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*The Run For Crystal Palace*

Joseph Hailey

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# THE BERING SEA

Thirty-four degrees south of Crystal Palace, effervescent foaming white caps dotted the surface of the gray colored water just off the Aleutian Islands.

An occasional seal, followed by a large killer whale herding a lone morsel of food to his friends in the waiting pod, was the only living thing for hundreds of miles in all directions.

Ice-cold wind, chilled even further by the freezing temperature of the large floating icebergs that it swirled over, made the day an easy one for flying. The cold air, thicker in molecular density than warm air, would pass over the wings of the aircraft and give it more lift than flying on a day of hot, thinner air.

An alien sound began to increase in volume as it approached quickly from somewhere farther north. It sounded like a motorcycle off in the distance, a bike preparing to cross a faraway bridge, then got louder as it got closer. It wasn't a threatening sound, not invading the senses, but a growling noise, almost a deep hum getting steadily louder. The source was unseen by the human eye as it passed overhead and Dopplered, changing pitch like a high-speed race car as it zoomed by the spectator stands and headed for the finish line.

Short, stubby wings having already been pulled into the fuselage to actually reduce the lift of the cold, thick atmosphere now extended slightly as the aircraft transitioned from the terrain it was following to the white-capped water below. The flight computer, aware of where it was because of the onboard global positioning system, adapted quickly as it realized it was over water. Notorious for having little to no lift over its liquid surface, the flight computer's programming ordered the short wings slid. Within only twenty-feet of flight, the wing stubs extended outward to gather more pressure from the diminishing lift that was even now swirling a great deal less under the supporting aluminum alloy wings.

The terrain-following cameras, working double duty as eyes for the graphic-oriented camouflage computers, quickly began feeding input from the high-powered Zeiss lenses mounted in the fore and aft of the fuselage. The electroluminescent panel-covered fuselage of the vessel would turn the skin of the craft a light, almost sky blue on the bottom and a dark grayish blue, complete with moving whitecaps, on the top. The bottom colorings that slid into place were to inhibit revealing the craft from the surface of the ocean or land, and the top blue gray with authentic-looking white-capped animated waves to limit its being noticed from above. The definition of *above* included visual inspection at close range and also from *bird's eye* orbiting spy satellites.

Within a matter of moments the twin cruise missiles, after all encountered colors were broken down by the onboard computers into digitally readable pixels, vanished so completely, it was as if they never existed. If anyone had seen them for the blink of an eye it took them to recalibrate their camo-covered light-emitting membrane, they would have easily thought they were seeing things. Everything vanished into the background colors of the frozen tundra except for the one word that seemed almost out of place on the streamlined hull of a tried-and-true weapon such as the Tomahawk.

The telltale yellow and black flower of nuclear warning was missing from these birds, those symbols of a weapon as ordinary as kilotons and radiation had vanished months earlier. The only thing that distinguished these from the ordinary U.S. arsenal of Tomahawk nuclear missiles was the simple word across their fuselage: *experimental*.

The chances of anyone seeing the two missiles, 250 miles south of the Arctic Circle at wave-top level and well over Mach one, were remote by anyone's standards. They were sophisticated machines of war, state of the art at the very least, and heading for target with hateful mechanized vengeance.

The knife-edge bow of the USS *Ticonderoga* sliced through the water like a razor dropped on point into a pool of liquid. The gray hull, freshly painted from two months in dry dock and usually dull in appearance, seemed to gleam in the early-morning light of dawn. Aircraft of every size and description filled the deck as each waited for orders to take off, go below, hangar up, or simply wait for update.

Lt. Simon Sinclair, who had the interesting call sign of “Lady,” adjusted the cockpit harness as he looked at the sky above the flight deck. It was chilly, slightly cloudy, with a six-knot breeze coming over the forward deck. A perfect day. He hoped the weather held for his thirtieth birthday in two days.

