "You can all see the fifty-meter line out here, fifteen miles from the central seaway into the estuary. I'm not completely crazy about this chart, but they have the fifty-meter line well defined. It follows the coastline very accurately, all the way down from the narrow border with Bangladesh. Anywhere you look it's showing depths of around one hundred sixty-five feet to the left and one hundred twenty feet to the right. So we gotta assume it's more or less correct. So our submarine is going to have to make a rendezvous point somewhere right there on that line, where she can still hide in one hundred fifty feet of water.

"But that's up to the SEALs and to SHARK's CO. More important is the insertion of the troops. And I've given it a lot of thought, because that ASDV is so damned slow. And fifteen miles is a long way at only six knots, and that only gets us into the mouth of the estuary. It's another ten up to the deeper water off Haing Gyi. That's a total running time of more than four hours, and it leaves us with the ASDV in a pretty vulnerable spot.

"My conclusion, therefore, is that we bring the guys into the estuary, which will take two and a half hours, and then creep up the new channel as far as Rocky Point, right here on the southeastern headland of the island, and let 'em swim in. We then have the ASDV return to the SHARK."

"Leaving the guys alone in there?"

"For a short while. Because I think we have to get 'em out with fast, rigid inflatables. The possibility of pursuit by the Chinese is high, and they may have fast patrol boats out searching. If they locate the ASDV crawling through the mud, in a channel less than forty feet deep, with nowhere to maneuver right or left, we could be light one boatload of very precious guys. And that would not be good."

"You mean we set up a rendezvous point somewhere right along the island beaches?" asked General Scannell. "Then get 'em out fast, running all the way back to the submarine at high speed on the surface?"

"No alternative. ASDV in, for maximum stealth, when we're not expected. Top speed run out, when the Chinese Navy is searching around in the dark, but may not catch us. Those fast inflatables make twenty-five knots. The guys will obviously get a good start... maybe fifteen minutes... and that way they have a real shot no one's gonna locate 'em."

"Okay, Arnie. Sounds good, so long as they don't get caught in the base. We got a contingency to rescue if the crap hits the fan while they're still working?"

"No, Alan. No I'm afraid we don't."

"Nothing?"

“How can we? We wouldn’t know if they were in trouble. The only thing we can do is have an accurate rendezvous point on the island, with fast boats waiting to evacuate. The ASDV cannot fight, and the submarine is too far away.”

“Jesus, that’s a tough call for the guys. Who’s in charge?” asked Tim Scannell.

“Commander Rick Hunter.”

“That makes me feel better. But it’s still tough. I hate to send the guys in with no backup.”

“So do I. But they will be armed to the teeth, and very thoroughly prepared. Chinese guards wouldn’t have a prayer against them if push came to shove.”

“They didn’t have one against Ray Schaeffer, either,” replied Admiral Dixon. “But shit happens.”

The four men were thoughtful for a few moments. And as they each contemplated the horror of discovery while the SEALs were ashore, plying their devastating craft, the door swung open and the beautiful Kathy O’Brien came in bearing a brown envelope addressed personally to Admiral Arnold Morgan, delivered by hand from Fort Meade to the White House.

“Just a moment,” said the Admiral. “This might be just what we need. If it is, it should have been here two hours ago. But if Borden’s taken my advice, the newest observations are gonna be real thorough.”

And thorough they were. Fort Meade had apparently solved the mystery of the power source of the sprawling Naval complex on Haing Gyi Island.

Report on Haing Gyi Island Power Source

Comprehensive overheads have revealed no external power sources or supplies to Haing Gyi Base. This includes possibilities of the use of a generating ship or nuclear power plant.

Power supplies for operation of the base facilities all appear to emanate from a single large building in the center of the base.

Detailed examination of the foundation area of this building, in particular its size and scope beyond the building itself, suggests a possible geothermal source of power. This is confirmed as entirely consistent with local geophysical characteristics, supported by the known existence of mud volcanoes within 15 miles of the Haing Gyi facility.

An attachment is a full engineering statement of how geothermal energy is tapped. It indicates its vulnerability, and opportunities for disruption/accident.

Arnold Morgan mumbled about another cup of coffee, and asked his three colleagues to “hold everything” while he skipped through the notes on geothermal power. Bob MacPherson poured, and Arnold yelled “KATHY!” once again, and asked the goddess of the West Wing to have three copies made of the photograph of Haing Gyi.

Three minutes later, the Admiral looked up, complained that his coffee was half cold and told his guests that the principal mission of the SEAL attack on the Chinese base would be to destroy a power station, and with it the entire electronic network that runs from it. There would also be some other Naval hardware that

had to go, but basically they were knocking out a major power supply, which would shut down the base entirely.

The three color photocopies arrived and were duly studied by Admiral Dixon, General Scannell and Bob MacPherson. Admiral Morgan pointed out the building in the center and asked if anyone knew how a geothermal power station worked. And no one did.

“Well, what you’re always looking at is an area where heavy rainfall has filtered through the earth’s surface for millions of years. And right here we have such an area. It’s sandy in a lot of places, and it gets a lot of sudden, fierce rain from the monsoons in a very flat basin, where it can hang around and filter through.

“And right here we have an area with volcanic activity, where the earth’s plates can pry apart, shifting way below the surface, forming giant, hollow caverns thousands of feet deep. Now in these caverns we get huge underground lakes, and the bottoms of those lakes are so deep the water becomes colossally hot from the earth’s core.

“If you drill down in the exact right place, you hit one of these lakes, and the compressed, boiling water flashes off into steam. If you let it, it will blast three thousand feet into the air, in a clean, clear white plume of steam. The Nevada Desert is the big steam-well area in the USA. Some of ’em light half of San Diego and occasionally Las Vegas.”

He paused to let everyone absorb what he was saying. “Right,” he added. “Got that? Now look at the picture. See that building? Well, here’s how it got there. The Chinese geologists located the steam lake and capped the drill hole. Then they dug deep and poured a solid concrete foundation, probably fifty yards by fifty yards by fifty yards deep.

“Clean down the middle of this, they sank their main shaft into the vast cavern that contains the lake. They capped it with a massive valve at the top, right on the concrete, and then they built their power-generating station all around it, right on that big concrete cube. They installed the electric turbines to run on steam power, and when they completed their electronic grid for the whole dockyard, they opened the valve.

“The steam surged straight up the shaft in the middle of the fifty-yard cube, into the system, and began to rotate the turbines. The clever little Chinks thus had virtually free, endless electric power for years to come. It sounds complicated, but it’s not really. It’s just a kinda upside-down dam with the force coming upward from the earth, rather than downward from released water. One thing about electric turbines: The only thing you have to do is turn ’em.”

“And our guys have somehow to get in there and blow it up?” said the General.

“I think that would do very nicely,” replied the Admiral. “Because that would shut down the base indefinitely.”

“Is John Bergstrom on side?” asked the CNO.

“He is. Right now they’re consulting their main demolition guys, and I have to get this stuff to Coronado right away. Then two of the main SEAL explosives officers will leave immediately for Diego Garcia to brief Commander Hunter and his team.”

“Do we have any handle on how well this place is guarded?”

“Fort Meade’s been watching it carefully for some weeks now. And there is some security. But not overwhelming. Haing Gyi is in such a strange, inaccessible place. It’s literally surrounded by Burma, whom the Chinese have been financing. It looks to me as if they have not even considered the possibility of an attack on the base.

“But of course it is a military installation. And there will be patrol boats, and guard patrols on the jetties. But we have not found any sign of patrols in the interior of the base. Just some activity close to the visiting ships. The trick is to get in there nice and quiet. Then cause absolute havoc, and get out while everyone’s trying to find out what’s going on. It nearly always works. Surprise. You can’t beat surprise.”

“Meanwhile, where’s the SEAL team?”

“They’re all in Diego Garcia, waiting. The refinery team are all there too, waiting to fly back to Coronado. They made it back from Hormuz in one of the carriers. The SHARK’s in there too, waiting to embark the SEALs for the coast of Burma.”

All four men took a break from the charts to watch the CNN evening news, and the lead item was more or less what Admiral Morgan had expected. The Chinese were fighting fiercely for the port of Keelung, and according to the news had swiftly secured the actual dockyard area with a team of Special Forces, which had overpowered the mainly civilian security guards. Most of this information had leaked out through merchant ships’ radios via Hong Kong.

But the rest of the picture was very blurred. The Chinese had breached the wire fences and now controlled the container docking areas, but the surrounding town was still very much Taiwanese. The local garrison was well equipped and was backed up by continuing air strikes from a remote strip in Hsinchu County. The Chinese assault force thus found itself badly bogged down, sustaining heavy casualties out on the Yehliu Road, four miles from the town.

The Taiwanese had somehow managed to conserve eight of their most modern ground-attack aircraft. Armed with cluster bombs and cannon, the Taiwanese pilots came in groups of four, from the south, constantly harassing the great mass of Chinese troops, tracked vehicles and artillery moving ponderously toward Keelung.

CNN had found access to satellite photographs that showed a mass of fire out along the western approaches to the seaport. And, in some ways, the Chinese were in a very difficult position. They had a Special Force in control of the port area, but it could not hold out forever, and right now the advancing army from Chinsan was at a standstill. The Taiwanese had found the range with a battery of cruise missiles, which were currently smashing up the entire road system from the west. They had 40 M-48X medium tanks on that side of the town, arranged defensively, and the Chinese commanders knew beyond doubt they were in a serious fight for this seaport, and they were not winning it.

The problem was they had to win it. Otherwise this local war might drag on for weeks. The Chinese needed heavy reinforcements. They needed possibly 300,000 men on the island of Taiwan in order to secure it. And they could not land that many without capturing a major container port and bringing in major transport ships that could land men in the thousands. They needed the jetties, they needed the docking facilities. They needed Keelung.

And out on the Yehliu Road things were going from bad to worse. The Chinese army was having constant problems with its surface-to-air missiles, and after 16 hours of sustained attack from Taiwan's brave fighter pilots they had hit only one, and had themselves sustained hundreds of casualties. It was impossible to evacuate them all back to the beachhead, and their hospital capacity on the long sands was negligible. The fact was, China had to take Keelung, not just to provide a proper inbound port for her massed armies, but to give her a proper mechanized base for supplies of both food and ammunition, treatment of the wounded and communications. Right now they had no base on the island of Taiwan.

Admiral Morgan stared at the screen, trying to read between the lines. He was a military officer attempting to picture the scene in his mind. As were General Scannell and Admiral Dixon.

And it was the CNO who spoke first. "They don't get ahold of that goddamned seaport in the next two days, they could find themselves in serious trouble," he muttered.

"Think they might switch the attack altogether, maybe go south to Kaohsiung?" asked Bob MacPherson. "That's as big as Keelung."

"I wouldn't have thought so," replied Admiral Dixon. "According to our information, the bulk of the Taiwanese Army is trapped in the south, can't get back north. But that army is probably in pretty good shape, mainly because they're kinda stranded, with nothing to fight. By the look of this, the Chinese are determined to win the battle in the north, and right now they're in some trouble."

"They are that," interjected Arnold Morgan. "They got a foothold in the container port, and another in the museum, which is what this war is at least partially about. But they have to consolidate, and that does not seem to be happening."

"You know what their real problem is?" said General Scannell thoughtfully. "They are bound and determined not to knock down Taipei. And you take that option away from an invading army, you cut its balls right off. You render them unable to use the ultimate force. If they rolled up their sleeves and began a bombardment of the capital city, flattening major buildings, destroying the downtown area, Taiwan would surrender inside of an hour. It's not like the London blitz, or Berlin. It's different. More like a civil war."

"And, faced with imminent death, or normal life under an ultimately benevolent ruler on the mainland, there's only one answer for Taiwan. And until China gets prepared to slam Taipei, she's gonna be fighting a half-assed conflict, against a very proud enemy. And that's gonna cost them a lot of guys."

"Not that they care about that," said Arnold Morgan. "But I'm with you. They have to *take* Taiwan by force of arms... with an army occupying it mile by mile. Until Taiwan formally surrenders."

"And the longer they take to get their asses in gear at Keelung," said the CNO, "the worse it's gonna get. In my opinion, they'd be better off knocking down Keelung to save Taipei."

"They might at that," added General Scannell. "But one thing's for sure: They can't stay long as they are now."

The second item on the news was just as serious. The conflict in Taiwan had again sent the world oil markets into a complete frenzy. The prospect of a war, into which the United States might be drawn, always does. And here was the CNN

newscaster reporting another chronic rise in the price per barrel. Brent crude was up \$10, back to \$64, having subsided from its peak of \$72 as the Pondicherrys did their work in the Strait of Hormuz.

But Americans in the Midwest were paying four dollars a gallon at the pumps. And Texaco was intimating this could go to five in the weeks ahead, while the world's VLCCs struggled to replenish supplies. Now the latest "spin" being placed on the news of China's war with Taiwan was frightening the markets all over again.

What if the Chinese somehow seized control of the Malacca Strait? What would happen to Japan if the price of their fuel doubled again? They were still the world's second-largest economy, and they needed fuel for everything. What price would they pay to survive? And where would this put the West?

Essentially this was a newsroom's dream, free rein to terrify the populace, ratchet up the ratings and look wise. There were frowns, set beneath perfectly coiffed hairstyles and -pieces. There were expressions of deep concern and superior learning from men who had zero firsthand experience of politics, the military or the world's financial markets. Save as onlookers.

"The question is, Where is this all going to end?" asked one of the network anchormen. "And what is the U.S. government planning to do about it? That's what's concerning every American here tonight." He said it as if he had just plumbed the very depths of Socrates.

"What a total asshole," observed Arnold Morgan.

Nonetheless the oil crisis remained exactly that. And the situation in Taiwan was out of control. Admiral Morgan knew only one thing—the United States had to get China out of the Bay of Bengal. The U.S. Navy had to lead the way in freeing up the oil routes both to the east and to the west.

He stood up and walked over to the window, staring out into the darkness. And he mused to himself in the silence of his profound intellect: *Whichever way you look at it, the financial fate of the modern industrial world right now lies in the hands of a dozen U.S. Navy SEALs, and may God go with 'em.*

1100. Saturday, June 2.

U.S. Navy Base. Diego Garcia.

Commander Donald Reid had temporarily handed over the wardroom in the recently arrived USS SHARK to his XO, Lt. Commander Dan Headley, and the Team Leader of SEAL Assault Team reunited somewhat surprisingly in this remote U.S. outpost in the Indian Ocean, had not yet progressed to their principal business.

Far from the steamy Bassein River Delta, their talk centered on a cool, sunlit afternoon in Maryland, two weeks previously, on Saturday, May 20, when a big gray colt named White Rajah had won the Preakness Stakes, by four lengths, over nine and a half furlongs, the second leg of the American Triple Crown.

White Rajah, bred in Kentucky by Rick Hunter's father, Bart, raised from a foal under the supervision of Dan's father, Bobby, thus joined the immortals who had thundered to victory in the 134-year-old classic: Man O'War won this, so did his

son War Admiral. Then there were Whirlaway, Assault, Count Fleet, Citation and Native Dancer. Bold Ruler and his peerless son Secretariat, the greatest of all twentieth-century stallions, Northern Dancer, the Triple Crown winners Affirmed and Seattle Slew. They all won in Maryland.

White Rajah would retire to stud with a book value approaching \$8 million. Breeders would line up to send mares to him at \$50,000 each. And according to Rick there was a chance he would begin his new career at Hunter Valley Farms, the land of his forefathers, the land of his vicious grandpa, Red Rajah, who had once nearly bitten off the young Dan Headley's arm.

"Been in touch with your dad?" asked the XO.

"Oh, sure. We fixed up some kind of a computer hookup right here a few days ago. I watched the race on one of the screens."

"Hey, Ricky, that must have been really exciting."

"Sure was. Even though I knew the colt had won. Christ! You should have seen him... heading into the last turn at Laurel Park... you know how damn tight it is... and it was a big field... bunched right up... the Rajah stuck in the middle...

"But they fanned out like always on that track, and there he was... two on his inside, three on his outside... holding his place... waiting for the split. Jorge hit him once, and he dug in... deep in the stretch he hit the front and at the eighth pole he was clear... drew right off... beat 'em by four lengths. No bullshit."

"Fantastic, Ricky. Just fantastic. How 'bout the Belmont Stakes? They gonna let him take his chance in New York next week?"

"Dad says not. None of that family went twelve furlongs, and they think he only just saw it out at Churchill Downs. They don't want to get him beat over a distance too far for him. I think they'll put him away for the Travers at Saratoga, and if he wins take a shot at the Breeders' Cup Classic. But they're not gonna run him a yard over ten."

"Yeah. Sounds right. The family really throws milers. But how come the owners don't want to keep him and send him to stand at Claiborne?"

"Well, Dad's put in a big offer, and of course he knows the bloodline. They been raising those big fiery bastards for years at Hunter Valley. I think the Rajah's trainer thinks he'd be better among people who knew him as a foal. Guys who're aware of the family's tricky temperament. If he comes to Hunter Valley, the owners will probably hang on to four shares."

"Guess so. And I guess my own daddy's gonna end up in charge of him."

"No doubt of that. And that's gonna be real good news for you...if we get him, Bart's giving your dad a breeding right to him. He told me."

"One pop?"

"Hell no. Every year. First classic winner we've bred since 1980, and your dad gets to share the wealth. The Rajah hits in the breeding shed, your retirement is buttoned up safe."

"Shit, Ricky. We gonna end up drinking cold beers in the bluegrass, singing the music, and raising the yearlings."

"Nah... not us. We got bigger things to do. That's an ole man's game. You and me gonna run the goddamned United States Navy."

"Well if we are, we better get this next sonofabitch right or we might both end up dead. 'Specially you." Dan Headley looked pensive.

He stood up and asked the steward for more coffee. "Have you looked at this mess?" he asked the SEAL boss. "According to the chart, there's no way in except on a fucking Jet Ski."

Rick Hunter chuckled. He'd spent a lot of his life chuckling with, or at, the son of his father's right-hand man. When they were kids, Danny had always been the funnier one of the inseparable pair, and when they were old enough to sustain an interest in girls, it had usually been Danny who had attracted them most. Until they realized the potential of one day becoming the chatelaine of Hunter Valley Farms.

"Seriously, Dan, I can't see how we can make it in there on the surface... straight up the middle of the channel. They'll surely have a patrol boat. And there's not enough water to bring even the ASDV in submerged."

"I got a few notes right here, Ricky. Apparently there's an unmarked channel in there, maybe forty feet deep, enough water to get a diesel-electric submarine into the jetties."

"You mean right in the center of the tidal stream? Jesus, that's only about as wide as the home stretch at Laurel Park."

"Guess so."

"I don't need a submarine. Be better off on White Rajah. He knows how to stay straight."

"Well, at least you're not gonna be driving. Last time you and I tried to stay straight in the middle of the night you hit a telephone pole with your dad's truck and knocked out half the lights in Bourbon County."

"Yeah," said Rick. "But I was only eighteen years old."

"Nonetheless, old buddy, your legend lives on. No one's achieved anything like that with that particular pole since Arthur Hancock hit it in the middle of the night back in the 1960s."

"Keep pretty good company, don't I? The great Arthur Hancock and the future Admiral Rick Hunter. You want someone to put your lights out, you can't do a whole lot better than us."

"Well, I hope someone's put 'em all out when you get into this Bassein River. You get caught, Chinese sailors slice off balls of aging Kentucky hardboot. First gelded SEAL reporting for duty, yessir."

"Shut up, Dan, for Christ's sake. You're making me nervous."

"Okay. No more jokee. Let's have another look at that chart. Now, see this mark here, this is where your boss, Admiral Bergstrom, suggests we make the rendezvous point. We got one hundred sixty feet of water, and we can put SHARK under the surface with room to spare. That's 16.00N 94.01E, about twelve miles off the Burmese coast west sou'west of Cape Negrais.

"We launch the ASDV right there and steer one-two-zero straight into the mouth of the delta. It's all of sixteen miles, and it's going to take two and a half hours. That's where it gets tricky, because you have to find the damn channel. We know it's there, because we know they got a submarine in there. But we do not know where the hell it is, and right here we got a real issue.

"And a big question: Does it run north or south of this little island here... what's it called? Thamihla Kyun. There's a little deep water to the south, maybe sixty feet plus. But your men in Coronado think they dredged straight across this narrow

shoal. It's easier to drag silt out of the shallows. Your guys think the channel's right in there... see? Right here... by this fifty-foot trench northwest of Thamihla."

Commander Hunter stared at the chart. "Okay, but what if they're wrong? We'll just plow the ASDV straight into the bottom, and we might never get it out. How are we supposed to do this?"

"Very, very slowly, my lad. Using your sonar, sounding the bottom, carefully checking the surface picture whenever you dare. See this mark here? That's a red can, flashing light every two seconds... I want you to take a visual on the periscope... the guys think you'll pick up the main entry channel, right here... less than a mile east of the can. And that's where you alter course. Speed three knots, steer three-five-zero for two thousand meters and change course at 15.53N 94.16E. At this point you are going to be in patrolled waters, and you're gonna be awful careful, hear me?"

"Yessir, Danny. Jeez, you really know this submarine crap, right? I can see why your boss handed the insertion over to you."

"Nearly. I had to ask him. I just didn't want you going in there briefed by anyone except me. Kinda surprising how easily he agreed, though."

"Guess he recognizes a young master."

"Guess so. Just keep paying attention to what I'm telling you. We got another hour before lunch. Then the first formal briefing of your guys starts at fifteen hundred hours. I'm sitting in on it, so don't fuck it up. Don't want to have to keep correcting you. So listen."

"How 'bout you listen for a minute, shithead?"

Dan chuckled at the sobriquet, an ageless boyhood term of endearment. But Rick Hunter continued seriously, "What happens if we do bump the bottom and we can't find the goddamned channel? What then?"

"Look, I realize you've been rolling around in the dirt strangling guards, killing terrorists and blowing things up all your life. But what I'm going to show you requires careful thought... now look here... this deep trench is very important because it's a haven for a small submarine, moving through waters that are plainly too shallow to allow it free passage.

"You want to get a channel into this main lane, which your guys have marked here; you want first to get into the trench where you don't have to dredge. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Right. Now there are two ways into the trench. The long way, across here, maybe two and a half miles, dredging all the way, in water only fifteen feet deep. That'll take months. Or, alternatively, you could take this three-mile detour, west of the island, in deeper water, and that way you only need to cut a channel three hundred yards long max, and you're in the trench. What do you think?"

"I'll take the three hundred yards cut, any time, any day."

"And that's what our oceanographers think the Chinese Navy will have done. Therefore your driver will take the ASDV around through the deeper water, and we think he'll find the hole straight into the trench. When the water settles at, say, fifty feet, you guys go to PD and you'll see the flashing light about a mile up in front. At which point you're headed straight for the channel, and that'll take you right in to where you wanna be."

“What happens if some bastard’s coming the other way down this narrow ditch?”

“Edge hard to starboard. Drop down to the bottom and sit in the mud, act like a recently drowned pig. Whatever it is will go right by. If you hear anything, just lie very quietly on the bottom. Gently.”

“You keep saying *quiet* and *gentle*. You suggesting I’m some kind of a gorilla, young Danny?”

“Not really, but you’re the leader and you got a lot more in common with a gorilla than a sea wraith.”

“Well, anyway. I’m not driving.”

“Thank Christ. But what I was going to mention was the utter unlikelihood of your meeting another ship. I mean right now the latest satellite picture shows only two warships in there, plus a submarine, with two or three patrol boats running around some of the time.

“We have no pictures of any boats running around after midnight at any time. Personally I think you will find the channel easily, and you will make your landing with no trouble. After that, you’re in charge. But my guys will get you out, Rick. On that you can trust me. That’s a promise.”

“Who’s driving the ASDV?”

“The best man in the Navy. He’s a specialist. You might even know him. He’s Lieutenant Mills, and he can maneuver that little ship anywhere. He’s calm, expert and very instinctive about danger. Better yet, he’s done it before. And you could not be in safer hands. He’ll get you in, and if there’s trouble, he won’t get caught. You can’t ask for more than that.”

“Yes I can.”

“What?”

“Just for you and me to be sipping a coupla cold beers on my daddy’s side porch, listening to the music, watching the mares and foals moving across the paddocks in the evening. Instead of raising hell in some Chinese dockyard.”

“Yeah, doesn’t that sound great right now? Guess it’s because we’re right around the corner from real danger. But it’s too late now to think of our own world. It’s too late. We’re in someone else’s world, big time. And we gotta make it happen.”

Two hours later, Commander Rick Hunter stood before the team that would shortly embark for the eastern end of the Indian Ocean. They had taken over a brightly lit, concrete-walled ops room, with a five-foot-wide computer screen placed at the side of a long trestle table.

The eleven SEALs who would accompany the Commander into Burmese waters were seated casually along the other side of the table with notepads and pens. Each man was issued a map of the delta of the Bassein River, plus various views, shot from the satellites, of the Chinese base itself. Everyone had a blowup of the geothermal power station that sat almost in the center of the dockyard complex.

And behind the SEALs sat the additional, but critical, personnel: The XO, Lt. Commander Dan Headley, who would take the USS SHARK in and supervise their escape; Lt. David Mills who would drive the ASDV inshore; Lt. Matt Longo from Cincinnati, the ASDV navigator; and Commander Rusty Bennett, who would not join the mission but whose guidance would be greatly appreciated.

Behind them, the steel door was shut and locked. Two Naval guards remained on duty immediately outside, with four more patrolling the area beyond the main door to the otherwise-deserted building. No one, including the C-in-C of the Fleet, was permitted to enter. Even to exit the ops room, each SEAL needed to have his notepad personally signed by the Team Leader.

No one was permitted a phone call. There was absolutely no further contact with the outside world. Nor would there be until they were back in the USS SHARK at the conclusion of the mission. They were scheduled to sail at 2200 that night, Saturday, June 2.

Commander Hunter immediately introduced his second-in-command, 28-year-old Lt. Dallas MacPherson, a wide-shouldered southerner from South Carolina who had started life at The Citadel, the state's near-legendary military academy, but had switched after only a couple of semesters to the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

He rose rapidly in dark blue, making Lieutenant in double-quick time, and serving as a gunner and missile officer in an Arleigh-Burke destroyer before the age of 25. This was good, but not good enough for the restless Dallas, who suddenly, to the surprise of his colleagues, requested a transfer to the US Navy SEALs.

He crashed through the BUD/S course, finishing in third place, complaining he'd probably "been stitched up"—most SEALs are happy to pass through in the first 30. And throughout his short, but meteoric, career people had been more or less divided on whether he would end up in Admiral Bergstrom's chair, or in a box with a posthumous Medal of Honor. He was tough as hell, brave as a lion and smarter than almost everyone. But there was a daredevil in his soul, and that might either save the lives of an entire squadron or, alternately, get them into terminal trouble.

Commander Hunter was in no doubt. Lieutenant MacPherson was reputed to be the most brilliant young explosives expert on the base, a progressive Naval scientist on the subject of demolition in all its forms. Rick Hunter would take Lt. MacPherson any day, on the strength of his swiftness of thought. When he appointed him, he had said, "Dallas, where we're going, the only thing that's gonna keep us alive is brains. Keep using 'em, and we'll make it out."

In fact, Lt. MacPherson's father was a distant cousin of the veteran Secretary of Defense, Robert MacPherson. And when news of this had seeped through various wardrooms, one senior commanding officer had remarked playfully, "Well, young Dallas, you can't beat a few family connections in the military to ensure you advance your career."

"Sure can't, sir," replied the twenty-two-year-old Midshipman. "I taught that Bob MacPherson damn near everything he knows."

And now, right here in the most secretive room in the most remote American Naval base, Dallas was about to undertake an awesome responsibility, not only to accept command of the entire force, should anything befall the leader, but to ensure personally the total destruction of the geothermal power station on the island of Haing Gyi.

Rick Hunter introduced him carefully, as a young officer in whom he had the utmost confidence, and from whom they must take orders unquestioningly while working in the Chinese electricity-generating plant.

He then introduced his personal bodyguard, Lt. Bobby Allensworth, with whom he had served on another highly classified mission the previous year. He provided no background, certainly not the information that young Bobby had fought his way out of a life of petty crime in south-central Los Angeles and obtained his commission in the U.S. Marine Corps. He said merely that Lt. Allensworth would be personally responsible for the safety of the force, particularly if they had to fight their way in, though he hoped this would not be necessary.

Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook, also from Kentucky, a medium-sized supreme athlete and swimmer, was included as the number-two explosives expert on the team. He would be personal assistant to Lt. MacPherson during the time setting of the charges and the guardian of the special bomb they would carry in—the one Dallas said would split the steam shaft asunder, releasing a massive geothermal force, which might very well blow up the entire base.

“How far in the clear do we want to be when that happens?” asked someone.

Before Commander Hunter could reply “One hour,” Lt. MacPherson remarked he thought back in Coronado would be just perfect.

That was the deceptive side of Lt. MacPherson’s character. He sometimes sounded merely flippant, but the truth was he was always a few strides in front. He knew “one hour” was correct, but he’d gone past that and was instinctively trying to defuse the tension, trying to reduce the fear factor, the prospect of the unknown. Some officers think this approach has no value whatsoever. But you still have to be extremely able to do it. And Commander Hunter laughed anyway.

Only Lt. MacPherson understood the perfect timing required to send that armor-piercing, steel-cased bomb thousands of feet down the main steam shaft, to blast the giant well-head valve apart and release the seismic energy from the core of the earth.

“Gentlemen,” said the Commander, “details of the in-base mission will be clarified during the three-day journey to the Bay of Bengal. Right now I am intending to show you precisely where we are going, how we land, where we get off and the main drive of our objective.”

Briefly he introduced other key members of the team: two SEALs who had also served under his command the previous year in the South China Sea, Riff “Rattlesnake” Davies and Buster Townsend, the radio operator. Both were from St. James’s Parish down in Louisiana’s Mississippi Delta. Both had served in surface warships.

He also brought forward the toughest man in the squad, Petty Officer Catfish Jones, an ex-deepwater fisherman from the coast of North Carolina. Catfish, 29, was a combat veteran of the Kosovo campaign. He had a 19-inch neck, and forearms of blue-twisted steel. Bobby Allensworth had instructed him in unarmed combat. And these two represented the front line of the Assault Team’s heavy muscle if they came face-to-face with the Chinese inside the Navy base.

For his opening remarks, Commander Hunter played down the danger of the mission. “We are going into a lightly defended Chinese Naval base,” he said. “It’s a relatively new facility, and we’ve had it under observation for several weeks. Our

Intelligence conclusion is that the owners do not anticipate a serious attack from anyone. Which should give us a reasonable chance of accomplishing our mission. Which is, incidentally, to take it off the face of the earth as quickly as possible.”

At this point a ripple of disquiet could easily be sensed in the room. And the Commander elected to clear up the question that was on everyone’s mind: Why are we doing this?

“As most of you know, we are in the middle of a world oil crisis, caused principally by the Chinese. In the judgment of our colleagues in National Security, China has further plans for disruption at the other end of the Indian Ocean. But she can only instigate this disruption by maintaining a major Navy base in the area.

“This one, at the mouth of the Bassein River, is the sole means by which China can have a catastrophic effect on the free and peaceful flow of the world’s oil. Our instructions come direct from the White House. We are to take that Naval base out, on behalf of the government of the United States of America.

“The successful achievement of our objective will not only send the Chinese right back to their home waters, where they belong. It will also deservedly earn the gratitude of every person in the industrialized world. Although they will not know, of course, to whom they are grateful. But we’ll know. And that’s what matters.”

Everyone in the room nodded approval. And Commander Hunter told them that for the purpose of this initial briefing he wished to demonstrate to the entire group precisely where they were going, and how they were going to find their way in, in the pitch dark.

“Okay,” he said, “look at your own charts, and follow my bigger electronic one as we go.” He used a long ruler and pointed it at the rendezvous point where the SHARK would arrive with the entire mission on board.

“Right here,” he said pointing precisely, “we get into the ASDV, in about one hundred sixty feet of water. We then take this route, down toward this little island here... and according to our experts we take this route, to this slightly deeper water right here. We believe this flashing light on the red can, marked here, will guide us into a newly dredged channel. Then we pick up the main throughway up to the island of Haing Gyi, where the base is.

“You’ll see right here on your chart, we adjust our course to zero-two-zero and run on up here in the main channel, as far as the next light—right here... it flashes every two seconds. We’ll pick that out probably a mile before we get there. And though we have not absolutely finalized our landing spot, we are leaning toward this area here...Rocky Point.

“It’s a headland with deep water in front, right up to the beach. Maybe fifteen feet. We can swim in there, and it’s far enough away from the base to carry no sentries. About one and a quarter miles. We have to walk that, with our equipment, but there’re no hills, no swamps, and just a tidal river to cross. We’ll take a look when we get there. This looks like a bridge, and if it’s quiet we’ll use it.”

“We coming out the same way, sir?”

“Absolutely not. Because there’s no way we can make our business look like some geothermal accident. The Chinese are going to know it’s us very early on. The ASDV’s too slow, and it’ll need to turn around as soon as it drops us. So

they're bringing in rigid inflatables to get us out fast. The water's very flat this time of the year. We'll be back in the submarine in fifty minutes."

"How many buildings are we planning to hit?"

"Probably three, but the big one's the power plant. That's our mission critical. We slam that, the base is useless. There are also a couple of Chinese warships in there. We'll take a crack at both of them if we can. Just a couple of stickies."

"Any idea of the strength of the guard, sir?"

"Well, our guys have counted only about eight men patrolling at any one time. Four on the main jetties, and four back here a little, where this destroyer seems to be farther inshore. That probably means if we arrive there at around zero-one-hundred, there'll be eight guards we may have to eliminate before we enter the power plant. If we're quiet we may not see any more for two or three hours, by which time I hope we'll be on our way out.

"If we do have to fight again, we may have to eliminate eight more. But I am not sure that will be necessary."

"How about knocking down the guardhouse with everyone in it, maybe at midnight when they probably change over?"

"We thought about that. But it's awfully noisy. And we're not quite sure where the Chinese keep reinforcements. But we don't want a bunch of Chink helicopters chasing around all over the goddamned place. Especially as one of 'em might locate and kill us. Generally speaking, we think stealth is the best way to accomplish our objectives."

"Okay, sir. No problem."

"Final refinements will be made throughout our journey, via the satellites. We got a lot of guys working on this, and things will develop before we reach the coast of Burma. Broadly speaking, we think the element of surprise will be decisive in our favor."

