

were the contacts, missiles? The time was the hard part. At the point of detection, the incoming flight was moving at more than 1000 feet per second. In the time it took the missile director to utter the warning and the ship's Captain to comprehend it, the air exploded, the deck of the destroyer shook violently, everything reverberated from the thunder and shockwaves of the jets as they skimmed the ship close enough to leave exhaust stains on the paint work. The missile officer panicked, pushing the launch button, sending four Gadflies into the sky in pursuit of the aircraft.

On the bridge and around the rest of the ship they realized quickly that they had suffered no damage and this was no missile attack. If there had been one, they would have been dead by now. Several of the crew had seen the sinister black shapes seemingly leap from the ocean without any sound, leaving an explosion of noise and shock waves in their wake.

The flight profile was the problem the ship's Captain thought. If they were firing missiles the attacking jets would never have passed over the ship. Indeed, they would have never come that close. Captain Li Zhenbang realized what was happening and swore loudly. "Shut the system down," he screamed into the ship's communication system. It was already too late.

Hamilton now had a real problem. He had the Gadfly locked on to him and coming in fast. The warbling of the threat receiver was annoying the shit out of him. The Gadfly missile profile would have been to climb, look down and then plunge towards the target - him. How low can you go, he thought? Running parallel to the big rolling swell of the Antarctic Ocean, Hamilton dialled 20 feet into the system. The aircraft sank so low it flew between the swells; he could look up at them on either side, the canopy heavily smeared in salty spray. The F-111s Electronic Warfare (EW) system was in hyper drive. The EL/L-822 system had autonomously detected and classified

the enemy radar and missiles emitting electronic signal to jam and deceive the threat. The missile hesitated and lost the F-111 as the fleeing jet plunged into the heavy swells, unable to see through the waves it lost lock. Within seconds the missile warning stopped and Lance's heart started again, but only for a few moments of respite.

"We're being painted by radar." Lance's navigator Jake, worked his box of tricks. There was no sign of his wingman. "Looks like a Zhuk."

"Let him keep looking. We are turning around. The rules of engagement were quite clear, only fire if fired upon. We have been fired upon and by the looks of it Stuart and Hat Trick are gone."

The Taizhou was following the heavy Southern Ocean swell. At 60 miles out Hamilton approached from an angle to the stern, settling the big jet in between the moving mountains of water to keep her below the Taizhou's radar. He closed the gap to 50 miles and popped the aircraft up. The threat receiver blared immediately as the Taizhou's radar picked them up. He waited until the F-111's own radar registered the target and fed the information to the Harpoons.

The AGM-84D Harpoon Block II was an all weather, over-the-horizon, anti-ship missile system. The Harpoon's active radar guidance, integrated Global Positioning System/inertial navigation system, warhead design, and low-level, sea-skimming cruise trajectory and re-attack capability, made it an extremely unpleasant visitor, even on the best of days.

With the target information fed through to the missiles, two were released. The inner pylons (3, 4, 5 and 6) all carried Harpoons and once satisfied the first two were tracking, the next pair with a different attack profile were let go. Lance then stood the aircraft on its wing and dropped back into hiding among the heavy swells. With the missiles gone Lance jettisoned the empty pylons and swept the wings back picking up speed.

For the second time that day the Taizhou's on board threat systems came alive as they briefly picked up the F-111 during its pop up. While the men and systems on the ship reacted, the active radar on the four inbound Harpoons clearly painted the ship as they closed in their terminal flight phase. The missile's onboard computer system compared the target ship with the profile in its memory. They matched. Programmed to fly like the Pigs, they dropped back to just above the water's surface, skimming in low and fast between the rolling walls of water, concealing themselves from the Taizhou's highly developed detection system. They needed no input from Lance's aircraft, which was now busy escaping. Lance had deliberately launched the missiles to run parallel to the big rollers so they could hide. Any other direction would have forced the missiles higher.

The Taizhou's Captain heard the expected warning, "Incoming missiles," from the radar operator, the voice tight with fear. But this time the ship's Captain knew it was no aircraft. They were going to pay for the missile director's trigger-happy fingers. The ships incredibly sophisticated CIWS systems, which included COIL lasers and microwave anti-missile capabilities accounted for two of the missiles hitting the incoming Harpoons at the last nanosecond. But hiding in the waves the missiles were near impossible to track.

The surviving Harpoons struck hard near the center of the ship close to the water line. The two 500 pound warheads delivered a lethal blast that almost broke the ship's back. The frozen waters of the southern seas eagerly raced into the gaping hole in the side of the Taizhou's hull. With a quarter of her compliment killed instantly by the joint explosions, the injured and surviving crewmembers raced for escape hatches and to the lifeboats. None of them made it. In a slow and sickening movement, the ship, still making headway, her engines faithfully making revolutions, rolled onto her back. For a

few moments the two large propellers rotated in the air, thrashing the water as the doomed ship slipped quickly beneath the sea.

To the north the surviving F-111 was making a hasty exit.

"We are being painted"

"Same bogey?"

"Yes, it's miles out. 100 kilometers I would say."

"You think they've seen us?"

"Not yet. Not at this level with all the clutter. But they will. We have to go past them to get home. The bogey is between us and home."

"Is he single?"

"We are only looking passively. So I'm only picking up the active signals. He could have a hundred buddies for all we know."

"Oh good," Lance said, the tension setting back in again.

Almost 100 miles away Captain Vlas Naberezhnyi looked hard at the primary display. His Su-27SK, temporarily based out of Martin de Vivies, was equipped with a Phazotron N001 Zhuk coherent pulse Doppler radar with track-while-scan and look-down/shoot-down capability. The range of the radar was over 80 miles in the forward hemisphere and 28 miles in the rear hemisphere. It had the capacity to search, detect and track up to 10 targets. At extreme ranges he almost had to have the nose of the big fighter pointed directly at the target to see it. But there was something out there. It would come and go.

One of the F-111's enduring qualities was its ability to carry a big payload. That day it carried the Harpoons as well as AAIMs and another surprise. The surviving member of the flight of three, named Wombat carried an internal weapons palette similar to the F-22, capable of carrying two AMRAAM and two AIM-9X.

MacDowell Aviation engineers had replaced Wombats old radar system with the APG-79 AESA, the same as that used in the Super

Hornet. There was no reason for either the Russians or the Chinese to believe there was any aircraft operational in the area that posed any threat outside of 30 miles. Which is why Captain Vlas Naberezhnyi was shocked to hear the threat receiver shrill in his ear with an almost instant radar lock. What the hell was that? The active radar provided him an instant lock by his own system, giving him little comfort. He was still out of range to use his own missiles.

Almost 80 miles away, Lance dropped both AMRAAMs. They speared off ahead of the aircraft, arching up high into the sky. Naberezhnyi cranked his aircraft defensively as Hamilton tracked his missiles. As soon as they acquired, like the Harpoon he could forget them. Once again he dropped the Pig back into the tide, trying as best as he could to hide the Wombat among the waves.

It was a painful wait for the Russian pilot. There was little he could do. His own radar was excellent. But it could not shoot down missiles at that range; not yet. He sweated as he watched their approach. When they were near, Naberezhnyi viscously weaved and hauled his aircraft around the sky, punching chaff and using every avoidance technique he knew, every minute closing ground on his unknown attacker. The target was hard to acquire, flitting in and out of the background noise of the radar. F-18s didn't normally fly that low, nor as fast he thought. It was so low it was being lost in the ocean swell. As he closed to 45 miles he dropped two Alamo-B missiles with combined semi-active radar guidance and infrared homing. Less than 10 seconds later both Hamiltons missiles arrived, Naberezhnyi evaded one but not the other. His missiles had however locked up their target before he died.

The two Alamo missiles chased the elusive Wombat as it wound its way though the ocean swells at over the speed of sound.

"Shit, we have two missiles chasing us."

"Counter measures!"

Both chaff and flares spewed from the Wombat's ejectors. But the two Alamos kept coming on. The Wombat hugged the water, her life depending on it, weaving down the big watery canyons between the waves. The supersonic shock wave threw a curtain of thick spray behind her. The first Alamo to fall on the Wombat lost her behind a wave and then struck the heavy curtain of spray in the big jet's wake, tumbling out of control. The second missile was more lucky, the approach higher. It closed to within yards of the Wombat's airframe before hitting the curtain of water, but close enough for the fuse proximity sensor to detonate the weapon.

The aircraft kicked hard, the blast tipping her forwards. Any other airplane would have smashed into the waves, but not the Wombat. The close terrain-following system was acutely aware of the aircraft's position and made immediate adjustments.

"Lost number two!" Jake cried.

"Shit. Number one?" Lance's eyes were riveted on the towering waves either side of them, too busy to look at the instruments.

"Looks good. We are back to three fifty knots."

Lance could see that on his HUD but he liked confirmation when systems were starting to fail. "Warning lights?"

"Compressor stall. The missile must have blown back up the pipe," Jake said, trying to get the other engine started unaware of another lethal threat closing on them.