“Perfect day,” his radar instruments operator (RIO) blurted over the headset in Lady’s helmet. The RIO, or GIB for “guy in the back,” was named Chuck Applethorpe. He looked to be a clone of “Lady” Sinclair, except for the fact that his call sign, “Panther,” sounded more like the name of a crew member on board an F-14 preparing to go supersonic at a moment’s notice. Panther’s hair, unlike Lady’s, was dark brown and short, not high and tight like the marine’s, but a more civilized gentleman’s cut that seemed to fit more into the real world when the *Ticonderoga* pulled liberty. Both of them had olive skin of black Irish descent, with cold blue eyes that were sharp and darting everywhere. Finally, seeing the deck was clear of turbine-clogging debris, both of them looked at their instruments then at the skies for any sign of trouble, any danger that could be a threat to the carrier.

The dawn patrol’s wingmen, “Deeter” and “Ice,” would lift off forty seconds after the first Tomcat, just long enough to let the jet wash of the lead F-14 dissipate. In contrast to Lady and Panther, Deeter was a short-cropped redheaded kid with a large splash of freckles across his nose and cheeks. Ice, his RIO, was a black kid from Oklahoma with hair shaved so close to his head it was merely a shadow across his scalp.

Lady nodded unconsciously as he heard the weather report from the tower. The same weather report read verbatim from a piece of paper that every pilot in line had memorized only an hour before in morning briefing.

“Foxtrot Zebra, acknowledged,” Lady said into his helmet mike, and listened to the other Foxtrots call in and confirm the morning weather speech.

“Foxtrot Zebra, this is Sammy Smith, you are clear for takeoff, wind is out of the west at seven knots,” the tower voice said, using the designated code name of Sammy Smith.

Lady casually looked over to visually inspect that the canopy was down and locked, then glanced over to the green light on his console, confirming that the glass bubble surrounding him and the RIO was indeed down and locked. Lady raised his right hand to the visor of his helmet, saluted the officer of the deck (OOD), slid his hand over and slammed the throttles to full

military power. Within a matter of seconds, the interior of the F-14 vibrated like a pissed-off cobra as the afterburners of the Pratt and Whitney engines reached full takeoff power. Lady released the brake and felt the G-force slam him into the cockpit seat as the steam-powered catapult grabbed the front of the jet and, like the foot of a giant, kicked the plane in the ass end of the blue-flamed, screaming turbines. Instantly, the deck of the *Ticonderoga* fell away only to be replaced by the deep watery blue ocean that supported the floating city they had just left.

“Sammy Smith, this is Foxtrot Zebra, we are in the tube, five by five, have a good day,” Lady said calmly, looking to the horizon and calculating how long it would take him and Panther to do their rendezvous with the one-hundred-mile mark. He realized that at the speed they were traveling as they were a little over three miles out, that Deeter, his wingman, would just be leaving the deck. Lady didn’t want to be that far from his wingman, so he backed off the throttles.

“What the hell was that?” Panther said from the rear seat as he looked down at his screen.

Lady merely focused on the heads-up display (HUD) that was illuminated on the glass of his canopy in front of him. The radar, altimeter, false horizon, and even onboard system checks were displayed on the front canopy in front of him in a soft red light. From what Lady Sinclair was looking, there was absolutely nothing to be seen. He frowned, checked his instruments, and realized that nothing about his panel had malfunctioned.

“Don’t see anything,” Lady replied, scanning the internal warnings for any kind of incoming bogie or radar lock. Nothing.

“It was a blip. I saw it. Something was there,” Panther insisted, now straining over to his right to see if he could spot something visually through the rear of the polycarbonate bubble.

Inside the *Ticonderoga* radar command center or CIC, Ensign Paul Bairot stared at the screen of his radarscope as the light bar spun over the visual screen in front of him. For only a moment, he too noticed that something wasn’t right. Something looked as if it had blipped. Something, almost like a passing shadow that appears at the corner of a person’s eye, seemed to surface and then vanish as quickly as it had appeared.

An incoming bogie was the first thing he thought, but then, like the shadow that moves at the flick of a light switch, it seemed to magically disintegrate into the green screen of the radarscope. Unlike the myth of “flying under the radar,” it was virtually impossible to fly at an altitude so low that the military radar couldn’t pick up the aircraft. So for Ensign Bairot, his dark lower lip becoming more contrasting to his pale white skin as he bit down on it, it spelled out the fact that in a military situation, or in this case a combat scenario, what he saw could be something coming in under a stealth format. No radar contact, no infrared signature, and no supersonic footprint. Immediately, as he had been trained to do, he went to the overhead live feed satellite. His hands flew over the console as the in-range satellite moved into position and aimed its powerful lenses and electronic sensing devices down onto the coordinates he was now feeding it.