"How about the getaway, sir? Can we board the inflatables up close to the base...like we don't want to end up running through a fucking paddy field for about ten miles pursued by the goddamned coolies, right?"

"Dallas, no we don't. Neither do we want to look as if we're running boat trips round the fucking harbor in the middle of the night. We'll have that organized in another day or so. My own view is we take the edge of the swamp in the south."

"But that's a hell of a distance, sir. Do we have any chance of immediate help if we come under fire, or if we are seriously pursued?"

"No, Dallas. I am afraid we do not."

Chapter 10

**0900. Monday, June 4.
Northern Taiwan.**

The Battle for Keelung had now lasted for five days, and despite heavy casualties, the Chinese began inexorably to win it. They kept coming forward,

landing thousands more men on Chinsan Beach, and calling in more and more air sorties from the mainland. But they left more than 3,000 dead along the Yehliu Road, before they finally forced their way into the inner suburbs of the seaport.

Street by street, block by block, yard by yard they fought their way toward the docks. The Taiwanese defended with their courage high, and they were never really defeated. Merely engulfed.

And then, as the Chinese Army prepared for the one push that would drive them into the vast container port area, the Taiwanese pulled off a master stroke. A team of their Special Forces crossed the railroad out along the Chungshan-1 Road, swam in to the harbor and severed the mooring lines of two massive container ships, just as the tide was turning.

Thirty minutes later, with these two gigantic ships slewed beam-on across the entrance to the docking areas, the Taiwanese scuttled them both with high explosives, partially blocking the main route both into and out of the harbor. It would take the Chinese Navy three more days to drag the wreckage clear and make a free passageway for their big troopships.

Scuttling the containers caused a momentous commotion on the docks, and it allowed the Taiwanese Army to escape cross-country, dropping back to Taipei, leaving the invaders from the mainland victorious but in something less than good order.

For a start, Keelung was a shambles both in the harbor and in the streets. There were debris and rubble everywhere. No one knew how to get anywhere. In addition, there were several isolated pockets of local resistance, and the Chinese were desperately trying to avoid killing civilians.

This was a serious hindrance, since the civilians were well supplied with grenades, rifles and machine guns. And they fought furiously, night and day, to eliminate the invading army using ancient tactics of snipers and booby traps against unsuspecting troops.

Not in living memory had the Chinese armed forces been so extended, engaged in highly complex combined operations. This was an adventure the like of which they had had absolutely no previous experience in modern times. Much of their equipment lacked any form of sophistication, and there were glaring shortcomings in their military processes and procedures.

And it all began to take its toll. There were Chinese commanders who began to believe the only way to capture Taiwan was to knock it down. And everyone knew China's top Special Forces units were trapped in the museum, without supplies. Their helicopter squadrons had been savagely depleted both over the ocean and in the air above northern Taiwan. Attempts to air-drop food into the museum grounds had been met with vicious rocket, shell and missile fire from regrouping Taiwanese anti-aircraft battalions.

General administration of those who had been in battle was very poor. No one was being fed on a regular basis, personal equipment was often inadequate and almost all the logistics systems had fallen apart. Lines of combat resupply were crashing. Ammunition, fuel, lubricants, rations and water simply could not be brought in fast enough to keep up with the thousands of troops on the ground.

There was of course scope for the Chinese forces to requisition water and fuel supplies from local sources, even to scavenge food supplies, but this was a hostile

area. Everyone was a sworn enemy, and it took a huge amount of time and effort just to stay alive and moving. Failure to bring forward munitions for armor, artillery, air defense and attack helicopters took another heavy toll.

Chinese progress was thus becoming fearfully slow, and the morale of the ground troops was beginning to suffer. By midday on this June morning the High Command, now meeting in Beijing, was being informed that the Taiwanese Army was again moving north, throwing pontoons across the rivers, heading back to defend their beloved Taipei. This was too much even to contemplate, another ferocious fight through city blocks, having to fight around every corner, not knowing what lay ahead, around any corner.

Admiral Zhang Yushu knew about warfare in all its facets, but specialized street combat in a foreign capital, against a reinforced enemy, was too much even for him. But, wily old warrior that he was, he came up with the only solution there was: He decided their best strategy was to stretch the limits of the remaining Taiwanese resources, and at 1300 on that Monday afternoon, he ordered the Chinese Navy to open up another front in the south, with immediate effect.

More particularly, he ordered a Naval bombardment of the northern beaches of Taiwan's banana-belt city of Tainan, followed by a second full-scale amphibious assault at Luerhmen. In Zhang's opinion, this would surely stop the headlong rush north of the Taiwanese Army.

And Luerhmen had precisely the correct historic credentials to attract a strategist of Zhang's abilities, with his curious mixture of grim reality and flights of *folie de grandeur*.

Luerhmen, a beachfront suburb of Tainan, was where the great Koxinga had landed 400 war junks, containing the 35,000-strong Ming Dynasty Army, and hurled the ruling Dutch out of their Tainan stronghold in 1661.

As far as Zhang was concerned, the ruling Taiwanese were at least as alien as the Dutch, and the vibes about the old provincial capital were all good. And he turned the full might of his Navy against the southwestern city, sending in his second Sovremenny destroyer with three frigates, to soften up the area for the forthcoming landing the next day.

His principal mistake was miscalculating the strength of the Taiwanese Air Force at the Naval air base outside Kaohsiung. They still had 19 F-16As and they had repaired the long-range radar facility on the outskirts of the base. At first light on the morning of Tuesday, June 5, they picked up China's Sovremenny, cruising six miles off Tainan, making a racetrack pattern in a light-quarterming sea.

Admiral Feng-Shiang Hu, C-in-C of the Taiwanese Navy, was on duty himself, pacing the ops room, still determined to fight off the marauders from across the strait. He instantly dispatched a flight of five of his F-16s, the ferocious little single-seaters, converted now to carry a 500-pound bomb under each wing instead of their usual Sidewinder missiles.

They took off overland at 0620, swung out south of the island and made a long right-hand loop over the strait, coming in from out of the west, 50 miles off the Taiwan coast at 600 knots, wavetop height, in a formation of three, and then two, dead astern. The 8,000-ton Sovremenny destroyer was silhouetted against the rose-colored eastern sky, and her ops room acquired at 0628. The missile

director's fingers flew over the keyboard, sending up four SA-N-7 Gadfly weapons into the launchers.

But the CO of the Sovremenny was devoid of real-time battle experience, and he spoke swiftly to his accompanying frigate, which had also picked up the incoming Taiwanese fighter-bombers. They conferred briefly, and the destroyer captain ordered his ship to make a hard turn to port in order to reduce his radar echo signature to the incoming bombers. In a grotesque, elementary error he offered them the knife edge of his narrow bow, instead of the broad beam of his ship.

Temporarily the radar control operator lost the F-16s altogether when they ducked down below the radar, but at 27 miles they "popped up" again, and the Sovremenny instantly acquired, the operator calling, his voice rising:

"...Track one-zero-four-eight... incoming six hundred knots... bearing two-seven-zero... range twenty-five..."

Higher now above the waves, the Taiwanese pilots heard the Sovremenny's radar locking on, squealing on their radar warning receivers, but they pressed on grimly toward the Sovremenny. Streaking in over the water, making 10 miles a minute, a mile every six seconds, the three leaders aimed their aircraft straight at the huge Chinese warship.

They spotted it eight miles out and lined themselves up only just in time. Then they unleashed all six of their bombs in a dead line at the bow of the ship, the one non-variant, the one computer calculation that could not significantly change.

The machines were fighting the engagement, but it was men who were directing it. The Chinese missile director, in the same split second, launched the Gadflies, which blasted into the air even as the bombs flashed across the waves propelled by the colossal speed of the aircraft.

The F-16s tried to bank away, but the one on the left took the missile head-on and blew up in a fireball. The center bomber was also hit right behind the wing and exploded as it made its turn, both pilots dying instantly.

The third and fourth missiles both missed, and now the bombs were screaming in, bouncing like flat pebbles hurled across the water. The first one smacked into the waves and leaped high over the destroyer's bow. Had it been the beam, it might have cleared the ship and gone right by, but it was not the beam. It was the bow, and the bomb slammed off the water, shrieked over the foredeck and smashed straight through the bridge windows and down deep into the hull before it exploded.

The next bomb came in a fraction of a second later, again clearing the bow in a high arc and down through the middle of the superstructure, wrecking the ops room, the communications room and every missile-control system on board. The third bomb cannoned into the water, 30 yards off the bow, and slammed into the hull, just aft, crashed through the plates on an upward trajectory and removed a large slice of the foredeck of the ship.

But it was bomb four that did the real damage, albeit entirely accidentally. This one, dropped from beneath the wing of the escaping F-16 out on the right, crashed into a rising wave 100 yards in front of the Sovremenny, deflected left, and rose high, 150 feet into the air. It screamed down into the aft area behind the main superstructure, its descent so steep it slammed straight through the deck, into the

engine room, and detonated with a shattering blast, close enough to the keel to blow the bottom out of the ship.

The Sovremenny, listing sharply to port, capsized within three minutes, and, 10 minutes later, sank with all hands to the bottom of the strait.

The two Taiwanese backup bombers, running in four miles astern, were not acquired by the stricken Sovremenny, and they raced past the already burning warship and banked hard left, straight to the frigate that was supposed to be riding shotgun for the bigger ship, but had made no move to fire her missiles.

The ops room of the frigate, distracted by the carnage on the destroyer, finally launched her shorter-range missiles. But it was too late. One malfunctioned, and the other blasted off way after the F-16s had launched their four weapons and turned away.

Nonetheless the CO was well trained, and he offered the incoming bombs the beam of his ship, as indeed the destroyer should have done. The first one flew harmlessly overhead; the second one flew almost harmlessly but smashed the mast and radar equipment as it came through. The third one came in low, crashed through the hull and went straight out the other side, demolishing almost the entire central deck area.

The fourth bomb detonated in the water before it reached the ship, and miraculously no one was killed, though two sailors were wounded, mostly by bomb splinters. Equally miraculously, the frigate was still floating; crippled, largely useless, but still floating. Generally speaking, Admiral Feng-Shiang considered it a very good hour's work by the Taiwan Navy fliers, since it was not yet time for breakfast. But one of the downed pilots was his nephew, age only 20, and it was 15 minutes before he could bring himself to face his senior commanders.

Admiral Zhang was furious. The sheer numbers of the bombs that had hit his Russian-built ship meant that plainly there had been a monumental mistake. And Zhang Yushu had been in the Navy sufficiently long to believe the most common mistake by Naval commanders in all of modern warfare: the realization that any bomb, hurled forward at low level by an aircraft making over 600 knots, hardly *drops* at all. It is flung forward with enormous force, and when it finally catches a wave, it slows right down, then ricochets upward, maybe 80 feet, and onward. Still on line, but high.

In Zhang's view, to stay alive in the path of this ship killer, you should offer your beam, which will afford a fair chance of the lethal bouncing bomb whizzing over the top, since the deck is only about 50 feet wide. Offer your bow, especially on a ship as large as the Sovremenny, and you present a target the entire length of the ship, 500 feet from bow to stern, 10 times more surface area than its width: a 1,000 percent greater chance of being hit and sunk.

Admiral Zhang knew the overriding temptation to turn bow-on, presenting a target so narrow it must be safer. But he remained convinced of his theory, since the incoming bomb's line trajectory is pinpoint accurate to about three inches. Zhang's Law on Bombing said, the only issue is the *length* of the target, not the width.

And now his commanding officer had paid for his error not only with his life, but also with the lives of his ship's company. Not to mention the \$500 million ship itself.

“*What a complete and utter...*” ranted the Admiral, employing a Chinese colloquialism normally heard on the lower decks of his ships, rather than in the offices of the military’s highest command in Beijing.

He simply could not believe the price he was paying for the rebel island of Taiwan. He could not believe the manpower, the death rate, the number of lost ships, the near-destruction of dozens of his aircraft. And now the great destroyer.

Zhang Yushu was going to end this war. And he was going to end it fast. *If this goes on, the damned U.S. Navy will get here, and then there’ll be all hell to pay. I cannot allow this to go on. We have to move, and move big.*

Meanwhile, the airborne troops were piling out of the transporters high above the drop zone, three miles northwest of Tainan airport, and the Taiwanese Army was awaiting them on the ground, raking the landing fields with a steel wall of ordnance. All attacking armies, down the centuries, have sustained far greater losses than the defensive forces. But this was getting right out of hand. It took a succession of air strikes, sustained for more than two hours, finally to clear the Taiwanese Army out of the area.

Wind speed for the airborne landings was around 15 knots, and there were heavy Chinese casualties because wounded men were being blown off course from the central area. The commander on the ground had set up his “hospital section” way upwind, and several troops became involved in bringing the wounded in for emergency treatment. Eventually they would be transported on for evacuation, to the airport, which was of course China’s immediate objective.

The opening assault force was late reaching the airport. It was broad daylight now, and due to a total failure of communications—as usual, Taiwan’s weakest link—the Chinese, by some miracle, achieved an element of surprise. They stormed the perimeter fence and swarmed onto the runways, capturing entire sections of the complex.

They moved 2,000 troops into the roads surrounding the airport, securing the area. They dug in and established their portable low-level air-defense weapons, principally the QW-1 surface-to-air missile. They blasted their way into the control tower and occupied it. They also secured the fuel farm, and commandeered a vast supply of gasoline and jet aviation fuel. They seized every airport vehicle and sent a task force back to the drop zone to evacuate the wounded paratroopers.

By midday Tainan Airport was in Chinese hands, their first major airhead on the island. Within a half hour, massive troop reinforcements and equipment began to fly in. Almost two complete divisions were on the ground by 1400, and they were accompanied by 30 attack helicopters, checked, refueled and armed, ready for the assault, first on Tainan, and then on to the great Taiwanese port of Kaohsiung.

By this time, a division of Marines was attempting to land on the beaches at Luerhmen, and scores of landing craft, protected by warships from China’s East Sea Fleet, were driving forward into the shallows, only to be met by a strong, well-disciplined force of Taiwanese militia.

Again the Chinese commanders on the landing beach had little option but to fight, and the two forces met on the main road at Tucheng. The early advantage went to the home troops, and they mowed down the invaders, firing at will from

rural positions more in tune with guerrilla warfare than a formal confrontation of twenty-first-century armies.

With hundreds more troops pouring onto the beaches, the Chinese began to crash forward in a major breakout early in the afternoon. They left more than 500 dead on the field, but the remnants of the Taiwanese militia, bombarded now by Chinese mortars and howitzers, were forced to retreat, and the newly landed Marines kept moving up, marching on toward the airport to join the massed divisions of the Army, which would surely now capture the southern part of the island.

Meanwhile, back in Beijing, Admiral Zhang Yushu stared in dismay at the reports coming in from the front. He could see there had been a long delay in the attack on the airport; he could read the reports of more heavy casualties, and what seemed like carnage both in the drop zone and on the Luerhmen beaches. He weighed all this against the crushing loss of the Sovremenny. And, with fury in his heart, he ordered a total abandonment of the new beachhead at Tainan and instructed his commanders to maximize the airhead at Tainan airport. He also demanded to know the precise position around the city of Taipei.

And from here, things almost went into slow motion. Again, on the outskirts of Tainan, the Taiwanese fought heroically. China's huge army was stopped dead, just as it had been on the outskirts of Keelung. And again there was bitter fighting, block by block, street by street, as houses, shops and industrial buildings were systematically cleared. But there was a huge price to pay, both in manpower and a colossal expenditure of ammunition.

Simultaneously, in the north, the Chinese Army had reached the outskirts of Taipei, and they too ran into a fight that would drain their limited resources. Casualties were appalling. The Chinese lost more than 1,000 men in the first two hours.

The Chinese commander on the ground was in satellite contact with Beijing, and Admiral Zhang himself decided that if he had to knock down Taipei in order to subdue the island, then so be it. He ordered his senior battle commanders to take drastic measures, whatever it took to reduce the level of casualties. As things stood, the invading Chinese would need to capture and control the National Taiwan University Hospital in Taipei, and certainly the Chengkung University Hospital in Tainan.

And so China began to send in an armada of Z-9W Dauphin attack helicopters, heavily armed with antitank missiles. These 140-knot monsters cruise at 15,000 feet, and with the airhead established at Tainan Airport, and the main airport outside Taipei now under Chinese control, they were free to clatter over the strait, land and refuel and await deployment.

That happened late in the afternoon. The Dauphins took off and swooped into the western approaches to Taipei. They came in low over the Tamsiu River, through sporadic anti-aircraft fire, and slammed four missiles straight through the granite outer wall of the Presidential Building on the corner of the Paoching Road. They hit the Armed Forces Cultural Center, almost blew apart the Tower Record Building and for good measure banged a missile into the great Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. That killed eight people but failed to put a dent in the giant white statue of the departed father of the Taiwanese nation.

This was the first attack on the city, and members of Taiwan's ruling party were petrified, because from where they stood among the crushed masonry and collapsing ceilings in the Presidential Building, it seemed as if China had reluctantly decided to knock down the entire capital.

And things seemed even worse far to the south in Tainan, where again, the Chinese Navy's Dauphin choppers came in hard and sudden, firing their big missiles at will. They slammed the biggest religious temple in east Asia, the Shengmu, flattened the police station, blew up the Department of Motor Vehicles. Knocked down an outside wall of the biggest department store in the city.

And right behind this apparently indiscriminate air attack, the Chinese sent in their hard-trained Marine and airborne forces. In both cities, they moved forward tactically, behind the air attack. The remainder of the Taiwanese forces began to melt away, some throwing down their weapons. Civilians fled the central areas by the thousands, women and children picking their way through the rubble, accompanied by local soldiers who had discarded their uniform jackets.

The Chinese Army kept coming, but there was a subtle change taking place. The massed soldiers and Marines of Admiral Zhang's military had no stomach for killing civilians, especially Chinese civilians, which the Taiwanese still plainly were. And the commanders on the ground knew it. The Army marched on to the entrance to the Presidential Building near the Peace Park, and blew open the locked main doors with three hand grenades. The guards fled, and six minutes later the President of Taiwan, in company with eight of his senior ministers, sued for peace.

They came out with their hands high, and were greeted with immense respect by their conquerors. The leaders of both sides went formally to the high cabinet room, and the national television station was summoned to hear their government command the Army, Navy and Air Force of Taiwan to lay down their arms and surrender.

Communication lines were immediately opened up to Beijing, and Admiral Zhang, with his senior commanders, announced they would land at Chiang Kai-shek Airport at 1030 the following morning, to agree to the terms of surrender.

Thus, shortly before 6 P.M. on the afternoon of Tuesday, June 5, 2007, the independent Republic of China, known internationally as Taiwan, returned to the rule of the "other China," the Peoples' Republic, the communist successors to Chairman Mao Zedong. It was the ultimate horror, the endless dread of the peace-loving, profit-worshipping populace of the defiant little island across the strait. And thanks to the guile of the smiling Admiral Zhang Yushu, Taiwan's mighty friends in Washington had been powerless to raise a finger to save them.

Which left Admiral Morgan in his dressing gown, sitting in the book-lined study in Kathy's house in Maryland at 6 A.M., watching the news, sipping black coffee, with buckshot, in a mood that hovered somewhere between disbelief and rank poison.

"Just so long as they don't think for one moment they're going to get away with this," he growled. "They got the island. Needless to say they got the museum, which was why they went to war in the first place. And there's not a damn thing we can do about any of it, short of going to war ourselves. But there's a lot of ways

to skin a cat, and we're gonna make those little bastards regret the day they decided to fuck around with Uncle Sam."

"Sorry, darling, lay that on me again, will you?" Kathy O'Brien had slipped into the study bearing orange juice and hot croissants with preserves.

The Admiral's eyes were still glued to the screen, but he was hungry, having been there, on and off, all night. He said nothing but reached out absentmindedly for one of the croissants, and he let out a yell, it was so hot.

"Jesus Christ!" he cried, adopting one of his favorite mock-wounded expressions. "What the hell is that? A pastry grenade?"

Kathy was wearing a dark green silk robe, and she laughed as ever at the speed with which Arnold Morgan could coin original material.

He turned toward her, smiling in appreciation of the woman he loved. "I shouldn't think this burn's worse than second degree," he said pompously, shaking both his head and his right hand. "I shall require ice, cold water, towels and the home number of my lawyer. You did keep your insurance premiums up? I do hope so."

"You should of course have been on the stage rather than wasting your time trying to eliminate Red China," said Kathy, expertly cleaving the croissant sideways with a serrated knife and spreading it with butter and strawberry jam. "Here, take this," she added, offering the plate.

"Well, why the hell didn't the damn thing burn you?" he demanded.

"Probably because I didn't clamp my hand around the hottest part on top," she replied. "Heat tends to rise, you know."

Arnold then firmly informed her that as the former master of a large nuclear reactor on a U.S. Navy attack submarine, he was acquainted with the rudiments of physics, even if he had temporarily forgotten the heat-retentive properties of the common croissant.

She poured him some cold orange juice, and advised him to take the greatest care with the glass since he would probably get frostbite. But Arnold was no longer listening.

"Jesus, Kathy, will you look at that?"

She turned to the screen where the giant U.S. aircraft carrier JOHN F. KENNEDY could be seen listing slightly to starboard and moving slowly through the water.

"The accident on board the JFK happened two weeks ago in Japanese waters," the newscaster reported. "These dramatic pictures show her making under ten knots, limping toward the U.S. base at Okinawa. They were taken by our associate station in the western Pacific region, and according to our sources they caught the JFK forty-seven miles south of the American base.

"The U.S. Navy has denied our request to put a camera team on board for the final miles of the journey, and they have denied us all requests for an interview to explain precisely what happened. Last night the Navy was showing no signs of any intention to clear up the mystery of what happened out there west of the Ishigaki Islands on the night of May twenty-second."

Admiral Morgan ate his croissant thoughtfully. Like the Navy, he was of course keenly aware of what had happened. Two Chinese torpedoes, fired from one single Kilo-Class submarine, had crippled the 88,000-tonner. Which made her the fifth Battle Group leader to become unavailable for the protection of Taiwan. Counting the RONALD REAGAN Group, still in San Diego, BIG JOHN was actually the sixth.

"Maybe it was for the best," offered Kathy. "Maybe Taiwan is ultimately better off as a part of mainland China. And maybe the carrier would have been drawn into a real shooting war if she'd been in her regular patrol area. And there might have been God knows how many dead, and we could have been sucked right into a long conflict."

"Wrong," replied Arnold, uncharmingly.

"What do you mean, *wrong*? You're not always right about absolutely everything."

"Wrong again," replied Arnold, even more uncharmingly.

Kathy poured them both some more coffee and awaited the short, bludgeoning lecture she knew was on its way.

"Katherine," he said, "a mighty navy, with nuclear weapons and a strike force of devastating guided missiles, has nothing to do with inflicting defeat and destruction upon another nation. It has to do with prevention. An all-powerful nation like ourselves has one useful purpose, and that's to frighten the life out of anyone who might step out of line.

"That's why this world is mostly at peace. By that I mean there has been no global conflict for years and years. It's *Pax Americana*, as I have often explained. Peace on our terms. If the JFK had been on patrol, with its full air force operational at the north end of the Taiwan Strait, China would not have attacked. They would not have dared, because we have the capacity to eliminate their ships, their aircraft, their Army, their military bases, their Naval bases, their goddamned cities, if you like, anytime we feel like it.

"They attacked Taiwan because we were not there to scare 'em off. As we know, to our cost, they made damn sure we were not there. But it would not have happened if we had been."

"Well, I suppose not. But I still have never understood why the carrier was so far out of its operational area, and how the Chinese were somehow lying in wait. I know that's what you think. But I don't really get it. It was almost as if they lured the JFK into that bay. That's what the media should be trying to find out."

"The media are probably going to find out that the carrier was hit. But I agree, it's a real puzzle why the carrier was so far out of its area. I look forward to reading Admiral Holt's preliminary report next week. So do a lot of other people."

061600JUN07. USS SHARK. Bay of Bengal.

15.53N 93.35E.

Speed 15. Depth 100. Course 084.

The aging black hull of the 5,000-ton Sturgeon-Class submarine moved slowly through the warm blue depths of the eastern Indian Ocean. She was just about at the end of her 2,000-mile journey from Diego Garcia, and she moved to the

northeast, about 30 miles short of the great shelving Juanita Shoal, where the ocean floor suddenly rises up from 3,000 feet to 120 feet, to form a massive, almost sheer, underwater mountain wall of rock, shale and sand.

Lieutenant Pearson, watching the chart, in constant communication with sonar officer Lt. Commander Josh Gandy, would order SHARK well south of that particular hazard, while they made their way east to the rendezvous point at 16.00N, 94.01E, twelve miles off the coast of Burma.

Lieutenant Commander Headley, now in sole control of the insertion of the SEALs, deliberately ordered their speed cut to 12 knots, which would put them on station at the RV point at 1800, approximately two hours before dark.

For the past four days they had steamed steadily, submerged all the way through the near-bottomless waters that surround the southern shores of the Indian subcontinent. It had been the busiest underwater journey Dan Headley could ever remember, with frequent satellite communications, while Fort Meade and the Pentagon battled for information about the Chinese base on Haing Gyi Island.

Lieutenant Shawn Pearson, like many navigators, was an excellent draftsman, and he provided immeasurable assistance to the SEAL commander, making detailed scale drawings of China's newest Naval complex. By the third day, they had it pretty well nailed down. They had located a tough-looking chain-link fence that guarded the southern border of the dockyard. They also had located a guardhouse on the southern perimeter.

But as far as they could see, the fence ended abruptly at some dense woodland that protected the northwestern perimeter of the dockyard from the most treacherous-looking marshland area where the Letpan Stream splits and forms two wide channels. Each one runs straight through the swamp and out into the unnavigable Haing Gyi Shoal, which provides only four feet of water in some places at low tide.

The new satellite pictures being beamed into the submarine were grainy and of very moderate quality, but Lt. Pearson's sharp pencil drew hard, accurate lines through the chart of the swamp. And SHARK was just about at her halfway point on her journey from Diego Garcia when Commander Rick Hunter had seen for the first time an excellent way out for his team.

"We bolt through these woods at the back of the dockyard," he'd told them, "until we reach the swamp, right here. According to Shawn's map, that gives us a run of thirteen hundred yards, at which point we're only a hundred yards from this deep tidal stream, and that's where the guys are gonna be with the inflatables."

"Christ, sir," said Catfish. "You sure there's enough water in there to get the boats running?"

"Shawn says yes," replied the Commander. "According to his chart there're one-point-three meters of water at dead low tide. For the truly ignorant that's about four feet, and the boats draw less than a foot when they're running."

"They draw more than that when they're stationary," said Catfish. "Those big engines drop down around two feet, more as she starts to come bow up."

"Catfish, baby," said Rick. "There are guys in this submarine who can make those inflatables talk. They raise the engines, skid 'em along the surface, and then

slowly drop 'em down, and whip 'em up on the stump, no sweat. Don't worry about it. Those boats will get us out. I've just never been sure where to bring 'em in. But I am now."

"Aye, sir," said Catfish. "And I agree it's a damn good spot, right around the back of the island. It's got to be deserted. Shawn says he can't find even a track from the pictures."

"It's probably full of fucking cobras, and creepy crawlies and Christ knows what else," said Rattlesnake Davies.

"Well, thank God you're gonna be with us," said Buster Townsend. "You can do your jungle thing, blow the heads off a few pythons and stuff."

"Seriously, guys. We're in good shape for a run through country like that," said Rick. "We'll be in our wet suits and black trainers. We'll have our gloves on, carrying just flippers clipped to our belts. We'll have no heavy baggage, because the explosives will be gone and we'll leave the Draegers behind. They weigh thirty pounds, and we don't need 'em if we're going back on the surface. Speed's everything. And we'll have our knives, machine guns and ammunition. Soon as we're done, we'll pull up our hoods and get going."

"You worried about that one hundred yards of green marked swamp before the channel, sir?"

"Hell, no. It's tidal there so there'll be thick grass and probably rushes; we'll run straight through it, but the guys in the boats are going to be less than one hundred yards away, and they'll have ropes to help us if we need 'em. Plus, of course, the spare Draegers we brought in case we have to go over the side. We'll get there. Don't worry."

"When's high tide?" asked Dallas MacPherson.

"Right here on your chart," said Shawn. "I've marked it zero-three-three-zero. The water should still be rising when you get to the water's edge. That's if your timing stays the same. You make your shore landing before midnight, after the warship operation. Then you have a three-hour shore mission, and a half hour to reach the embarkation point at zero-three-three-zero. That's correct, isn't it?"

"If there's a real chance of that fucking steam well going up," said Dallas, "I'm likely to break the Burmese all-comers record down to that swamp. I'll probably be there at about zero-three-zero-one."

All the SEAL meetings were like this, informal but completely relevant in every aspect. Each man was free to offer any opinion, or ask any question. Then, when the mission was under way, every man knew not only what he was going to do; he knew precisely what everyone else was going to do as well.

Commander Reid had allocated a section of the submarine for the SEAL team to meet and it turned into a kind of locker room, a place where the leader lectured the guys, pored over the charts, discussed the mission, perfected the split-second timing that would spell success or failure.

For the first two days of the journey from Diego Garcia, the problems were academic, but as the voyage wore on, there was a strange, underlying tension right below the surface. Everyone could feel it, particularly Lt. Commander Dan Headley and his old buddy Commander Rick Hunter.

And everyone knew it all traced back to the night of May 16, out in the Strait of Hormuz when SHARK's commanding officer had refused permission for the ship to

move in toward the ASDV and evacuate the SEAL team, with their dead leader and dying explosives expert. And then Charlie Mitchell had died before he could receive help, and every single member of the big group from Coronado believed that Commander Reid had personally signed the young SEAL's death warrant. Commander Rusty Bennett, mission chief of the team that went into Iran, was extremely angry and felt that the entire tragic incident should be taken to the highest possible authority.

He and Commander Hunter had spent much time on it when Assault Team One finally returned to DG. And Lt. Commander Headley was more worried than either of them, because he had made the decision to save the SEALs at all cost and been overruled by his own CO. Dan Headley was unused to being overruled. Indeed he had been informed that his appointment as Executive Officer on the Sturgeon-class ship was because of an unspoken concern about the mind-set of the Captain.

Both the SEAL leaders and the XO felt they could not count on the CO to make the right decision if the combat troops came under serious threat. It was always possible that a fast unorthodox rescue might be required, and no one believed they would receive the correct degree of support from the Captain.

Reid had delegated all details of the insertion to Lieutenant Commander Headley, cautioning him only about hazarding the submarine. Any deviation from the strict, agreed orders of position and timing would almost certainly be met by a rigid adherence to the rules by the CO. The XO had seen it, and he was extremely concerned. Rick Hunter, briefed by Rusty Bennett before he left by air for Coronado, was making a conscious effort not to let it play on his mind.

"Danny," he said, "I'm trying to get my mind straight. I'm trying to lead these guys in to accomplish an unbelievably difficult objective. I cannot allow the possible conduct of this nutcase CO to occupy my thoughts. It'll get in the way of the real stuff. I just haven't the time."

But then, two nights previously, an incident had taken place that had truly unnerved Dan Headley, and the only colleague he had confided in was Rick Hunter.

It had started a half hour before the Captain's normal appearance in the control room around 2000. He had asked the XO to come to his office/cabin to confirm their ETA at the rendezvous point off Burma. Entering the room, Dan had been quite startled to find it lit by just a single candle, in a holder on the table.

"Hello, sir," he had said cheerfully. "Bit dark in here, isn't it?"

The Captain's reply had been, in Dan's view, pretty weird. "XO," he had said, "sometimes I feel the need for some spiritual guidance. And I am usually able to find it in communication with a fellow traveler."

Dan Headley had looked quizzical. But the CO had not wanted to elaborate, and the number-two officer on USS Shark did not feel like pressing the matter further. He returned to the control room and gathered up his partially completed plans for the insertion, and decided to take them down for Commander Reid to peruse for a few minutes before moving up for his watch.

But when he arrived outside the CO's room, the door had been slightly open, and he could not help but hear the voice of the ship's boss talking inside to someone. But the stilted quality of the language was most unusual.

“Gregory, I am trying to reach you again. I feel you very close but someone stands between us... I think an American officer... please tell him to go, Gregory. Then we can communicate as we did before... Captain Li Chin... I believe we must talk before I am forced to follow you... wherever that may lead...”

Dan Headley did not know who was in the room with Commander Reid, and he was not absolutely certain of the words he had heard. He was pretty sure about Gregory, but there was no Gregory aboard SHARK as far as he knew, and if there had been, he would have been called Greg. Forget Gregory.

Still, maybe he was just on the line to someone. God knows who. But *Captain Li Chin*. What the hell was all that about? *Li Chin*, thought Dan Headley. *That’s a fucking Chinaman!* For a brief moment he actually wondered if the CO of SHARK was some kind of a spy, maybe in touch with an agent. But then he thought, *Steady, Dan, he can’t be a spy. He’s been a career Naval officer for thirty years, commanding nuclear submarines for ten. He’s an oddball, no doubt about that. But he can’t be a spy.*

At this point, he doubted whether he had heard the conversation correctly. He was dead sure of the Gregory name, but the more he pondered, the more he doubted the part about Captain Li Chin. Nonetheless, he had not felt much like making an embarrassing entry carrying the plans for the SEAL insertion, and he had tiptoed quietly away, back up to the control room. And there he had sat thoughtfully for at least 15 minutes, running over the conversation he had heard, and carefully committing it to his notebook, in the manner of a lifelong Naval officer, as if ensuring an accurate entry in the ship’s log.

Lieutenant Commander Headley doubted his ability to solve all of the puzzle. But he was determined to take a look around that cabin of Reid’s, and he waited until the CO came into the control room. After formally handing over the ship to the OOD, he said, “Oh, sir. Those insertion plans. I just had a couple of details to fill in...you’re busy now, but I’ll put ’em on the table in your cabin if you like... then you can take a look when you have a bit of time.”

“Thank you, XO. That will be fine.”

Dan Headley headed once more down to the CO’s room, and pushed open the door. The desk light was already on, and the little portrait of Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve stared out across the small room. Dan put the plans on the desk and kept a ballpoint pen in his hand in case he was disturbed. There was a small bookshelf to the left of the Captain’s chair, and Dan leaned over to inspect the half dozen volumes it contained.