Lieutenant Colonel Lachinov took his time. Three hundred knots, he thought. Flies between the waves and shoots long range missiles, or something similar anyway. It was like a game show quiz; he liked those. Now it was injured; it had slowed substantially, making it an easier kill. Dobycha Lachinov had closed the distance to use his Archer missiles, an all-aspect, close-combat air-to-air missile that at close range had a better chance of taking out the opponent. The

target was almost invisible. But every now and then he would get a glimpse. He switched the active radar on.

The Wombat sensed its pursuer. Once again the threat warning wailed; it wasn't loud but took all your attention. Lance dialled the bomber down another two more feet.

Lachinov swore. He couldn't get an accurate lock; there was too much interference from the water. Switching to guns he ran the throttles forward plugging in the afterburners. It would have to be guns. Whatever it was, at 300 knots it was dead. There was nothing out here on this day as far as Lachinov knew that could take him on.

The seconds dragged ... and then he saw it. Lieutenant Colonel Lachinov was no slouch. It was an F-111. One engine glowed, the other obviously dead and all her weapon pylons were empty. She might have guns but there was no way they would ever get a chance to get a shot at the Sukhoi. Even though the other aircraft was slower, wounded on one engine, it was incredibly hard to follow between the waves, even as he flew above them. The F-111 seemed to flatten out and was hard to see. Not hard enough, he thought, for a gunshot. Everyone knew there was no competition between an F-111 and the big Su-27.

Lance knew the Sukhoi was on his ass and if he could have chatted with Lachinov over a glass of beer he would have agreed with him. There was no doubting that the Pig was no fighter. Against the Su-27 Flanker she was a lamb to the slaughter in a turn-and-burn fight. The Flanker was a truly best of breed fighter. But the Pig still had a few tricks. Hamilton was not about to get caught in an energy-bleeding exercise that would end in his demise. After the AMRAAM surprise, the guy on his rear was probably champing at the bit to take a piece of F-111 ass when it was most vulnerable.

"Engine?"

"On it."

The sea in front of the Wombat exploded as canon shells ripped the surface.

"Christ Jake, give me my engine." It was not an order but a comment. He really didn't need to tell Jake how urgent it was.

Lachinov missed on the first shot. He told himself to calm down and settled the Sukhoi high and behind the fleeing bomber, lining the HUD indicators up for the next burst.

"Got it...spooling up.....wait," Jake said.

"Can't wait!" Lance hit the burners on the first engine prematurely, pulling hard and left, risking a flame out.

Lachinov saw the engine light as the big F-111 hauled itself out of the trench and throw itself into a left turn. He followed easily. Pigs might fly he thought, but not very well. He chuckled, once again setting up another shot.

Squadron Leader Lance Hamilton ground his teeth. Something he did when he was really annoyed. Right now having a Flanker trying to shoot his ass off ranked as most annoying...and perhaps a little nerve wracking, but enough of this shit. He needed one good turn without exposing himself. The Flanker was on him like a fly stuck to butter. He couldn't see him. The Flanker was directly behind.

"Both engines now at 100 percent," Jake reported. It was time to leave and open some space. As old as the Wombat might have been, even the Sukhoi had no chance of pacing the big jet down in the weeds. The Pig leaped ahead but then turned presenting Lachinov with an excellent cannon shot. Bad mistake Lachinov thought. He turned inside the other jet, closing the distance, too short for missiles but good for guns. As he pressured the trigger he saw the plumes of two missiles as they sped from beneath the F-111. He was sure the racks had been empty; still, the other aircraft was facing the opposite direction, another stupid mistake he thought, and your last.

But before he could fire, his threat-warning receiver went active and in that instance Lachinov went from offensive to defensive.

Lance Hamilton was sweating heavily. It was all about timing. He needed the turn. But too long and he was dead. He knew the Sukhoi either had to get distance to take a missile shot or get closer. Either way he had to take the initiative away from the superior Russian dogfighter. This was another first: the real-time application of the F-111's new helmet-mounted cueing system. As the F-111 turned, wings extended, he was able to see his enemy. If he could see him he could kill him. It was fast. Thank god. As he looked at his pursuer, his Helmet Mounted Cueing System began talking to the AIM-9X high off-boresight air-to-air tucked in the weapons bay. Basically it meant he could fire the missiles while still facing the F-111 in the opposite direction. The magnetic head tracker combined with a display projected onto Lance's visor allowed him to aim sensors and weapons wherever he was looking. Hamilton knew exactly how to use it. The weapon bay doors had opened and the two missiles ejected clear of the aircraft before firing.

The AIM-9X was the latest member of the AIM-9 Sidewinder short-range missile family. With the F-111's extreme speed capability at low level, he could engage and blow past his opponent, taking on aircraft that would have given his predecessors a heart seizure.

To Lachinov's alarm he could see the two missiles turn towards him, even as they left the F-111. He tried to live. He tried to avoid the missiles. But in his mind he knew he was dead. Like Naberezhnyi, he did not feel the end, both missiles arriving almost simultaneously.

Antarctica. The Dry Lakes Region.
December 5 1311hrs UTC.

As the Wombat fled north over the Southern Ocean, Colonel Brian Hamilton was tumbling through space reaching for his ripcord. The canopy of the MC-5 ram air parachute snapped open, yanking hard on the body straps and swinging him wildly in the frigid air. Just as quickly and a whole lot more disconcerting was the unexpected and sudden release of that pressure on the straps. A quick look up explained the renewed feeling of rushing to the ground. The canopy had collapsed and the lines looked hopelessly tangled. Maybe some rogue piece of shrapnel from the missile hit had pierced the parachute pack.

The ice rushed to meet his feet at over 100 miles per hour. Brian could imagine a red smear across the crisp white glacier that would mark his last jump. Part of the chute still dragged behind him spinning him viciously as the white expanse began to engulf him. Using all his strength he rolled on his back pulling his combat knife from its ankle sheath and slashed at the shrouds. With his other hand he released the reserve chute. The reserve chute streamed out as the failed canopy fluttered and quickly disappeared behind him.

Watching him, Warrant Officer Fedor Mikhailovich Rabik felt the smooth recoil of the rifle flow into his shoulder. A practiced veteran, he kept his eye to the telescopic sight and watched as the man's parachute began to candle. That was unexpected but welcome. He was enormously impressed by the man's efforts to jettison the tangled chute and deploy his reserve. He doubted whether he could have done the same. Still, it was a shame in many ways that his target was not rewarded by such an impressive effort. The man and the un-deployed reserve hurtled out of sight into the glacier. Rabik lowered the weapon. Aptly named "Thread Cutter", the 7.62mm VSK-94 Vintorez was living up to its name, even if it was a coincidence.

Ideally suited to cold conditions, the VSK-94 was made completely of composite construction with an alloy barrel and integral suppressor while still retaining full-automatic capability. The whole setup was incredibly light and weighed less than three kilos.

After a few moments of scanning the impact area, Rabik stood up, shouldered his weapon, and began to walk the 500 yards to where he saw the body fall. The glacier was rough going. Like a page of wrinkled paper that someone had tried to straighten out, it was criss-crossed with compression ridges, berms and deep fissures. Two water channels had also dug into the ice surface, fed by the summer melt water. This was the only place on the continent you could hear the sound of running water. Despite his supreme fitness, it still took Rabik twenty minutes to cover the distance.

Standing near the edge of the glacier, Rabik scanned the ice. There was nothing. No chute, no body. He hadn't slammed into the glacier after all, but had obviously fallen somewhere near the base of the towering ice cliff that ended the glacier's march to the valley below. Not good. He wanted to see the body. A veteran of Chechnya and numerous other hotspots in which the Russians found themselves, Rabik was still alive because of his instinct and unerring dedication to do each and every job properly. No short cuts. It was then he heard the sound of rocks. Rocks and pebbles sliding down a slope.

Hamilton had missed the glacier edge by just a few feet. The canopy had just started to bite into the air as his body smashed into the top of the scree slide, plunging him headlong down the slope. The force of the impact knocked him unconscious. When he came to he was on his back facing downhill. His senses were immediately alert. He lay perfectly still, slowly allowing his eyes to focus as he looked back up the scree slope and to the towering cliffs of the glacier. The sun glinted off the ice. Not ice! A voice in his brain

screamed. Hamilton rolled rapidly to one side as a heavy calibre slug buried itself into the rocks and stones where he had just been laying.

Rabik swore to himself. He had had him dead to rights. Rabik's quarry was now moving surprisingly fast, zigzagging erratically as he raced down the remaining slope, trying to put the scree slide between him and eternity. The Spetznaz Warrant Officer squeezed off two more shots and then went to full automatic. Puffs of dust and stone exploded all around the running figure. This guy was good. Really good, he thought. His movements were unpredictable, making it hard to keep a bead on him. And he was strong. Rabik bit his heavy mittens; they were making shooting more difficult. He quickly shook them off and hoisted the weapon back to his shoulder.