“Come on, come on,” he said under his breath, a cold sweat slowly forming on his forehead.

Anything supersonic leaves a turbulent invisible wake on the ground and in the air. With the correct instruments, the “wake” or footprint can be tracked from the air or even from space. If it could be followed from the air, then it could be sent via telemetry to the console in front of him and shadowed without the “enemy” knowing about it. The only problem was shadowing the inbound before the invader knew it, and being ready for them. At the speed that the bogie, or in this case, the *hypothetical* blip he thought, was moving, Ensign Bairot, if he was right, realized he wouldn’t have time to finish peeing his pants.

Dr. Bishop liked to picture the hundreds of sailors scurrying around for any kind of protective cover in the last seconds of their lives. He almost smiled to himself, if it could be called that, as he gave the order, six miles before impact, to the two inbound UGM-104 Tomahawk cruise missiles to “de-cloak” from stealth mode and arm their small very specialized programmed warheads. Dr. Bishop liked the fact that he had changed his mind, liked the fact that with only a whim, he had decided to alter the programming while the birds were in flight. He looked at the small screen and smiled at the time-to-impact counter. There was no logic in his thoughts, only a decision of pure human desire, pure incongruity with his first decision of tactical perfection.

Ensign Bairot's console suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree as alarms began sounding at every other console in CIC. Bairot was out of his chair and screaming into his headset as the two inbound rockets appeared just about on top of them.

"Con! CIC! I have two inbound bearing one niner six! Range!" he screamed, quickly looking at the bulbous distance to target housing over his head. The smooth metal housing contained red light-emitting diodes that formed numbers that were rapidly counting down to zero. Zero, of course, meant the midships of the *Ticonderoga*. He shook his head, not believing what he was looking at and how fast the numbers were approaching impact.

"Range!" he repeated, "*Four point five* miles! Speed eighteen hundred knots! Impact *two* seconds!"

Other alarms began to sound. All in the CIC knew in those last few moments that it was hopeless, as the time factor was too close, too imminent. They were about to be hit with two rockets that were impossible to hit, impossible to ward off. Ensign Bairot's last thoughts were those of wonderment. He knew that whoever had launched the missiles knew a great deal more than they should about the defense systems of the nuclear carrier. The automated, computer-driven Gatling guns, missile launchers, and support system radar could lock on, cycle rounds, and even pivot 180 degrees in anticipation of destroying a target within a parameter of 2.5 seconds. The incoming missiles would impact in just under that, not giving the ship's auto systems time to react by a mere half of a second. All the crew could do, if the Tomahawks weren't nuclear, was hope that they didn't hit anywhere near where they were stationed.

That, in this instance, wouldn't be the case.

Lady looked down at his radar as Panther began screaming in the rear seat.

"Radar contact! It's two fucking cruise missiles. They're headed for the carrier!" Panther screamed as he turned around trying to look behind the cockpit.

"Turning to intercept!" Lady screamed into his mike as he jerked the stick around and watched as the first missile hit and seemed to lift the whole carrier



off the water. It was all Lady could do to get his visor down, only milliseconds before the impact and the subsequent flash of detonation.

It looked like a wave pattern as the missiles detonated. In a nuclear strike, Lady thought there should have been nothing left of the floating runway. But half of it was going down; the other half looked like it was cut down the center parallel to the water.

“Son of a bitch!” Panther screamed, “what the hell kind of weapon is that?”

“Mayday, mayday!” Lady began, trying to keep his voice in a calm, highly trained drone, “this is Foxtrot Zebra to Sammy Smith, do you read?” Lady shook his head, not believing he was watching the front half of the carrier tilt over and roll like Jell-O sliding off a plate. Lady continued to radio, only to suddenly realize, as he stared at the sinking ship, that the radio room located in the conning tower of the USS *Ticonderoga* was gone.