There was a travelogue about the south of France, a biography of de Villeneuve, and an account of the Battle of the Chesapeake. A book called *The Stress of Battle and Trauma* stood next to the *Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*. There was also something called *Edgar Cayce on Reincarnation*, by Noel Langley. Dan picked this one up and glanced at the blank sheets inside the jacket. In pencil there were the following words: *Another life, another battle, so many mistakes in BUCENTAURE. I must never repeat them now that I have another chance. June 1980. DKR.*

Dan Headley frowned. He could not risk hanging around for long. Quickly he skipped through the pages of the volume on reincarnation, and then pulled out the Oxford companion. On instinct he flicked through alphabetically to page 883,

which gave an account of de Villeneuve's highest/lowest moment: Trafalgar. And he ran his finger over the the French Fleet's line of battle... *here it is... "BUCENTAURE, the flagship... struck its colors"... Fuck me! This crazy prick I work for thinks he's the reincarnation of de Villeneuve, one of the worst battle commanders in Naval history.*

Dan Headley put the books back. He still had no clues to the identity of the mysterious Chinese Captain Li Chin. Nor indeed to "Gregory." He glanced down to the writing pad on Commander Reid's desk and could see only a small sketch of a submarine. Beside it was the name Lt. Commander Schaeffer. And through the name were two hard diagonal lines forming a cross, as if to eliminate the name of the late SEAL Team Leader.

Dan shook his head, and left, in a hurry. *Do I give a shit who he thinks he is? Does it matter? A lot of people believe in reincarnation, right? I just don't know how seriously people take this stuff. And it would be a lot better if he thought he was General MacArthur, or Admiral Nimitz, even Admiral Nelson. But de Villeneuve? Jesus. He's even got his picture on the wall, and the guy was a catastrophe. Do we have a real problem here?*

The XO made his way up to the wardroom, poured himself some coffee and sat alone in a corner seat, thinking. *What do I really know about the CO? Have I actually seen him make decisions of really momentarily bad judgment?*

Dan thought some more, and decided that he had twice seen him make decisions that went absolutely by the book. Rigid. Unswerving adherence to the rules and regulations. The kind of adherence submarine commanders consistently ignored. The nature of the underwater beast means you have to be flexible. And everyone knew it. Holding hard to the rule book was okay on a peacetime surface ship. But it was often not okay on a combat submarine.

Do we have a problem here? Yes. I think we do. Because Commander Reid twice deliberately made an operation LESS successful when we plainly needed to make a change in our orders. He caused unnecessary battery-running time in the ASDV for the insertion into Iran. And he may have cost us the life of one of Rusty Bennett's best combat SEALs. He certainly refused to save that life. Two decisions. Two mistakes. Both important. We got a problem.

Lieutenant Commander Headley had no member of the crew in whom he could confide. It was simply unthinkable for a senior U.S. Navy executive officer to mention to a colleague, who must, by definition, be of a lower rank, that he, the Exec, considered their commanding officer had lost his marbles.

He also thought it was not anything he could bother Ricky with, since the SEAL commander was trying to prepare his team for the big push into the Chinese Navy base. *Oh, by the way, the officer in overall command of your only escape route is probably insane.* "Holy shit," breathed Dan Headley.

He contemplated the prospect of dinner. But he wasn't hungry, and he walked back to the area of the wardroom aft of the dining room table, where they kept a small library for officers and in fact for anyone of the crew who requested a book on a particular subject. SHARK, like most U.S. Navy submarines, was a literary democracy.

Dan had no idea what he was looking for. What writings might shed light on a commanding officer who once, certainly in 1980, had believed he was the

reincarnation of someone else? And anyway, did it matter? Dan himself had once read that General George Patton had believed himself to have been a major-league warrior in another life. And wasn't there some story that the General claimed to have known the precise spot where Caesar had pitched his tent when he arrived in Langes, France, to assume his first command?

Maybe it's not that bad, he thought. *Not that bad at all. However, I wouldn't give a shit if Reid thought he was Alexander the Great, or even Napoleon, but DE VILLENEUVE! I mean, Christ, that's beyond belief for a Navy officer.*

I used to be the the world's worst battle commander, and from now on, I'm playing it dead safe, right by the book. And that's what I think we've got right here. Except this fucking nutter might be in cahoots with the Chinese.

The XO scanned the bookshelves until he reached the section on psychology, a complicated subject for men who command warships, and an increasing concern in the modern Navy. He stopped at a volume entitled *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*.

"I suppose it's possible this character has adopted the kind of symptoms he believes de Villeneuve may have developed after Admiral Nelson took out twenty of his Fleet at Trafalgar. The most decisive sea battle ever fought. Maybe Commander Reid feels he is supposed to suffer the French Admiral's pain for him." *Steady, Headley, you're getting crazier than he is.*

He opened the book and paused at one of the earliest sections of the textbook formula—*The Effects of Having Survived a Frightening Traumatic Event*. The subhead read, "Armed Combat, Shell Shock, Battle Fatigue." It was fully 20 seconds before he realized the block of type had been pointed up with a yellow high-lighting pen.

The next part was not highlighted, but it contained such lines as, "Reliving the painful memories, images and emotions, i.e., intense fear, horror, helplessness, as if it were happening. Recurring nightmares. Trying to erase the memories. Intense emotional stress in the face of events, present, future or even imagined, which may resemble any part of the traumatic event."

"Sudden emotional outbursts," the author wrote, "anger, fear or panic, may occur, for no apparent reason, as the person tries to avoid thinking or talking about the trauma that haunts him."

What exactly is this? Some kind of damned conspiracy? Well, you've picked the wrong man to make a fool of... waiting until I'm asleep and then flagrantly disobeying my orders.

These were the words of Commander Reid, uttered in temper, without logic, without concern, and without reason. Dan Headley pictured that scene in the control room last month, as the SEALs tried to fight their way back from their mission.

Was it actually possible that their own CO, as he addressed them, was hearing not just the quiet hum of SHARK's turbines as she made her turn in the silence of the dark waters of the gulf? Was he actually hearing the crash and thunder of British cannon, as Nelson and Collingwood came in quite slowly, in a light quartering wind, hammering both the French and Spanish Fleets to a standstill? Two hundred years ago, the morning of October 21, 1805? Was that actually possible?

Lieutenant Commander Headley shook his head, skimmed the rest of the chapter, but every few moments phrases jumped right out at him—*avoiding responsibility, isolation, symptoms increasing with age, guilt feelings for the deaths of others*. “And through it all,” the author wrote, “the person may still appear a strong and capable leader. Only those who serve closely with such a man can see the sudden moments of utterly illogical behavior, so often anger, or an obdurate adherence to the rule book, all to camouflage self-doubt.” And for good measure, the author added that, in his view, real-life trauma was no different from imagined trauma in the mind of such a personality.

Dan Headley liked it less now than he had 10 minutes ago. There was a final section on military officers who believed themselves to have been commanders in past centuries. But it was not written in a sinister way. Indeed the author believed the association with long past greatness may have given certain men inspiration, even knowledge, into the conduct of a battle.

But Dan noted that the author did not go into any detail of a commanding officer who thought he had been a catastrophic, world-renowned failure in a past life, had committed suicide, and, in his own handwriting, believed he now had a chance to make amends by eliminating mistakes.

One thing he knew for absolute certain: He needed Rick Hunter, and he needed him right now. And he did not even finish his coffee. Dan stood up and set off down to the SEALs’ locker room in search of his oldest friend. He knew the Commander was pretty good with the minds of fractious racehorses, and he hoped he could make the species jump, straight into the unbalanced psyche of a certain human being.

He located him at a good time. It was almost 2100, and the SEAL boss had been briefing his team for hours, poring over the new pictures of the Chinese base. When Dan Headley had come wandering into the conference area, aft of the control room, Rick had stood up and said, “Okay, guys. That’s it. Go get food and rest. Lieutenant Commander Headley and I are about to solve the problem of the Belmont Stakes. Which horse stays one and a half miles? That’s the key. Because most modern racehorses won’t last out twelve furlongs in a horse box, never mind running. We come to any definitive conclusions, I’ll let you know who to bet.”

“No mistakes now, sir. We don’t want any screwups, right?” called Lt. MacPherson.

Commander Hunter and the XO thus returned quietly to the wardroom, and asked the steward to bring them some dinner... “Coupla steaks, green vegetables and salad,” said the SEAL.

“You eating them both?” asked Dan. “Or may I have one?”

“For your information, I no longer have the appetite I had at eighteen,” replied Rick. “Specially when I’m confined to this ship. No fresh air, no exercise, no physical activity except the communal set of weights we’re all using to try to stay more or less ready to hit the Chinese.”

“Okay, Ricky. But I came to find you on a matter of great concern.”

“You did? What?”

“Well, I am assuming that you know the details of the altercation that took place in the control room of this ship when Rusty Bennett and I tried to take her inshore to save the badly wounded SEAL?”

“Doesn’t everyone know the details? Even the staff in Diego Garcia have no other subject to discuss.”

“They’re probably correct, too. Because I think we have a major concern here.”

“You mean he might make another foul-up like that?”

“I mean, I think it’s inevitable he *will* make another foul-up like that.”

“Why?”

“Because I think that right here we are dealing with a dangerously flawed personality.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I do. That’s why I need to talk with you.” And for the next 20 minutes the XO shared with the SEAL team leader the evidence he had found that Commander Reid believed he was the reincarnation of the French Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve.

“Well, everyone in the Navy knows about Trafalgar and the disastrous command of the French Fleet, Dan. We all learned it at Annapolis. “Wasn’t he some kind of a coward?... I forget the details.”

“Ricky, this guy was terrified of Admiral Nelson. He spent most of 1805 trying to get away from him. Napoleon had him under threat of suspension if he didn’t get his act together. Right before the battle, he ducked back into the port of Cadiz, trying to hide. And when he finally came out, he literally froze with fear.

“Nelson and Collingwood split the French line right near the flag. And the French ships took terrible broadsides from the Royal Navy. Admiral Nelson fell at 1315, and never really saw his sensational victory. De Villeneuve was merely taken prisoner after his ship surrendered.”

Commander Rick Hunter nodded quietly. “And you mean our CO actually thinks he is de Villeneuve?”

“Yup. That’s what he believes. I just showed you my note of what he wrote in the book... *So many mistakes in BUCENTAURE... I must never repeat them now that I have another chance...*”

“Well, maybe he won’t,” replied Rick Hunter.

“Shithead, you’re not hearing me. I am saying that in his mind this guy is suffering from the trauma of what happened out there off the coast of Portugal in 1805. He believes he is responsible. The stress of the battle is in his mind, and he is exhibiting classic symptoms of that kind of behavior. I’ve just been reading about it. Trust me, it fits.”

“Okay. It fits. But he doesn’t do it all the time, does he?”

“Course not. They never do. Just sometimes, when events seem to be getting too big, or out of hand, or there is clear-and-present danger. Or everyone is watching him, willing him to make a major decision. That’s when this kind of stress-damaged character can’t cope. Because in his mind he hears again the thunder of a past war, and he is consumed with self-pity, and it gives him a feeling of superiority because he knows no one else is going through what he’s going through. No one else understands the tragedy of a great Naval commander, which is why he feels free to shout and lay down the law in that self-righteous way.

“That’s where it all came from, Rick. The words are like cast concrete in my mind... *But, sir, we’re just trying to conduct a mission of mercy for our own injured people. And what did he reply? What exactly is this? Some kind of damned conspiracy... well, you’ve picked the wrong man to make a fool of...*”

"HMMMMM," said Rick Hunter. "And where we're going, he may have to make a few more major decisions before we're all a lot older."

"And that's not all."

Rick Hunter looked at his old friend, questioningly. And Dan told him of the conversation he had overheard in Commander Reid's cabin. He read over to him, verbatim, what he had written down about Gregory and Captain Li Chin.

"That makes no sense, does it?" asked the SEAL.

"Not to us, maybe, but it might for the CO."

"What are those names again? Gregory and Captain Li Chin?"

"Yup. That's exactly what I heard, or thought I heard."

"And you don't think there was anyone in there with him?"

"No. I do not. It's just that I never heard of anyone with either of those two names."

"Well. Let's try to piece them together. Say it all at once. How about Captain Gregory Leechin?"

"That's not right. He said LY chin."

"Okay. But you cannot be called Gregory Li Chin. Because that's a very American name, coupled with a Chinese one. And that would be very unusual. Gregory is a long name, and it sounds very definite. It's not like Ronnie or Tommy. You sometimes get Chinese people called that. I think you heard Gregory right, but I think you might have Li Chin wrong."

"I might have. But the CO did call him captain. I'm not wrong about that."

"Well, maybe he was talking to a guy who had trouble with the truth. Maybe he was Liar-chin..."

"You know, Ricky, that sounds really familiar to me. Liarchin. Do we know someone called Liarchin? Captain Gregory Liarchin. Someone maybe famous. Liarchin. That's got a real ring to it."

"You're right. Who the hell was Captain Liarchin?"

"Dunno. But it sure does sound familiar. How about Gregory... how about Gri-Gory like eastern European... how about Captain Gri-GORY Liarchin?"

"Tell you what... we need to hit the ship's library, conduct a quick search through recent Navy records... there's a good reference section."

"Someone down there will do it for us, I guess. I don't want the CO to see us down there."

"Haven't you got a buddy who'll do it quietly?"

"Yeah. The Navigator, Shawn Pearson, will get it done. I'm outta here, back in five minutes and don't eat my fucking steak."

The XO was back in a few minutes. "Shawn's going to have a look himself. I told him to fool with the spelling... Grigory Liarchin, or with a *y*, like Lyachin. Something foreign, right?"

"You got it. There's your steak, which, you will doubtless note, I did not eat."

The two officers settled into their dinner, trying not to speak too much about the submarine's CO. Occasionally a new officer came through the door, but no one stayed more than a few minutes. There must have been urgent vibes being given off by the XO and the SEAL Chief, because no one seemed interested in engaging them in conversation.

It was 25 minutes before Lt. Shawn Pearson came in bearing a sheet of paper. He handed it to Lt. Commander Dan Headley, who read the following four lines of type:

“Captain Grigory Lyachin, commanding officer of Russia’s 14,000-ton nuclear submarine KURSK, which sank with all hands in the Barents Sea, 60 miles north of Severomorsk, on Monday, August 14, 2000.”

Dan Headley whistled softly through his teeth. “Jesus Christ,” he breathed. And he silently handed the sheet of paper to Commander Hunter.

“I knew that name was familiar.”

“Sure was. But do you realize what this means, Rick? Our CO thought he was talking to Captain Grigory Lyachin. He thought he was in communication with a guy who’s been dead for almost seven years. I’m telling you. He was chatting away as we are now.”

“If I’m reading this correctly, Danny, it’s a lot worse than that.”

“How do you mean?”

“What do Admiral de Villeneuve and Captain Lyachin have in common? They both presided over major Naval catastrophes. And that’s what our CO identifies with. He thinks he is de Villeneuve, and he thinks he has something in common with the Russian submariner. I imagine he’s been trying to talk with him for years.”

“The way he was speaking, they’re old buddies.”

“Yeah,” said Rick. “In his dreams.”

“Well, do you think this has sinister connotations for us, and the people who work under his command?”

“Normally, I’d say, maybe not. A lot of people are spiritualists, trying to get in touch with people ‘on the other side.’ Doesn’t make ‘em necessarily crazy. And certainly not dangerous. I mean, there’re institutes of learning for spiritualists all over the place. A lot of very clever people think there can be communication between the living and the dead. And who the hell are we to say there’s not?”

“I know. But it’s not just any old dead we’re dealing with right here. We’re dealing with a couple of guys who have suffered traumatic catastrophe. And my immediate boss, who is about to be charged with the execution of one of the most dangerous Special Forces insert-and-rescue missions ever mounted, *thinks* he’s one of them, and wants to have a chat with the other.

“It’s as if your bank manager thinks he jumped out of a high-rise window eighty years ago, in the crash of twenty-nine. And now he’s desperate to get in touch with another suicidal bankrupt bank president before he invests all your money.”

“Well, Danny, you always did have a way with words. But this time I don’t like ‘em much. But hell, what can we do? We can’t just lay it on him. He’d have us both court-martialed for causing riot and unrest in the ship.”

“I’d sure as hell rather that than have *him* court-martialed for causing everyone’s death in the face of the enemy.”

“I know. And you think this problem he has manifests itself when there’s some form of pressure being exerted on him?”

“No doubt in my mind. I’ve seen it twice.” And now Lt. Commander Headley spoke very slowly, very deliberately. “This, Ricky, is a guy I guarantee will fold up completely, if something goes wrong, or if we had to throw the rule book overboard

and play a very bad situation by ear—you know, if we really had to wing it. Which is always possible in missions like this one coming up.”

Those had been, virtually, the last words the two men had spoken on the distressing subject, because there really was nothing more for them to say. And they were both trained to say nothing about Naval operations unless it was absolutely necessary. They finished their dinner in near silence.

That entire private investigation of the CO by the XO and the SEAL boss had taken place two nights previously, on Monday, June 4. And since then they had both tried to cast it to the back of their minds.

And now it was Wednesday, June 6, and the guys were going in, that night, in less than two hours. USS Shark came nosing up to her rendezvous point, with her cargo of SEALs making final preparations for the launch of the ASDV.

Commander Hunter had everyone ready. They were sitting in shorts and T-shirts only, but their faces were blackened with waterproof combat cream. The atmosphere was tight, as they checked over their wet suits and flippers, personal weapons and underwater breathing equipment. And they all listened to the monologue of Lt. Dallas MacPherson, as he checked the explosives list against the hardware.

He seemed to be wisecracking his way through it, as always. “One velly big bang right here, blow off many Chinese borrocks.” But Dallas wasn’t joking. He was coping—coping with the pressure the best way he could, steadying his nerves, fighting down the icy fear they all felt as they prepared to board the ASDV.

Every now and then, one of the younger SEALs reached out and just touched the shoulder of the man next to him, maybe ruffled his hair, punched him lightly on the arm.

It was a technique Commander Hunter had taught them—*Don’t go quiet. Don’t let it wash over you, or you’ll get overwhelmed before you start. Stay in close communication with each other. Remember: In this outfit, we don’t SEND anyone anywhere. We all go together.*

Chapter 11

061830JUN07. USS SHARK. Bay of Bengal.

16.00N 94.01E. Speed 2. Racetrack pattern. PD.

This was Commander Rick Hunter’s final briefing of his team. They had already gone over and over the details, infinitesimally, back and forth, every measurement, every millisecond of time, every piece of equipment, how much it weighed, where it would be stored in the ASDV, who would carry it in. They knew the point where they would breach the outer fence. It was too high to climb with the stuff. They would have to cut it.

They knew the precise yardage along the fence to the guardhouse, the precise distance, to the inch, up to the power station. They knew the timing of the guard changes, the location of the lights. They knew there was the likelihood of a bright

moon; they knew the terrain, its firmness, its chances of being muddy. They knew the doors they must go through. And they knew the precise location of the massive main shaft down to the geothermal core. They also knew there was a probability of having to kill to survive.

And now the SEAL team leader was painting with a much broader brush. Each man had a small Navy chart in front of him, and a small, detailed scale map of the Chinese Naval complex. And each man was marking up both sheets, strictly as they applied to him, and the part he would play in the attack.

Each man had already completed his last will and testament, and a short letter home to either his wife or parents, in case he did not survive. All 12 of the wills were secured in one of the submarine's safes.

Rick Hunter stood before his team, and he looked much the way they did, but bigger—face blackened, wearing his wet suit, and black running shoes. A larger-scale Navy chart of the area was pinned to a board behind him and he was pointing with a ruler at the critical points of the mission, talking the SEALs through the timing...“Okay, we leave here at seventeen hundred, proceeding to this point on your chart right off Thamihla island. That's a distance of fifteen miles, and it's going to take us two and a half hours. From there we expect to find the deep-water channel right here, and we head on up to this can with the flashing light, okay? We then move up here for four more miles to this buoy with the flasher, right at the start of the natural deep-water channel leading right into the base... we'll see it easily. Now that's all clear, right?”

The SEALs all nodded in the affirmative, and Rick carried on. “At this point right here, a half mile off the jetties, we exit the ASDV, Catfish, Mike, Buster and myself. We carry in four sticky limpets and place them on the underside of the hulls of the two Chinese warships that are moored alongside... there's a six-thousand-ton Luhai-Class destroyer right here in the photograph.

“It's five hundred feet long and fifty-four feet wide, twin shafts and a lot of guided missiles, and torpedoes. Right next to it is a much smaller ship, a two-thousand-ton Jangwei II frigate, only three hundred sixty feet long. But it's fast and it carries a lot of antisubmarine mortars. Gentlemen, I assure you it's in our best interests to get rid of it very thoroughly. Both these ships carry helicopters, and it would be nice to somehow have them tip into the harbor.”

“Sir, I forgot to clarify. Are you guys getting back in the ASDV to go to our next stop? Or do we just meet up there?”

“No, we're getting back in. The insert wants to be in a much more lonely place, and it's too far back down the channel. We're hitchin' a ride.”

Commander Hunter then confirmed the landing site, a point less than one mile south of the jetties, behind a half-mile-long navigational hazard marked on the chart as Wolf Rock. “We'll all get out right there, about five hundred yards offshore; one hundred fifty of those yards are marked as a marshy area with a lot of vegetation. We'll walk through there, and when we hit the beach we're gonna be only a half mile from the dockyard fence. It's gonna be dark, desolate and without military guards. The first place we meet people will be the guardhouse, and there're only two people in it—one engineer and one Navy patrol guard. That's all. You know what to do.”

From that point on, Commander Hunter talked quickly through the well-documented plan. Everyone knew it by heart. This was just a brief refresher before departure, one final look at the campaign map. One final look, perhaps, into the face of death. They were frightened, as Special Forces must always be a little frightened. But no one flinched.

At 1855 the SEALs began to embark the ASDV, climbing up through SHARK's dry hatch, into the minisubmarine itself, which rested in one of the round, twin deck shelters up on the casing. Right now it was dry in there, and as each SEAL entered the tiny electric underwater craft, he checked the precise location of the gear he would personally carry in.

Lieutenant Dave Mills was already at the controls, seated next to his sonar operator/navigator, Lt. Matt Longo, upon whose brain would fall the task of locating the secret Chinese channel into the harbor. And one by one the SEALs moved into position, the five rookies from Coronado, then the veteran combat SEALs Catfish, Bobby, Rattlesnake, Buster, and Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook, followed by Lt. MacPherson who slipped expertly up through the gap, and took his place next to Bobby Allensworth.

Last of all came Commander Rick Hunter, who was talking to Dan Headley in the small area below the dry hatch.

"Guess this is it, ole buddy," said the huge SEAL leader. "Don't forget your promise. You're gonna get us out of there no matter what."

"We'll get you out. The boats are coming in to RV Two one hour before you need them. They'll be transmitting every thirty seconds as from zero-two-four-five. Two single beeps right on your frequency... Good luck, Ricky... it's gonna be fine... but for Christ's sake, be careful."

They shook hands, formally, unsmiling; nodded curtly one to the other, and then parted. Lieutenant Commander Headley going back to the control room. The SEAL chief climbing up into the little submarine.

Immediately the hatches were closed tight and clipped. And Rick Hunter's team all heard the sudden rush of water as the departure crew outside flooded down the shelter. They could hear the metallic thuds in the water beyond the hull as the ASDV came free of its steel lines. Six hefty frogmen began to heave it forward on its tracks, away from the mother ship. They waited for 10 minutes, riding free in the water, for the deck shelter to close, and for the outside crew to rejoin the SHARK.

Then they saw Lt. Mills switch on the electric motor, and the ASDV swung right, onto its course one-two-zero, creeping now at its maximum speed of six knots toward the tiny Burmese island of Thamihla, and the deep-water channel they hoped to God they would find. Because if they did not find it, they knew they would have to postpone, until someone did find it, because these orders came from On High. Really High. And most of the SEALs preferred to get this thing done right now.

Inside the ASDV it was dry, but as they traveled it grew colder. There was no heat in this vehicle, but the SEALs were warm in their superbly insulated Navy wet suits. They could talk if they wished, but water magnifies all sound, and SEALs are trained to say nothing unnecessary on a combat mission. Thus there was hardly a word spoken for the first two hours. Not since Lt. MacPherson had

mentioned, as they flooded down the shelter, that he usually charged a lot of money for his “world-famous imitation of a fucking goldfish.”

All journeys in an ASDV seem to take forever. They travel blind, instruments only, and the passengers can see nothing. The submarine is dark, except for the light cast from the orange-colored screens on the control panels, and that left each of these highly trained assault troops with nothing to do except think about their tasks on this night.

Sometimes it was possible to see a couple of particular friends, like Bobby and Mike Hook, catch each other’s eye, and perhaps smile. But it signified only that they were aware of the other’s thoughts, and the colossal dangers they were facing, and the possibility that one of them, or perhaps even both, might not make it back. SEALs only think such private thoughts. They never say them.

And so the little submarine pressed on forward, 40 feet below the surface all the way. After two hours and 15 minutes they slid up to PD, and Dave Mills sent up the mast. Seven seconds later they went back down to 25 feet, and Matt Longo said quietly, “We’re getting into the area, guys. I got us at fifteen fifty-one north and ninety-four fifteen east on GPS. Right now I’m searching for the channel.”

All the SEALs knew now precisely where they were. Hours of study had committed that chart indelibly to their memories. They were in only 36 feet of water, but they were headed for a shoal over which there were only 15 feet in some places, which would put them damn close either to the surface or on the bottom.

Everyone, involuntarily, held their breath as Lt. Mills eased the ASDV along the southern edge of the shoal. They could hear the tiny click of the sounder, testing the seabed.

Lieutenant Longo’s monologue never stopped... *“We got twelve feet below the keel... make that ten... steady at ten... looks like we got it first time. We need a course of zero-eight-zero.”*

Lieutenant Mills: *“Zero-eight-zero it is.”*

Longo: *“Sir, this must be the channel. Suggest we speed up a touch... sounding still steady at ten.”*

Five minutes and 300 yards later the ASDV was in 50 feet of water, right in the trench northwest of Thamihla. The Chinese had dredged precisely where the engineers in Coronado had said they would. And Dave Mills again brought the ASDV to periscope depth. Right in front of him the mast slid upward, and he peered through the viewfinder, ranging right, from dead ahead to zero-four-zero. There it was, about a mile off their starboard bow, the light flashing every two seconds on the red can they had imagined so often on the chart.

Slight course change at 15.53N 94.16E on the GPS... come to zero-four-zero through the dredged channel... but we’re in patrolled waters... advise visual every three minutes.

“That Longo. Clever little prick, right?” Lieutenant MacPherson whispered it just loudly enough for the Navigator not to hear.

“Shut up, Dallas,” hissed Rick Hunter. “I’d like to see you doing what he’s doing.”

“Me? Sir, you must be joking. How many times do I need to tell you? I can do it all.”

“As a navigator you’d probably hit it all.”

There was a lot of stifled laughter, which defused some of the tension but not all of it. And the ASDV crept forward through the dark narrow channel, its only “eyes” an occasional look through the periscope. It took them another 40 minutes to move all the way to the north end of the dredged channel, and right at the entrance to the natural deep water they spotted a patrol boat through the periscope.

And it was coming straight toward them, the unmistakable Hainan Type 037 fast-attack patrol boat, heavily gunned, with a phalanx of ASW mortars. This ship is the coastal warhorse of the Chinese Navy. They have a hundred of them, divided among their three fleets. Lieutenant Longo spotted it way up ahead, with its distinctive low freeboard, making 30 knots through the water, with a big white wake astern, almost as if it had nothing to do with the Chinese Naval dockyard off to the west.

Lieutenant Mills whipped down the periscope and took the ASDV as deep as she would go, cutting her speed, and steering left toward the edge of the Haing Gyi Shoal, trying to put a mile of the Bassein Delta between the U.S. SEALs and the oncoming Chinese patrol.

She was not transmitting, but Lt. Mills was taking no chances. He cut the engines and allowed the submarine to drift down and settle on the sandy bottom. And everyone heard the Hainan go charging past.

“You know what I think?” whispered Matt Longo. “I think she was Burmese, coming straight down the estuary from their Naval base up at the city of Bassein, several miles upstream from here. She looked too settled on her course, and she was going too fast, to have just exited the dockyard. And she sure as hell didn’t look like a patrol boat snooping around the deep waters beyond the Chinese jetties. She was in a real hurry.”

Lieutenant Mills started the engine and engaged the shaft. The ASDV moved immediately forward, bumping off the soft bottom, heading northeast again. Another three miles, and they’d be right off the jetties. Thirty minutes from right now, the SEALs’ four hit men would be on their way.

They moved on slowly, transmitting on the fathometer occasionally. At 2250 Lt. Mills slid quietly up to PD for a visual, and there, 500 yards off their port beam, he could see the lights along the jetties. He could also see the shape of one small frigate moored dead astern of a large destroyer.

“Okay, guys,” whispered Longo, “we’re a bit too close. Get out right here. We’re still in the fifty-foot channel. Targets are five hundred yards to our west. Steer course two-eight-five and you’ll come in right against the hulls.”

Rick Hunter came forward to take a visual on the targets. And Lt. Mills decided they could exit on the surface, since there was not a single sound of any ship, radar or even a remote sonar. The dockyard was silent, unsuspecting, as everyone had expected. And of course the little ASDV is dead flat along its upper casing. There is no sail and it’s invisible from 500 yards in dark water, just a jet-black steel tube in the night.

The Lieutenant, already at periscope depth, lowered the mast, quickly pumped out some more ballast. The ASDV rose another five feet, just breaking the calm harbor surface with about one foot of freeboard, and stopped in the water. Lieutenant Mills opened the deck hatch and Catfish Jones, mask on, flippers on,

hood up, Draeger connected, a heavy limpet mine harnessed to his back, attack board under his arm, heaved himself up and over, rolling silently into the water without as much as a ripple.

Buster Townsend, similarly equipped, minus the attack board, was next. Then Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook, and finally Commander Hunter. The SEALs sorted themselves out, treading water, heads above the surface, waiting for their adrenaline to die down. Adrenaline eats oxygen. And the wait was frustrating. They were already running at least 20 minutes late. The detonator clocks would be set for 0345 instead of the planned 0330.

Commander Hunter would lead the way, with Mike Hook on his left shoulder. Catfish Jones, his attack board set on course two-eight-five, would swim in right behind them, with Buster's right hand on his left shoulder. They would not use their arms or hands for the swim, just their legs, kicking the oversized special SEAL flippers every five seconds, covering 120 feet per minute. It would take them around 13 minutes to reach the Chinese warships.

It was 2307 when Rick Hunter, facing east, finally held his attack board out in front of him with both hands. And then the big farm boy from central Kentucky drove himself forward, kicking hard and counting for distance. He was a human torpedo, scheduled to inflict about a billion dollars worth of damage on the People's Liberation Navy. And Commander Hunter could kick like one of his dad's stallions. Battleships have left their jetties with less power.

The four SEALs drove forward, the three younger men settling in to their leader's now-easy pace... kick... one... two... three... four... kick and glide all the way in. After eight minutes, the Commander came to the surface for his last look through the mask. Their course was accurate, and he paddled quietly back down to their regular depth, 14 feet below the surface. They were exactly on schedule, heading for the twin propellers of the destroyer, almost underneath the bow of the frigate.

Five minutes later, they were there, right under the shafts, in the shadow of the stern, and Rick signaled them to wait while he went deep to check the distance the keel floated above the harbor floor. As he suspected, it was only about three feet. This meant he and Buster would swim from the stern to the halfway point of the 500-foot-long ship, just about two minutes at 12 kicks every 60 seconds. Then Buster would swim right under the keel and place his mine exactly opposite Rick's. The subsequent detonation would hopefully break the back of the Chinese destroyer.

Catfish and Mike had only 60 yards to swim, which translated into 18 kicks, each taking them 10 feet, at which point they too would be just about halfway along the hull. Then Mike Hook would swim right under the keel and place his charge. Swimming under a hull is a nerve-racking business when it's tight, as this most certainly was. But they were on a rising tide, which was lifting the ship higher, and that's a lot less stressful than a falling one.

Rick Hunter rejoined the other three, about eight feet now below the surface. They could hear the hum of the big generators inside the destroyer. Rick and Catfish clipped their attack boards on their belts and then they separated into two pairs, diving down into the dark, kicking their big flippers, driving along the steel hull of one of Zhang Yushu's most prized warships.

Rick Hunter counted carefully. On the twenty-fourth kick he stopped, confident now he was right under the section of the destroyer where all the guided missiles and torpedoes were stored. Right here he could see the lights of the ship reflected in the water, but both SEALs knew it would be pitch-black when they reached the keel.

Rick felt the surface of the hull as he went, and it was very rough, covered with barnacles and small sea growth. None of this was good news unless you happened to be a naturalist: the magnetic clamps of the mine were never going to grip this. Buster would realize the same thing when he reached the other side.

Within a few seconds both SEALs were standing on the sandy bottom in water black as oil. They could feel the rough surface, and they unclipped the harnesses that held the limpet mines on their backs. Rick saw Buster turn and swim underneath the keel, feeling his way in the dark. And he himself again ran his hand against the metal of the ship.

He uncovered his magnetic clamp and screwed it into the mine with its five pounds of explosives. He tried it on the hull, but it would not grip. So he drew his kaybar fighting knife and, holding the blade with two hands, he scraped a section clean on the hull. Again he tried the clamp, and this time he felt it pull, then lightly thud home. He could see the small dial of the timer glowing lightly, showing its 24-hour setting. Rick checked its timing again against that of the clock on his attack board. Then he set it for 0345. Then he ducked under the keel and showed the exact time to Buster, who was just finishing scraping with his kaybar knife.

Thus synchronized to the split second, they made the fix to the hull of the ship, took a compass reading and kicked straight back down course one-zero-five, straight back to where the ASDV awaited them. Fifty yards in front were Catfish Jones and Mike Hook, whose swim down the hull of the frigate had been much shorter, and whose hull had been much cleaner.

They picked up the intermittent homing beeps from Matt Longo's fathometer, and kicked in toward the hull of the minisub. Only when Commander Hunter signaled with four knocks on the hull, that all four of them had made it back, did Lt. Mills return to the deserted surface of the water, and one by one they clambered up and into the dry compartment. They were all breathing heavily as they unhooked their Draegers, pulled off their masks and sat down. Again the hatch was shut and clipped, and Lt. Mills took her 20 feet down once more, right in the now-desolate main channel.