Brian's lungs burned and his muscles screamed in protest. It was still 100 yards before the curve of the scree slope hid him from his hunter. He weaved furiously, running across the slope, every muscle in his back twitching as he waited for the impact of the big 7.62mm slug. Stones and dirt sprayed up around him, blinding him. It was a VSK-94, he thought ... Spetznaz, big soft bullets with the stopping power of an elephant gun. They made nasty holes on the way in and took most of your insides with them on the way out. One hit was all it took. He shook his head as a round buzzed past his ear. Too close, still fifty yards to go, too far. The guy was going to pick him off. He should be dead already. The scree was a mix of rocks, light shingle and powdery dust, hard to run on.

More bullets exploded into the ground around him. Hamilton removed his own mittens, which hung on straps, and then threw himself into the air, spinning and rolling in space while removing the Browning from his jacket. He landed hard on his back, head facing down hill, skidding down the slope. Through his legs he could see

his attacker and the barrel of the VSK pointed directly at him. It was too far for a handgun but it was all he had. He emptied the clip, 13 rounds in rapid succession as he continued to skid down the scree.

Rabik jumped as the 9mm slugs ploughed into the glacier beneath and around his feet. Ice splinters sprayed through the air and into his eyes, blinding him. By the time he cleared them the man was gone. Shit.

Once behind the protection of the scree slope, Hamilton kept going. Removing himself as far as possible from the last position the Spetznaz trooper saw him.

He reached into his jacket for the new Sat phone he had pocketed on the C130. Wrong! It was obviously not designed to crash into mountainsides. He quickly buried it. He then stopped and took in the landscape around him. He was no stranger to the Dry Valleys.

On a continent completely covered with ice, the valleys were small oases of exposed dirt and running water. Only two percent of Antarctica was ice-free, most of it right here. It had been that way for over eight million years. At times they were filled with giant lakes and at other times almost empty. The glaciers that oozed between the mountains had retracted and advanced, but never far. The reason the valleys were ice-free was that the distant Trans Antarctic Mountains formed a dam there, holding back the East Antarctic Ice Sheet.

There were no fish in the lakes, no birds in the sky and no animals. Glaciers retreating through here four million years ago had wiped out everything except microscopic organisms.

From his position looking down the valley, Hamilton could see Lake Vanda. There would be a summer research team there, exploring the strange and bizarre environment of the dry lakes.

A stream wound its way between tall berms of material deposited by the retreating glaciers providing possible cover. It also

provided cover for his enemy. Somewhere out there was a team of Spetznaz, intent on killing him and taking the evidence. He had to assume they wanted the stick.

Hamilton knew Lake Vanda was just a 10-minute helicopter ride in from the Ross Sea coast, so close, yet so far. First of all he had to get rid of the guy following him and then try to avoid the rest and figure a way of getting back to McMurdo. The sound of water was the inspiration.

Getting wet was not a good idea. Despite that, Hamilton slid into the freezing glacial stream at a point where it wound its way under the glaciers edge. It was numbing and he knew within minutes he would be unable to function or defend himself. The seconds seemed like minutes and the minutes hours. His shivering was becoming convulsive. From under the ice ledge that he hid beneath, all he could see were the boots. Russian boots. Because of the cold, Hamilton knew he would be weaker and the Russian stronger and prepared. The fight would have to be decisive. He struck hard with his K knife, grabbing one of the man's legs, cutting and sawing hard through the boot, severing his ligaments at the ankle.

Rabik was taken by surprise. He had not thought to look in the water, a bad mistake. The knife strike caused his left foot to fail. Powerful hands grabbed his legs and he felt himself being dragged under the ice shelf. In the last moment he cursed his decision to put the big black mittens back on as his flailing hands reached for his own knife. His head struck the ice as he was dragged under, the freezing water engulfed him. He knew only too well the feeling of the knife as it severed his throat and what it meant. Warrant Officer Fedor Mikhailovich Rabik thought for the briefest moment of his wife before it went black.

Hamilton released the body and sheathed his knife. Without so much as looking at the Russian's body as it floated away face down in

the stream. He scrambled out of the water and lay panting on the sand. The sand was warm. Just inches higher the temperature was very much colder, just seven degrees Fahrenheit.

Because of its unique nature, the Dry Valleys were a favorite site for research teams during the summer months. A Kiwi meteorologist and Australian biologist idly watched the group of men approach them from the lower part of the valley, chatting and wondering what research party they belonged to, because they had not heard of anyone else coming out here for the next few days. It was not until they got closer that they saw the guns. Then it was too late.

Of course the Russian Officer did not kill them immediately. The Colonel wondered whether the two, now enemy scientists, might know something. Maybe they had seen or even helped this man Hamilton. He would make them talk first. Then kill them. Spetznaz had a special passion for the sexual organs. A very old and simple method was used to demonstrate the power of Spetznaz. The captors drive a big wedge into the trunk of a tree, then forcing the victim's sexual organs into the opening and knock out the wedge. They then proceed to question the other prisoners. That was one of his favorites. Obviously, Mikolai Nabialok thought, there were no trees here. So it had to be the old 'swallow' method. Well known in Soviet concentration camps, it did not require any weapons or other instruments, and if used with discretion, didn't leave any traces on the victim's body. Mikolai ordered his men to lay the scientists face down on the ground. The Spetznaz troopers grabbed the scientists' legs, bending them back until their heels touched the back of their necks.

The men screamed and moaned in agony. Despite their ordeal, the two scientists were still not able to help much. One more try, the Colonel thought. He removed the principal Spetsnaz weapon - the

little infantryman's spade. He ordered the men untied. They kept saying they knew nothing. It was becoming annoying but exciting. He was wary to keep the pleasure of the interrogation from his face.

Spetznaz did not torture anybody for the sake of torture. There were practically no sadists in Spetznaz. If one was found they were quickly disposed of. Both the easier and the tougher forms of questioning in Spetznaz were an unavoidable evil that the fighting men had to accept. They used these methods, not out of a love of torturing people, but as the simplest and most reliable way of obtaining information essential to their purpose.

Mikolai Nabialok knew this and went to great pains to erase the facial evidence of the huge pleasure he derived from the infliction of pain on another. He first used the blade of the shovel to cut off each of their ears and then fingers, while also smashing the victims in the liver. They screamed, wept, begged and protested ignorance and innocence until the end. Still keeping a mask on his face, Nabialok stood up from his severing operation of the man's genitals, the thick red blood pumping onto the sandy soil, the only place on the ice continent that it would not freeze on. The man was dead, like his academic friend. Now they could really join the valley culture, he thought, almost laughing at his little joke.

"Let's go", he said, once again impatient. They were not there for razvedka, intelligence gathering. They were there to kill and take the evidence. Rabik had told them over the radio he had seen the parachute further up the valley. He said he had seen the man plummet to his death. That was the last he had heard from Rabik. Had he fallen? Had an accident? Was the man on the parachute dead and was it Hamilton? Clearly the scientists knew nothing. It was obvious the Americans would want to keep the evidence secret. Only one parachute was seen to leave the aircraft before it crashed. Four of his men

were already on the way to search the wreckage. He now had to find Hamilton and Rabik.

If Rabik were injured he would give him the blessed death. He almost hoped. It would provide a good demonstration that he was not sadistic. Spetznaz had a very humane means of killing its wounded soldiers - a powerful drug known as 'Blessed Death'. An injection with the drug stopped pain and quickly produced a state of blissful drowsiness.

In the event that a commander decided, out of misguided humanity, to take the wounded man with him, and it looked as if this might jeopardize the mission, the deputy commander was under orders to dispatch both the wounded man and the commander, the commander to be removed without recourse to drugs. It was recommended that he be seized from behind with a hand over his mouth and a knife blow to his throat. If the deputy failed to deal with his commander in this manner, then not just the commander and his deputy, but the entire troop would be regarded as traitors, with all the inevitable consequences. Colonel Mikolai Nabialok smiled to himself again. He really did love his job.

Hamilton made his way to the floor of the dry valley. His new Sat phone was smashed, not that it would have worked without satellites, but at least he had the VSK-94. He was in a boulder field. Ventifacts -- rocks polished and smoothed by the wind -- littered the surface. The ground in between was soft and brown, powdery, filled with pebbles. As he dived for cover behind some boulders the fine powdery sediment kicked up into his face. He couldn't help but notice it tasted like flour with some gunpowder mixed in.

There seemed no sense to the rocks scattered around him. As he stopped and listened for his pursuers, all he could hear was the wind shooting down from the glaciers.

Just ahead of him lay the mummified seal. He had heard about it but never seen it. It gazed with perfectly preserved black eyes in his direction. It was the ideal guardian for this land of the barely living and the long dead.

It was blond and lay on its left side. Part of the skin around its eye socket was gone, but his eyes were still black and a little shiny. The skeletal structure of his left flipper and his tail were clearly evident: long, thin grey-white bones that looked like human fingers. He could have died last week. He could have died last year. One look around the valley and you were staggered to understand how he got there. For over 10,000 years the little seal had watched with dead black eyes.