"Okay, guys?" asked Rick Hunter.

"No problems for us," replied Catfish. "What took you two so long?"

"Much longer swim down the hull, and when we got there it was coated with barnacles. You know what little bastards they are to clean off. We couldn't get the magnets to pull until we'd scraped a section. But it's fine. All set for 0345."

"Same," said Catfish. "Damn creepy down there under the hull, though. Wouldn't wanna do it every night, I'll tell you that."

Lieutenant Mills ran back down the channel, steering course two-zero-zero from the 16-degree line of latitude on the GPS. They ran for just less than 20 minutes at six knots, then they all felt the ASDV make a turn to starboard, slowing down while Lt. Longo scanned the water for Wolf Rock. He found it just to their north, and then he guided Lt. Mills in until the submarine was 150 yards off its

southernmost point. They took a visual, and Matt could see its shape jutting out of the water.

“Okay, guys,” he said, “this is where we say ‘so long.’ Your landing place is dead ahead. Steer three-two-zero, for no more than 350 yards. Right there you’ll be in the marshes, north of that river, so you won’t have to cross it. You just got a short walk in from there.”

Rick began to distribute big plastic cups of cold water. “I’m suggesting you drink one of these before we go. Because we’re probably going to get hot, and we have no time to get our suits off. Just don’t want anyone getting dehydrated, because it makes you feel lousy.”

The SEALs drank, pulled up their hoods, loaded up with six satchel bombs, plus medical supplies, radio and one shovel. They took the greatest care loading up two of the rookies with two 50-foot rolls of “det cord,” the hugely volatile detonator link that burns at the rate of *five miles per second*, and is beloved by all SEALs.

Then they slung their personal weapons on their backs, the Heckler and Koch light submachine guns packed in waterproof cases. And they lifted out the bigger M-60 machine gun, which would be used only in a dire emergency, if they had to fight their way out. But their most precious cargo was two heavy armor-piercing bombs, about three feet long in special waterproof carrying cases. These had been especially adapted by Naval ordnance in San Diego. They would not explode in contact with other explosives: they would only explode with heavy impact on the point of the nose cone. And heavy impact they were going to get.

Inside the ASDV, Draegers were connected and tested, masks pulled down, flippers fitted on and several belts of ammunition in waterproof sheaths were split among the SEALs not using attack boards. The vicious-looking kaybars were adjusted in combat belts, ready for easy access.

At 0016 they began to exit the submarine, one by one, each man rolling out of the deck hatch and into the still, calm waters of the Bassein Delta. There was a pale moon rising to the east casting low, ghostly shadows on the water. And there was no sign of life save the increasing number of black-hooded heads above the surface, each man breathing in the fresh night air deeply, treading water and waiting for the adrenaline to die down.

It was 0026 when Dallas MacPherson, manhandling the big machine gun with Bobby Allensworth, slithered down the hull and essentially fell into the water, the heavy gun now made much lighter by the special air pockets inside its waterproof cover.

Rick Hunter dived to their swim depth of 10 feet, adjusted his attack board and kicked forward on the short swim into the marshes. Ten minutes later all ten of them grounded into long marsh grass growing out of firm sand. Rick stood first and listened, pulling back his hood and shoving his mask into a holster on his belt.

They had already decided to hide the Draegers. They were too heavy to carry, and they walked on together to the beach, found a wooded area beyond the sand and dug out a hole to bury them. In an emergency they could run back and find them, if they needed to escape. If not, no one would ever find them. They covered

them over with grass, then wet sand, and dumped the shovel under thick undergrowth.

The six men with the light attack boards clipped them onto one another's backs; the bombs were similarly carried. The SEALs drew their weapons, Rattlesnake Davies held the wire cutters, and Rick Hunter checked the compass and decided on a tight group in single file walking carefully through the light grasses 100 yards inshore from the beach.

The landscape was uninhabited as far as they and the satellite could tell. The first sign of life they would encounter would be in the guardhouse right on the south perimeter wire. And so they went forward, moving steadily across the ground, their start point no more than 1,200 yards from the fence. Their watchword was stealth. There was no mileage in causing an uproar, nothing to be gained from a gunfight, except almost certain death. The SEALs had no immediate backup, no hope of immediate rescue. The Chinese guards in the dockyard had access to at least three helicopter gunships, plus almost a thousand armed Navy personnel—not to mention the entire Burmese Navy base upriver with even more access to fast patrol gunboats.

It was imperative that no one see them and live more than three seconds. It was the opinion of the Coronado brains that the guardhouse would contain a bank of television screens, closed-circuit from all over the base. That way one man could watch over the entire complex, positioned down on the main perimeter fence that guarded the base from the outside world—one guard with access to a panic button that would summon heavy reinforcements immediately. The only colleague he would require through the night would be an engineer ready to attend to any problems in the electric generation plant, the refueling areas or anywhere else in the high-tech areas of the Naval yards.

The SEALs' plan was almost primitive in its lack of subtlety, but everyone thought it would work. The one thing they must not do was cause a panic in the guardroom, which would cause the guard to hit the appropriate button. And they walked on, each man certain in his own mind of the sequence of their actions in the next 10 minutes.

At 0110 they picked up the lights inside the fence, and it was plain they were not designed as a security aid, but rather to light a blacktop interior path along which a jeep carried the guardhouse personnel. The lights were dim and focused on the ground, not the fence. The SEALs could see only one light along the fence, not high, about 100 yards from the guard-house itself.

It was thus dark as they made their approach, and they had no need to hit the ground and snake their way forward on elbows and knees until they were as close as 50 yards.

They reached the fence in good order, and Rattlesnake began to cut a hole in the wire in a dark area 40 feet from the little building. It took just a few minutes, and Buster Townsend folded it back away from his buddy's hands as the thick strands were severed. The hole was five feet wide by the time Dallas MacPherson and Bobby Allensworth hauled the big gun through, followed moments later by the entire team with all their equipment. Thus the Chinese guard and engineer, watching the television inside the brightly lit room, were in fact sitting 40 feet from one of the most lethal platoons of fighting men in the world.

The only man not through the wire was Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook, and no one could see him crouched outside the fence in deep grass carefully aiming a silenced M-14 rifle, the only one they carried, at the light nearest the guardhouse on the wire. At 0130, right on time, the veteran SEAL pulled the trigger and shot the bulb out the first time, missing the metal cover. There was not a sound. But inside the guardhouse a tiny light flickered, confirming that a bulb had gone out somewhere along the south fence. Instinctively the young guard stood up and walked to the screen door, opened it, stepped through and looked along the fence, noticing immediately that the light they could see through the window was no longer there.

In Cantonese he called, "We have a light blown, Tommy—we may as well replace it now. The television program is awful." At which point the engineer also walked out into the night, carrying a white box and a tall stepladder. It was obvious that the cheap Korean bulbs blew out on a regular basis, even without Mike Hook's valuable assistance.

And now both men were outside in the dark, the guardhouse unmanned. And right then the SEALs pounced. Rick Hunter took the guard from behind, breaking his neck with a tremendous blow from the butt of his machine gun. The man fell dead without a murmur, mainly because the SEAL leader had a massive hand clamped across his mouth as he died.

The engineer never even saw it, because Bobby Allensworth slammed a blow into his throat at the same time as Rattlesnake rammed his kaybar into the man's heart. Two down, the guardhouse in SEAL control. Not a sound as they fell. It was 0136.

Rick and Dallas raced into the guardhouse and stared at the screens. From there it looked as though the place was deserted. There was no sign of a human figure on the top line of three screens. On the second line there was also no sign of life. The trouble was the lettering under the screens was in Chinese, and the two SEALs were unable to read which television recorded which area.

They stayed watching for a few moments, and then suddenly there was life on screen six in the lower line, four men walking across a room, dressed in engineering overalls. In the background there was a tall construction, which seemed to have a large wheel on top, but the quality was not good enough for an accurate assessment. In Rick's opinion it was almost certainly the interior of the electric power station.

No surprises. They had guessed there would be little night security, in a remote Chinese base in the middle of a Burmese river, literally hundreds of miles from *any* known enemy, like India. And thousands of miles from *the* known enemy, the USA.

Commander Hunter's one problem so far was the possible discovery of the bodies. There would almost certainly be a watch change at 0400, but by that time the SEALs would be, hopefully, long gone, and the base would be, hopefully, nonoperational. Nonetheless there was a chance that a patrol might call at the little guardhouse sometime before 0400. Finding it deserted was one thing. Finding two plainly murdered occupants was quite another.

Rick's instinct was to disable the televisions so that no one else could look at them, but he did not dare for fear the disconnection could trigger an alarm that

would send more engineers down to the guardhouse. It was the lesser of two evils, but he elected to leave them operational, counting on no one else seeing the pictures before the 0400 guard change.

Rick watched the bodies being dragged out through the hole in the wire and hidden in the long grasses through which they had just walked, at least 50 yards away from the fence. They clipped the wire back into place. If a patrol did show up, it would be confronted with a mystery, but not with unmistakable evidence of an attack on the base.

It was 0150 when they began their advance on the Chinese dockyard. The 12 black-clad figures walked steadily toward the lights of the main complex, a distance of 200 yards. According to Rick's map, there were five main buildings—the power station, the main control and communications room, a large accommodation block, a long warehouse facing the surface ship jetties and an ordnance store right next to it.

Beyond here was the wide sea inlet where the Chinese had constructed jetties for their patrol boats, and farther in, two large dry docks, the type that flood down and sink to allow ships to navigate in and then wait for the docks to pump out the ballast and rise again to the surface.

Opposite the patrol boat landings were the submarine jetties, but according to Coronado's latest Intelligence, there was no underwater boat in residence. And then, even farther along the shore, was the fuel farm, containing 12 massive holding tanks, an area 200 yards long by 150, containing a million gallons of diesel. Between the fuel farm and the refueling jetties there was a main fuel-control block, a sizable three-story building 240 feet long. With that out of action, and possibly a bad fire among the holding tanks, the base would be totally diminished as a possible operations center. That fuel-control block was the farthest building from the SEALs' point of entry. It was also their first target.

And Rick Hunter led his men on a 300-yard diagonal route across the rough ground between the outer fence and the accommodation block, deep in the interior of the base. It was all surprisingly badly lit, for which each of the SEALs was grateful, particularly the two rookies bringing up the rear, carrying the big machine gun and ammunition belts that Lt. Allensworth would handle in an emergency. A big weight like that always makes assault troops feel vulnerable, slow and less mobile than everyone else. And the two rookies, carrying the machine gun between them, preferred the dark to the light.

The Commander led them carefully, and they made no sound as they crossed the uncut, uneven grass. They saw no one, and even as they passed the rear of the accommodation block there was no discernible light in any window. Rick was trusting his map now, because the base was unknown territory, and the map was telling him that at the end of the accommodation block they would make a right-hand turn and see in front of them a floating pontoon dock, with a gantry crossing the sea inlet, right behind the innermost dry dock.

The gantry was better lit than any other area, and Rick decided that if they were going to be seen, and caught, it was going to be as a team right in the middle of that illuminated bridge. He thus decided to regroup on the pontoon and send each man over the bridge one at a time, nice and slowly, attracting no attention. He

sent Dallas MacPherson over first, and the young Lieutenant did as he was ordered, strolling nonchalantly over the metal bridge as if he owned the place.

One by one they made the crossing, until 11 men were over. Then Rick Hunter picked up the big machine gun on his own and walked it over the gantry to join the others. And right then the pace stepped up about 200 percent. There were almost no lights on this side, just a low four-foot steel-railed fence to protect the fuel farm.

Rattlesnake and Buster cleared it together, racing through the holding tanks and planting a powerful, high-explosive Mk-138 satchel bomb against each of the two central ones. They joined them with det cord and wired it into the detonator, setting the timer for 0345. Then they jumped the eastern fence and worked on two more bombs, carried in and left in position on the outer back wall of the control center by Rick and Bobby. Each satchel held 10 blocks of explosives. There was enough TNT against that wall to knock down Yankee Stadium, and Rattlesnake thought privately, *I just hope to Christ no one finds it before H-Hour, 0345.*

Meanwhile Dallas and Mike Hook were edging around the control block searching for a main electricity inlet or outlet. The other team, Rick Hunter and Bobby Allensworth, was searching for the main fuel lines, which they never found. Dallas and Mike, however, were lucky. They opened up a big manhole in the ground and found a labyrinth of heavy-duty cable, coated with plastic, in brown, red and blue. Dallas said to wind six turns of det cord around the central point and set the timer on the detonator for 0345.

“Okay, guys, we’re done on this side of the inlet,” whispered Rick Hunter. “Let’s round up the lookouts and head right back over that creepy little bridge.” Twenty minutes later they were back in the shadow of the accommodation block, their loads lightened considerably.

It was 0225. And there were two targets left, the control and communications block, which represented about 5 percent of their problem, and the power station, which was the other 95 percent. The control block was important because, without it, the Chinese would be unable to contact the outside world. But the power plant represented a fighting chance of obliterating the entire Naval base.

With incredible stealth, the SEAL team moved way back into the rough ground over which they had walked from the guardhouse. And now they could see the silhouette of the station, and as Dallas MacPherson observed, “It looks a whole hell of a lot bigger right here than it did on the photograph.”

And Dallas was right. The building loomed high, maybe five stories up. On its southern side it was 90 feet long, and it was plainly bigger than that on the western and eastern walls. The only door they could see was set into the wall on the west side, right-hand corner looking in. There was a high outside metal staircase running up the east wall, probably for use as an emergency exit.

A high chimney jutted out of the roof, probably to release surplus steam.

To the right of the station, as the SEALs lay watching, was the control and communications block, situated centrally between the station and the dockside warehouse. They would deal with that first, because it was relatively simple, the mere placing of two bombs strategically.

The planners in Coronado had discussed the possibility of getting a couple of guys on the roof and winding a few coils of det cord around the entire bloom of

rooftop aerials, but decided, in the end, against it: too hard to climb it without special gear, and the SEALs were already fully loaded; too much chance of being detected, even stranded up there if things went awry below; too little advantage gained, since there was soon to be no electricity whatsoever throughout the base. Or whatever was left of it.

This time the bombs would be placed by Buster and Rattlesnake, both experts in such matters. Mike Hook, carrying the big gun for covering fire, accompanied them across the ground assisted by one of the rookies. They set themselves in position covering the main door of the building and the short southern wall. They could also cover the blacktop perimeter road.

The two SEALs from Louisiana moved like lightning to the building, and their luck held. At the rear of the structure there was a short flight of concrete steps going down to a semibasement, and remarkably, the door was open. Buster and Rattlesnake crept in and placed their two satchel bombs right by the main boiler. They spliced in the wires, set the detonator for 0345 and moved briskly out of the area, shutting the door carefully behind them. And still no one disturbed their lethal tasks. It was exactly 0245. And they were now running a half hour late, not 20 minutes.

But no one could deny that the Fates had been with them. The base, though occupied by a large number of military personnel, was, like all bases, quasi-civilian in character. One of the two duty guards had been an engineer/electrician. All the men on duty in the power station were civilians, and there was no duty guard whatsoever in there. They had seen no patrols along the docks either, presumably on the basis that no one was expected to attack a Chinese guided-missile warship with several hundred trained Navy staff on board.

And now, late or not, the SEAL team was moving forward to its main objective, taking no chances, moving on elbows and knees through the rough grass. The plan had been perfectly memorized by each one of them. Commander Hunter would enter the station, backed by Lt. Allensworth, Catfish Jones, Mike Hook, Dallas MacPherson and two rookies. They would take in with them the two steel armor-piercing bombs and four sizable hunks of C-4 plastic explosive. Plus a couple of hammers, jammed in the rookies' belts.

In Commander Hunter's opinion they would have to fight to take control of the power station, probably killing everyone who stood in their way. They knew from the television screens in the guardhouse that there were at least four, and possibly more, engineers on duty, but as it was a civilian installation that would probably be all. The problem with an assault like this was that anyone who got in the way had to die. There was no question of stunning, or disabling or even drugging with chloroform. What if the victim suddenly awakened and sounded an alarm. The stakes were too high for such a risk. Any risk, for that matter.

Outside the power station, 20 yards into the rough ground, Buster and Rattlesnake would man the big machine gun, covering the door and the approach road. The rookies would be deployed as lookouts on the near corners of the building. At 0255 the seven-man SEAL assault force set off toward the raised door of the geothermal generating plant. It was pitch-dark, the moon having vanished behind low rain clouds, and there was just one dim bare bulb lighting the eight steps up to the doorway.

The SEAL leader opened it carefully, but did not enter. No one moved, and certainly no one came to find out who had opened the door. One by one the team slipped into the building, weapons poised to cut down any opposition. If it was just one man or two, they would use knives. Any more, they would simply take them down with submachine-gun fire: noisy, and slightly risky, but the only option. They shut the steel door hard behind them, trying to contain any noise they might make inside the reinforced walls of the building.

They knew what they were looking for. The engineers at Coronado had sketched it for them several times over—one massive shaft with a giant cast-iron valve on top, the kind of heavy-duty machinery that might feasibly be holding back a volcano, powered by the core of the earth.

The room they now stood in was pure concrete, with a square exit into a room in which the noise was all-embracing. They could see huge turbines, with 10-foot-high wheels, spinning at a steady speed, plainly generating the electricity. The Coronado guys had said they should immediately look for a kind of mezzanine floor below, because the steam power was upwardly powerful. It would surge up the shaft and then find itself guided by the valve system, just below the turbines.

What Rick Hunter sought was steps, downward steps, and the seven men fanned out walking through the turbine room, hesitating as they came out from behind the giant machines, treating the room as if they were clearing a block in a conquered city.

They moved stealthily, their MP-5s held out in front, trying to listen, trying to catch any additional sound above the hum of the machines. Up ahead they could see another opening in the thick, cast-concrete walls. And right in the center of that gap was a wide flight of stone steps, 10 of them, leading down, Rick thought, to the main geothermal shaft.

So far the place seemed deserted. But no one imagined it could be, with millions of dollars of machinery working ceaselessly, apparently unsupervised. There had to be a team of guys in charge somewhere. But where were they? That's what Commander Hunter wanted to find out.

And the answer was not long in coming. Right at the bottom of the steps leading to the main shaft, three Chinese engineers suddenly appeared. In absolute shock, they stared up at the black-faced hooded giants who towered above them on the upper steps, armed with submachine guns. No one knew quite what to do, certainly not the engineers. One of them helplessly raised his hands, another called out loudly, a third shouted something in Chinese. And then Bobby Allensworth stepped in front of Commander Hunter and hit the trigger, firing from the hip, four short bursts. No one was as fast as Lt. Allensworth. In another life he'd have been at the OK Corral.

Bullets from his MP-5 slammed into the three men, each of whom took at least three shots, either to the head, throat or heart. It was a whip-crack reaction from a trained professional killer. And no sooner had the bodies slumped to the ground when a fourth man came running around the corner, stopped dead in his tracks, then stopped dead in his life as the MP-5 held by Rick Hunter's bodyguard spat a single round into his heart.

Even the SEALs were shaken at the speed at which it had happened. Commander Hunter turned to Bobby, whose prime task it was to protect the SEAL

leader, and he just nodded, confident the noise from the turbines had suppressed any possibility of the shots being heard outside.

Lieutenant Allensworth said, "Sorry I had to do that, sir. But I was afraid one of them might have had a button or an emergency beeper. Just didn't wanna give 'em no time. No time. Nossir."

"Thanks, Bobby. There was no alternative. I agree. Come on, let's get after that main shaft."

And still their luck appeared to hold, and they located the shaft two minutes later at exactly 0310, at which precise time the telephone was ringing forlornly in the guardhouse out on the fence.

Lieutenant Bo Peng, an engineer in the moored destroyer, was trying to call his brother Cheng who was on duty on the perimeter. He usually called him when they were both on the midnight watch, and they sometimes shared tea in the ship's wardroom when the watch was over. Lieutenant Bo could not for the life of him understand why Cheng was not replying, or alternately, why the answer-and-automatic-relay machine was not connected. It was a golden rule among the guards, and Bo was baffled by the silence out on the boundary guard-house.

He was a persistent and ambitious young man of 24, and he called the duty officer of the base, reporting that there was no reply to the telephone in the guardhouse. And why was that? There was not even a way to leave a message, and that was disgraceful in a military complex.

The duty officer was not altogether crazy about Bo's tone, but he was also wary that a warship officer with a serious complaint about the shore personnel would be listened to. In a few minutes he could be on the line to the destroyer's CO, a chore he was not prepared to deal with.

So he answered crisply, "I'm sorry about that, Lieutenant. I have no idea what could be wrong, but I'll play it by the book, and send a full night guard-patrol down there, right away.

Three minutes later, a complement of six Naval guards, all armed with Russian Kalashnikovs, was piling out of the accommodation block and boarding a waiting jeep. It was the first time they had ever been summoned to do anything after dark, and they almost went the wrong way.

Rattlesnake and Buster watched them leave, burning rubber outside the building and then making a U-turn, heading wrongly for the dry-dock inlet. At the end of the first throughway between the buildings, they swung right, down between the power station and the main workshops. They shot through the gap between the warehouses and the ordnance store, and then made a corrective right turn along the jetties. Lieutenant Bo, high above on the upper deck of the warship, watched them go roaring down the blacktop toward the guardhouse.

And there, of course, they discovered that the place was strangely empty. No duty guard. No duty night engineer. All six men jumped out and began to look around outside, spending several minutes calling out for the missing men. However, the patrol leader, Lt. Rufeng Li, went back into the little outpost's control room and took a look at the television screens.

And at that precise moment in the power station, Rick Hunter, noticing a scanning camera in the corner of the steam-entry room, took it out with a volley of bullets at 25-foot range. Lieutenant Rufeng was thus watching the screens when

one of them just blanked right out. It did not even fizz, or show interference. It just blacked into nothing.

The Lieutenant, however, did not suspect something drastic was happening. He just thought instantly that the two missing men were working wherever that screen had failed. And he took a close look at the wording below, which told him the camera was located on the upper southwest corner of the main shaft room in the power station.

He walked outside and summoned his patrol. He took his time, and lit a cigarette and told them laconically that he had solved the mystery: the two missing men had gone to attend to some kind of machine failure in the power station, and while it was irregular to leave the guardhouse unmanned, the problem may have been quite serious. They had obviously gone to deal with it together. After all, no guard had ever been called to deal with a prowler of any kind since the base had opened six months ago. He, Lt. Rufeng, understood those kinds of priorities, which was only to be expected.

He held his cigarette in his front teeth, an affectation just learned from a tobacco commercial on the Internet. He smiled languidly. It was a smile that said, "Don't worry, gentlemen. The reason I have achieved a position so superior to your own is my natural penchant for using the little gray cells rather than running around in a frenzy." At this particular moment, Lt. Rufeng, in his own mind, was the Hercule Poirot of the Orient.

It was 0325, and Rick and his team were working furiously in the shaft room, trying to shut off the lower valve, the one three thousand feet down, right above the boiling steam lake. They had located a control board and made the switches, three big ones, which Rick and Dallas believed had shut down all three valves.

The main one, located on the huge pipe where the steam divides off into the separate turbine feeds, was certainly closed. The turbines were already slowing. Any second now the reserve diesel generators would kick in, and it would not be long before the failure of the power plant was noticed.

The massive control valve at the head of the shaft, located at floor level in the lowest room, was also closed. But the SEALs could not read the most important one of all, constructed in cast concrete, high in the roof of the lake, the first line of defense, if for any reason the steam had to be halted. However, the switches were all three in the same position, and they could do no more. In any event, they now opened up the top two valves and let the remaining steam escape.

Lieutenant MacPherson observed that if they were wrong about the switches, they'd probably blow up most of East Asia, including themselves. "And wouldn't that be a blast?" he added. Dallas always found time for irony even when he was working flat-out. It was impossible not to like him.

Right now Lt. MacPherson was sweating like a Burmese panda. He had just blown out two sections of pipe right below the center and upper valves, and there was steam leaking, but it was not pressurized.

The bottom valve, right over the underground cavern, was plainly shut. The opening of the top two for several minutes had allowed the pressured steam to rise up through the system and then die out.

It was hot, but not diabolically so. Dallas and Mike Hook were feverishly trying to fix the first bomb inside the fractured shaft, winding it tight with det cord right below the center valve.

There were only 17 minutes left to tie up the second bomb through the hole in the shaft below the higher valve, directly above. That, too, had to be secured with det cord. Then, when the first detonator popped the cord, the lower bomb would scream down the shaft, arrowing through the remaining steam and slamming into the bottom valve with terrific force. It just might split the entire main shaft asunder.

Thirty seconds later the second det cord would pop, and a large hunk of white semtex explosive would blow the cast-iron upper valve to pieces. And this would release the second bomb to drop down the shaft, gaining speed for three thousand feet, then exploding somewhere in the rubble at the shaft base, or even in the waters of the underground lake itself; maybe even in the *floor* of the lake, slightly north of Hell, presumably.

Dallas thought if that happened it might actually cause a brand-spanking-new volcano to erupt from the core of the earth. "I always told my daddy I intended to leave a mark on this earth, but I bet he never thought I was gonna change its goddamned shape!"

Even without the wit and imagination of Lt. D. MacPherson, this was a drastically complex and dangerous set of linked explosions, and no one knew what on earth the result would be.

But whatever happened, the colossal forces of the steam, sufficient, it is always said, to blow a four-ton rock 400 feet into the air, would now be unleashed to roar furiously into its only escape route, straight up the remains of the shaft. It would most definitely blast off the roof of the power station, and probably rupture the entire foundation of the structure. The milk white superheated plume of steam, thundering into the sky, from the floor of the generating plant, would probably reach 3,000 feet.

It would take weeks to cap it, especially if the concrete foundation was split, and even this would take special equipment unlikely to be available within 1,000 miles. But the main issue was, from the U.S. Navy's point of view, that the Chinese base in the eastern waters of the Bay of Bengal should become history.

Meanwhile, Dallas MacPherson, assisted by Mike Hook and Catfish Jones, was manhandling the second bomb up to the huge upper valve, the one that had to be obliterated. It was 0330, and they had the bomb well secure on its moorings. They eased it through the gap and made it fast, hanging in the shaft, swinging in the spooky plumes of white steam still drifting up from below.

Dallas wound in the last of the det cord, wrapping it around the spokes of the red wheel on top of the valve. Then they placed the C-4 plastic explosives in three places on the cast-iron casing of the valve itself. Just below them Rick checked his watch, it was 0334. They had to get out of there before the base started to explode. And they didn't dare to set the timers in the power plant for anything less than a half hour from the moment they began to head for the marshes where the boats were waiting.

The leader's mind raced. *Say 40 minutes from now... gives us ten minutes to get clear of the building... then a half hour to get clear of the island... is that enough?*

Don't wanna get killed by flying masonry... I'm gonna make it forty minutes from now. Just hope to hell it's not too much time for the Chinks to discover the plot.

“Set that clock for zero-four-one-five, Dallas,” he said. “That’s thirty minutes after the ships, the fuel and the buildings blow. There’s gonna be a lot of chaos. Hopefully the blast from the control and comms building, plus the ships, will blow the ordnance store as well. But we have to get outta here in one piece. And we’re not committing suicide. My daddy wouldn’t like it. Nossir.”

At this exact time, 0334, the night-patrol jeep was running back down the blacktop from the guardhouse. When it arrived at the point where the road swerved right along to the jetties, the driver swerved left and headed directly for the power station, driving across the rough ground.

Rattlesnake Davies, lying in the grass with the machine gun, nudged Buster, and they turned around and saw the lights of the jeep coming toward them—not directly, but approximately.

“Jesus Christ, have they seen us?” he whispered.

“No. But I hate the coincidence,” replied Buster. “What do we do?”

“Nothing. Keep our heads down. I think they’ll go by. First sign they ain’t goin’ by, we take ’em out with the ole MP-5s, all of them, however many.”

By now the Chinese jeep was almost on them, still making a straight line, at a narrow angle toward the southern wall of the power station. If it did not stop, it would pass 25 feet in front of them.

Buster and Rattlesnake, now gripping their small submachine guns, followed the vehicle with their eyes, every sense alert. If it stopped, there were going to be six dead Chinese guards, no question about that, because they would not see the prostrate SEALs until it was much, much too late. But Buster and Rattlesnake both knew the real problem would come after that, after the base rippled into life at the sound of gunfire. Ten minutes later it would ripple into death at the sound of high explosives. It was 0335.

And events were moving rapidly. Rick Hunter and his team were moving swiftly back through the power station toward the exit room through which they had arrived. And, to their horror, Rattlesnake and Buster were watching the Chinese patrol’s jeep pull up right outside that door.

There was no sense of urgency, but it was obvious they were going in. The SEALs’ rookie lookouts were flying across the grass back to the rendezvous point. They hit the ground together right next to Buster. “Jesus Christ,” said one of them, “the bastards are going in. They’ll be behind the guys... oh, shit... Buster... they’ll fucking kill ’em.”

By now the guards were climbing out of the jeep, and Rattlesnake Davies, without a word, wriggled left to the standard M-60 machine gun they had set up in the grass. Buster had already laid the 100-round ammunition belt in the clip. And it was aimed right at the power station door. Lieutenant Rufeng and his deputy were on the steps, the other four right behind them. Each one carried his Kalashnikov. And without a word Rattlesnake Davies, the SEAL from the Louisiana bayous, opened fire with the M-60.

The range was only 70 feet, and the fatal 7.62-NATO rounds tore a path straight at the steps, killing the man now opening the door, and virtually taking Lt. Rufeng’s head off. The other four guards, stunned at the explosion of blood

running down the steel door in the dim light of the bare bulb, wheeled around, trying to see where the gunfire was coming from. They tried to raise their Kalashnikovs, but they were facing Rattlesnake Davies directly now, and that was a very poor strategy. He blew all four of them away; the force of those big shells, almost four inches long, slamming into them, actually knocked them sideways into the jeep, one of them hurtling backwards over the hood, his uniform riddled with bullet holes.

It was 0336 in the morning, the darkest time, and the sound of the SEALs' machine gun, rattling away in the night, had echoed around the base. A light went on in the accommodation block, someone came to the window of the communications room. Up on the foredeck of the Chinese destroyer, two seamen on their watch looked up in surprise. It was gunfire. Unmistakable machine-gun fire. And it was only 160 yards away. Both of them raced aft toward the near-deserted comms room below the aerials.

At which point, 175 yards away, Commander Hunter opened the door to exit the power station and nearly fell over the blood-soaked bodies of Lt. Rufeng and his colleague.

The thick, reinforced walls of the turbine room had spared them the anxiety of listening to Rattlesnake take out the entire Chinese night patrol, but Rick was amazed by what he saw. He jumped over the two bodies, followed by Catfish, Bobby and Dallas, grabbed the rail and jumped the steps in two bounds. In front of him was the jeep, three more bodies lying around it, and one lying on it.

"What in the name of Christ?..." he muttered, just as Rattlesnake, Buster and the three rookies came charging in from the rough ground, Buster saying too loudly, "We had no choice... let's GO-GO-GO... down to the marsh... do we take the jeep...?"

"Hell NO!" said Rick. "It's too easy to follow. We're better off in the dark, running on our own. Get my fucking attack board off my back, will you? We need the compass.... Okay... let's go, that way... make a diagonal back to the fence at the jungle end... *GO NOW! ALL OF YOU! FOR FUCK'S SAKE, RUN!*"

And with that, the SEAL leader grabbed the M-60 from Rattlesnake and one of the rookies and tucked it under his arm, checking the belt to see what was left—about 36 rounds. He was the only one of them strong enough to handle it comfortably alone.

"DALLAS! Quick. Blow that fucking jeep up, willya? It's faster than us and they may follow. Catfish's got the grenades."

But Catfish was off and running. Dallas, who had once considered an athletic career at 200 meters—an ambition abandoned only when he failed to make the 1992 U.S. Olympic team at the age of 14—could still run like hell, and he caught Petty Officer Jones in short order. He ripped the pin out of the grenade, and hurled it back at the jeep. Six seconds later, with the SEALs in full flight heading for the woods, it exploded in a fireball.

And it attracted the attention instantly of all four half-dressed but fully armed guards running out of the accommodation block. The light from the jeep illuminated the 11 black-hooded figures pounding across the rough ground making a southwest course toward the trees. And the frightened but disorganized Chinese instinctively opened fire. They were shooting almost blindly into the dark,

in high but flickering light from the gasoline flames. But a bullet caught Buster to the right of his shoulder blade, paralyzing his arm, and knocking him flying to the ground.

The Chinese saw the SEAL go down, but they did not see Commander Hunter rumbling along 30 yards behind his men with the M-60 poised. Rick stopped, steadied the weapon, then opened fire at the four running Chinese, cutting them down, dead in their tracks in a bloody scream of anger and fear. Then he turned the machine gun onto the accommodation block itself and blew out all the side windows, in an attempt to discourage anyone else from giving chase.

Meanwhile Dallas and one of the rookies had the wounded Buster on his feet with both arms around their necks. But the pain in his right side was agonizing and he screamed as they tried to carry him to the trees. Rick Hunter finally caught up with them, ordered everyone to stop for 20 seconds, and then he injected a shot of morphine right into the stricken SEAL's right shoulder.

"Let's go..." he said. "Fast as we can... Buster... that shoulder's gonna ease in a few minutes, old buddy. Don't worry about it..." Buster Townsend, blood pouring down his back, nodded and smiled. "Thanks, guys," he said.

And so they struggled on, plunging into the woods, glad of the dark, glad of the cover.

Behind them they had left abject chaos. The fact was that the Chinese Navy was fully aware the base was under attack. They had no idea, yet, of the scale of the attack. Nor indeed who was mounting it. They knew only that there appeared to be a gang of madmen running around murdering people.

The air was alive with the transmissions of cell phones as the comms rooms in the two warships talked both to each other and to the main control center of the base. The Commanding Officer of the Jangwei frigate was fastest into his stride. He hit the buttons to the destroyer suggesting they get helicopters into the air, with lights and pilots with night goggles. It was plainly essential to locate the killers as soon as possible.

The CO of the destroyer reacted equally quickly. Both of his helicopters were in a ground-crew service area, way over beyond the fuel farm. It was a workshop complex, with fuel pumps. But the choppers rarely used it, and the U.S. satellite trackers had scarcely bothered with it. The Captain knew they were there, and he moved fast to alert his air crew.

And this was just as well, because it was 0344 when the destroyer's CO was on the phone, and his ship was just about 23 seconds away from being blown sky-high. And so was the frigate directly astern of him.

Chapter 12

**0345. Thursday, June 7.
Haing Gyi Island, Burma.**

On an academic level, it was the limpet mine of Commander Rick Hunter, expertly clamped flat among the barnacles on the port side of the Luhai destroyer's keel, that exploded first. Buster Townsend's mine exploded two and a half seconds later. The viciously tailored "shaped" charges magnified the power of the detonation fivefold, and the limpets blew two gaping holes, one on either side of the keel, the blast slicing through the steel hull of the 6,000-ton warship.

Generally speaking this was all bad news for the People's Liberation Army/Navy, but not quite as severe as it would become four seconds later when the Luhai's torpedo magazine went up with a thunderous explosion, killing half of the ship's company.

Any onlooker might have been dumbfounded at the scale of the explosion, stunned by the flames and billowing jet-black smoke. But it would nonetheless have been difficult to focus attention strictly on the destroyer, because eight seconds after the torpedoes blew, the 2,000-ton Jangwei II frigate, moored dead astern, did a passable imitation of Hiroshima 1945, when the limpet mines fixed by Petty Officer Catfish Jones and Chief Mike Hook detonated with massive force right under the guided-missile magazines.

The little Jangwei, only 360 feet long, a ship that punched a lot harder than its size, paid the penalty for that and literally blew itself to pieces. The entire complement of guided missiles, the SSM 6 YJ-1 Eagle Strikes, the CSS-N-4 Sardines, the 1-HQ-7 Crotales, all contributed to the crushing explosion, and the docks shuddered, lit up with two towering fires that could be seen 10 miles away.

Only six men would survive in the frigate, only 50 out of 250 in the destroyer. Automatic fire alarms began to howl throughout the base, but they were drowned out by the colossal explosion in the fuel farm as one million gallons of diesel and jet fuel detonated into a raging furnace, courtesy of the Louisiana SEALs Rattlesnake Davies and the now-wounded Buster Townsend. Their carefully timed Mk-138 satchel bombs had blown apart a total of five holding tanks, and within moments the other seven had formed a gasoline inferno.

The roar from the fire almost, but not quite, drowned out the noise of the two other bombs blasting apart the fuel control center. In the middle of all this the coils of det cord, wrapped around the main electricity cables by Dallas MacPherson and Mike Hook, exploded with sufficient force to blow the manhole cover 60 feet into the air and permanently wreck the electronic fuel-control system.

And way over on the other side of the inlet, an unbelievable blast right by the main boiler in the basement of the control-and-communications center paid further tribute to the smooth black skills of Buster and Rattlesnake. The explosion literally caused the entire building to cave in, crushing all of its five occupants to death.

Residents of the base, at least those not gunned down in their tracks by the marauding U.S. Navy SEALs, believed they were witnessing the end of the world. Any other explanation seemed utterly inadequate. And the whole spectacularly awful scenario had erupted in under two minutes; out of nowhere. There was zero evidence of an attack either from the air or the sea. The place just seemed to be blasting itself to pieces.

Meanwhile, struggling through the woods on the north side of the base, the SEALs were still 1,200 yards from the edge of the marsh. Buster was losing blood, and he was still in pain despite the morphine. Rick Hunter ordered them to stop while he examined the wound, and to his dismay he discovered the bullet was still lodged in the flesh on the right side of Buster's upper back, and he was losing blood fast.

He took Dallas MacPherson aside and told him to bring out the rest of the medical kit. Between them they had sticky and plain bandages, plus disinfected swabs for just this kind of wound, plus more disinfectant. But they had no groundsheets and they had to kneel Buster down, and he kept losing consciousness, and Rattlesnake held his head and splintered shoulder. Dallas held the tiny pinpoint light beam they had brought, and Rick Hunter gritted his teeth, and using a large pair of tweezers, designed for this particular task, gripped and pulled the bullet out.

Blood cascaded from the wound and Dallas tried to stop it with a strip he tore from his own shirt. Rick used a gauze pad soaked in strong disinfectant to clean it. And for the first time, Buster Townsend screamed, and Rattlesnake Davies, one of the toughest men ever to wear the trident, broke down and wept at the agony of his lifelong friend.

Rick Hunter kept going. He used another gauze pad and pressed it on the wound. Dallas fixed it tight with a roll of bandage that he wound around Buster's chest, then stuck it down firm with the sticky tape. They stuck another length of this around Buster's upper arm, taping it tight to his side. Then Rick Hunter injected him with more morphine, and the SEAL climbed back to his feet, and Rattlesnake just said, "I'm taking him."

He put Buster's good arm over his shoulder and held his wrist, and with his own arm around the wounded man's waist, they pushed forward, walking as well as they could through the undergrowth of the Burmese forest.

"I'm glad we did that," said Rick. "We've stopped the blood, stopped the infection, and it isn't going to get worse before we reach a doctor."

Moments later Mike Hook's radio, tuned to the frequency, picked up the bleep-bleep-bleep of the homing device in the inflatables, now parked somewhere down by the Letpan Stream. "Got 'em, sir. They're waiting."

"Good job, Mike... we just gotta stay on this course," said Rick. "It's due west and right now the attack board compass has us headed two-seven-zero. We're right on the money—gonna pop right out of these woods on the left-hand fork of the stream, right where Shawn drew the spot."

"You want a couple of us to make a bolt for it?" asked Lt. MacPherson. "Just to let the boat drivers know we're on our way—tell 'em we got a problem?"

"Good call. Why don't you, Mike and one of the rookies take that other little radio and get down there. Bobby'll handle the transmitter. And use your compass—you know they say it's impossible to walk through trees in a straight line?"

"Okay, boss. See you in about fifteen minutes."

070400JUN07. USS SHARK. Bay of Bengal.

16.00N 94.01E. Speed 3. Racetrack course. PD.

The watch changed at 0400, and Lt. Commander Dan Headley still had the ship. No sign yet of Commander Reid, who had remained distant throughout the SEAL operation at Haing Gyi. Dan Headley knew he was not coming, at least not formally, to take over the watch. Although he thought the CO might show up casually a little later. He had just seemed extremely relieved when the XO had requested that he handle SHARK during the Special Forces operation.

At that moment Lt. Pearson came into the control room and said the CO wished to see him in his room immediately.

“Any clue why, Shawn?”

“None, sir. He just stuck his head out of the door when I was passing and said to tell you.”

“Okay... Officer of the Deck, you have the ship.”

“I have the ship, sir,” replied Lt. Matt Singer.

Dan Headley made his way down to Commander Reid’s room, and was surprised to find the CO unshaven and looking fraught, which he considered was several degrees worse than worried.

“Hello, sir,” he said. “What’s up?”

“We have a very serious problem,” replied the boss of USS SHARK.

“We do?”

“We certainly do. And before I elaborate, I want you to understand that I am talking about a subject on which I am something of an expert.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Mercury, XO, is just coming into retrograde.”

Dan Headley had rarely, probably never, been quite that bewildered.

“No shit?” he said, lamely.

Commander Reid glared at his second-in-command. “Do you, XO, have any idea how serious that can be? ANY IDEA WHATSOEVER?”

“Who, me?”

“Plainly, Lieutenant Commander, I am addressing you.”

“Well, sir. I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

“MERCURY, XO! One of the greatest planets of the universe, will be in retrograde by dawn. MOVING BACKWARD. CAN YOU UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THAT, XO?”

Commander Reid’s voice was rising. And so were Lt. Commander Headley’s antennae.

“Astrology is what we are discussing, Mr. Headley. Astrology. The ancient study of cycles—created originally by the Chaldeans of Babylonia three thousand years before Christ. Babylon, XO, Iraq in the modern world.”

“Oh, Saddam’s mob. Guess I hadn’t figured them as students of the universe.”

“Maybe not, maybe not. But I am a student of the universe. And I must tell you that when the planet Mercury begins to turn in an apparent backward motion, things can become extremely difficult. It’s one of the ancient laws of the zodiac.”

“Sir, look, I am sure this is all very fascinating, but I’ve got twelve brave men trying to get out of a Chinese Naval base under the most terrible circumstances. Could we go into retrograde some other time?”

“XO. ARE YOU ACCUSING ME OF IRRELEVANCE? THERE IS NOTHING MORE RELEVANT THAN MERCURY IN RETROGRADE. I’M TALKING OF MATTERS AS OLD AS TIME, FOR GOD’S SAKE!”

“Sir, I’m talking about high explosives, the destruction of a major Chinese Navy installation. I’m talking about life and death.”

“And what could be more significant to that matter of life and death than the slow reverse motion of a mighty planet, stilled briefly in the heavens? MERCURY IN RETROGRADE, SIR! WE ARE ABOUT TO BE BOMBARDED BY THE TIMELESS, MADDENING EFFECTS OF THE PLANET THAT CONTROLS US!” And his voice rose even higher. “CAN YOU UNDERSTAND THAT, XO?”

Dan Headley was at a loss. But at that moment the phone rang. The CO grabbed it and handed it over immediately. “Sir”—Lt. Singer’s voice was almost as urgent as Commander Reid’s—“can you come back? The SEALs have a problem. Buster Townsend has been badly wounded. They’re being hunted down by helicopters, sir. It’s bad. Please come back up here.”

Dan Headley’s heart missed at least two beats, maybe three. “Sir, excuse me. We have a problem.”

“PROBLEM? PROBLEM? OF COURSE WE HAVE A PROBLEM! WE’RE IN RETROGRADE. AND WHICH PLANET IN THE GREAT SCHEME OF THE UNIVERSE DO YOU THINK CONTROLS ALL TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION ISSUES?...”

“Me? I’m not really sure about that, sir. But I gotta go.” And with that Dan Headley charged out of the door, and long after he had turned the corner for the companionway, he heard the CO shout, “MERCURY, SIR, MERCURY! AND WHERE THE HELL DO YOU THINK IT WAS ON AUGUST 14, 2000? ANSWER THAT, DAMN YOU.”

Dan heard that, all right. It was the day the KURSK hit the bottom of the Barents Sea. *We got a problem okay. But it’s not some hunk of fucking rock flying backwards around outer space. It’s sitting right back there in that little room—Reid in Retrograde is a lot more like it.*

Inside the control room, there was an atmosphere of extreme concern. Lieutenant Singer was on the line to comms. The satellite signal just in from the driver of the lead inflatable was brief and forbidding.

It read:

070410JUN07. 16.00N 94.19E—SEAL team delayed in escape from Haing Gyi. Townsend walking wounded. PLAN has helos up searching shoreline to Letpan Stream. Nine SF trapped in high woods unable to reach boats. Attempting new RV downstream. Inflatables not located. Chinese base history. Hunter.

Master Chief Drew Fisher had the conn, and Lt. Commander Headley read the signal carefully. Lt. Singer handed him one of the 10-inch-wide scale maps on which Lt. Pearson had drawn in the details of the triangular island, and they assessed the situation.

There was a distance of 1,000 yards downstream of the rendezvous point along the edge of the marsh. Right there the map showed a wide inlet of water running right into the shore. Shawn’s map showed trees almost 40 feet high all the way.

There was no doubt Rick would make his way along there and make a rush for the boats. Since the helos had plainly not yet located the inflatables, there was obviously high grass cover in the marsh. The problem was probably the inlet—everyone would have to break cover in there, and then attempt to charge out through the shallows across the Haing Gyi Shoal. Three miles.

“Mother of God,” whispered Lt. Singer. “They haven’t got a prayer on the open water.”

“You mean the helos?”

“Yessir.”

“Actually, they have two chances, Lieutenant. To break cover in secret, unseen by the helos. Or to shoot the fuckers down. They have three standard M-60s, right? One already in each boat, one with the team.”

“You need to be a bit lucky to down a helo with one of those, sir. But I know it’s been done plenty of times, and they do have six belts of ammunition in each boat.”

“Where would you rather be, Lieutenant? On the ground with the guys holding the ammunition belts, or in a helo being machine-gunned by Commander Hunter?”

“On the ground with the Commander, sir. No question... But what are we going to do?”

“Tell comms to get a signal in. Tell the boat driver to let us know the moment they’re under way. We’re going in to get ’em.”

“Christ, sir. There’re only about thirty-five feet of water this side of the big shoal.”

“I don’t actually give a fuck if there’re only two feet. We’re not leaving them.”

“I’m afraid that decision will be made by me.” And all three men in the control room turned to see Commander Reid standing there, very calmly, in marked contrast to his demeanor of just a few moments ago.

“Debrief me, XO. I need to appreciate the precise situation if you are planning to endanger the lives of my entire crew, and indeed of USS SHARK itself.”

Lieutenant Commander Headley walked over to him, and his tone was icy. “This is the map of the island, sir. The X there marks where the boats came in to embark the SEALs. This mark is where we anticipate the team will move, in order to embark farther downstream. There are PLAN helos up, but they have not yet discovered either the boats or Commander Hunter’s team.”

“I assume they will attempt to cross this wide shoal at high speed?”

“I agree, sir. And I’m proposing we come in on the surface and meet them. If we have to, I’ll take the helos out with Stingers.”

“Not on my watch, you won’t, XO. How dare you decide in my ship virtually to declare war on China? In the open sea, firing publicly on Chinese aircraft quite properly defending their own base. No, sir. For that, you will need not only my permission, but that of the flag, and probably CINCPACFLT. Do you have any idea of the consequences of what you are proposing?”

Dan Headley stared him hard in the eyes. There was total silence in the control room. Commander Reid shook his head and turned away, walking out through the door.

Lieutenant Commander Headley did not acknowledge what had been said. He just turned back to Lt. Singer and ordered, “Please carry out my last order, Matt.

Get that signal in to the boat drivers. We must know immediately when they leave.”

“But what about the CO, sir? He plainly doesn’t think we should go in.”

“No,” replied Dan. “He doesn’t. Now get that signal away, and tell comms to stand by for the reply.”

The Boat Chief, MCPO Drew Fisher, looked at the XO, and said quietly, “We’re going in to get ’em, right, sir?”

“Do you want to leave Rick and the guys to die out there, Drew?”

“Nossir. No. I do not.”

0414. Haing Gyi Island.

It was just beginning to rain now, and Commander Hunter with his eight SEALs were struggling through the thick tropical forest. They’d made their course adjustment in radio contact with Lt. MacPherson, who was now helping to drag the big inflatables along the shore in about two feet of water, too shallow to paddle, under a canopy of insect-ridden grasses.

“Jesus,” he said, “I’m supposed to be a combat SEAL, not Humphrey fucking Bogart.” And he was right. It was like a scene from *The African Queen*. All they needed was Katharine Hepburn manning the machine gun.

However, the deadly nature of this night was brought into all of its terrible reality by the clattering of the helicopters overhead, searching, searching for the murderers who had infiltrated their base and very nearly destroyed it.

Back under the trees Rick could hear them coming in low, circling the area. But right now all nine of the SEALs had but one thing on their mind. It was just 0415 and the armor-piercing bomb should be on its way. They would not hear the blast, one mile away and 3,000 feet below the surface of the earth. But they should hear something in the next couple of minutes.

Rick told them to keep moving, and the sense of anticipation grew more intense with every stride they took. Then they did hear it...a dull, muffled rumble, more like a distant earthquake.

And then there was nothing. But quite suddenly in the weird silence of the night, an explosion shook the island to its foundations. A colossal crash, erupting out over the forest, as the roof of the power station was blasted a hundred feet into the air, followed by a shattering white light that lit up the area.

A giant bright plume of incineratingly hot steam, 50 feet across, gushed skyward. Higher and higher above the island, burning into the rain clouds, 1,000 feet, 2,000 feet, roaring like the oil flame on an old-fashioned boiler. A million old-fashioned boilers.

The noise was an unearthly, unnatural, uncontrollable sound, gushing out of the very core of the earth. Up through the trees Rick Hunter and his men could see the dead-straight, ivory-white tower, like an endless sky-scraper reaching up into the stratosphere, into the heavens, for all they knew.

Aside from the fact that it most certainly signaled the end of China’s Naval base in Burma, the howling tower of steam did the SEALs one other colossal favor. It totally distracted the three PLAN helicopters, two Russian-built ASW Helix-As and

a single Helix-B assault craft carrying its full complement of UV-57 rockets. All three of them had been a mere 500 feet away from the power station when it blew, and they swerved instinctively away from the white inferno as it slammed the roof into the sky, showering the local airspace with bricks, concrete, dust and metal beams.

With everything on fire down below, it was difficult for them to land. Also there was no electric power, anywhere. There was no one to consult with. The pilots did not even know if there was anyone left alive. All three of them had managed to get airborne as a result of the last-second message from the late CO of the destroyer, but they had done so at huge risk, flying out and away from the fire in the fuel farm, and then picking up a new signal from the emergency transmitter in the accommodation block.

The officer had delivered the message under immense stress. He was badly wounded and his signal was more like a MAYDAY than an order. He just had time to tell the lead pilot the direction the murderers were headed—down to the marsh—before the radio went dead. As it happened, there were six officers still in the accommodation block, and they were trying to transmit to the helos. There was no one else at this stage to transmit to.

The big red-and-white Helix choppers were all very capable; two of them had the weapons to destroy a submerged submarine, and the other had rockets to outrange the U.S. Stingers. But they were very exposed, and very noisy. With their twin high rotors and four-corner landing wheels, they looked like a cruising flight of pterodactyls.

And now the pilots brought them in to land, out on that rough ground, 200 yards from the stream. And all nine of the occupants, pilots, navigators and gunners, ran for the accommodation block to receive whatever orders there might still be.

And that left the SEALs, for the moment, unthreatened. Commander Hunter told them to keep going. He told them to carry Buster somehow between them, and Rattlesnake and his rookie assistant made a chair with their linked hands. Buster was able to sit in it, and he could lean back into the powerful arms and chest of Catfish Jones. Once they found a regular stride they were able to move fast, with Buster's weight distributed between them. Much faster than if he had had to walk himself.

They pressed on beneath the trees, struggling forward, dreading the sound of the returning helos. But none came, and Rick led them on down to the inlet, watching the compass, trying to keep on course two-five-five, more southerly than their previous route. And the sound of the roaring steam provided them with an inspiration, a feeling of self-congratulation. They had done what they came to do, and to a Navy SEAL that represents the meaning of life.

At 0440, they noticed the reeds and grasses petering out, and there was a new urgency in the bleeper, sounding out from the inflatable boats. Rick knew they must be close, and then he saw the water, gleaming in a kind of aerial phosphorescence from the snow-white steam towering over the entire island. It was a wide, shallow inlet, probably 50 yards across, and down the inlet, possibly 100 yards away, they could see five black figures trying to drag the boats nearer.

Rick Hunter snapped sharply into the radio receiver, "*DALLAS. RIGHT HERE... over.*"

"Okay, sir," the reply came back. "It's just too shallow. We can't get the boats nearer, even empty... I'm coming back to the shore now... hold everything... over."

One minute later, Lt. MacPherson, followed by Mike Hook, came splashing through the shallows. "Sir," he said, "how about that? What about that steam? Way to go, right!"

"Way to go, kid. What now?"

"The bottom of this creek's firm. Let's get Buster inboard. The guys are hiding the boats under that grass. It's a beautiful overhang—choppers never even saw them. C'mon, Rattles... okay, Buster, ole buddy, let's go home."

And now the full team stepped into the water and began to move on down to the boats, Rick now carrying the M-60, all the others holding the MP-5s, one rookie with the second belt of ammunition. Their hoods were up now, wet-suit trousers folded and clipped over the tight rubber shoes, custom-made to fit the flippers. With no Draegers, bombs, explosives or hardware, it was easy going.

Except that out there above the trees there could suddenly be heard the sound of the helos returning, the pilots now firmly briefed as to the direction the fleeing murderers had taken. They have to be down along the shore of that stream. *Look for boats... and look for men in black combat suits.*

All three of the helos had their square rear doors open, and inside each one a gunner crouched behind a machine gun twice the size of the M-60, aiming it out through the gap. Up front, the navigator, wearing night goggles, sat beside the pilot, calling back target instructions.

This was big trouble. The SEALs were close to the boats, but there was no protection in there. And walking down the bright water of the inlet they were at their most vulnerable point of the entire mission.

"*Get into the shore, and hit the deck right now.*" Rick Hunter was not joking. And he was not in time, either. The lead helicopter came battering in over the treetops. It was heading west out over the water when the rear navigator spotted movement in the shallows. He snapped out an order to the pilot to bank left, and hover at 100 feet. Then he told the gunner where he had seen movement, and he opened fire, raking the shoreline with a fusillade of bullets, ripping into the grass, making vicious lines in the water.

The first burst hit the last man into the reeds, and Catfish Jones took the full volley in his back and head. He fell dead into the shallows, still trying to hold on to Buster Townsend. Rattlesnake Davies, now left carrying Buster all on his own, saw Catfish hit the water, saw the bullets lashing all around him, and still went back to try to drag him to safety.

By some miracle the bullets missed Rattlesnake, and even though he knew Catfish was surely dead, he would not let go, and he dragged the former North Carolina fisherman out of the firing line, and he kept saying over and over, "C'mon, Catfish, buddy, we'll be all right. I know we'll be all right... just keep comin' buddy... we're gonna be fine."

When at last he was under cover, he turned Petty Officer Jones over so the others could not see the terrible effects of the bullets, especially not the gaping hole in the back of his head.

Rick Hunter knew what had happened instantly. And he told them all, “We just have to keep still. Remember that machine gunner has no idea whether he hit anyone or not. Heads down, don’t move. And say a prayer for Catfish. He was a great and brave man. But we have to go forward and save ourselves.”

“Sir, we’re not leaving him, are we, sir?” Rattlesnake Davies was beside himself. “I can’t leave him, sir. I can’t leave him.”

“Don’t be fucking stupid, Rattles. Of course we’re not fucking leaving him.” The Commander knew exactly how to talk to people who were on the verge of losing their grip.

“Jesus, sir. How the hell are we going to get outta here?” asked Lt. MacPherson.

“By using our brains, staying quiet, holding our nerve, hiding when we have to and hitting back hard when we get a chance.”

“What worries me most is the daylight coming,” said Dallas. “It’s headed for zero-five-hundred, and I’m guessing it’s gonna be light by six-thirty—we got ninety minutes max to make the open water.”

“And it ain’t gonna be all that great when we do, unless we can get some help. I’m counting on my buddy Danny for that.”

And now they could hear the three helos making a long circle out over the Haing Gyi Shoal, and their clatter died out to the east, which signified they were coming right back in roughly six minutes from now. Commander Hunter rallied his team. They got Buster to his feet and walking, and two of the rookies dragged the body of Catfish Jones out into the water, faceup, and began to pull him through the shallows toward the inflatables, now only 50 yards away.

It was slower than anyone wanted, but the skies seemed clear and the fresh water running down toward the ocean was cleaning the wounds of the dead SEAL who had destroyed the Chinese frigate.

They reached the boats safely, placed the body in one and stretched Buster out comfortably in the other. The two Navy boat drivers, Seamen Ward and Franks, helped load the rest of the men inboard. Rattlesnake was in with Buster, plus Rick Hunter and the two rookies who had served with them outside the power plant. Lieutenant MacPherson was in the other boat.

Two more rookies went into the second craft, where Mike Hook was already sorting out the gear and organizing the M-60. Everyone was still in the cover of the over-hanging grass, but the weight had put the boats on the bottom. Commander Hunter and Lt. Allensworth went back in the water, and the skies were clear. It was still dark and the team leader decided they should at least be floating ready for the moment when they would make a run for it, straight down the widening river and across the shoal.

“The grass is just as good to hide in down there another fifty yards as it is up here,” he said. “And there’re probably five feet of water. Bobby and me’ll drag us down there. I’ll pull, he’ll shove. I don’t like boats aground in a foot of water.”

Rick Hunter seized the painter of the lead boat and heaved. Astern Bobby Allensworth pushed with all his strength, and the boat moved. Rick heaved some more, and the boat slid off the mud with water under its keel.

“One at a time. We’ll take ’em separately,” he said. “Use the paddles to stay as far into the grass as you can.” And Commander Hunter began to haul the boat

along, with Bobby at his side, preventing it from drifting out into the bright stream.

They'd gone 25 yards when the helos came back, and the sound of the steam roaring out of the power plant deadened the sound of the engines. Bobby Allensworth saw them before he heard them, and he yelled at Rick to shove the boat inshore and then hit the water.

The SEAL commander turned, saw the helos about a half mile off, racing into the inlet where they had opened fire before. The pilot banked right, losing height as he came in over the trees. The navigator thought he spotted something in the water, and he ordered the gunner to open up along the bank again.

Once more the bullets from the big Russian-made machine gun ripped into the left bank, and he kept firing all the way down its length. The two SEALs dived face-down into the water, and the first helicopter overflew them. But the second one didn't. Rick Hunter and Bobby surfaced without knowing it was there and the second machine-gunner, wearing night goggles, spotted them, and rained fire down on them.

The chopper was so low it could hardly miss, and with heartbreaking courage the SEAL from the Los Angeles ghetto flung himself onto his Commander's back and took eleven bullets that jolted his entire body, obliterating his spine, neck and head. He died instantly, still clinging to Rick's back. Still the devoted bodyguard.

Rick Hunter forced himself up out of the mud, safe but wet. "Shit, Bobby," he said. "You trying to drown us both?"

And then he saw Bobby Allensworth, lying in the water, faceup, blood streaming down his face where two bullets had almost gone right through. And Rick just had time to lift him up and into the boat, before he broke away, momentarily burying his head in the blank rubber side of the hull. No one had ever seen Rick Hunter that close to breaking before.

Lieutenant MacPherson saw what had happened and now he too went over the side, manhandling the craft into the deeper water. "Those fucking little creeps," he said. "But at least we know where we stand. We gotta float and we gotta fight. Get those fucking M-60s ready right now, and start the engine."

They drove along to Commander Hunter, while Chief Mike Hook laid out the ammunition belts for the M-60s. And none too soon. All three Chinese helicopters were making a long turn, plainly to return to the inlet.

"Sir, I'm sorry," said Dallas. "Really sorry. But I got the machine gun ready in our boat. You all set here? Get under the grass again. We'll let 'em have it as they come in, sustained fire on the leader, right? Everything we got, to down one of 'em. Discourage the others, right?"

"Right, Dallas. Let's go."

But the Chinese pilots were not certain they had done any damage at all so far. And they fanned out, with just the leader flying back down the bloodstained little water way. He came in low, and as he did so the SEALs opened fire with everything they had from the little boats behind the grasses. Dallas blew 30 rounds straight into the rear door of the chopper killing the gunner and, somehow, the navigator.

Mike Hook blasted away at the engines, set topside left and right below the rotors. And Commander Hunter, firing with a venom he had never experienced

before, emptied an entire belt of 100 rounds into the cockpit area of the rocket-firing Helix-B. It might have been the engine, it might have been the bullets smashing through the side windows, it might have been anything. But whatever it was, the helicopter was suddenly belching flames, and it spun right over and slammed into the water at 130 miles an hour.

“Fuck me,” said one of the rookies.

At which point they could all see the lights of the two remaining Helix choppers wheeling around to the north, running up the narrow island where the downstream channel parts, before slowly turning east, back toward the blazing Naval base.

Both pilots were confused. They had just seen 33 percent of their attack force destroyed. The ships upon which they normally served were gone. There was no fuel. No electricity. Hundreds were dead. The entire base was engulfed in fire. At the epicenter of the inferno was a roaring white phenomenon, directly from Hell. They had no one, formally, to whom they must report, and they had just seen, firsthand, the firepower of their adversaries. No two Chinese warriors had ever had so little stomach for the fight. And they headed once more for that rough ground opposite the power station, to land once more and inform the remaining group of officers what had befallen them.

The SEALs, of course, did not know all this. But Commander Hunter again rallied his battered team.

“Guys, we have to break out of here sometime... it might as well be now... How many ammunition belts do we have?”

Seaman Ward, a tough-looking Irishman from Cleveland, said, “We brought six. You guys had one left, which you used, sir. So we got four unused, and half of two others.”

“Okay, divide ’em up. We’ll take one gun in the lead boat, which I’ll handle. Lieutenant MacPherson and Chief Mike Hook will operate the other two. Get the paddles and shove out. Soon as the water’s deep enough, drop the engines and go. Someone fire up the radio, and I’ll get the signal into the satellite.”

The two boats paddled out through the shallows and into the wide channel. It was definitely getting light now, not sufficiently to see Shawn Pearson’s map clearly, but the tiny point of the flashlight showed three feet of water. They dropped their engines at 0520, and under deserted skies, still lit up to the east by the burning Naval base, they accelerated the engines mildly, making eight knots, course two-six-zero, straight for the uncertain waters of the Haing Gyi Shoal.

**0528. USS SHARK 16.00N 94.01E.
Speed 3. Racetrack course. PD.**

Lieutenant Commander Headley read the new signal with absolute horror:

070520JUN07. 16.00N 94.18E. Under heavy fire from pursuing helos. Lt. Allensworth, Petty Officer Jones both killed. Inflatables undamaged. Headed for Haing Gyi Shoal course two-three-zero flank speed. Downed one Helix. We

have ammo, and still three M-60s. Request SHARK assistance. Difficult for us in open waters. Hunter.

The CO was again not in the control room. And Dan Headley now summoned the senior executives in the submarine. Master Chief Drew Fisher was already in there, and the Officer of the Deck, Lt. Matt Singer, had the conn. Lieutenant Pearson came in, accompanied by the Combat Systems Officer, Lt. Commander Jack Cressend. The Sonar Officer, Lt. Commander Josh Gandy, came in last.

“Gentlemen, I am going to read out to you two signals we have received in the last two hours from the SEAL team we inserted last night into Burma.”

From their faces, it was not difficult to discern the personal pain each man felt from the death of the two SEALs and the wounding of another.

“As you can see from the signal, they are essentially making a run for it,” said the XO. “A high-speed run back to this ship. They have around eighteen miles to travel, which puts them in open waters for around forty-five to fifty minutes.

“The Helix will make 130 knots, no sweat. He could get here in about eight minutes. Which makes the SEAL team sitting ducks. Those damn Russian choppers, either the ASWs or the assault versions, carry a lot of hardware. And they plainly have heavy machine guns. The guys might shoot one of ’em down, but they might not. The odds have to favor the helos. Which means that Rick and the rest of the guys will all be dead sometime in the next hour.”

Dan Headley paused, and he could see the unease written on their faces. “It is my view,” he said, “that we comply with their request and head on in to save them. As you know, we’re just about on the fifty-meter line and we have about eighty feet below the keel. We can probably move in at fifteen knots PD for four miles, but we can make twenty-plus on the surface, so I’m proposing we surface right now and go straight for it. There is no serious Chinese Naval presence left in the area, thanks to them. But we may have to take the Helix out with Stingers; the sooner we get the inflatables under Stinger cover the better chance they’ll have.

“Gentlemen, I am proposing we make all speed inshore to rescue them. Is anyone not in favor of that action?”

Lieutenant Pearson and Lt. Commanders Cressend and Gandy said, almost in unison, “In favor, sir.”

Chief Fisher said, “Why are you asking, sir? Sure we’re in favor. We have the gear to save ’em. Jesus Christ, let’s GO.”

“*Officer of the Deck, steer course one-one-zero, stand by to surface...*” There was no mistaking the firm edge to his voice.

“Aye, sir...” said Lieutenant Singer, with equal emphasis. Like the XO, and like Chief Fisher, he understood that this was tantamount to a total confrontation. He had, after all, heard their Commanding Officer insist that such a decision was going to be made only by him. Commander Reid had also left little doubt that his decision was likely to be negative. His own words had betrayed his own worst fears...“*Do you have any idea of the consequences of what you are proposing?*”

USS SHARK nonetheless surged forward, shoving her blunt nose through the water at 22 knots on the surface of the Bay of Bengal.

“*Depth twenty fathoms, still fifty feet below the keel, course steady one-one-zero... making twenty-two knots.*”

The submarine had been virtually stationary for 12 hours, and the sudden dramatic change in speed was obvious to everyone. But to the XO, Lt. Singer and Chief Fisher there was something far more dramatic waiting in the wings. And there was not long to wait.

Commander Reid came through the door with a face like an ocean storm. But he spoke quietly. "Lieutenant Commander Headley," he said, "where, precisely, do you think you are taking my ship entirely without my permission? And, I suspect, entirely contrary to opinions I have already expressed?"

"Sir, I am taking the ship inshore on a rescue mission to save a team of United States Navy SEALs from what I consider to be imminent death. I am certain this course of action is approved by every man serving on this ship, including, I hope, yourself."

"Well, your certainty is misplaced. I wonder if you would be kind enough to inform me why you believe death to be imminent?"

"Because they are being pursued, sir, by two Russian-built Helix helicopters. And they are in open boats, inflatables, on the open sea, protected only by three M-60 light machine guns, which will probably be no match for the weapons against them."

"Are the Helix aircraft ASWs?"

"I believe one of them must be, sir. They came from the two warships moored in the base. So I doubt there would be more than one Type-B assault craft. There were almost certainly two Type-A ASWs, which means there's at least one left. The guys downed one of the three."

"I see. And how do you propose to continue this mission of mercy. On the surface?"

"Yessir."

"I see." Commander Reid's tone was cold. "Now I want to get this straight. You are proposing to take *my ship, on the surface* into the direct path of an oncoming Russian-built helicopter, which may be carrying rockets that outrange us? IS THAT CORRECT, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER?"

"Yessir."

"Have you gone mad, XO?"

"I do not believe so, sir."

"Then explain yourself, sir. And while you are about it, consider, if you will, the conversation you and I had less than two hours ago."

And now Commander Reid's eyes were moving back and forth across the control room. His head was turning only slightly, and his stare was upon all three of those present.

"*RETROGRADE! RETROGRADE, XO!* The great planet Mercury is in retreat. I have tried to explain this to you, and I trust you have relayed my concerns to the crew? WELL, HAVE YOU?"

"Nossir."

"*WHY NOT, DAMN YOU! DO YOU THINK THERE IS SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT?*"

"I am not really qualified to offer an opinion on that, sir."

"*NO, XO. NO, YOU ARE NOT.* Because you are an ignorant man. Like all these others. You know nothing of the cycles of the universe. You know only minor

details. Details of your own insignificant life and those immediately around you. You know nothing, XO. Nothing.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“I have tried to be patient with the terrible depths of your ignorance, Lieutenant Commander. I have tried to explain that Mercury rules so much of our lives, particularly those of serving Naval officers. Because of the planet’s supreme involvement with transportation and communications.