They did not have to go far to find the Russian Spetznaz Warrant Officer. Face down his body floated and bumped down the stream towards them. His throat had been cut, by an expert too. Whoever was out there, the Spetznaz officer realized was a professional. Rabik had been a legend in the force. Not a man to be taken easily. This was going to make for an excellent hunt.

Further up the valley the four-man team Nabialok had dispatched to the C130 crash had discovered two survivors, the rest of the crew and passengers burned. Both survivors were injured and the spetznaz had to drag them down the slope from the crash site. It was a tough job. They had packed stretchers for such an event, but this was no rescue mission. The stretchers were to get them to a place to stabilize them, get them to talk and then kill them. The team leader spoke briefly on his radio. Far below Nabialok smiled. He tucked the radio back into its carrier.

Hamilton waited. For an hour he combed the surrounding slopes with the rifle's scope. Nothing moved. He waited longer. Finally he was rewarded for his patience; higher up on the northeastern slope he could see dust. It must have been two thousand yards away. He

hunkered down and waited. He could see they were dragging two stretchers. That could only mean there were two survivors. But not for very long if the Spetznaz had a chance.

The VSK-94 Vintorez, Brian thought, was a very nice weapon, really light, well balanced. The scope was brilliant. The shot was 1,000 yards, extreme range for the weapon. The first round found its target, slamming into the back of the neck of the lead trooper. He fell flat on his face. The other men reacted fast. The second round took out another as he dropped the end of a stretcher. Return fire came quickly. It now came down to a matter of time. Other Spetznaz would arrive. Brian knew that. The two wounded were in the open. Brian was no longer on the defensive. He knew who his enemy was and they would use the wounded Americans as bait. As soon as he had fired the second shot, he rolled back into the creek and was quickly carried along the thin channel of water, dug in and concealed from the view of the two surviving Spetznaz who were still figuring out what was going on. Minutes later he was below them. Already the cold was biting back into muscles, slowing them down. He crawled back on to the dry dusty valley surface, the VSK-94 poised in front of him. The two surviving Spetznaz were well trained. They realized they were blind to the flank and exposed to the rear. Hamilton had hoped to chance upon an undefended flank. Instead, they were prepared, with one facing in his direction as soon as he became exposed. 7.62mm rounds impacted the sand so close to his head he could feel the breeze from the bullets.

He fell back into the water, drifted for twenty feet and mustering all the strength in his cramped muscles pushed hard and fast from the creek bed, the VSK-94 already up to his eye as he crested the bank. The Spetznaz was quick, his weapon swinging quickly to him, the flash of the muzzle suppressor telling Brian he might be too late. There was a heavy punch to Brian's shoulder as he

lunged forward, his own weapon barking in response. The Spetznaz jerked violently from the headshot. Brian kept his momentum, jumping over the still-twitching body, looking for the surviving trooper. He was committed; he kept moving. The surviving trooper reacted to the fire fight, spinning quickly to face the threat. He only saw a blur as a dark figure rushed over him. That was the last thought he had.

Hamilton released the Spetznaz trooper's head, letting the body fall to the ground. Without pausing he put the riflescope back to his eye, looking back down the valley. Far below he looked into another set of VSK-94 scopes pointing back at him. For a moment both men looked at each other, Nabialok and Hamilton, both of them mentally squaring off against each other; neither bothering a shot at the extreme range. Hamilton was sure the man was smiling.

The problem was the injured men. There was no way he could move them. Looking back at the Spetznaz team on their way up the valley he figured he had at best 15 minutes. They were running and he knew they would not stop until they started shooting. It was a trap. There was nothing he could do with the two wounded men except save them a protracted death. He slid his knife from his sheath wishing he were anywhere else but here.

Even for the fittest of the fit, it was a hard run in sand, all uphill. The sight of their comrade's bodies floating face down in the stream only pushed the Spetznaz troopers harder. They wanted vengeance.

The two bloodied Americans lay on their stretchers shot in the face. The Russian Colonel wondered: the act of a coward or a ruthless professional. If it were the latter he would make an excellent Spetznaz. He paused for breath as his men quickly worked to secure the area. There was nothing. The unseen foe had run, leaving nothing but the dead. This man had already killed half his force.

It was the white T-Shirt that bothered him. It clung to the creek's edge. Bloodied and torn. It was out of place. Nabialok stood there, something snapping and biting on the edges of his brain. Then it came in a rush. The cigarette dropped from his fingers as the cold realization fell upon him. He opened his mouth to scream a warning. But even as the sound came out there was an enormous explosion that lifted him off the ground and threw him thrashing and struggling into the bitter cold of the creek.

With the last of his strength Brian pulled the injured men ashore. These men were not trained like himself. Yet they had floated down the river without a breath for nearly two minutes, severely injured and freezing. They were all hypothermic. Brian's gunshot wound to the shoulder was numb, but at least the cold had slowed the bleeding. The enormous effort of pulling the two wounded men's bodies though had finished him. He lay spread eagled on the sandbank, the two Americans now dressed in Spetznaz cold weather clothing next to him.

Master Chief Andrew Wilkins was in a bad way, broken ribs, punctured lung and severe concussion. Despite that, he looked across at Hamilton, a frigid white face attempting to crack a smile. "You think we are screwed?" he said weakly.

Hamilton could only nod. His speech was slurred by cold, barely comprehensible.

"Maybe not" the Chief managed to say. His hand partially opened, the red light of an emergency radio locator beacon flashing between his fingers. It featured two-way speech facility and provided homing signals to assist search and rescue operations. The beacon was picked up by a U.S Naval helicopter which was already responding to the crash locator beacon from the C-130.

The rescue helicopter was fighting its way into the crash site against some extreme weather. Despite the still tempestuous winds

that would normally ground most aircraft, U.S. Marine Pilot Lieutenant Michael Jeffries found himself blown all over a sky he would much rather have viewed from the sidelines. The twin jet engine, 22,000lb UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter bounced violently at the mercy of the Antarctic's powerful winds. The Black Hawk, nose down and with the pilot pulling a lot of collective, had to fight for its fragile purchase in the air. Jeffries looked at the cold green water of McMurdo Sound 200 feet beneath him. Strewn with broken ice, heavy swells smashed themselves against the towering white cliffs of the Ross Ice Shelf. It wasn't at all conducive to swimming. It made him wonder what could be so important that the U.S. Government felt it warranted risking a highly skilled pilot, crew and multi-million dollar chopper.

There was a transition zone maybe a mile long, where the ice met the hard-pack and then Piedmont Glacier at the foot of the Valleys. Jeffries entered the valleys just east of Marble Point through a saddle and into a course local pilots call "The Labyrinth." The dark brown walls of Wright Valley towered above him 5000 feet high, streaked with pressure marks from a past no one was around to remember. The Black Hawk raced up the valley tracking the distress beacon, hoping it wasn't another trap. Within minutes they were pulling on board what looked like two nearly dead Spetznaz soldiers and a civilian.

McMurdo Station.**Brian tells Alex the well is on fire.**

Brian came to with a start, smashing the hand away from his body and rolling off the table and into a crouch. It was purely defensive. Unfortunately for the nurse, it broke her hand. The doctors and Marine security detail all took an immediate step backwards. The nurse was screaming, adding to the confusion. A frightened Marine

pointed the barrel of his weapon in panic at Hamilton. This was getting boring, Hamilton thought. Before the startled Marines could even think, they found themselves facing one of their own weapons. After releasing the clip, Hamilton handed it back, tapping the inside of his jacket at the same time. The stick was still there. The nurses, doctors and security detail were all still looking at him.

"Get me a phone," he said loudly. "NOW!"

"The phones don't work," one of the Marines said. He pointed up. "Satellites are down or off line," He shrugged. "and the weather of course."

Hamilton grunted a response, still feeling pretty sore. There were a lot of satellites that serviced Antarctica. GOES-4, INMARSAT, LES and MARISAT to think of just a few. There were four INMARSATs in a geosynchronous (GEO) orbit over the equator at an altitude of 36,000 km. This meant that any key surveillance and communication satellite linked to Antarctica had been targeted or disabled somehow.

"What about radio?" He asked.

"Jammed," the Marine said. "We seem to be suffering severe jamming."

Some one was obviously very well prepared. The hardware and systems to achieve such a black out weren't readily available unless deliberately positioned with an intent to use them. They, the Russians or Chinese, were preparing an attack, Brian thought. But if normal communications were down it was likely that some airborne relays would be positioned to intercept and pass on communications. "Weather balloons?" he said. "There must be weather balloons here. Can you find one?"

The Marine had decided Brian was one of the good guys. "Yes Sir!" He moved under Hamilton's arm and helped him up.

The patch took a while to setup. Hamilton was right, beyond or above the weather homeplate had setup some relays. He also knew there

would be only so much time to communicate. The balloon was moving away fast meaning weather and jamming would soon overwhelm the link.

"Alex, it's Brian. No doubt you know what's happened down here." He could visualize the man nodding on the other end. There was a garbled response; he guessed it said yes. "Okay, can you get some imagery on Vostok?" he responded.