“It is apparent to me, as it must be apparent to you, that the forces of the planet are already at work. If you happened to have been Chinese, working at the Naval base, you would have faced catastrophe probably unprecedented in your lifetime. And what has been destroyed? Ships, fueling facilities and communications. The essence of any Naval base. The targets of the great planet.

“And as for our own operation: Plainly the SEAL mission has gone drastically wrong. The journey they are now on may be their last. *AND YOU, XO, ARE TRYING TO TAKE MY SHIP INTO THE PATH OF A HELICOPTER ARMED WITH ROCKETS THAT CAN PIERCE OUR PRESSURE HULL? RIGHT NOW, WITH MERCURY IN RETROGRADE? NOSSIR. NO YOU WILL NOT.*”

“Not everyone believes in astrology, sir.”

“No, of course not. But many great men believe in it. Who was the greatest U.S. President in recent years, the man who rebuilt the Navy?”

“President Reagan, sir.”

“Exactly so. He and his wife believed. They understood the cycles of the universe. They took expert consultation, as many great men before them have done. And now, XO, turn this ship around. And return to our official rendezvous point, 16.00N 94.01E.

“*AND WHILE YOU ARE CARRYING OUT MY ORDERS, REMEMBER THE OLDEST RULE OF THE NUCLEAR SUBMARINE COMMANDER... NEVER... NEVER, EVER... TAKE YOUR SHIP TO THE SURFACE IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY. TURN IT AROUND, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER.*”

Dan Headley replied slowly and carefully. “I am afraid I cannot do that, sir,” he said.

“Lieutenant Commander, I am going to pretend, for the moment, I never heard that. And I say again, Turn this ship around, *RIGHT NOW!*”

“I think you heard me, sir. I am afraid I cannot do that. Under any circumstances whatsoever... *Conn-XO, continue course one-one-zero at flank... same course, same speed.*”

“Lieutenant Commander Headley, you are forcing me to conclude that you are conducting a one-man mutiny on this ship. And I now formally place you under ship’s arrest, and I command you to leave the control room.”

“I am afraid that will not be happening, sir.” And with that, Dan Headley summoned again the senior executives of the ship back to the control room. And one by one they entered, the Lieutenant Commanders, Jack Cressend and Josh Gandy, and the Navigation Officer, Lt. Shawn Pearson. Master Chief Fisher and the Officer of the Deck, Lt. Matt Singer, were already there.

“I have consulted with the ship’s senior execs already, sir,” said Dan Headley. “And it is the opinion of each man that it is our duty to save the platoon of SEALs

if that is possible. We are a warship, and we're certainly equipped to deal with a couple of aging Chinese Navy helos.

"The SEALs have just acted with the utmost bravery, successfully carrying out the orders of, I understand, the President of the United States, the National Security Adviser, and the Chief of Naval Operations. Only if I receive direct orders from one or all of those three men will I cease and desist in my efforts to save our colleagues."

Commander Reid swelled into what looked like the opening moments of a towering rage. "XO!!" he bellowed, "do you have any idea what it would be like if one of those helicopters hit and sank us—could you imagine us being like the Russians in the KURSK, trapped on the floor of the ocean, suffocating to death. CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT, XO?"

"Perhaps not as well as you can, sir."

"If you only knew, Lieutenant Commander. If you only knew, as I know, the terror of such moments."

And now Dan Headley, surrounded by his fellow officers, stared straight back at the Commanding Officer, and he spoke kindly. "Sir, it is my opinion that you have not been feeling terribly well recently. You have been under strain, and I think everyone would prefer you to grab some sleep, while we take care of this rescue. As you know, we are moving toward the SEALs as fast as we can go, and I am afraid nothing is going to stop that. The crew will not leave the SEALs to die, and that is the end of it."

Commander Reid once more bristled with fury. "*THE ONLY THING AT AN END RIGHT NOW IS YOUR CAREER, XO. AND THE CAREERS OF ANYONE WHO WISHES TO SUPPORT YOU IN THIS LUNATIC ADVENTURE.*"

"I don't think so, sir. But perhaps you would now leave the area, because we are about to become very busy... Lieutenant Pearson... if the guys were in the shoal waters at zero-five-three-five, making twenty-five knots... where are they now? How far from us?..."

But before Shawn Pearson could run those calculations, Commander Reid exploded: "I WILL NOT HAVE THIS DEFIANCE... I AM THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF THIS SHIP, AND I WILL NOT HAVE HER TAKEN DELIBERATELY INTO A FATAL CONFRONTATION... NOW STEP ASIDE, OFFICER OF THE DECK... I'M TAKING THE CONN... XO, YOU WILL ALSO STEP ASIDE WHILE I ISSUE NEW, CORRECT ORDERS TO THE PLANESMAN. I WANT THIS SHIP TURNED AND RUNNING BELOW THE SURFACE IMMEDIATELY."

No one spoke. No one moved. And SHARK kept running forward, fast, on the surface, toward the SEALs.

Lieutenant Pearson broke the ice. "Sir, I do not think they could have reached the shoal before zero-five-four-zero. The approach from the channel through the marshes is very shallow, medium speed at best. But they could have rushed across the shoal. There're always three or four feet there, even at low tide in the worst parts. Four miles would have taken them probably twelve minutes, so they should be right off Mawdin Point, running fast, west, at zero-five-five-two... right now I have zero-five-five-zero... two minutes from now there should be eight miles between us... closing at forty-seven knots. Probably see 'em from the bridge in around ten minutes."

Lieutenant Pearson spoke as if the CO were not even in the control room, never mind in control of the ship.

And the XO turned once more back to Commander Reid, and said quietly, "I'm putting you on the sick list, sir. I think that would be best for everyone."

"XO, you are doing no such thing. I am taking command of this ship and I am turning around, and going below the surface, where I intend to remain. If the SEAL team arrives being pursued by the Helix helicopters, I will remain below the surface. Because, XO, unlike yourself and others in this room, I am governed by Navy regulations. Nuclear submarines do not travel on the surface in the face of the enemy. NOW STEP ASIDE."

Lieutenant Commander Headley did not move. He simply said, "Under Section one-zero-eight-eight of United States Navy Regulations I am relieving you of further duty. Since you have refused my offer of placement on the sick list, I am placing you under arrest. I am next in the succession to command. I am plainly unable to refer the matter to a common superior, and I am confident that your prejudicial actions are not caused by instructions unknown to me..."

Commander Reid raised his arms in exasperation, holding them high and slightly to the front, like a Catholic priest before communion. "MY *PREJUDICIAL ACTIONS!* How dare you, XO. This entire episode has been caused by your childhood friendship with Commander Hunter. We all know you and the SEALs have been buddy-buddy ever since we arrived in Diego Garcia. And this has come down to loyalty. Your loyalty to those damn brutes in the rubber inflatables, against my loyalty to the one hundred seven officers and men on this nuclear submarine. YOU ARE A DAMNED CHARLATAN, Lieutenant Commander. And you may have fooled some of the crew. But you have not damned well fooled me. SO STEP ASIDE."

"COMMANDER REID. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST." Dan Headley was not speaking kindly anymore. "Chief Fisher, go and round up six seamen and escort the former Commanding Officer to his room, where he will be confined until further notice..."

"NOW, Officer of the Deck, continue at the conn and continue this course with all speed... Lieutenant Commander Gandy, have comms try to contact the little boats... Lieutenant Commander Cressend, have Stinger missiles brought up, ready to be fired from the sail... Lieutenant Pearson, report to the bridge... I'll be there in a few minutes... That's all."

Every man so addressed replied with a sharp "Aye, sir." And then Lt. Commander Headley turned back to Commander Reid. "I would very much like to think you are just undergoing psychological problems, which may have been with you for a long time. However, the only alternative view available to me is that you are nothing short of a damned coward."

"Those are the remarks of an insolent and very misguided officer," replied the ex-CO. "I have the lives of the one hundred seven officers and men on this ship very much on my mind. And I am aware that in order to save your friend Hunter, you are quite prepared to sacrifice the lives of every one of us."

"I suppose it would never occur to a man like you that we can fight and win this thing, down the Chinese helicopters flying out of their burned-out base. And then save the lives of perhaps ten of the bravest men ever to have operated on behalf of

our country. I don't suppose it would have occurred either to that French creep you so admire, or think you once were, or whatever crackpot thoughts go on in your mind."

"You'll damned well pay for this, Headley. I'll have you court-martialed the moment we return to an American port."

"You may try; of course that's your prerogative. I'd be surprised if you didn't have a few questions to answer yourself, about the death of yet another SEAL you flatly refused to help. Charlie Mitchell was his name, and I can tell you now, Commander Bennett is not pleased."

At that point, Master Chief Fisher arrived with a group of seamen. "Take him below, Drew," ordered the XO. "Lock him in his quarters until further notice. If he resists, carry him. Just get him out of my sight."

"And what am I supposed to do shut up in there until you feel inclined to release me?"

"I neither know nor care. Why don't you ask your dead friend Captain Grigory Lyachin. He'd probably help. I wouldn't bother to contact Villeneuve. He'd probably tell you to commit suicide, as he did."

Commander Reid departed under escort, hissing venomously, "You out-and-out bastard, Headley."

0554. Bay of Bengal.

Off Mawdin Point, West Coast of Burma.

The two fast inflatables, throttles wide open, raced across the flat sea. Out to the east, the skies were colored rose-pink, but the sun had not yet risen out of the endless rice fields of the delta. No sun, no sign of the helicopters returning.

They made a course change, heading now roughly west nor'west, two-nine-zero, directly toward USS SHARK. If the submarine remained at the rendezvous point, they had a run of 15 miles and perhaps 40 minutes. But everyone hoped against all hope that SHARK was on her way in to try to save them. One of the rookies was balancing, standing up in the inflatable, holding an aerial way above his head, while Lt. MacPherson attempted to raise the submarine's comms room on the VHF radio. So far they were receiving nothing.

They raced on for another mile, and then the lookout in the rear boat spotted them—the two Chinese Helix-A choppers battering their way across Burma's western headland, slowly, making a search along the shore, under strict instructions now from the gathering of surviving officers at Haing Gyi to hunt down and destroy the criminals who had blown up the base.

Instantly, Commander Rick Hunter shouted, "Man both the M-60s... don't waste your ammunition by firing too soon... they'll probably come in right on our six o'clock and then bank away... all three of us go for the cockpits first... then, Dallas, go for the rear doors... try to take out the gunners... Mike, you again go for the engines... I'll keep banging away at the pilots. FIRE on my command."

Moments later, the Chinese pilots spotted the little boats, almost two miles away now, holding a steady course, separated by a distance of only 30 yards.

Commander Hunter then ordered the boats to split up. "Just make sure neither helo can fire at both boats at the same time."

Thirty seconds later the Helix-As were on them, coming in low, dead astern. "*FIRE!!*" yelled Rick Hunter, and the SEALs opened up, but it was very difficult in the bucking inflatables. They drove them away, neither helicopter managing to get a clean burst of fire at the boats.

But now they came around again, and the leader banked right, giving his gunner a clear shot, and he raked the water and then the inflatable with bullets, ripping four large tears in the rubberized hull, and hitting Commander Hunter in his upper thigh and one of the rookies in the chest. A blistering fusillade of bullets from Dallas and Mike Hook drove the other one away, but neither chopper was damaged, and with blood pouring from his wound, Rick Hunter swung his machine gun around and turned to face them again.

But now the two pilots flew back to the east. One of their machine gunners was badly wounded, and they needed to caucus. That gave the SEALs three more minutes to restore order. Buster Townsend, using his good arm, tried to get a tourniquet around Commander Hunter's thigh but it was not very successful, and the blood kept flowing.

And then they saw it, the black hull of USS SHARK barreling in over the horizon, a huge bow wave flooding blue water aft down the hull, splitting at the sail, and cascading off port and starboard.

Commander Hunter, gritting his teeth, shouted, "*Steer straight for the submarine. GO-GO-GO!*"

There was about a mile distance between them now, and they were closing at 47 knots. That represented only a little over a minute's running time. Too long. The Helix-As were heading back toward them, and they had the hang of it now. They came in low at an angle, the machine gunners now firing at will.

Rick and Dallas both went for the rear door, and again they hit one of the gunners, but the Chinese fired four lethal bursts, and again they hit the lead boat, which was now shipping water. A vicious line of bullets ripped through the little craft, hitting Buster Townsend three times in the chest, and killing him instantly as he tried to bandage the Commander. One of the rookies was also killed, and Rattlesnake Davies took a bullet in his upper right arm.

The SEALs could not possibly survive such an onslaught. And now both helos were on their way back again. Dallas and Mike Hook were still trying to clip in a new ammunition belt, and Rick Hunter, his hands sticky with blood, tackled them alone, blasting away at the cockpits. But this time the lead helo changed tactics, kept going forward and then swung hard to port, right across the bow of the sinking inflatable. Big mistake. Because it flew right into the range of one of SHARK's missile men, waiting patiently on the deck behind the twin dry-dock shelters, the only one not up on the sail.

He aimed the five-foot tube straight at the helo, hit the buttons the infrared homing, heat-seeking Stinger needed, and then fired it dead straight at 600 yards range. It blasted out of the tube, almost knocking the operator flat, adjusted its flight, and then streaked in at Mach-2 straight at the Helix.

It slammed into the starboard engine and blew the entire aircraft to shreds. The second Helix banked around, determined to loose off a depth bomb against the

hull of the submarine. But he was not in time. The missile men up on the sail had two more Stingers in the air before it could adjust height and course, and the astounded SEALs watched both engines explode in one single raging fireball, right below the rotors, before it joined its cohort, crashing into the waves right off SHARK's portside bow.

And now more boats were being launched off the deck to pick up the SEALs who were in the water and the crew of the second inflatable, which was still floating by some miracle, since its entire starboard side had been split open by the bullets.

Rick Hunter and Rattlesnake were hauled out first, and assisted up on deck. Stretchers were produced immediately for both the wounded SEALs. Body bags were brought up for Catfish, Bobby, Buster and the young SEAL Sam Liefer. And they hauled Mike Hook, Dallas MacPherson, the two drivers and the four rookies back aboard.

Commander Hunter was drifting in and out of consciousness now, and they strapped him into the stretcher while they lowered it through the hatch on its way to the medical room, where the Navy doctor and his assistants awaited him.

Lieutenant Commander Dan Headley was also down there to meet his old buddy, but Rick was very weak and needed a blood transfusion. Buster's tourniquet may have saved his life, because a bullet had hit within millimeters of the femoral artery, the one that almost always causes matadors to die, if the horn of the bull happens to rake through their thigh.

He was awake for just a few seconds under the lights of the medical center when he saw Dan standing next to him.

"I can't believe this... I thought the game was up," said Rick.

"You didn't think I'd leave you to die, did you? You didn't leave me."

"Hey, thanks, shithead," muttered the SEAL Commander, as they wheeled him into the emergency area.

And Now Lt. Commander Headley was alone with the consequences of his actions. He returned to the control room and ordered SHARK back into deep water. Then he found a quiet corner to draft a signal back to San Diego, and it took him longer than he had spent saving the SEALs.

In the end it read:

To: COMSUBPACFLT. 070700JUN. At 16.00N 94.01E. At 0540 this morning under Section 1088 Naval Regulations, I took command of the ship, and placed Commander Reid under arrest on grounds of psychological instability. Commander Reid refused request for assistance from U.S. Navy SEAL assault team operational in Bassein Delta. All senior executives in agreement with my actions. USS Shark subsequently carried out rescue. Four SEALs killed in action before we arrived to save remaining eight men, including badly wounded Commander Hunter. Two Chinese Helix helicopters destroyed with missiles. Submarine undamaged. Request immediate orders to return either Diego Garcia or San Diego. Signed: Lt. Commander D. Headley, CO USS Shark.

Dan put the signal on the satellite a little after 0700. He then appointed an official second-in-command, the Combat Systems Officer, Lt. Commander Jack Cressend. Then he retired to sleep until 0900, having been awake for almost 24

hours. To sleep, perhaps to come to terms with the word *mutiny*, and to await his fate.

It was 1430 in Pearl Harbor when the communication from Lt. Commander Dan Headley landed on the desk of Rear Admiral Freddie Curran, Commander Submarines Pacific Fleet. In fact, it did not actually land; it just fell right out of the sky with a resounding thud, like a time bomb. Not in living memory had there been a mutiny in a United States warship on the high seas.

Rear Admiral Curran just stared at it for a few moments, and tried to decide whether to have SHARK routed back to Diego Garcia to rejoin the HARRY S TRUMAN Carrier Battle Group. Or to order the submarine to make all speed home to its base in San Diego, a distance of more than 12,000 miles—three weeks' running time.

As far as Admiral Curran was concerned, most of the U.S. Navy was already in the area of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, so it was scarcely imperative to get USS SHARK back on station. And right now he was holding not so much a hot potato as an incandescent potato, and that three-week cushion would give everyone time to decide a reasonable course of action.

It was clear from the signal that SHARK's XO had acted with the highest possible motives, and there was no doubt that the veteran Commander Reid was something of an oddball. *But Christ!* thought Admiral Curran. *Mutiny is mutiny, and it took place in a United States warship on the high seas.* And he hit the secure direct line to the Pearl Harbor office of CINCPACFLT, Admiral Dick Greening, and read him the signal.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet gulped. Twice. "Mother of God," he said. "Mutiny?"

"Well observed, sir. I'd come to a similar conclusion myself."

"I assume you've ordered the submarine back to San Diego."

"I was about to do so. And I will have done it in, say, fifteen minutes."

"Okay."

Admiral Curran's signal was carefully worded...

Lieutenant Commander Headley. Received your signal 1430. Return USS SHARK San Diego immediately. Admiral Curran. COMSUBPAC.

Dan Headley read it minutes later. "Wonder if they'll give me a job at Hunter Valley?" he pondered. "Because if the Navy court-martials me for mutiny, it's all over in dark blue. This is probably my first and last command. Kinda unusual end to an otherwise exemplary career."

Meantime the surgeon operated on Rick Hunter's ripped thigh. The bullet had mercifully not damaged the femoral, but it had wreaked havoc with all the other blood vessels. And the doctor stitched carefully for three hours, after a major blood transfusion for the mighty SEAL leader.

It was several hours before Rick could sit up in his bed and make any sense. During the late afternoon he listened to Dan Headley's account of the mutiny in the privacy of the sick bay.

At 1800 he decided to send in his own short satellite signal to Coronado. It read:

SEAL mission on Haing Gyi Island accomplished. Naval base plus two PLAN warships destroyed. Four of our platoon killed, including Lt. Allensworth, Petty Officer Jones and Buster Townsend. We also lost combat SEAL Sam Liefer. Both Riff Davies and myself were wounded. We would all have died but for the actions of Lt. Commander Dan Headley. Signed: Commander Rick Hunter, on board USS Shark.

That signal went straight in to SPECWARCOM and arrived on the desk of Admiral John Bergstrom in the small hours of the morning. Its result was to put the Navy of the United States of America into one of the biggest quandaries it had ever experienced: whether to court-martial for mutiny a man who was not only an outstanding commander but also a plain and obvious hero.

Chapter 13

Lieutenant Commander Headley had offered Commander Reid every courtesy, including the freedom to send in his own signal to CINCPACFLT in Pearl. It went, of course, directly to Admiral Dick Greening and portrayed the actions taken by Shark's XO as nothing short of "making a mutiny."

It stated:

My command was removed by my own Executive Officer in the most shocking and totally unjustifiable manner. The XO was tacitly supported by other senior officers in the crew, but not verbally. They merely failed to object to this plain and dangerous breach of Navy regulations. I am thus drawn to the opinion that Lt. Commander Headley stands guilty of making a mutiny, and ought, by rights, to be court-martialed forthwith. Signed: Commander D. K. Reid, Commanding Officer, USS SHARK.

"That," pondered the Commander-in-Chief, "is not the message of a man looking for peace." And in that moment he understood that battle lines were about to be drawn, despite the obvious danger that press and public opinion might consolidate behind the hero who had saved the embattled SEALs, and against the right and proper Commanding Officer of the nuclear submarine.

And so, as USS SHARK made her way home across the wide Pacific Ocean, the High Command of the United States Navy was forced to acknowledge the probability of a court-martial: a court-martial that could very well split opinion in half, both in the service and in the entire nation, if the press managed to grasp its significance.

Admiral Greening viewed the situation with such seriousness, he consulted immediately with the Pacific Submarine Chief, Admiral Freddie Curran. And the two men left Hawaii that evening for Washington, to consult with the CNO, and then with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, before taking the matter inevitably to the White House.

There was nothing on record in the annals of the U.S. Navy that showed a court-martial for mutiny, and the CNO, Admiral Alan Dixon, was especially anxious for that situation not to change, certainly not on his watch. Because mutinies, although rare, possess a special glory of their own. The leader inevitably presents himself as a Samaritan, saving his ship from disaster. Worse yet, he is frequently believed. Even in fiction, the most famous case being *The Caine Mutiny*, Captain Queeg was widely accepted as some kind of obvious nutcase.

Admiral Dixon greeted Admiral Greening with grave concern. Essentially this should have been the province of the Submarine Fleet Commander, Admiral Curran, but it was likely to be bigger than all three of them. And one hour later, only one fact was obvious: To get rid of the spectacle of putting a Navy hero on trial for his life and career, it would be necessary to stop Commander Reid from pressing charges.

Even then, a Navy Board of Inquiry might very well recommend a court-martial. In fact, they would almost certainly recommend that in any instance of mutiny on the high seas, the offending officer must, by the very nature of his crime, face the most searching examination by his peers.

That, of course, was all very fine, since Navy Boards of Inquiry can be carried out in the strict privacy of the service. But there are certain crimes, transgressions and errors that, if committed by a senior officer, must be examined. And certain findings must, by their very seriousness, be continued into a court-martial.

The U.S. Navy is not as stringent as the Royal Navy in these matters, but they both operate out of a near-identical rule book. And whereas the Americans are often content with a Board of Inquiry, and a stern letter of censure to the officer concerned, the Royal Navy is much more inclined to court-martial, on principle, *any officer* who manages to lose, or even mislay, his ship. And that applies to a departmental chief who is considered to have created a major foul-up.

Practically the only exception to those rules occurred in the Battle for the Falkland Islands in 1982, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made it subtly clear she wanted no tarnish upon the shining glory of victory.

Admiral Alan Dixon was extremely worried. They must, he knew, convene a Board of Inquiry, just as soon as SHARK reached San Diego. And although it might be possible to lean on its members not to recommend court-martial, that was a risky course of action. Members of official Navy boards are apt to consider themselves sacrosanct in all their deliberations, and they would be fully capable of recommending a court-martial, and making their decision public.

Meanwhile he and the two Admirals from Pearl Harbor were obliged to inform the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs that they stood on the verge of a public relations nightmare, and that they faced a terrible quandary: Do we charge and court-martial Lt. Commander Dan Headley for "mutiny in a U.S. warship on the high seas"? More important, What the hell can we do to stop it?

At 0900 the following morning they all stood in the office of the CJC, General Tim Scannell, and deliberated the problem... to court-martial the hero of the Bay of Bengal, the fearless Naval Lieutenant Commander who drove into the face of the enemy, destroyed that enemy and rescued one of the finest U.S. Navy SEALs assault teams ever to serve the American people.

“Jesus Christ,” said General Scannell. “The Big Man, over yonder, is not going to love this.”

Nor did he. The three Admirals and the General carefully explained the ramifications to Arnold Morgan, and the President’s National Security Adviser told them the whole scenario was a “complete goddamned horror story.” And his reason was, characteristically, one that they themselves had not considered.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I may not yet be ready to inform the People’s Republic of China about our actions, neither in the Strait of Hormuz, nor in the Bassein River Delta. I intend to let them know when I’m good and ready, but that may not be quite yet. Now, the trouble with a court-martial, such as the one you are considering, is that it will promote, for one reason or another, *outrage*.

“Outrage, on the one hand, in support of the case of an American hero, recognized by the SEALs as the savior of their mission. Then there will be another kind of outrage, by the traditionalists, on behalf of the Commanding Officer, *outrage* that any half-assed little two-and-a-half can suddenly seize command and control of a U.S. Navy nuclear submarine just because he doesn’t damned well agree with something.

“Either way, whichever way a court-martial jumps, you’re gonna get *outrage*. And you know what outrage does? It makes people talk. Animatedly and indiscreetly. In short, gentlemen, it blows gaffs, hard and fast. It causes people to vent their outrage to media assholes and other third-class citizens. And it causes that which we want to remain secret, for the greater good, suddenly to become very public.

“Media assholes, who know close to nothing in any depth about any subject, cannot tell the difference between what they believe is an exciting and dramatic story and blowing a major secret straight to the pain-in-the-ass Chinese, in flagrant disregard for the stability of world peace and world markets. That’s what being a media asshole is. They have to take an examination in advanced ignorance and intermediate crassness before they’re allowed to join.

“But, and you can mark my words on this, not one of them will put in a check call to the military—*Is this okay to use? Or might it put us in a compromising position with the Chinese?*”

“No, gentlemen, that is not what they will do. They will instead seize upon the outrage of someone involved in this court-martial and blab it all over the earth, to the possible damage of the USA. And not one of them will give a damn about the consequences. Children, gentlemen. Always remember, they are essentially children. Which is why we gotta try to head off this court-martial.”

Admiral Morgan’s military visitors nodded in agreement. Alan Dixon was extremely worried. “It’s just the procedures, Arnie,” he said. “And you know them better than I do. Right here, we have a wounded, hurt and dangerous commanding officer. He’s been humiliated in front of his friends, in front of his peers and in front of his family. There is nothing else in his mind except clearing his name. On the other hand, we have a plainly gallant and probably brilliant XO who, for whatever reason, believed his own CO was prepared to let the SEAL team die. So he seized the ship, arrested the CO and carried out his own program perfectly, destroyed the enemy and saved the SEALs.”

“Well said, CNO,” replied the NSA. “That states it just like it is. And I realize there is no way we can avoid a formal Navy Board of Inquiry. Just to establish the facts. It’s the events after that which may burn out of control. Because to exonerate Headley, they gotta write the CO off as some kind of nut. And they will not do that unless they are certain, to a man, that the guy is deranged.”

“And that’s not going to happen,” said Admiral Freddie Curran. “Commander Reid is going to show up at the inquiry, all scrubbed up in his number-ones, and give his evidence in tones of calm, but surprised, incredulity. They might make him look a bit eccentric, but no group of veteran officers serving on a Naval board is going to write off a fellow officer, of thirty years standing, ten of them commanding a nuclear submarine. *There, but for the grace of God, go I.*”

“Then our only chance,” said Admiral Morgan, “is to get with Commander Reid, as soon as he arrives back in the USA, and try to persuade him to admit he was not feeling well, and that he handed over command of the SHARK voluntarily to his XO, who performed heroically.”

“That is correct, Admiral,” replied the CNO. “But there’s not a snowball’s chance in Hell of his agreeing to that. I can nearly guarantee we’ll find a man bent on revenge, determined to punish the men who overthrew him in his own ship.”

“Yes. I am afraid you are right,” replied Admiral Morgan. “But we have to try. Because in the end, if Commander Reid wants that XO court-martialed, the Navy will have absolutely no option but to court-martial him.”

“And at that moment, we will be holding the flimsiest of redoubts against a massively hostile press and public. And I, for one, am not looking forward to it,” said Admiral Dixon.

“Do you think we could try the national security tack, the highly classified nature of the entire mission?”

“That’s probably our best shot, sir,” replied Admiral Dixon. “And certainly the one we should try first—and of course we do have the argument that events proved Lt. Commander Headley correct. He achieved his objectives.”

“It’s a powerful, but not necessarily winning, argument,” said Admiral Morgan, thoughtfully. “Though an old friend of mine, Iain MacLean—he’s an ex-Royal Navy flag officer, submarines—once told me it was the best way to convince everyone of the merits of the case.”

“They’d never had a tougher one than this, though?” asked Admiral Curran.

“Tougher,” replied the National Security Adviser. “They went to war over such a quandary.”

“They did?”

“Sure they did. The Falklands War. Iain MacLean was there.”

“I don’t quite follow, sir.”

“Well, when the Argentinians invaded in the spring of 1982, they put a force of about fifteen thousand on the islands. And that put the old Brits in a bit of a spot. They had this group of goddamned rocks, containing about eighteen hundred of their citizens, in the middle of the South Atlantic, eight thousand miles from home. They’d sold their carriers, there was no air cover for any assault force to land, the Falklands were now fortified by a well-equipped army, protected by a land-based air force.

“Unsurprisingly, the military advice was absolutely negative. The Royal Air Force said forget it, the Army said no air cover, no go. The United States wrote the whole thing off as impossible. In fact everyone said it was impossible for the Brits to travel that far and win the islands back.

“Except for one man, and he happened to be the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Henry Leach, another old friend of mine. He said it could be done. He knew the carriers were sold, but not yet gone, and he convinced Margaret Thatcher the Navy could do it.

“As most of you know, it was a goddamned shaky exercise. The Brits lost seven warships, more than two hundred fifty men, and they fought like fucking tigers to pull it off. But they damn near lost it, and if they had lost it, one man would have taken the blame for probably Britain’s most humiliating defeat: Henry Leach.

“However, they did not lose it. They won it, thanks almost exclusively to Admiral Sandy Woodward and the parachute regiment. Without them, they *would* have lost it. Trust me. And the notion of taking an unforgivable risk, which you could say Henry Leach did, is never mentioned. Why? Because he was proved RIGHT.”

“Guess we could do with a few more like him around here,” said Admiral Greening. “Guys with the courage of their convictions, guys prepared to operate with no thoughts whatsoever for their own self-interest.”

“Guys like Dan Headley,” said Arnold Morgan, softly.

Two weeks later.

Friday, June 24. San Diego.

Admiral John Bergstrom paced the inner sanctum of the offices of SPECWARCOM. Before him sat the silent figures of the professional heads of America’s Pacific Strike Force, Admirals Freddie Curran and Dick Greening.

“You realize that my ultimate successor in this chair, Commander Rick Hunter, is quite prepared to put his entire career on the line and resign his commission over this, do you not?”

“Of course we do, John,” replied Dick Greening. “I am just trying to ask you if you feel just as strongly. Will you also resign if Dan Headley is court-martialed and found guilty?”

“Right now it is not necessary for the United States Navy to know whether I will resign. However, you should bear in mind that I have not yet decided not to.”

“John, I know how bad you all feel about this,” said Admiral Greening. “But I am afraid you have to inform the appropriate authorities if you intend to announce your retirement, if the Navy board recommends the court-martial of Lieutenant Commander Headley.”

“Listen, you guys,” said Admiral Bergstrom, slipping into the easy informality this particular High Command had always enjoyed. “We’ve all known each other for a lot of years, and I think we all know the pros and cons of this case.

“But I am here to tell you I have never known such intense feelings of betrayal by the SEALs. It is common knowledge that this nutcase captain of yours refused to help the guys coming out of Iran. Indeed, he left one of my men to die. And he would have left all my men to die coming out of the Bassein Delta. You guys

somehow appointed a fucking psychopath to take my SEALs in and out of an area of operations. Twice. And there's no way we're gonna sit still for that.

"Anyway, my position here would be untenable if you decided to jail Lieutenant Commander Headley for making a mutiny. I'd never be taken seriously again. Not by the Special Forces. I would *have* to resign, because I'd be a standing joke—the SEAL chief who sent the guys in, put 'em in the hands of a rule-book shit, who everyone knew was fucking crazy. Do you have any idea what that would do to the morale of this place?"

"Guys, somehow you have to stop this bullshit; you have to award Dan Headley a high decoration, and somehow get this fuckwit Reid the hell out of the United States Navy. Quietly, if possible."

Admiral Greening nodded in agreement. "If it were that damned simple, we wouldn't be sitting in this room, John," he said. "But it isn't. These things develop a life of their own. We have, right here, a ten-year veteran of a nuclear submarine command who was arrested on the high seas by his own XO and fellow officers, relieved of command of his own ship, locked up and told to shut up, while his orders were flagrantly contravened. Those actions plainly give the right to be heard, at least. The right to request a full Naval Board of Inquiry. The right to defend himself in front of his peers."

"Okay, okay, I get it," replied the SEAL boss. "But let me ask one question: In this specific case, who was right, Headley or Reid? And I mean both morally and in terms of war-fighting expertise? And even gallantry, concern for others? Headley or Reid?"

"Headley. Plainly. Headley was right," replied Admiral Greening. "But I'm afraid that's irrelevant. Being right gets you off the hook, as long as no one cares to push the case. But here we have an antagonist, who has been wronged in his own eyes and does not give a flying fuck whether Headley was right or not."

"We have a CO, who is brandishing the goddamned official book of rules, and saying loudly, *I'm the injured party*, and it says so, right here between these sacred covers... Well, Admiral Bergstrom, right here we got a problem. A real, live problem. And we gotta deal with it. And if you don't like it, Johnny, baby, I'm afraid that's show business."

Admiral Bergstrom chuckled. "You want me to get a couple of guys to take him out, nice and quiet?"

It was of course only a joke, a black, macabre joke. But the sheer simplicity of the solution was not lost on the two visiting Admirals, and neither of them laughed.

Admiral Freddie Curran just said, "Precisely the kind of solution one would expect from the SEALs... What's that motto of theirs?... Oh, yes... *There are very few of the world's problems that cannot be solved with high explosives*. Isn't that it?"

"Guess so, and it's mostly right." The SEAL Chief looked grim now, because the consequences of this impending Board of Inquiry were beginning to look so far-reaching, they were out there beyond the horizon.

"When do you want to initiate the inquiry?"

“Oh, right away, John. Here in San Diego, as soon as Shark arrives back. She’s due Tuesday night. We’ll aim for Thursday. Most of the men are entitled to leave, so we’ll get under way while they are all right here at the base.”

“Will it take long?”

“I’m not sure. If the board is in any way compliant they’ll agree to make a firm decision, one way or another, as soon as they have ascertained the facts. They are not sitting in judgment on the case. They are just being asked to establish the simple truth, and most of that’s not in dispute:

“One. Was there a mutiny on board the submarine?”

“Two. Was Commander Reid relieved of his command and placed under arrest?”

“Three. Who was responsible?”

“Four. Did that officer have the support of the senior officers?”

“Five. Why? What had the CO done wrong?”

“Dick, we’re talking real basics then, at this stage?”

“Absolutely. And those basics should be established very quickly. Which will allow the board to arrive at one of two conclusions: A) There was a mutiny, and the ringleader MUST be court-martialed under Navy regulations. B) There was no mutiny, the CO was under psychological stress and Lieutenant Commander Headley was well within his rights to assume command of the ship under Navy Regulation one-zero-eight-eight.”

“Yeah,” said Admiral Bergstrom, “but B requires the CO to *agree* he was under stress, and that Headley was correct to take over.”

“Afraid so,” said Admiral Greening. “And my forecast is that he will do no such thing. We will talk to Commander Reid at the highest level. Admiral Dixon will have him into the Pentagon, maybe even to Admiral Morgan’s office in the White House. They’ll pressure him, but I cannot see him agreeing to accept the most complete humiliation any CO can suffer. Just can’t see it.”

“Well, I’ve got another curve for you,” replied Admiral Bergstrom. “Tonight, at approximately twenty-one hundred, Commander Rusty Bennett is arriving back here from Diego Garcia, and he has a major problem with your Captain Reid, leaving that young combat SEAL to die out there in the gulf. To my certain knowledge he is filing a formal complaint about the conduct of SHARK’s CO during the time the guys were trying to get out of Iran.

“He’s alleging that the seas were clear of any potential foreign warships, and the skies were clear of foreign fighter aircraft. And he’s alleging cowardice of the very worst kind against your Captain Reid. I’ve seen the preliminary, and it ain’t pretty reading. Rusty, you know, was in the submarine at the time.”

“I think that may be rather helpful,” said Admiral Curran. “Even Captain Reid may not relish the idea of appearing at a court-martial and having to listen to two counts of cowardice against him, by two different officers, from two different but connected areas of operations.”

“The problem there is Commander Reid’s degree of wackiness,” replied Admiral Greening. “Let’s face it—not to go beyond this room at this moment—he must be a wacko. You don’t get guys like this hitherto outstanding XO Dan Headley and two proven SEAL combat Commanders, Hunter and Bennett, all thinking he’s a complete jerk, along with a lot of other senior submarine officers, unless there’s something the matter with him.

“And it’s been my experience that the more of a wacko a guy is, the more he’s likely to adopt a firm, unyielding defensive position. If he were normal, he might say, ‘*Okay, I’ll back down, you guys save my career, I’ll go for a little psychological help and I’ll leave the Navy with honor, and a full pension. No courts-martial, no trouble.*’

“Unhappily, that is not the way of the greater-crested common wacko. He is apt to see the world from a very narrow perspective. His own. The psychologists call it Loss of Insight. It means that you can no longer grasp the views of anyone else.

“How many major murderers appear sorry? Full of regret? Very few. They try to justify their actions. Remember Son of Sam, in New York. Wasn’t his fault, was it? There was a voice telling him to get out there and start killing. And what about that fucking dingbat they had in England, the Yorkshire Ripper who murdered all those women? He was just cleaning up the streets, right? He wasn’t sorry, despite battering innocent women, students, to death. He went to jail mystified that society had turned against him. Pleading not guilty, I think.

“Plainly, I’m not saying Commander Reid is a criminal. But I’d bet he’s a wacko. And wackos never make life easy. They defend. To the death.”

**Tuesday evening. June 26.
San Diego Navy Base.**

The journey back from the Indian Ocean had been fraught with tension. SHARK’s original CO being confined to his cabin was a constant reminder to the entire crew that they were steaming back into big trouble. In the beginning, a lot of the younger crew, anxious to see wives and girlfriends, wished to hell that Commander Reid could be reinstated in order to free them up to go home as soon as they docked.

They anticipated a very formal welcome, which might even see certain popular and trusted members of the crew placed under arrest. Everyone knew they had been to some degree a party to a mutiny. However, the presence of the wounded SEALs on board was a vivid reminder of the supreme heroism of the SHARK’s XO and his fellow officers.

Everyone was in awe of Commander Hunter and “his guys,” and rumors of their success and bravery swept through the submarine. The four body bags stored in the torpedo room were also a chilling reminder of the SEALs’ desperate battle for the Chinese base, and by the time the submarine approached California’s coastal waters, opinion was hardening. Opinion that they, the *Sharks*, were a part of this great and selfless campaign, and more and more of them began to stand four-square behind the Exec who had saved the Special Forces.

It was 2030 when USS SHARK came in sight of the coast. She was making 20 knots through a warm evening, on a calm surface, which rose with the long Pacific swells but offered no discernible chop. On the bridge stood Lt. Commander Dan Headley, the Navigation Officer, Lt. Shawn Pearson, and the Officer of the Deck, Lt. Matt Singer. Directly below them in the control room, Lt. Commander Jack Cressend had the ship, with Master Chief Drew Fisher at the conn.

They rounded Point Loma, heading up into the narrow channel that leads both to the U.S. Naval stronghold of San Diego and to the headquarters of SPECWARCOM. Above them, to their port side, on the heights, was the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, where Buster Townsend and Bobby Allensworth would both be laid to rest this week. The bodies of Catfish Jones and his colleague were being flown to their home states.

SHARK slowed as she reached the narrows. She stood fair up the channel leaving the North Island Naval Air Station to starboard. Then she made her hard right turn toward the towering stilts of the Coronado Bridge, and into the sheltered waters of San Diego Bay.

Lieutenant Commander Headley brought her alongside at 2120, and the mooring lines were attached. On the dock stood the resolute figure of Commander Rusty Bennett, in company with Admiral Bergstrom. The Pacific submarine boss, Admiral Freddie Curran, was also there. And there were eight Naval guards on duty, along with a throng of wives, girlfriends and colleagues from the base.

As SHARK was made fast and the men began to file out onto the deck, there was a spontaneous burst of cheering from the crowd. The figure of Lt. Commander Dan Headley stood motionless, unsmiling, on the bridge, watching the scene below as families looked forward to being reunited after months and months apart.

It did not seem that much different from any other submarine homecoming in San Diego. But it was different. No ship had ever returned here after a mutiny on the high seas. And there were certain protocols that had to be observed. Plainly Commander Reid would be escorted immediately to the offices of the Submarine Fleet HQ in San Diego, and, probably separately, Lt. Commander Headley would also be required to attend a debriefing.

Admiral Curran had made it quite clear that no one was to be arrested. There was not to be a semblance of authoritarian action, just a formal welcome, and a routine conference among senior officers. The less anyone knew about the events in the Bay of Bengal, the better. Meanwhile, the two conflicting signals sent from a distant ocean by SHARK's Captain and XO were not much short of nuclear meltdown in Admiral Greening's private filing system.

Commander Reid was the first officer to leave the ship, and he was greeted by Admiral Curran. The two men left immediately in a staff car for the central office complex. Thirty minutes later, Lt. Commander Headley, in company with the limping Commander Rick Hunter, crossed from the submarine to the shore, where Commander Rusty Bennett and Admiral Bergstrom awaited them. They shook hands and separated, the two SEALs boarding a staff car with the Admiral, Dan Headley boarding another car alone with a staff driver.

Curiously, there was little for the XO to say. His defense of his actions would be unwavering, scarcely varying from the short signal he had already sent. The problem was Commander Reid. Could he be persuaded to agree he was not in a proper frame of mind to conduct the SEAL rescue and that he had willingly handed over command of the ship to his number two?

Within a half hour, the answer to that was obvious. No. And with Admirals Greening and Curran, SHARK's former CO boarded a military jet for Washington at first light on Monday morning, June 27.

They arrived at the Pentagon from Andrews Air Base at 1500, and were escorted immediately to the office of the CNO, Admiral Alan Dixon. And there, for the next four hours, the head of the United States Navy, the head of the Pacific Fleet, and the head of the Pacific Submarine Fleet attempted to persuade Commander Donald Reid that there was nothing to be gained from the court-martial of his XO, save the worst publicity the Navy would ever suffer.

The Commander did not agree. He felt there was something else to be gained: the salvaging of his own personal reputation. And he was damned if he was going to condone in any way the actions of a group of mutineers who had seized his ship and contravened his perfectly reasonable orders not to put a nuclear submarine in the path of anti-submarine-warfare Chinese helicopters with long-range capacity.

Nothing that any of the Admirals said made even the slightest impression on him. Commander Reid knew his rights, he knew the regulations of the United States Navy and he was going to play those rights by the book, the way he had always conducted his career.

"I intend, CNO," he said, "to stand before the Navy Board of Inquiry and to tell the absolute truth about the events that took place in the Bay of Bengal. And I shall demand the court-martial of the ringleader of the mutineers. With respect, sir, you must know I am entitled to that."

"You may be so entitled," said Admiral Dixon wearily, "but we are asking you to reconsider, in the interests of the greater good of the United States Navy, and its image before the public."

"Then your request, with the greatest respect, is declined," he replied firmly. And then Commander Reid shook his head and spoke almost in a mutter, as if speaking only to himself: "*This is not my fault, not my fault at all... I told him over and over the planet was in retrograde... If he had just had the sense to listen to me...*"

"I'm sorry, Commander," said the CNO. "I didn't quite catch that."

"Oh, nothing, sir. Nothing at all. I was just thinking and wishing things could be different. But I'm afraid they cannot."

All three of the Admirals realized there was no point in pursuing this. Reid's mind was made up. And nobody was going to change it for him.

Commander Reid had no grasp whatsoever of the evidence that would be given on behalf of Lt. Commander Headley, and he had no interest in it. He knew only one thing: He had wished to play it safe, to keep his submarine out of harm's way, and he had been thwarted by the reckless actions of some damned two-and-a-half, who had never commanded a warship in his life.

On the flight back to San Diego, Donald Reid sat separately and silently, all the way, several seats behind the two Admirals. In contrast, they had much to talk about, because they were both struggling to find a way out of this particular mess. But there was no way out. Not unless Reid reconsidered his position.

And judging by his demeanor in the office of the CNO, SHARK's former CO had a very private agenda of his own, an agenda that would not easily be intruded upon.

"He's a strange kind of a guy, don't you think?" said Admiral Curran, quietly. "He has that confidence some people have. As if they could never be wrong. By the

way, what did you make of that last stuff he was muttering? I couldn't really hear it."

"No. I couldn't either," replied Dick Greening. "But I seemed to catch the word *retrograde*. Tell the truth, I'm not really sure what the word means."

"It means going backwards, doesn't it?"

"Beats the hell outta me. But if it does mean that, he must have been referring to our conversation. That sure as hell was going backwards."

Eight days later.

0900. Wednesday, July 4.

San Diego Naval Base.

America's national summer holiday was still in beach-bound progress on this bright sunlit California morning. The temperature was a near-perfect 78 degrees, and a light southwester off the Pacific promised to keep the sun worshipers relatively cool before the fireworks in the evening.

In the shaded gloom of the big office he always used in San Diego, Admiral Dick Greening felt almost sick with worry. He had before him a memorandum, signed by Captain Stewart Goodwin, who was presiding over the Board of Inquiry.

It read:

After three days hearing evidence in the USS Shark case, it is clear there was indeed a mutiny on board the submarine while on patrol in the Bay of Bengal. The facts are not in dispute. There was great sympathy for Lt. Commander Headley, whose actions were courageous in the extreme. However, Commander Reid is demanding the court-martial of his Executive Officer for making a mutiny on the high seas. And Naval regulations permit a Commanding Officer to make such a demand.

With reluctance I, and my fellow members of the board, believe there is a prima facie case for a court-martial, and we are sending our findings to the Trial Service Office. The Judge Advocate General will then decide whether Lt. Commander Headley should indeed stand trial.

Admiral Greening stood up and walked across the office to a wide computer screen on the wall, and he punched up the numbers 16.00N 94.01E. And there before him was the exact stretch of ocean where this terrible drama had been played out. He could see the island of Haing Gyi, the swamp, the little creek running through it. He could see the Haing Gyi Shoal marked clearly, the shallow water across which the fleeing SEALs had raced in their fast but tiny outboards. He could see the low marshy headland of Mawdin Point, and in his mind he pictured the scene.

The Chinese helicopters mercilessly machine-gunning the Americans as they tried to get away. Catfish Jones dead, Bobby Allensworth dead, Buster Townsend badly wounded, Rick Hunter pouring blood, still firing, all of them helpless sitting targets in the open boats. He imagined the terror. Imagined the courage. And then

he imagined the sudden appearance of the SHARK, lambasting the choppers with their Stingers, saving the eight survivors of this awesome SEAL mission.

And now they want me to approve the court-martial of the man who commanded the submarine?

“Jesus Christ,” said the Pacific Fleet Commander. And it was as well there was no one in the room to see him so upset, as he stared at the screen, hearing again in his mind the staccato rattle of the murderous Chinese guns.

**1500 (local). Same day.
Office of the National Security Adviser.
The White House. Washington, D.C.**

Admiral Morgan was displeased in the extreme. “Alan,” he said, “there’s gotta be some way we can stop this. You want me to get the President to intervene?”

“I don’t know,” replied Admiral Dixon. “The trouble with the damned Navy is that certain things are just like presidential elections—ain’t nothing anyone can do to stop ‘em. They just happen.”

“Tell me about it. How about a presidential pardon for Lieutenant Commander Headley? The man in the Oval Office, as Commander-in-Chief, has to be able to do at least that.”

“Well, I guess he could. Somehow. But that’s not really the issue, is it, Arnie, old buddy? The press will want to know if the Navy has gone off its trolley, court-martialing such a man as Dan Headley. As you pointed out, it’s the very act of court-martial that is going to bring this whole thing right out into the open, where we don’t want it to be.”

“Who’s the Judge Advocate General in this case?”

“Veteran surface-ship commander, former lawyer, Sam Scott from Oregon. About as rigid a man as you could find. He’ll play this case right by the book. He’ll look at the recommendations of the board, check his goddamned law books and then decide that Lieutenant Commander Headley should stand trial as charged.”

“Could we reason with him?”

“No chance. He’ll just ask, What happens if the CO resigns and goes public, in a book, which will inevitably detail what he thinks is a cover-up.”

“Well, I guess it would be.”

“Sure would.”

“Well, what can we do?”

“We can put in a massive effort to help Dan Headley beat the rap.”

“But that’ll mean we have to prove Reid is insane.”

“Correct. And then the media will jump all over us for putting in charge of submarines men who ought rightly to be in an institution for the seriously nerve-wracked.”

“Damned if we do. Damned if we don’t.”

“This case was always thus, Arnie. Either we talked Reid into a complete capitulation, which we couldn’t, or we were going to find ourselves in the deepest possible shit. Where we now are.”

“Yeah. But it’s not quite over.”

“Enlighten me, NSA.”

“We owe it to this Lieutenant Commander Headley to help him prove his boss was both nuts and a fucking coward. And the press can go fuck ’emselves.”

“Yessir.”

0900. Wednesday, July 18.

Office of CINCPACFLT.

Pearl Harbor.

The Judge Advocate General’s decision took two more weeks to arrive. And now it lay smoldering on the sunlit desk of Admiral Dick Greening, just as it lay smoldering on the desk of Admiral Alan Dixon in faraway Washington, D.C.:

After careful consideration of the evidence and observations of the Naval Board of Inquiry which examined the events on board USS SHARK in the Bay of Bengal, I have decided there is a prima facie case for the court-martial of the Executive Officer, Lt. Commander D. Headley. He will thus stand trial for Making a Mutiny on the High Seas on the morning of June 7, 2007, on which date he did relieve his commanding officer, Commander D. K. Reid, of his duties, under Section 1088 of Navy Regulations.

On the basis of the depositions before me, I have recommended that Commander Reid undergo psychological examination by three doctors, including but not limited to one civilian practitioner.

My findings have been referred to the Trial Service Office, for selection of trial counsel and defense counsel. I have recommended a senior judge advocate shall attend the proceedings, which will be heard in the trial Service Courtroom at the San Diego Navy Base on a date to be arranged. Signed: Captain Sam Scott, Judge Advocate General.

It was not unexpected, but the reality of the situation suddenly loomed before the Pacific Fleet Commander. This was it, the court-martial of a U.S. Navy hero, whose actions were witnessed not only by a crew of 107 completely supportive, very talkative seamen on board a fighting nuclear submarine, but also by eight highly regarded members of the U.S. Navy’s Special Forces, all of whom owed their lives to the actions of Lt. Commander Headley.

Their story was already well on its way around the SEAL bastions of neighboring Coronado and Little Creek in Virginia. Offhand it was difficult for Admiral Greening to think of any member of the service who would not know at least a vague version of this melodrama by nightfall.

As Commander of the Pacific Fleet, he was required to “sign off” on the court-martial, as indeed was the CNO in the Pentagon. And Dick Greening was going to hate doing that. But he had no choice.

Admiral Greening picked up the phone to Admiral Dixon, who was already on the line to Arnold Morgan. It was merely a matter of waiting for the press to get hold of the details, from any one of the hundreds of Navy men, and women, who now knew all about it. But the media would not be looking, and it might take them

a while. Though they'd sure as hell make up for their lateness when they did find out.

Admiral Morgan's wishes were very clear: Lt. Commander Headley and his lawyer were to be given every assistance in their case to prove that Commander Reid was in no fit state to run the SEAL escape and rescue from the Burmese island. It was the only way out of a scandal that would surely engulf not only the senior service, but also, possibly, the administration itself.

In fact it took five days, and even then only half of the story was published. On its front page, the *San Diego Telegraph* ran a double-column item, toward the top of columns four and five, under the two-deck headline *MYSTERY OF NAVY SEAL RESCUE OFF BURMA*.

To the connoisseur of such matters, it was plain the writer knew more than he dared print. But the newspaper printed enough:

The United States Navy last night refused to comment on a report that a U.S. Navy SEAL assault team, out of Coronado, came under direct attack from Chinese helicopters while escaping from a mission on a Burmese island.

It is believed that at least two of the SEALs were killed and that others may have been wounded. There were no details available as to the nature of the mission, and a Navy spokesman would only say, "All Special Forces operations are highly classified, and this one is no different."

Five weeks ago reports from Rangoon stated that a new Chinese Navy base on the island of Haing Gyi in the delta of the Bassein River, western Burma, had been badly damaged by a massive explosion inside a geothermal electricity generation plant.

The Navy spokesman would neither confirm nor deny that the SEAL team had been involved in this destruction.

Further reports suggest there was an American nuclear submarine in the area of the Bassein Delta on or around June 7. There was no information available as to the identity of the ship, but an insider told the Telegraph last night that the Sturgeon-Class nuclear boat USS SHARK, under the command of Commander Donald K. Reid, was operational in the Bay of Bengal at the time.

Last night Commander Reid could not be reached. His Executive Officer, Lt. Commander Dan Headley, would not comment on any part he may have played in the rescue of the surviving SEALs.

He would only say, "Throughout SHARK's recent Middle East patrol, I carried out my duties as a U.S. Naval officer to the best of my abilities."

Accompanying the story was a single-column picture of Commander Reid, under which was the caption "Unreachable." There was also a picture of Lt. Commander Dan Headley, beneath which was the caption, "I carried out my duties."

The story was just signed *Geoff Levy, staff writer*. But he had plainly been briefed about the entire scenario, either by a member of the submarine's crew or by a San Diego resident SEAL. However, young Geoff had been unable to obtain any official confirmation, and he wrote only what he thought was more or less safe, given the fact that he was trespassing in a top-secret military area.

The Navy's high command, in Pearl Harbor, San Diego and Washington, glowered at the report as the e-mails were downloaded from computers all over the fleet and its executive offices. The media's high command, almost shrieking with glee, set about pinning the story down. But they made little headway, because essentially reporters needed to be in San Diego where most of the crew and SEALs were stationed.

And once more Geoff Levy's source delivered and on Wednesday night, July 25, the *San Diego Telegraph* went to bed with end-of-the-world-size type stacked in two decks, clear across the top of its front page: *NAVY COURT-MARTIALS SUBMARINE EXECUTIVE OFFICER FOR MUTINY ON THE HIGH SEAS*. Beneath the headline was the subhead "Heroic U.S. Officer Who Saved the SEALs Is Accused."

Someone had not only blabbed. Someone had blabbed in spades; leaked the court-martial recommendation from Captain Sam Scott, and suddenly Geoff Levy was a media star. And Admiral Arnold Morgan held his head in his hands as the young San Diego journalist said on national television, "I've been on the Navy beat for my newspaper for three years now, and I have never known such outrage. There are a lot of very furious guys in the U.S. Navy right now. Most of 'em think Dan Headley should be given the Medal of Honor."

"Holy shit," groaned the CNO.

By midday on July 26, the fertilizer was clogging the bilge pumps. The Navy Department in Washington was under siege from the media. The San Diego base switchboard was jammed by phone calls from newspapers and television. All lines to the command office of the SEALs in both Coronado and Virginia were occupied by journalists, researchers and columnists.

And the questions were all the same... What really happened out there in the Bay of Bengal?... And why is the hero of the operation being court-martialed by his own Navy?... Where is Lt. Commander Headley?... Can we speak with him?... If not, why not?... Do the SEALs agree Lt. Commander Headley should be court-martialed?... What has he actually done to deserve this?

Photographers were camped in groups at the main gates to the base. They were massed outside the Pentagon, outside the base at Coronado and at Little Creek, Virginia. By late afternoon, infuriated by the lack of cooperation of the U.S. Navy, they swung their attention to the White House, demanding a statement either from the National Security Adviser, the Defense Secretary or the Commander-in-Chief himself, the President of the United States.

In the opinion of both Arnold Morgan and Admiral Alan Dixon, there was absolutely nothing to be gained by saying one word to any of them. "No comment" would send them into a frenzy. "We are unable to confirm anything at this time" would drive them mad. "All matters such as these are highly classified, and in the interests of national security we will say nothing." That last one would have been a red cape to a fighting bull.

What national security? Are you saying the SEALs attacked that Burmese island? How many of them died? Why are members of the crew saying Lt. Commander Headley rescued the survivors? What's he done wrong? If he mutinied, why did he mutiny? Did the CO blow it or something?

To hold a press conference, or even to issue a press statement, would be to open the floodgates. Better to let them get on with it, block all calls at the switchboard, or the automatic answering machines, and let the cards fall where they may.

Where they fell was all over the place. In the following three days, right up until the last editions of the Sunday tabloids were on the presses, it was as if no other story in the entire country mattered. The inaccessibility of the Navy bases and the personnel involved seemed only to fan the forest fire of leaked knowledge. There was even a posse of photographers outside the locked wrought-iron gates of Bart Hunter's farm in Lexington, Kentucky, trying to catch a glimpse of the SEAL leader's father. Local journalists even managed to interview Bobby Headley, Dan's father, when he mistakenly answered the telephone late one evening.

But the Navy said nothing. And the media slowly pieced it all together in various forms. The general scenario put forth was that the SEALs had attacked the Chinese base in some kind of retribution for China's capture of the island of Taiwan. They had been caught and attacked on the way out, and there had been an altercation between the Commanding Officer of USS SHARK and his Executive Officer.

The CO had been overruled by the XO, supported by the majority of the officers on board, and SHARK went in to save the SEALs. This mission was accomplished, and now the Navy was charging the Lieutenant Commander who masterminded the rescue with mutiny. It was obvious to everyone that almost every officer and enlisted man in the U.S. Navy was up in arms about this. And almost every commentator in the entire country, newspaper, radio or television, was of the opinion that the Navy, the government and presumably the President, the C-in-C of all the armed forces, had, collectively, gone mad.

The *New York Times*, with a searing inside "exclusive," revealed that the entire high command of America's most elite troops, the Navy SEALs, had threatened to resign en masse if the court-martial proceedings were not called off.

All this was achieved without one single identified source inside the U.S. military. It was as Admiral Morgan had forecast, *the outrage*. That's what binds people together, a shared grievance, a communal anger. And there sure was profound anger at this ensuing court-martial of Lt. Commander Dan Headley.

Nonetheless, media or no media, the legal wheels turned relentlessly inside the Navy's Trial Service Office. The trial Counselor was duly appointed, Lt. Commander David "Locker" Jones, a 46-year-old lawyer from Vermont, who had attended the Naval Academy but left the service for the law after three years in a surface ship. Ten years later he returned after a messy divorce involving a client's wife. For the past four years he had been an extremely able Naval lawyer, much admired throughout the legal department both on the West Coast and in Washington.

David Jones was a broad-shouldered ex-athlete of medium height and thinning fair hair. He wore the nickname "Locker" with good humor; *Davy Jones's locker* being, of course, seamen's slang for the bottom of the ocean, the final resting place for sunken ships, articles thrown overboard or burials at sea. And Locker Jones was renowned not so much for his thoroughness as for his grasp of the very finest points of law, an ability to cut a swath through evidence and make it irrelevant, a knack for nailing the one salient fact that could make a case swing one way or the

other. Lieutenant Commander Headley could hardly have been dealt a more deadly opponent.

The Judge Advocate, who would sit in on the case, ensuring that the significant points of law were followed, was the veteran Atlantic destroyer commander Captain Art Brennan. He was a tall gray-haired former lawyer from Rhode Island, again a man who had joined, left and then rejoined the Navy. He was a traditionalist with a wry sense of humor, and a surprisingly irreverent way of looking at the world. On the face of it, you would put the 54-year-old Captain Brennan in the corner of the wronged CO. But those who knew him better suspected he would keep a careful watch on the rights of Lt. Commander Dan Headley.

The defense counsel was a matter for agreement between the Trial Service Office and the accused officer. And they chose easily the best man available to them—the sardonic, dark-haired Lieutenant Commander Al Surprenant, whose career, thanks to a wealthy father, had gone: Choate School, Harvard Law School, excellent degree, boredom with law, United States Navy, commission, rapid promotion, missile director battle cruiser Gulf War, U.S. Navy lawyer, Norfolk, then San Diego after he married a Hollywood actress.

Lieutenant Commander Surprenant was generally regarded as the one man in the U.S. Navy who could nail Commander Reid, and bring in a “not guilty” verdict for Dan Headley. He would prove thorough in his preparation, single-minded about the innocence of his client and brutal in his treatment of the CO, whom he knew beyond any doubt had left one man to die and had been about to leave another eight to the same fate.

The date of the court-martial was set for Monday, August 13. It would be the first such trial for mutiny in a U.S. Navy warship, ever. It would take place deep inside the San Diego base, in the Trial Service courtroom, which was much like a civilian courtroom, except for the fact that it was all on one level, no raised dais for the men who would sit in judgment on the submarine’s XO.

The panel would consist of five men, three Lieutenant Commanders and one Lieutenant, all serving under the President, an ex-submarine CO, Captain Cale “Boomer” Dunning. This particular officer would bring strong combat experience to the deliberations of his team, and, to those who knew him, a genuine appreciation of the split-second flexibility required in the command of a nuclear ship on a classified mission.

By anyone’s standards, the U.S. Navy was giving Lt. Commander Headley every possible chance of a sympathetic hearing—perhaps more in their own interests than in those of the hero of the Bay of Bengal.

Meanwhile, the media continued to worry the life out of the story. They had no official information, but they were getting a ton of unofficial leaks. It seemed that with each new breakthrough, each new snippet of possible truth, there was a counterattack. One television network came up with an entire career study of Commander Reid, citing his exemplary record. No sooner had this aired than a newspaper came blasting out onto the streets with the story that he had allegedly left a combat SEAL to die.

It went on day after day... WAS THE HORSEMAN FROM KENTUCKY A RECKLESS GAMBLER? DID THE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER OWE THE SEAL

CHIEF MONEY? HAD COMMANDER REID LOST HIS NERVE? WAS THERE A FISTFIGHT IN SHARK'S CONTROL ROOM? IS THE U.S. NAVY OUT OF CONTROL?

Day after day, the media bore into the events that surrounded the mutiny. But still the Navy would reveal nothing. Not even the date of the court-martial. And the press seethed with indignation, not because of a potential miscarriage of justice but because this story about the wronged hero had captured the imagination of the American public, and the press were unable to get a serious grip on the facts. Nor would they ever.

The day of the court-martial dawned bright and warm. Shades in the white-painted courtroom were down, and the air-conditioning was humming. The long, curved mahogany table at which the panel would sit formed a shallow well in the room. And the deadly serious nature of the case was highlighted by twin flags of the United States of America, set immediately behind the five oak captain's armchairs.

Between the flags, hung at an angle, was a ceremonial Naval sword, which would be used especially at this court-martial, reviving an old tradition. Its gold-plated brass hilt was set around a white fishskin-covered grip. The backpiece was surmounted by an eagle-head pommel. The 31-and-a-half-inch steel blade was encased in a hand-stitched black rawhide scabbard, with brass fittings.

Before the verdict was announced, it would be removed from the wall, unsheathed from its scabbard and placed upon the table. If the verdict was to be guilty, the sharp end would point directly at the accused officer. If he was to be judged innocent, it would be pointed away from him, toward the wall.

Aside from the five-man panel that would sit in judgment, there would be the two opposing lawyers, plus the observing Judge Advocate. Also permitted to sit in on the trial were the SEAL Commander-in-Chief, Admiral John Bergstrom, plus the Pacific Submarine Fleet Commander, Admiral Freddie Curran. There would be two regular court stenographers, officially recording the proceedings. Two armed Navy guards would be on duty at all times, with two more outside the door. Witnesses would be called into the courtroom but would not be permitted to remain after their evidence had been presented. No outsiders, public or media, would be permitted within a mile of the place.

At 0900 sharp, Lt. Commander Headley arrived with his defense counsel. They took their seats at the table set up for the accused man and began poring over the trial papers. In the following 30 minutes the witnesses arrived and were seated in a large anteroom along the corridor. Two Naval lawyers plus two guards were detailed to ensure that there was no discussion about the case, no possibility of corroboration between interested parties.

At 0930 the three Lieutenant Commanders, plus the much younger Lieutenant, walked into the courtroom from a private door behind the long table and took their seats. Captain Dunning, like his colleagues, in full uniform, arrived three minutes later, carrying a large leather binder, and sat in the center chair.

He wished everyone a formal "good morning" but wasted no further time. "Gentlemen," he said, "please proceed with the case against Lieutenant Commander Headley, charged this thirteenth day of August with making a mutiny on the high seas, while serving in the nuclear submarine USS SHARK on the

morning of June seventh, in the Bay of Bengal... Lieutenant Commander Jones... perhaps you would outline the case for the benefit of the court.”

The prosecuting counselor rose from his seat, a look of obvious concern upon his wide, frank face. He hesitated for a few moments, and then said, firmly, “Sir, it gives me no great pleasure to prosecute this charge, because I do not believe any of the parties acted in any way through self-interest. On the one hand we have a dedicated, experienced commanding officer concerned with the safety of both his ship and his men. And on the other we have an equally dedicated Lieutenant Commander desperate to save a team of U.S. Special Forces that was under attack.

“The facts are not in dispute. The Navy SEALs transmitted a cry for help, citing their Chinese attackers in hot pursuit with helicopters and heavy machine guns. Commander Reid’s view was that the helicopters were almost certainly ASW aircraft, and at least one of them would be armed with rockets, and that to bring USS SHARK to the surface was tantamount to suicide, because of the threat both to the submarine and the crew. It was, in a sense, one of the oldest quandaries any CO can face—will I sacrifice a very small number of men, in this case eight, in order to protect one hundred ten men, plus a very expensive nuclear ship?

“Gentlemen, Lieutenant Commander Headley thought not. He thought he could save the SEALs, and he rallied the senior officers to his cause. Despite the protests, indeed the orders, of his Commanding Officer, he seized control of the ship. He arrested the CO under Section one-zero-eight-eight of Navy Regulations and had him marched off under escort to his cabin, where he was incarcerated. And then the XO went in and successfully saved the SEALs under the most gallant circumstances.

“But I submit we are not here to assess gallantry; we are here to assess right and wrong. And I quote now the regulation that governs the actions of Lieutenant Commander Headley on that most fateful morning.

“Naval Regulations, one-zero-eight-eight. The Relief of a Commanding Officer by a Subordinate:

1. *It is conceivable that most unusual and extraordinary circumstances may arise in which the relief from duty of a commanding officer by a subordinate becomes necessary, either by placing the CO under arrest, or on the sick list. Such action shall never be taken without the approval of the Commandant of the Marine Corps or the Chief of Naval Personnel, as appropriate. Or the senior officer present, except when reference to such higher authority is undoubtedly impracticable, because of the delay involved, or for other clearly obvious reasons.*

2. *In order that a subordinate officer acting upon his or her own initiative may be vindicated for relieving a commanding officer from duty, the situation must be obvious and clear, and must admit of the single conclusion that the retention of command by such commanding officer will seriously and irretrievably prejudice the public interest.”*

Lieutenant Commander Jones paused, and then continued, “The Section is quite detailed but I mention the salient points, that the subordinate officer so acting must obviously be unable to refer the matter to a common superior, and

must be certain that the prejudicial actions of the CO are not caused by instructions unknown to him. He plainly must have given the matter much careful consideration, and—this is important—*have made such exhaustive investigation of all the circumstances as may be practicable.*

“The final paragraph in this area is one with which I take the gravest issue: *that the officer must be thoroughly convinced that the conclusion to relieve the CO is one that a reasonable, prudent and experienced officer would regard as a necessary consequence from the facts thus determined to exist.*

“I intend to convict Lieutenant Commander Headley on the words of that last paragraph, and I call Commander Reid as the first witness for the prosecution.”

The doors to the court were opened, and the former CO of USS SHARK walked into the room. He was immaculately dressed in uniform and made his way to the witness chair, which had been placed on the left-hand side in order that witnesses could address both the panel and the examining lawyers.

The Judge Advocate rose and walked across to ensure that the oath was taken correctly. With his hand on the Bible, Commander Donald Reid calmly swore to tell the truth.

After the briefest of identification procedures, Locker Jones went straight to work.

“And on the morning of June seventh, were you startled to find your ship was moving fast at periscope depth in flagrant defiance of your most recent orders?”

“I was.”

“And where were you at the time?”

“I was in my cabin. The XO had the ship.”

“And what action did you take?”

“I returned to the control room immediately, and I ordered Lieutenant Commander Headley to turn the submarine around and to return to our rendezvous point, the place defined in our orders, sixteen degrees north, ninety-four-zero-one east.”

“And did he carry out your orders?”

“No. He did not. He refused.”

“For what reason?”

“He said he was on a mission of mercy to save the very small team of Navy SEALs—only eight of them, I believe.”

“And how did he propose to do this?”

“He said he was taking the submarine on the surface at flank speed in order to effect a rescue.”

“And were you able to approve this?”

“Certainly not. No commander of a nuclear submarine takes his ship to the surface in the face of the enemy. It’s one of the oldest rules in the book. No one does it.”