"Are you kidding me?" Alex said. "Even the President is getting in the queue for that one."

"Alex, it's important. I want you to compare two shots several hours apart of the Vostok wellhead. It's melting down. Down to the goddamn oil lake beneath." The image of the fuel bladder burning a hole in the skiway played in his mind, overlaid by the thought of the much fiercer fire of the Vostok wellhead. Brian had been in Kuwait during the first Gulf War and had seen first hand how they burned. Oil under huge pressure rocketing from the ground in a massive tower of flame so hot you could not stand within 150 yards of it, the constant roar of the fire like the sound of big jet engines. Of course the Vostok flame was many times larger than any of those in Kuwait.

There was a pause on the other end. "You there....?"

The other man stuttered. "Its burning...oh shit"

"Big time now, massive blaze hundreds of feet into the air. Well at least it was. I guess it's sunk beneath the ice and is closer to the lake now."

The sudden realization and enormity of the situation hit Alexander Blake like a hammer; he was running on the spot. "Damn ... of course. How do I reach you?"

"Not so easy to get Sat Phones or mobiles down here. My last one broke. I'll have to....." The communication dropped out. Active jamming, Hamilton thought. Brian quickly scribbled a note and gave it to the Marine. "However you have to do it, Morse code, pigeon,

whatever, get this through to ADF. They will know what to do." The Marine nodded. Brian didn't notice, he had passed out again.

Avalon Air Field. Victoria Australia.
Lance returns from Southern Ocean.

Three F-111 crews were dead and a Chinese capital warship had been sunk. Under normal circumstances that would have been diplomatically disastrous. But the cruise missile strike and the ignition of the Vostok wellhead had cast the episode in a completely different light. On top of that, Hamilton's explanation of the shoot down of the other three aircraft in his flight illustrated the aggressive nature of the Chinese incursion into Australian territory and the assistance of Russian fighters.

With the situation deteriorating rapidly there was little time to waste thinking over such matters. The politicians would have to deal with that. Right now Hamilton was fixated on working up the rest of the aircraft and aircrew as well as getting as much time as possible on the F-111S simulator.

The strike groups aircrew had a little over one week's work up and training under their belts. It was hardly enough, but it would have to do. The crews were all experienced, most with thousands of hours under their belts. It all came back very quickly. They spent endless hours in the F-111 simulator as well as in the air. The skies over Avalon rattled 24 hours a day to the sound of Pigs thundering in and out of the airfield in a seemingly endless procession of sorties. They were the only assets that could provide any air support that far off shore. Ready or not, if the call came, they would have to go.

Media. Int.

For Immediate Release

Australians Sink Chinese Warship

By Vincent Gray, Media Int. Press Writer.

The Chinese warship Taizhou has been sunk by Australian fighter jets in the Southern Ocean. This adds to an already explosive situation in which the Russians and Chinese have accused the U.S. of trying to take Antarctica's Vostok Station by force.

Australian Defense Force Headquarters issued a brief statement midday claiming the aircraft were acting in self-defense. There was no confirmation that three F-111s were lost in the same engagement. The Chinese have been quick to lay the blame for the current crisis at the feet of the U.S. and Australia.

The Chinese Ambassador to the UN was uncharacteristically emotional when responding to the news, saying, "This was a cowardly and unprovoked attack on one of our vessels in international waters. A surprise attack by aircraft, that the Taizhou was led to believe were friendly, giving them no chance to defend themselves. This action reinforces our belief that the U.S. and Australia are working together to gain control of Antarctica's oil wealth through the use of military force.

"China asserts its right to free passage and movement over international land, sea or airspace; it will vigorously defend itself against the recently aggressive U.S. forces."

A Chinese defense analyst speaking off the record warned that Australia, with a significantly smaller military, was bent on "self-destruction by twisting the tiger's tail." Australia should not play "gunboat imperialism when they had little better than popguns," the analyst said.

The message from the UN has also done little to relieve the international pressure on the Australian and U.S. governments. The UN Security Council was quick to condemn the action and asked both Australia and New Zealand to respect the neutrality of Antarctica and remove their forces immediately; the UN also demanded unreserved apologies from the U.S. and Australia. There was no mention of the cruise missile strike on Vostok station. The Secretary General added weight to the world body's message by re-stating the UN position that Australia, New Zealand and other claims to Antarctic territory were not recognized. China, Russia and Germany, indeed "all friendly nations" were fully entitled to protect and defend their personnel operating in Antarctica, he stated. – End

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Both the Chinese and Russians were operating several aircraft carriers by 2018, including the Kuznetsov class.

CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia.

December 6 0600 UTC. Stringer learns of catastrophe of Vostok blows.

Stringer pressed the phone hard against his ear, unconsciously speaking out loud because he found it difficult hearing the other end. "The Tandems sensor suite can't see that far yet, not as far as Vostok anyway." He said into the phone. "What are you saying about the well head?" he shouted. He could barely hear Blake; his cell phone would drop in and out.

"I said we think that in seventy-two hours the burning well head will reach the lake below. The result could be catastrophic," Blake shouted back.

"What do you mean `catastrophic?'"

"A blanket of choking smoke over the southern hemisphere for decades, maybe even the entire planet. That and melting ice caps

rising in ocean levels, you get the picture. All the available data we have on the lake paints an ugly picture," He paused. "You don't have to be a mental giant to figure out the basics. Heat melts ice. At thousands of degrees it turns into vapor almost instantly. For the record Dave, I'm saying the best-case scenario is seventy-two hours."

There was no answer from the other end. "You there David?" Blake asked.

David Stringer stared at the phone in his hand. That did rank as catastrophic. His mind was racing. The logic was plausible. "You happy to share your work on this? Other people are going to want to look at how you came to this conclusion." Blake agreed. Stringer would have to get his own analysts to validate the hypothesis, but his gut told him Blake had a case. "Blake, don't go away, I'm going to need to speak to you."

"Okay, but David?"

"Yes?"

"Don't take too long, it's now three days to zero." He hung up.

Stringer cradled the phone. Blake's finality was unnerving. David's next call was directly to the Director, Chauncey Gray. He quickly relayed the information.

Gray sat back in his chair listening. What a fucking mess Finn and Miles have left. "So what's the deal? What do we need to do?" He asked.

Scott/McMurdo Bases

December 7 0100 UTC. Typhoon subs and Russkis enter Scott base

The sea ice had closed over. A flat white landscape as far as the eye could see. Beneath that, the black hull of TK-20 pushed quietly through a veiled ocean, hidden from the rest of the world. The massive and sinister shape of stealth had driven submerged through

the Ross Sea, McMurdo Sound and finally to Erebus Bay. It was a feat in navigation made possible by years of experience in hiding from the west's hunter-killer subs.

Silently she had drifted closer to the coast. As the bottom gradually shelved up closer to the sparkling roof of ice above, the big submarine had coasted to a stop. There was no cover of darkness, just the shroud of silence that had kept her hidden through thousands of miles of ocean. She rose up gently, the large sail punching easily through twelve feet of ice, shrugging off chunks big enough to crush an elephant.

Even before the last piece of ice had slid down the side of the hull to fall on the surrounding sheet of white, the Typhoon's large forward hatches flew open. The wet steel deck became a hive of activity as men and equipment swarmed over it and onto the surrounding floe. Within 30 minutes the hatches were closed again and the mass of titanium and steel slid back beneath the ice sheet.

TK-20 was the largest submarine in the world and one of the most feared weapons of the Cold War. The Russian Type 941 Typhoon, a massive ballistic missile boat which had for decades patrolled the deep ready to lay down a nuclear holocaust on her enemies. The submarine could carry over twenty long-range ballistic missiles delivering more than 200 nuclear warheads. She boasted two separate pressure hulls, the inner one made of titanium. The submarine's robust design allowed it to travel under ice and through it, the sail hardened for ice breaking, with bow planes, periscope and other masts retracting into protective housings in the hull.

Despite her size, TK-20 had driven at more than 25 knots half way round the world pushed by two large seven-bladed props fixed to two pressurized water reactors generating over 50,000-horse power each.

Forward of the huge sail, the missiles were gone along with their silos and launch tubes. The cavernous space that once housed nuclear destruction was now the temporary home to a full company of elite Russian Marines moving into the operational phase of their mission.

The Marines, black dots against the vast backdrop of white, were already on the move as the sub slipped away. Hand picked from the Northern Russian Naval Command, they were used to operating in a world of ice, having spent most of their lives in the frozen wastelands of Siberia and the Northern Arctic. Dressed in white camouflage 'freezers', their small fleet of specialized fast-track armored snow vehicles accelerated easily over the smooth flat sheet. To their left the imposing white mass of Mount Erebus towered above them; in front of them, thirty miles of nothing and then Ross Island, their objective.

It took nearly an hour for the Russian Marines to cover the distance. When Hut Point came into view, they split in two groups, some turning into Blackwater Bay and the pier, while the others continued past Observation Point and onto Scott Base and Williams Airfield.