“And were you aware of the enemy?”

“Well, I knew they were Chinese. And I knew they were helicopters. Two, we were told.”

“And what did you deduce from this?”

“I assessed that they would be helicopters from the two ships we knew were in the Haing Gyi dockyard, a frigate and a destroyer. The chances were very high that

at least one of them, probably both, would have an ASW capability, plus, probably, rockets that would both outrange us and pierce our pressure hull. We are not really built to fight on the surface, you know.” The court was listening to the refined voice of reason.

“No, of course not, Commander,” replied the prosecutor. “Absolutely not. I am sure everyone in the room appreciates that. But I continue: And did you communicate your assessment of the situation to your Executive Officer?”

“I sure did. I pointed out to him that there were almost one hundred ten officers and men on board my ship. We had a brave and experienced crew, a first-class crew. And I pointed out that to take the ship straight into the range of air-to-surface missiles, on the surface, on the open ocean, was contrary to everything I had ever known, been taught or believed in the U.S. Navy.

“Quite frankly, it was a risk I could not possibly take. Nor I suspect would anyone else in my shoes. Also I did not believe the U.S. Navy would be greatly thanked for putting a smashed nuclear reactor in the middle of the Bay of Bengal to pollute it for the next forty years. I had much to consider. And I did not believe the lives of the SEALs, just eight of them, warranted the potential destruction of USS SHARK and her crew.”

“Thank you, Commander. No more questions.”

The court was amazed at the brevity of Locker Jones’s examination, amazed that he had not extracted chapter and verse the circumstances of the arrest of the CO. Instead he had concentrated on one precious factor—the course of action the Captain of the submarine had proposed, and was it sufficiently crazy to have him placed under arrest and relieved of command?

It was a vintage ploy by the prosecuting counsel, a method of avoiding endless testimony and confusing contradictions. He had presented his star witness in a lean, pared-down light: the order he had given, and the reasons for it. Was it the order of a madman? Not so far, of that everyone in the room was very certain.

And now the frowning figure of the defense counsel, Lieutenant Commander Surprenant, climbed to his feet to begin his cross-examination. And he was perhaps more aware than anyone of the brilliance of the strategy of Locker Jones.

“Commander Reid,” he began, “I want to ask your indulgence right here, because the reasons for Lieutenant Commander Headley’s actions date back for several weeks, and I am sure you will not object to answering my questions while we establish them in this courtroom.”

“Commander Reid,” shook his head, as if to say, “No problem,” but his counsel was instantly on his feet, snapping, “Objection.”

Captain Dunning stared quizzically at the prosecutor, who said, “Sir, the CO is not on trial. He is here to give his reasons for his orders on that particular morning, in those particular circumstances. I am at a loss to understand why defense counsel wants to delve into the past. Lieutenant Commander Headley, under Section one-zero-eight-eight of Navy Regulations, must demonstrate that his CO issued an order that could not possibly be obeyed, without being prejudicial to the public interest.”

Captain Dunning looked doubtfully at Al Surprenant, who responded quietly, “Sir, it is possible that a pattern of behavior by a single individual may become so unnerving for those who serve under him that an action to relieve command

becomes necessary. Not just from the immediate orders, but from that pattern of unreliability. With respect, I intend to proceed along those lines.”

“*Overruled.*”

Lieutenant Commander Surprenant now took his time. He shuffled his file papers, and then looked up and inquired, “Commander Reid, may I ask if you recall the events of May sixteenth in the early morning, just before first light?”

“Well, I certainly know we were waiting at our rendezvous point for the Special Forces team to return from a mission.”

“Who had the ship?”

“Lieutenant Commander Headley. Our orders were clear. It was a highly classified operation, and we were detailed to remain at our RV in the Gulf of Iran while the ASDV returned with the team on board.”

“And were you ever informed of a problem during their escape from plainly hostile shores?”

“No I was not.”

“I believe you were not in the control room?”

“That is correct. My XO had overall responsibility for the return of the SEAL team.”

“And what caused you to return to the control room?”

“The submarine began to move forward in complete contradiction to our orders, which had been issued by the flag. Our RV point was in hard copy.”

“And when you did return, what did you learn?”

“Well, there had been some kind of an attack on the team, inshore, and they were on their way back, bringing with them an apparently wounded man.”

“They were also bringing back the body of their leader, Lieutenant Commander Ray Schaeffer, I believe?”

“So I was informed.”

“So. The leader had been killed, and another SEAL was badly wounded, and they were desperately trying to get away, trying to get back to safety after achieving their objective?”

“So I believe.”

“And did Lieutenant Commander Headley inform you that it was perfectly safe under clear skies, and on empty seas, to go in six miles, fast, toward the ASDV and get them back on board with all speed?”

“He was already headed inshore when I reached the control room.”

“And when you learned they had a top combat SEAL on board, dying, next to his already dead Leader, I believe you issued an order for USS SHARK to turn around and return to the rendezvous point, leaving this heroic blood-soaked American Special Forces unit essentially to get on with it as best they could?”

“Well, I was certain about my orders: to remain on station until they arrived back.”

“When Lieutenant Commander Headley informed you of the seriousness of the situation, that a man was dying, I believe you uttered the phrase *You can't run a Navy for a guy who's probably cut his goddamned finger?*”

“I do not recall that.”

“And so you turned around and went back to the RV?”

“Yes.”

“And do you recall a strong protest from the SEAL mission controller, Commander Rusty Bennett, almost begging you to go inshore and save his man?”

“No. I do not recall that.”

“Do you recall the condition of the wounded SEAL when they finally arrived back?”

“You know perfectly well that I do.”

“What was that condition?”

“Do you really have to persist in this unhelpful manner?”

“WHAT WAS THAT CONDITION, COMMANDER?”

“The SEAL was dead.”

“Thank you. And is it your opinion that he might have been saved if you’d gotten him aboard a half hour earlier?”

“I have no idea. I’m not a doctor.”

“And how long had he been dead before your crew got him back aboard?”

“I believe fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you. And would it surprise you to learn that from that moment on, both your crew and the SEAL assault teams regarded you as a heartless, somewhat remote figure who cared nothing about any of them.”

“OBJECTION! Counsel is harassing the witness, asking a question to which he could not possibly know the answer.”

“Sustained. Strike that last question from the record.”

But Al Surprenant smiled the quiet smile of a man who had said precisely what he wanted to say. And he rephrased it, good-naturedly... “Commander, would it surprise you to know that a lot of your crew did not agree in any way with your decision to let the man die?”

“OBJECTION! Commander Reid did not decide to let the man die. He simply followed the orders of the flag. Counsel continues to harass the witness.”

“Sustained. Strike the question.”

“Very well,” replied Al Surprenant. “In the light of everything, let me ask you this: Thirty-six hours previously, do you recall refusing to go inshore for a few extra miles, thus saving the battery of the ASDV when the navigator had informed you there was plenty of water depth.”

“No. I do not recall that.”

“Would you feel happier if I read it directly to you from the ship’s log?”

“OBJECTION. Counsel is treating the witness as if he were on trial, attempting to humiliate him before the court, and now he wants to produce evidence against him we have not even seen.”

“Sustained. But leave the record.” Boomer Dunning was a picture of calmness in increasingly stormy waters.

“Commander Reid,” continued the defense counsel, “would you say you were a man who followed orders to the letter, allowing no leeway, and no room for flexibility.”

“No I would not. I’m as flexible as the next man. But not when it comes to the safety of my ship.”

“Would you say you were as flexible as, say, Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve?”

Locker Jones shook his head, and held his hands apart in mock outrage. Captain Dunning stared at the former CO, awaiting an answer. And when it came, there was a frisson of unease in the room.

“Damn you, Headley,” he hissed, almost under his breath.

And now Lieutenant Commander Surprenant was on him. “Damn who, sir? Damn who? I did not quite catch that.”

Commander Reid’s face was beginning to redden, and he was starting to look angry. He made no reply.

And again Al Surprenant came in. “I asked if you were as flexible as Admiral de Villeneuve. Please answer me. I know you are well acquainted with each other.”

Locker Jones had never even heard of the French Admiral, or if he had, he’d clean forgotten it. But it was hard to object because he could not tell if there was venom behind the innocence of the question.

Still Commander Reid said nothing. And the president stepped in, requesting defense counsel to clarify the question for the benefit of the panel and indeed the prosecutor.

“Sir,” said Al Surprenant, “Admiral de Villeneuve was the commander of the French Fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar. He presided over probably the biggest disaster in a sea battle in history. He lost twenty ships, was captured by the British and soon afterward committed suicide. There is a picture of him on the wall of Commander Reid’s cabin, which is unorthodox for a U.S. Navy commanding officer, at best.”

“I see,” said Captain Dunning. “Well, I suppose it may be relevant. Please proceed.”

“Thank you,” said the counselor, and, turning back to Commander Reid, said flatly, “Is it not a fact that you believe you WERE Admiral de Villeneuve in a previous life?”

“Millions of people believe in reincarnation,” replied the Commander.

“And so they may,” said Lieutenant Commander Surprenant. “But that scarcely answers my question, does it? Shall we try again? Do you believe you WERE Admiral de Villeneuve in a previous life?”

“Well, even General Patton believed he had been a great warrior in a previous incarnation.”

“So he may have. But would you be willing to give my question yet another try? Do you believe, Commander Reid, that you actually WERE Admiral de Villeneuve in a previous life? That’s a yes, or a no.”

“Well, we do share some deep French roots.”

Captain Dunning interrupted. “Commander Reid, please answer the question. Yes or no.”

“No,” replied SHARK’s former CO. “I do not believe I actually *was* Admiral de Villeneuve.”

“Thank you, Commander,” said defense counsel. “And now, if I may, I should like to read something to you—*Another life, another battle, so many mistakes in BUCENTAURE. I must never repeat them now that I have another chance. June 1980. DKR.* Do you recognize those words, Commander.”

“Well, vaguely, yes I do.”

“Who wrote them?”

"I did."

"Where did you write them?"

"In a book, I believe."

"A book about reincarnation, wasn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Commander, perhaps you would care to tell the panel whose ship the BUCENTAURE was?"

"It was Admiral de Villeneuve's flagship."

"In your own words, Commander: ...*so many mistakes in BUCENTAURE. I must never repeat them now that I have another chance.* Sir, you believe you are the reincarnation of one of the worst Naval commanders in history, correct?"

Locker Jones had had enough. He leaped to his feet and almost shouted, "*OBJECTION!* This quotation, written more than twenty-five years ago, was plainly pilfered from the private quarters of the Commanding Officer of USS SHARK, unlawfully and disgracefully. It cannot be admissible evidence in any court of law in the free world."

Captain Dunning nodded. But he said, "This is not a civilian court of law, where lawyers are trained to find loopholes to free guilty people. This is a United States Navy court-martial, and we have no other objective except to find the truth. We are assessing the guilt or innocence of men who are trained to take charge of ships worth four hundred million dollars. Everything is relevant in this regard."

"But my client is not on trial, sir," protested Lt. Commander Jones.

"I know he's not," replied Boomer. "Objection overruled."

Al Surprenant continued. "Commander, do you think it might be unnerving for a crew to discover that their leader believed he was a navy disaster area in a previous life?"

"I cannot say what they might feel."

"But do you think they *might* quite properly be concerned?"

"*OBJECTION. The question's been asked and answered.*"

"*Sustained.*"

"Commander," asked the counselor, "are you a spiritualist?"

"In some ways."

"Does that mean you have merely inherited the spirit of Pierre de Villeneuve, or do you believe you have been in contact with people from... er... the other side, I believe is the phrase?"

"Like many millions of others, I may have."

"Commander, have you spoken lately with Captain Grigory Lyachin?"

Donald Reid remained silent.

"Someone enlighten me," interjected Boomer Dunning. "Who's Grigory Lyachin?"

"He's that Russian commanding officer who died with his crew in the KURSK submarine, Barents Sea, seven years ago," said Al Surprenant.

"Commander Reid, would it surprise you to know that certain senior members of your crew heard you talking to him by candlelight in your cabin?"

"*DAMN THIS. DAMN YOU ALL! I'M NOT ON TRIAL HERE.*" The ex-CO of SHARK was standing now, shouting back at the defense lawyer, all semblance of self-control slipping away.

Lieutenant Commander Jones was also on his feet. “Sir, I really must object most strenuously to this line of questioning. Defense is attempting to paint this veteran commander of many years standing as an oddball, which is patently unfair.”

“Your word, not mine,” interrupted Al Surprenant. “Thoughtful of you.”

“*SILENCE!*” snapped Captain Dunning. “Please be seated, and listen carefully. If I consider the questioning of a witness to be irrelevant or unfair, I shall make my views known. If you object to anything, please say so, and I will make a judgment. But I will not tolerate banter.

“And, for the record, I do think it is extremely important to know that Commander Reid has some unusual views. I was once in a ship where the Captain was known to pray extensively on a nightly basis, and it damned near caused a mutiny. Ships are like that. Little things can mean a great deal, especially concerning a CO.

“This evidence about Commander Reid matters. And I am afraid he is going to have to put up with it. He was, after all, instrumental in bringing this court-martial, and my sympathies are not with him in these instances. Please proceed, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Al Surprenant, humbly. “Commander Reid, have you ever tried to contact Grigory Lyachin in a spiritual way? Perhaps to seek counsel or guidance from a man who has paid the ultimate price for carelessness?”

“It was never his fault. Any more than it was de Villeneuve’s. They were both let down by others.”

“Then you have been in contact?”

“In a sense.”

“Thank you. And now I would like to return to more immediate concerns. As you know, Lieutenant Commander Headley, by the morning of June seventh, had much on his mind. His CO, a spiritualist who associated himself closely with two massive Naval disasters, had twice made decisions apparently detrimental to a SEAL operation—we have established that. He was dealing with a man who played rigidly by the book, presumably to avoid making the same foul-ups he had committed at Trafalgar.”

This was too much for Captain Dunning. “Counselor,” he snapped, “kindly desist from this soliloquy. You are not asking questions. You are merely ridiculing the witness. Ask, or sit down.”

“Of course, sir,” said Lieutenant Commander Surprenant courteously. “Commander, would you be surprised to learn that Lieutenant Commander Headley *knew* you would refuse flatly to help the SEALs. Because of your beliefs and your record?”

“Yes, it would.”

“You will later hear that he did indeed know. It was the predictability that caused the mutiny—that they all knew you would leave the SEALs to die. I have no more questions.”

“Commander Reid, you are excused. But please do not leave the building.” Captain Dunning wrote carefully in his book.

And then Lt. Commander Jones called his second witness, SHARK’s Combat Systems Officer, Lt. Commander Jack Cressend, who testified very briefly that he

had indeed been asked by Lt. Commander Headley to take part in an act of defiance toward the Commanding Officer, in order to save the SEALs.

At the conclusion of his evidence, a short account of how they did not turn the ship around but proceeded inshore to meet Commander Hunter and his men, Al Surprenant had just one question.

“Lieutenant Commander,” he said, “if you could live June the seventh over, would you still support the XO in his determination to save the SEALs?”

“Absolutely, sir. I would. No doubt in my mind.”

At this point, Lt. Commander Jones announced that he had no more witnesses—but would confine his cross-examination to those appearing on behalf of the accused.

Immediately, Al Surprenant called Commander Rick Hunter, who walked into the courtroom and swore to tell the truth before being seated.

After identification, the SEAL Commander admitted under oath that he had the gravest worries about the possible conduct of Commander Reid under pressure. He and Lt. Commander Headley knew each other well, and had discussed the “unreliable” nature of the CO, even before the mission began.

“When you first transmitted your distress call to SHARK, while your men were fighting and dying in the open boats, did you think help would come?”

“Not if Commander Reid had his way. I knew it would not come.”

“Did you think you had a chance to survive?”

“Only if Dan Headley took over the ship, in a big hurry.”

“But for Lieutenant Commander Headley’s actions, would you and your men have been killed.”

“Yessir.”

“Do you think he deserves to be court-martialed?”

“Nossir.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s just about the best officer I ever met. And he saved all of our lives.”

“Do you intend to make any protest whatsoever if Lieutenant Commander Headley is found guilty of mutiny?”

“Nossir. But I shall resign my commission immediately.”

“After a working lifetime in the Navy? And the very real prospect of becoming C-in-C of SPECWARCOM?”

“Yessir. I could never feel the same about the service if they convicted Dan Headley.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

Locker Jones arose. “You stated that you and Lieutenant Commander Headley knew each other well. That was not quite the whole truth, was it?”

“Sir?”

“You and Dan Headley are boyhood friends, correct? Best friends, correct? You went to school together, correct? Your father employs his father, correct?”

“All correct, sir. I am privileged to have him and his father as my friends.”

“Is it not probable that you would never hear a word against Dan Headley, from anyone?”

“Very probable. Because he does not do things to cause people to utter words against him.”

“He has now, Commander.”

“But not by people who really know him, sir.”

“And you think you know him well enough to say he could not be guilty of the crime with which he is charged?”

“I know him a lot better than you do.”

Locker Jones had had enough sparring with the towering wounded hero of the Burma operation. “No more questions,” he said.

Al Surprenant next called the SEAL Commander Rusty Bennett, who confirmed the counselor’s earlier contention that he had tried to remonstrate with Commander Reid about his decision not to move the ship forward in the Gulf of Iran mission to assist the wounded SEAL.

“And do you recall his precise words, Commander Bennett?”

“Some of them. I told him the rescue was at my request to go in and save the life of one of my most valued men. He then reminded me that I had no rights whatsoever on his ship. Told me he would not have this interference. Then he said, *What exactly is this? Some kind of damned conspiracy? Well you’ve picked the wrong man to make a fool of...* Then he said we had waited until he was asleep and then flagrantly disobeyed his orders.”

“And what did you think of this outburst?”

“Seemed very strange. You know, like paranoia...”

“*OBJECTION! The witness has no idea about the meaning of such a medical term...*”

“*Sustained.*”

“How about *nuts?*” offered the SEAL from the coast of Maine.

“Better,” said Captain Dunning.

“*OBJECTION! The Commander has no right to be making wild statements about insanity.*”

“I’ll take the word of an experienced Navy SEAL commanding officer that in his opinion someone seemed nuts,” replied Captain Dunning. “*Overruled.*”

“And now, Commander,” said Al Surprenant, “let me ask you the same question I asked Commander Hunter. Do you hold a strong view about the possible conviction of Lieutenant Commander Headley?”

“Yessir. I shall resign my commission if they find him guilty of mutiny.”

“Reason?”

“Same as Commander Hunter’s. Dan Headley saved the SEALs’ lives.”

“No more questions.”

Locker Jones had none either, and the SEAL team leader left the room, clearing the way for Al Surprenant to bring in a succession of minor witnesses, Lt. Commander Josh Gandy, Master Chief Drew Fisher, Lt. Matt Singer, all offering unerring support for the XO. He brought in two more SEALs, the wounded Rattlesnake Davies and Lt. Dallas MacPherson, who both offered the opinion that they would have been killed but for the appearance on the scene of USS SHARK.

He then called, in fairly quick succession, the three psychiatrists who had independently examined Commander Reid. One of them was definite: There was nothing wrong with Commander Reid, and on that he could not be shaken.

The other two were not so sure. Neither would say he was crazy, but they both agreed he held some very strange views, for a U.S. Navy commander.

Al Surprenant questioned and badgered, overstepped the bounds of polite interrogation and then dived back behind them against a barrage of “*OBJECTIONS*” from the prosecutor. Once he nearly had an admission that Commander Reid was just too strange, too bound up in his perceived French antecedents, to be trusted with a modern nuclear submarine.

But a belief in reincarnation, and indeed spiritualism, simply did not constitute “crazy.” Surprenant proved eccentricity, and he proved a profound instability. He *almost* proved a long-held emotional cowardice on the part of the CO. But he did not obtain an admission that Commander Reid was so unbalanced as to have been relieved of command on that particular morning.

It was immediately after the lunch break when the defense finally called the accused Executive Officer to the witness chair to testify under oath in his own defense. And before he did so, counsel requested permission to “read just two or three lines from Section Three of Navy Regulation one-zero-eight-eight, which the prosecution apparently deemed irrelevant.”

And he then stated, very simply, “*Intelligent, fearless initiative is an important trait of military character. It is not the purpose of these regulations to discourage its employment in cases of this nature.*”

Lieutenant Commander Headley sat motionless in the witness chair as the short but powerful words were read out to the court. He saw Captain Dunning nod, and he continued to sit bolt upright, immaculate in his uniform, as he began to answer his counsel’s questions, firmly and without hesitation.

“And when it came right down to it, why do you think Commander Reid refused to help the SEALs?”

“Two reasons, sir. One, he did not want to be associated with another disaster, like he had in another life. Two, he kept yelling that the planet Mercury was in retrograde.”

“He what?”

“He told me that the mighty planet that controls us was stilled in the heavens and that by dawn it would be in retrograde—going backwards, that is.”

“Did you have any comment?”

“I believe I just said, ‘No shit?’ I found it a bit bewildering, given the urgency of our situation.”

“Did this conversation take place in front of anyone?”

“Nossir. This started in his cabin. But then it continued back in the control room in front of everyone after the SEALs had transmitted their call for help.”

“Did you go back to the control room, leaving the CO in his cabin?”

“Yessir. I was in charge of the rescue operation, and I immediately ordered the submarine inshore to get the guys out.”

“You knew they were under attack, from Chinese helicopters?”

“Yessir.”

“And how did you assess the danger?”

“I planned to down the helos with our Stinger missiles from range eight hundred yards, handheld right off the bridge. They’re very accurate.”

“And what about the danger to your own ship?”

“Negligible, in my view. I thought the Chinese might have a couple of missiles. But there was a morning mist, and I thought they’d be preoccupied with the guys who were battering them with the M-60 machine guns. If they carried ASW mortars or depth bombs I knew they’d be largely useless if we were on the surface with Stingers. I thought we were in there with a good shot at success.”

“You were not afraid the SHARK might be sunk?”

“Sir, SHARK is a U.S. Navy fighting ship. We had eight valued colleagues being wiped out by Chinese gunships. Of course we went in to save them. That’s what we’re for. This is the Navy, not the Cub Scouts. And yes, I was afraid. But not too afraid to try.”

“And what happened when the CO arrived in the control room?”

“I told him precisely what we were doing. And he objected, as I knew he would.”

“How did you know?”

“Because Commander Reid is nothing short of a goddamned coward. And he’s plainly crazy.”

Finally uttered, the words hung like the sword of Damocles over the courtroom. “*OBJECTION!*” shouted Locker Jones, springing to his feet.

“*Overruled,*” snapped back Captain Dunning. “That is the heart of this case. The accused XO has been asked his opinion. And he has given it.”

“Was he afraid the ship might be hit and everyone killed?” asked Al Surprenant.

“Of course. And he thought because Mercury was in retrograde, that might happen.”

“Did he say so?”

“He shouted out, sir—‘*RETROGRADE! RETROGRADE! The great planet Mercury is in retreat.*’ He called me an ignorant man for not knowing what was happening in the zodiac, in front of everyone. He said my life was insignificant, that I knew nothing. That all of our lives, particularly in the areas of transportation and communication, were ruled by Mercury. And now the darn thing was kinda spinning backwards.”

“And then?”

“He told me there was no way he was going to allow his submarine to continue on the surface, in the path of an ASW helicopter, not while the planet was in retrograde.”

“Lieutenant Commander, is the direction in which the distant planet Mercury spins a normal consideration in the United States Navy when making combat decisions?”

“Nossir.”

“Ever?”

“Not in my experience, sir. It was a new one on me.”

“And then what happened?”

“He ordered me to turn the ship around, and to proceed in a direction away from the SEALs.”

“And did you do so?”

“Nossir. I told him I could not do that. Would not do that. And he told me I was making a one-man mutiny.”

“And did you change your mind and retreat, like Mercury?”

“Nossir. I did not.”

"You proceeded with the rescue?"

"I did. I told the CO I had the support of the entire command of the ship. That I would not leave the guys to be killed. I offered him the sick-list option as laid down in the regulations. But he declined."

"And then?"

"I ordered the conn to hold our course on the surface. And I ordered the missiles to be brought up from below."

"And then, you and the crew carried out the rescue. And were you on the bridge, in the line of fire, as it were?"

"Yessir. I was."

"And did you direct the firing of the missiles?"

"Yessir. I fired one myself, hit and blew up the second Chinese helicopter."

Lieutenant Commander Al Surprenant just shook his head and blurted out, "*My God! And now they want to court-martial you?*"

"Yessir."

"No further questions."

The silence in the courtroom was devastating as defense counsel finally sat down. And there was a slight air of resignation in the body language of Locker Jones as he stood up to cross-examine.

"Lieutenant Commander, the court has heard of your lifelong friendship with Commander Hunter. Would it be true to say you would have done anything to save him, including the making of a mutiny aboard your ship?"

"Yessir, it would. I would also have done anything to save any of the others... and, if I may, sir?"

"Please continue."

"Sir, you may question me for a thousand years. But I'm going to save you a lot of trouble. I did not hesitate to remove the CO and to proceed with the rescue myself. And if I could live it over again, a thousand times, I'd still do it. I hope I make myself clear, counselor."

"Perfectly clear. In fact you are the perfect mutineer. No further questions. I rest the case for the prosecution."

There was no summing up by either the court president or the lawyers, as there would have been in a civilian case. And Captain Dunning rose and led his panel out. Lieutenant Commander Headley and his attorney also left the room, in company with Admiral Bergstrom and Admiral Curran.

Their wait would not be long. In the room behind the main court, Boomer Dunning called his team swiftly to order.

"I'll take the view of the Lieutenant first, since I do not wish him to be influenced by the opinions of those who outrank him... Lieutenant?"

"Not guilty, sir. Reid is plainly crazy. In my view *he* should be court-martialed, for cowardice in the face of the enemy."

Boomer nodded. "Lieutenant Commander?"

"Guilty. If the CO says no, the risk is too great, that's an end to it. The CO stands or falls by that decision, and no one's charged him with anything."

Captain Dunning turned to the second Lieutenant Commander. "And your verdict?"

“Guilty. Headley, for all of his good intentions, had no right to seize the ship. Certainly no right to have his CO arrested.”

“And you?” replied the Captain, turning to the last of his four assistants.

“Not guilty. I think the XO was right to assume command. There were grave doubts about the suitability of Commander Reid to make sound judgments.”

“Excellent. But may I just clarify that none of you is interested in a possible change of mind? Anyone want to go over the issue? Or discuss it further?”

No one did. Minds were made up at 2-2. Captain Dunning would decide Lt. Commander Headley’s fate.

“Very well, gentlemen. In a few minutes, we will return to the courtroom and I will make my casting vote, plus a short summation for the court, in order that they understand our verdict.”

He sat at a table and wrote carefully on the pages of the large writing tablet inside the leather folder. Then he stood up, and beckoned his four colleagues to follow him. They walked through the door, and Captain Dunning removed the sword from the wall and placed it upon the table. “Ask them to come in,” he ordered.

Lieutenant Commander Headley entered last and stared at the sword almost in disbelief as he took his seat at the defense counsel table.

“I should tell you the votes are divided two to two in this case, and I now have the duty to pass the casting vote, and with it the judgment of the court,” said the ex-submarine Captain.

“And I should begin by stating that Lieutenant Commander Headley’s opinions about Mercury in retrograde or any of the other foibles displayed by Commander Reid are not the bedrocks of the case. And we are not here to stand in judgment on them either.

“We are here, very simply, to decide whether Commander Reid issued an order in the early hours of that June morning that was so wrong, indeed so crazy, that he had to be arrested and relieved of the command of his ship under Section one-zero-eight-eight.

“And what was that order? He said he would not leave his nuclear submarine on the surface, and risk the lives of his one hundred seven-member crew, and the ship, in order to save eight men. Was that wrong? Possibly, in the light of events. Was it crazy? No. It wasn’t crazy. Was there a suggestion of cowardice? Again, possibly. No more.

“But was it sufficiently outlandish for him to be relieved of command of his ship, arrested and incarcerated in his cabin while his number two took over?

“The answer is plain. NO. ABSOLUTELY NOT.

“The defendant is guilty as charged. Guilty of making a mutiny on the high seas. But the court does not recommend he be jailed, as would be expected in such a case. But rather that he be dismissed from the service immediately, under the severest censure. The court further recommends that Commander Reid never again hold the position of Commanding Officer on a U.S. Navy submarine involving Special Forces. That’s all, save to remind everyone in this room of the following:

“If you permit every lieutenant commander to seize control of a warship because he does not agree with his CO, you no longer have a Navy. You have a rabble, in a

very dangerous ship. My verdict was reached strictly for the greater good of the United States Navy. It was the only verdict to reach. And it always has been, ever since the morning of June seventh."

And long after the principals of the Navy's first court-martial for mutiny had departed, Dan Headley still stood helplessly at the defense counsel's desk, still staring at the long mahogany table. Still staring at the cruel steel blade of the gilded sword, which was pointed at him alone.

Epilogue

Rick Hunter and Dan Headley returned home to the bluegrass together. Old Bart Hunter said it was about time, and promptly retired, leaving the entire operation of the sprawling Hunter Valley Thoroughbred Farms to his son.

Rick thus moved from U.S. Navy SEAL Commander to president of a multimillion-dollar Kentucky corporation in the space of a week. His first action was to deed a 10 percent shareholding of the land, mares and stallions to the ownership of Dan Headley.

Within one more week the headed writing paper of Hunter Valley contained the words *Directors, Richard Hunter (President), Dan Headley (Vice President, Thoroughbred Operations), Bart Hunter (consultant), Robert Headley (Stallions).*

Bart was surprised, but agreeable. "Took me and my daddy fifty years to build this place," he said. "Took you about ten minutes to start dismantling it, giving it away to our good neighbors."

"It only took Danny ten minutes to save my life," replied Rick. "Guess it's called quality time, right?"

"Well, I'm glad he did. Whatever you think's fair, boy. That's the way to run a business."

"And a life," said his son.

Rusty Bennett also resigned from the Navy and returned to the coast of Maine, where he took over the operation of his father's two lobster boats, working out of the little island of Frenchborough, home of his mother's ancestors for 150 years. Six months later he married the prettiest girl on the island, 12 years his junior.

Commander Donald Reid was never heard from again, resigning his commission and moving his wife and family to France, to a small town house in Grasse.

Admiral John Bergstrom was seething at the loss of two of his top commanders, and it took Admiral Morgan five weeks to persuade him not to resign. Admiral George Morris recovered and returned to Fort Meade. His newly promoted personal assistant was Lt. Commander James Ramshawe.

The Chinese ambassador to Washington, His Excellency Ling Guofeng, ran into the most thunderously hard time from Arnold Morgan. The U.S. National Security chief, forced to admit U.S. involvement in the destruction of the Naval base at Haing Gyi, made it crystal clear that the United States would tolerate no further Chinese expansion into the Indian Ocean and its confines.

He told him the United States could, and would, make their actions on the Burmese coast look like kids' stuff if the Beijing government ever again elected to tamper with the free passage of the industrial world's oil supply.

The Admiral actually stood up and lectured him. He told him that Beijing now understood what happened when the American superpower was riled. "Just you remember, Ling, behave yourselves. No more adventuring in foreign waters. Because if you do, we'll hammer you again.

"Okay. Okay. I guess you don't care. You got Taiwan, which is what it was all about in the first place. The price you pay is to know that's as far offshore as you guys are going. At least, it is as long as I sit in this chair. As for your most-favored-nation status, you can forget all about that."

The ambassador stood up to leave. He nodded curtly and headed for the door. And as he opened it, Arnold Morgan said quietly, "*Pax Americana*, Ling. And don't forget it."

"I'm sorry. I don't quite understand," replied the ambassador.

"Go figure," grunted the Admiral, rudely.

Acknowledgements

As usual, I have a list of serving officers who have no desire whatever to be formally acknowledged as my advisers. The subject is always too secretive, too classified in its nature, and my sources too senior for identification.

Do I want to be named in one of YOUR books? Are you kidding! And yet they help me every year, ensuring that I am able to tell my story, handing me advice and detail, which they believe will give the public a greater appreciation of the armed heroes of the United States military.

Mostly my land attacks are planned with the help of former Special Forces officers. My insights into the diabolically secretive Intelligence world of Fort Meade are provided by a couple of former spies who seek only to highlight the sheer professionalism of the place.

However, at sea, my principal adviser, as always, is Admiral Sir John "Sandy" Woodward, the Task Force Commander of the Royal Navy fleet that won the Battle for the Falkland Islands in 1982.

On, and under, the surface, Admiral Sandy plots and plans with me to help bring readers right into the control room of the submarine. Without him, I could not bring reality to the subject of underwater warfare.

I did not trouble him with the final details of the court-martial, but rather relied on legal sources in the U.S. Navy, who again did not wish to be named.

They joined a whole range of new advisers who wished to protect their anonymity: the oil tanker captains who expressed their opinions on their highly combustible cargo; the oil company executives who tried to guess what they would have done in the face of crisis; the Aeroflot exec who told me all about the Andropov, not knowing the purpose for which it was being used!

One of my rare identifiable sources, however, is the excellent geopolitical writer, traveler and scholar Charles Stewart Goodwin of Cape Cod, who provided research on the ancient Chinese fleets and the contents of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. He knows how grateful I am. His own writings on global politics provide for me an unfailing guide.

For insights and expertise on the subject of reincarnation and post-traumatic stress, I have to thank Dr. Barbara Lane of Virginia, whose own book, *Echoes from the Battlefield: Past Lives from the Civil War*, is probably the best of its kind. Dr. Lane's wide knowledge of both these subjects, plus a certain surefootedness in planetary matters, provided research of the highest order. In matters of battle stress, her own views dovetailed almost precisely with those of Admiral Woodward.

I thank also my friend Chris Choi Man Tat, whose suave and courteous manner running Kite's, Dublin's best Chinese restaurant, quite conceals the fact that he was once bosun on a gigantic crude-oil tanker plying between the Gulf and the Far East. His insights on the great ships were constantly helpful.

Finally I thank my friend Olivia Oakes, who thought she was coming for a quiet weekend with my family and ended up reading this manuscript for almost fifteen hours, checking spelling and punctuation. For any errors in this regard I intend, unfairly, to blame her.

The Shark Mutiny is a work of fiction. Every character in it is a product of my imagination only, though there may be certain college baseball players who recognize their names but not their lives, nor any other connection with reality.

—Patrick Robinson