McMurdo was by far the largest station on the southern continent. Built on bare volcanic rock, which was exposed in summer, the station was not a pretty picture: a scattering of bland buildings against a backdrop of dirt and snow. It was the primary logistics base for U.S. Antarctic operations. The station was essentially a small city at the end of the earth with over 85 buildings, 3000 resident scientists and support staff, and all the luxuries, including stores, clubs and fancy stuff like sewers and power lines.

The arrival of the Russian Marines was barely noticed. The dock maintenance crew heard them first. The sound of the revving engines

powering the specialized armored snow tracks stopped them for a moment as they watched in curiosity. They shrugged and kept working. The Russian assault team leader gave the signal for the first squad to detach and secure the ship and pier. He took the rest of the assault team and headed directly towards the Field Operations Communication Center, which operated satellite, radio and data communications. The Ham radio shack was not forgotten either. The instructions for that were simple. Level the building.

The armored snow tracks drove with a purpose. The Russians knew exactly where they were going. They had planned and practiced the mission for more than three weeks. The officer commanding the first assault team tasked with securing McMurdo drove directly to building 167, the USAP operation and administration center. The Russian Major stepped purposefully from his tracked mount and strode into the chalet, passing without a glance the stunned administration personnel staffing the front desks and walking directly into the office of the Senior U.S. Representative in Antarctica - a National Science Foundation official. It was over quickly.

Fifteen miles away the second team had a potentially tougher job - securing Williams Field. On their way, they dropped troops off to prevent any communications or trouble coming from Scott Base and pushed onto the permanent airfield. There was not a single shot fired. On the ground were a C130 and C17 transport. The Marines rounded up the stunned crew quickly, preventing them from utilizing the aircrafts' communications equipment to alert anyone else.

It took less than 15 minutes to secure the two stations, ship and airfield. The Russians knew there would be others still outside their net, but that was not a problem; they would have to come in from the cold sometime. The primary mission objective was to secure the airfield since there were Russian support aircraft due in less

than 30 minutes, waiting for clearance to land. The Russian commander transmitted an all clear.

On schedule, the deep thunder of heavy jets could be heard as Russian Ilyushins code named 'Candid' by NATO, approached Williams Field. The Russian Marine Major looked at his watch, right on time he thought with satisfaction. The Il-76MF(TF) was a high winged, four-engine transport ideally suited to cold and rough field operations. The Candid could carry 50 ton of cargo, including armored vehicles, artillery and other hardware, over thousands of miles. The first aircraft to touch down had barely stopped before the rear ramps dropped to the ground to disgorge more men and equipment that quickly fanned out over the airstrip to prepare for the aircraft behind them. One after the other they landed on the airstrip and were directed by the ground force.

Back at McMurdo the typhoon had made her way to the pier. The docked U.S. icebreaker had been hurriedly backed out under emergency diesel power to make way for the typhoon and her sister ship as they broke through the pack ice to the wharf.

The huge submarines, having discharged their first responsibility were now ready for the second part of their mission. They still carried a lethal load of torpedoes and cruise missiles and were now free to go on the offensive.

At the same time at Scott Base, Brian was recovering consciousness. When he finally opened his eyes the doctor and the nurse he had seen previously were gone, replaced now by a Russian Marine who guarded the door. His initial hunch had been right; the Russians had taken the base. He wondered whether his message had got through to the right people. The Russians wouldn't know about the Dry Valley incident yet he reasoned. No doubt they were having troubles with communication as well, so even if something did surface, it would be

a while to put two and two together. He noticed his arm was in a sling. The Russian guard looked at him.

"You are awake." The guard said in Russian.

Brian didn't appear to understand, he made a snapping gesture with his hands and pointed to the arm, he moaned something unintelligible. The guard came closer, and bent over to try and hear what he was saying. With his good arm Brian smashed his palm into the guard's solar plexus, the man collapsed to the floor. Brian examined the body, he was still breathing. There was no point in killing if you didn't need to. However, the guy could wake up at anytime.

Brian looked quickly around the room and found the answer to that problem as he rifled through the drugs cabinet; Benzodiazepines, an anaesthetic with a useful property of inducing sleep and amnesia. The Russian Marine would wake up with a sore head and not a clue about what happened. After injecting the unconscious soldier, Brian carefully shaved and then quickly swapped clothes. He poked his head out of the door. There was another guard at the end of the hall. He hoped like hell these guys were not well acquainted.

He stepped into the hallway. "Эй, я нуждаюсь в моче." Brian said in Russian saying he needed a piss.

"теперь! Что относительно заключенного?" The Russian asked about the prisoner.

"Да, заключенный является не сознающим." Hamilton replied telling him the prisoner was unconscious."

Okay be quick the other guard said.

Brian walked straight out of the clinic and onto the main road of the station. That was when he saw her again. *Holy shit!* She looked at him in surprise; the three marines escorting her looked at him as well.

"I know you northern marines are desperate, but three guys to pick up one woman?" He said loudly in fluent Russian, a well placed regional accent in his practiced rendition. "It's been that long?" The men escorting her all laughed.

"I just use Vodka" He said laughing with a skulling motion, the other hand in the sling suggesting something else he did. They laughed louder. He dared not look at her. The recognition in his eyes would be too obvious and he couldn't trust her reactions; not only that, every time he saw this woman the world went to hell. He kept walking.

Natasha Braithwaite was nothing less than pole axed. The Russian soldier walking across the road looked exactly like Hamilton. He spoke heavily in Russian and all of the men laughed. She had no idea what was going on. Hamilton, she was sure it was him, turned as he laughed with the rest, and walked away with a casual wave. He never looked at her once.

JOCHQ Bungendore Australia

December 6 1400 hrs UTC, midnight local. CJOPS learns fire will hit in 70hrs.

The Chief of Joint Operations (CJOPS) closed the connection of the recently installed NSTS Secure Telephone System. From the pan into the fire, he thought. This was a term that would come back to him in a way that could not be imagined. The CJOPS looked across his desk to his senior staff officer. "The shit is truly going to hit the fan. One of our guys has just spoken to Stringer. He - Stringer, that is - you remember the guy, big fellow."

The staff officer nodded his head. He vaguely remembered some large fellow that was part of the U.S. intelligence network.

"He thinks the burning oil head at Vostok will reach the oil lake in less than 70 hours from now. Unfortunately it matches our own early estimates. Worst-case scenario, we understand, is a possible global catastrophe; at the very best, Australia, New Zealand and our other southern partners will be in a cloud of choking smoke for the next hundred years. A cloud so thick it will kill every sun-reliant organism that exists."

"Bugger." It made a nuclear winter or Krakatoa event sound like partially cloudy days.

"Precisely ... bugger." He paused. "Set up an urgent meeting with the Crisis Management Team and EMA within 60 minutes." He thought for a moment before coming to a decision. "Declare a Civil Emergency and put our entire defense force on alert. Issue a full call-up of Reserves and get every civil rescue, fire fighter, doctor, dentist and person able to help (Protected occupations managed at state level), on standby and ready to go." The CJOPS looked out the window. He wasn't giving the Prime Minister much choice here. But time was definitely not on their side. He would rather be fired for getting it wrong than damning the nation to oblivion. "The Prime Minister,"

he continued, "will be declaring a national emergency. Every television station, radio station, newspaper and every media outlet will be directed to broadcast any communication we deem necessary. If anyone stuffs around, the AFP are ordered to arrest those responsible on the spot.

"Last, but most important, get COG, the Combined Operations Group, to begin a plan to visit Vostok with FABs, courtesy of Mister Stringer, within 48 hours."

Australian Defense Headquarters Canberra

December 6. 0630 hours UTC. CJOPS launches Daisy Cutter mission

The senior intelligence-briefing officer didn't waste time. "As a result of the recent intelligence estimates, we have a New Threat Upgrade. We are cross-referencing the numbers now but have issued REDCOMS to all defense units. We think Colonel Hamilton is right. His guys have given us some pretty interesting calculations. According to them we have less than seventy-two hours before the wellhead fire reaches the oil lake and ignites it.

"So we are designating that event three N-Days from now (N-days are days before D-Day). We have in motion a plan that can potentially extinguish the flame; I will get to that in a moment. Before we can do anything about the wellhead, we have to deal with the entry of the Russian and Chinese fleets into the theater of operations. We have to get past them. They are now close enough with the Han AFB and tanker support to project air power over almost the entire region.

"The Chinese fleet is considerable, including its aircraft carrier and more than 40 plus modern and highly capable surface combatants, not counting submarine and air assets. If you look at your little electronic notepads, you can see the list of hardware we are facing." The staffer waited a moment while the audience scanned their notepads.

"Our AOPs are between 60° and 130° east, which is on the border of the French claim. We understand the Chinese AOPs are about the same. With the fleet, TU95s, H-6Ms and Backfires on round the clock operations, they have effectively drawn a metal fence between Australia and Antarctica.

"Within the last few hours we have also lost all contact with Davis, Scott and numerous other stations." Most of the assembled already knew this, but that didn't stop them from muttering beneath their breaths. "The Chinese and Russians claim they know nothing about it...naturally. But they have issued a communiqué that says any aircraft attempting to fly to the magnetic South Pole or Vostok Station will be shot down and that any vessel attempting to land near Zhong Shan or any of the two country's respective stations will, given recent events, be assumed hostile and a threat to their legitimate presence in Antarctica.

"Global Hawk via our surviving Tandem flights have identified numerous air defense missile batteries in and around these stations." He pointed to the large multi-functional command and control screen, which showed a map of the entire theater of operations overlaid with friendly and enemy assets.

"How the hell did they get that equipment in?" someone asked.

"It looks like the French let the Russians unload the equipment off the ice breaker Arktika at Dermont D'Urville and forward position it. The Chinese used the resupply ship Xue Long to load into Zhong Shan. Both these vessels are large. Big enough to land a brigade's worth of heavy equipment each onto hard ice. While we can't see much below the sixtieth with satellites, we have seen a lot of transports flying into the area; obviously fortifying their positions. These have been flown from Martin de'Vivies and Argentina.

"U.S. Defense Intelligence believes the Chinese and Russians will attempt to land more ground forces near Vostok; probably on the

strip that Colonel Hamilton built with the polar base crew to get the extraction aircraft in. Both the Vostok and original magnetic polar base skiway were wrecked by the Russian cruise missiles.

"The Russians are playing it safe and avoiding any conflict going in. Their Pacific fleet is headed through the Tasman Ocean to the edge of the Amundsen ice pack and the Russian research station at Russkaya, outside of Marie Byrd Land. All of this is unclaimed territory. They still have that huge icebreaker down there so they could potentially use that to carve a channel closer to the coast. The Russian Atlantic assets are probably headed for Novolazarevskaya, a base they have in the Norwegian claim.

"The Chinese, on the other hand, are pretty pissed off about losing the Taizhou and look like they might push their main fleet past the sixtieth parallel into Australian Territory to make for their base at Zhong Shan. From there, with air support from Zhong Shan and heavy equipment off the ships, including lots of defensive fire power, they will then go for the skiway at the Magnetic Pole and to Vostok from there."

"What are the options?" one of the officers asked.

"In less than two hours we will face off the main Chinese fleet at the sixtieth parallel. We can make an argument of it or let them go through. You can see on the display the position of all our current assets here."

"What about waiting till they get to Zhong Shan? All bottled up there it will be like shooting fish in a barrel."

"We thought about that. They will set up a defensive perimeter of mines, subs and airpower that has the advantage of concentrating firepower. They will have little to no threat from the interior and therefore only have to look north. It would be like walking into a bear cave in the dark. The Chinese Naval force is currently due east of the Heard and McDonald Islands, approximately 150 kilometers from

the sixtieth parallel and Australian Territory. We expect them to try and cross the 60th."

"What about the Americans?" The Commander of Joint Logistics asked. They were already working over time on the anticipated logistic requirements.

"Everybody is still blaming them for starting this whole thing, which is why we are trying to get Colonel Hamilton back here ASAP. Apparently he is carrying evidence that proves it wasn't the yanks that threw the e-bomb."

"Does he say who did?"

"No. No, he didn't say that."

The CJOPS stood up and took the podium. "It will take us 24 hours to recon Vostok Station and launch the Daisy Cutter mission. It's all of our jobs to make sure we are ready to go. Time spent in planning means less time wasted later when lives are on the line."

Avalon Victoria **Preparing the Bone Yard Wrangler.**

The 'call' came before anyone expected it. Such was the urgency that not just normal precautions, but any precaution that got in the way of the slated mission was ignored. It was to be a maximum effort, the magnitude of the threat so grave that virtually any risk that had even had a smidgen of a chance was worth taking. Buck Shot's plan had him using just one Pig to go to Vostok. Buck Shot decided it would be an F-111S, A8-272 aka the Bone Yard Wrangler. The least reason of which, she boasted a forward landing gear assembly that would be a necessity for what he had planned. The others would sortie with the F-111C's. No one else had enough time, any time in fact, on the F-111S to effectively use them.

From that moment forwards A8-272 was his personal ride. Along with Jake his systems operator, they would task and continually test

themselves and the aircraft. Every moment he was not needed on the ground, he was in the air. The rest of his training would have to be conducted on the way to the target.

Media. Int.

For Immediate Release.

Australian Ambassador and the entire diplomatic staff expelled at gunpoint from their embassy offices

By Vincent Gray, Media Int. Press Writer.

Dec 6 0500 Hours UTC. Adding to the deepening rift between Australia and China, early this morning the Australian Ambassador and the entire diplomatic staff were expelled at gunpoint from their embassy offices and taken to Beijing's international airport with nothing other than the clothes they were wearing. In a statement issued by the Australian Prime Minister Dennis Gordon today, he stated his government has and is making repeated requests to Beijing to resolve the current crisis through dialogue and to avoid conflict at all costs. Australia re-issued its regret for the loss of the Taizhou and its own F-111 crew but did not apologize for the incident as the UN has requested, pointing out that the aircraft were protecting the integrity of Australian territory and had acted in self defense after being fired upon.

There has been no response from the Chinese government. Gordon also notified the UN, Russia and China, of Australia's recent declaration of a state of emergency in relation to the threat of the burning oil head at Vostok Station. Environmental analysts have strongly suggested that if the fire melts down to the massive lake, the result will be catastrophic. 'This situation is alarming; and apocalyptic would better characterize the event,' Gordon said. 'I believe we should all be far more worried about the wellhead fire than making grabs for land or oil.'

The Russian President has dismissed the Australian claims. This is a futile attempt to regain control of the Vostok oil field, even after using electromagnetic pulse weapons to try to achieve the same result through force with their allies the U.S. This typifies the shotgun approach to international diplomacy these coalition countries use when they are unable to get their own way through dialogue or negotiation. They refuse to play by the umpire's rule when it doesn't suit them."=

Within the last hour, Prime Minister Gordon had made a personal plea to China's Secretary General to hold back its South Pacific fleet and allow Australian emergency teams to put out the fire, inviting the Chinese to join the effort. China dismissed this recent overture, issuing a statement to China's leading daily newspaper in which it accused Australia of an "unprovoked attack" on the Taizhou while repeating the Chinese government's intention to protect Chinese nationals "wherever they may be." End.

The 60th Parallel/第60平行**December 6 0830 UTC. 1800hrs local. Chinese cross Parallel.**

It was still daylight at the 60th parallel, an invisible line in the sea, oblivious to the naked eye. But to the electronic brains on the Chinese and Australian warships, it was measured to the foot.

The tension in the command center of each warship was palpable. Running at an even speed, the countdown to crossing was precise; one hundred and fifty eight seconds.

"Battle stations, battle stations," rang out on every ship.

The ANZAC, Adelaide Class Frigates and Hobart Class Destroyers stood back from the line by 20,000 yards, giving themselves room to fire and maneuver. It also meant that as the Chinese crossed the line, nearly all the surface combatants were within each other's range.

Admiral Wen Jinsong stood on the bridge of the Chinese aircraft carrier Shi Lang, watching the Captain direct last minute preparations for combat. While the carrier was much smaller than its American counterparts, it carried the powerful Granit (Shipwreck) anti-ship missile system that had a range of over 350 miles, not to mention some other surprises that the Admiral wondered if he would have a chance to use, hopefully not. Glancing to the port side he could see the PLAN ship Haikou plough through the southern swells the water raking past her bow and over the huge 171 number on the side of her hull. She was a Luyang-II class Missile Destroyer which featured an indigenously developed four-array multifunction phased array radar (PAR) similar to the Aegis AN/SPY-1 equipped by the U.S. Arleigh Burke class and Japanese Kongo class DDG. The ship was also armed with the indigenous HQ-9 air defence missile system comparable to the Russian S-300F/Rif in performance, and the newly developed YingJi-62 (C-602) anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM). Also out there, he knew,

were the Lanzhou, Harbin, Hangzhou and others, the latest in Chinese Naval development. Behind these were many older but reliable missile frigates and below, the Han, Kilo, Yuan and Shang class submarines. All of them ready for a fight. Would the Australians have the balls, he wondered? The digital counter showed 60 seconds.

Already launched were the carrier's air wing of SU-27 and SU-33 Flankers, the Yak-41Ms and seven Kamov Ka-27 anti-submarine helicopters, not counting those helicopters launched by the missile frigates.

On the other side of the 60th parallel, Wen's counterpart, Rear Admiral Kenneth Sullivan, watched the large combat screen in front him. The screen projected every visible surface and subsurface asset overlaid with the ship ID, direction, and speed. Also programmed in and visible was the 60th parallel with an estimated time of arrival. Less than 45 seconds. The Admiral listened intently to overhead communication, waiting for a cue from HQJOC. While he could defend the fleet, he was not yet given permission to start a war. The seconds wound down.

Every missile operator on every ship, both Chinese and Australian, was intensely alert. Opposing ships were already locked into the firing and targeting systems. It would be a battle of who could shoot first, fastest and most accurately. Five seconds to go.

Rear Admiral Kenneth Sullivan looked around the bridge of the guided missile frigate HMAS ANZAC. The ship's Captain looked calm. There was nothing else to say now, this is what his men had trained for; they knew what to do and would do it well.

The first Chinese ship reached the line. Sullivan knew his superiors at Joint Forces Command were watching the same screen as himself. The expectation was intense. The Luh Class destroyer crossed over the line. On every ship the combat operation officers held their breath, mikes in hand ready to give the orders; the combat

system operators tracking the targets waited for the order, their hands poised to initiate and launch their missiles.

On the bridge of the HMAS ANZAC, every nerve sang in the anticipation of the phone ringing. The seconds ticked by. The next Chinese warship moved up and crossed over the line. In each combat operations center, on every bridge and on every weapons and tracking system, the crew, so mentally geared up for action, began to give each other nervous glances. Gradually the entire Chinese taskforce crossed the line. The phone remained silent. Finally the order came.

"Stand down, stand down all systems." And to steering: "Steer course 180 south"

The orders were given and the ships of the Joint Australian and New Zealand Task Force heeled to starboard as they moved to increase their distance between themselves and the Chinese fleet.

Chinese Southern Task Force/中国南部的特遣部队

December 6. 1830 hrs. "So they backed down," General Chen Jianguo

"So they backed down," General Chen Jianguo responded acidly to the news. "As I said they would. Honor, and the Chinese people will demand heavy payment for the Taizhou. But for now, the fact they have faltered allows us to get on with business."

"It appears that way Sir. But these are not people to back down. I think there is more to it." Wen said speaking to the General over the PLAN Video Communication Network.

"You are a pessimist Wen. They know they are outgunned. Without the U.S., they blinked when they knew we meant business. They know we are angry about the Taizhou and that any provocation would invoke an immediate response. Indeed, they probably knew we were hoping to have the excuse to fire on them. They are not stupid."

"Yes, I agree with that General. But I still feel we are missing something."

The General bristled slightly. The Admiral was becoming annoying. It was obvious. The Australians had buckled when confronted with a superior force. Why wouldn't they? Most smart military commanders would back off and fight another day. Why did Wen find this so hard to understand? "All the more reason to be vigilant." He dismissed the concern and went to the reason for his call. "We have declared a 200-kilometer protective security zone around the fleet. The UN is conveying that message to the Australians as we speak. If any foreign ship infringes that, sink it. These orders are being sent to you in writing now."

The implication to Wen was immediate. "This means the security zone will be an ever moving line."

"Yes, and you must vigorously enforce it," he said forcefully.

Admiral Wen Jinsong realized that the CMC had decided on engagement as part of its strategy. Now with every turn of the big ship's screws, the closer his task force would come to that moment. The new security zone if enforced was the key to bringing the opposed forces to blows; it would inevitably envelope other naval forces at some point, providing a trigger to Chinese forces to take defensive action. Accepting that, his decision to move his flagstaff to the aircraft carrier Shi Lang was a good one; he would order his present flag ship, the supply vessel Nancang into Zhong Shan. If he was going to get into a fight, the Nancang, while very comfortable, was not the ship to do it from.

Canberra, Australia.

0900 UTC, 1830 local time. Chinese announce protective security zone.

It took less than 30 minutes for the Chinese message to be relayed through the UN to the Australian diplomatic mission and then the PM.

Prime Minister Gordon was fuming. "A protective security zone! Not only that but it's a fucking moving security zone!" he yelled, adding, "Filthy bastards." The PM never swore. He was either losing control or very pissed off.

"They relayed the message to us through the UN," the Australian SECDEF said.

"So the UN has become a delivery boy for the Chinese now! This is a rather transparent ploy to initiate a contact, so they then can blame us for the hostility through violation of their self-proclaimed space. And the UN sanctions it. If we were off their coast and tried the same thing the UN would laugh at us."

"Point is, they are saying it's not our coast," the SECDEF said, not wanting to disagree.

"We have a damn sight better claim than they do. It's akin to us going up there and claiming Taiwan or the Spratley Islands. The Chinese didn't have any conscience taking those territories, as well as Tibet and others, did they? Given the history of the Antarctic claim, the fact we are the closest and only sovereign state, the ownership is hardly contestable. Indeed it is enshrined in the very principles that the likes of Russia used to retain Chechnya, and China on Tibet, Taiwan and numerous other territorial acquisitions. The most important distinction is that the Antarctic territory was vacant when we claimed it, and in the case of Russian and Chinese claims in their own regions, we did not try to occupy or send troops or support those territories in dispute. Yet here they are on our doorstep, all the way from the opposite side of the planet. We damn well are in our rights!"

"But in the international press they can give their northern hemisphere argument a good run, especially in Europe."

"I think it deserves one more shot diplomatically, but we aren't going to back down."

"You don't sound confident."

Gordon sighed. "I'm not. The Chinese aren't going to back down either. This security zone thing was setup to deliberately draw us into a fight. We don't have any choice though, it's Vostok or bust."

Media. Int.

For Immediate Release

Australia Demands Chinese Withdrawal

By Vincent Gray, Media Int. Press Writer.

Dec 6 09450 EST. The Australian Government has used harsh diplomatic language in its demand for the Chinese to withdraw its forces from its claimed territory and Self Exclusion Zone in Antarctica. The Australian claim is one that most countries increasingly believe to be invalid and that Chinese forces are operating legitimately in international waters. The UN Security Council has met in urgent session passing a resolution put forward by Russia, France, China and Germany to help resolve the conflict. Australia risks the possibility of censure, economic sanctions and potential UN enforcement if it fails to abide by its rulings. End.

1100 Hrs UTC. UN enforcement, Indo and the Global Hawk shoot down.

The Prime Minister looked at the press release in dismay, snorting. "UN enforcement, the Undecided Nations? Where was that during every genocide they managed to ignore in the last half-century? Now they get the balls. Now the permanent Security Council is the cartel of three. I guess the greed factor is really kicking in, overcoming their normal complacency and gutless inaction.

"It looks like half the UN has been bought off with the promise of cheap oil. They also obviously think the Chinese will win this standoff while the U.S. is hunkered down in the Pacific."

"The Indonesians think so too," the SECDEF, said. "They were scared shitless the Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea could reach as far as the Natuna Islands." The islands guarded the

funnel to Java, and were the site of extensive gas fields. He waved a piece of paper. "They have just withdrawn all military co-operation in favor of Russian and Chinese relationships. The Chinese in return have promised not to attempt to resume ownership of the Natuna Islands and to provide military aid.

"You can bet your left nut when they receive the rest of their Kilos, Luda class destroyers, Sukhois and the rest of it, they will be breathing down our neck in the Timor Sea and all the way to the Barrier Reef." A prediction that would come back to haunt him. "What's the situation with the Chinese fleet now?" Gordon asked.

"The bulk of the force is unloading on the coast. They have established several guided missile destroyers as pickets with the bulk of the force standing just off the Amery Ice Shelf and heading east. With the 200-kilometre exclusion zone around their ships we can't even get close. Trouble is those bloody Shipwreck, Sizzler and Sunburn missiles. Well outside our envelope. Even our latest Block II Harpoons on the ANZAC's don't have those sort of legs. Both the Harbin and Qingdao can also lob at us from over 120 kilometers away, not to mention the capability of their other combatants. Point is we are out ranged. There is no way we can attempt a surface engagement. We are against a superior force that outnumber and outgun us. They also WANT a fight. They would love to bust our nuts over this. At the moment, the Chinese, Russians and their Euro mates think they have this almost in the bag."

"Maybe they do?" the Prime Minister said.

"It sure as hell does look like it, doesn't it?" But his expression looked determined.

The Prime Minister thought of the men and women that made up the crews of the submarines, frigates and aircraft that might have to go into harms way. He saw the Hamilton brothers, like the rest,

committed against all odds. "We are not quite out of the game yet," he said.

Thousands of miles south the Australian Task Force steamed at a safe distance from their adversary, shadowing their every move. In Avalon, ground and aircrews worked tirelessly, checking and rechecking aircraft, preparing for a shooting war.

In the mind of the Rosenbridge Foundation's Alexander Blake, there was only one important question: What was going on in Vostok Station? Stringer's request to include a close look at the wellhead during an SRO flight over Vostok had been approved. The data was critical to confirm or debunk Blake's worry about the wellhead. He now waited patiently to hear the outcome.

While he waited, on almost the other end of the globe, a high flying Global Hawk surveillance aircraft had been orbiting the destroyed station for several minutes before turning north and heading home. It would be a few more minutes before it could communicate with its mission control and send its data payload from beneath the satellite blackout.

To the northeast of the Hawk's flight path, Russian SAM sites sniffed the air. Situated on a small rocky outcrop, a BIG BIRD long-range surveillance and tracking radar had detected the SRO flight at 50,000 feet over 320 miles away. After several minutes the target was seen by the doppler target acquisition radar and then the phased-array engagement radar. The Russian Major looked up from the tracking screen. Global Hawk, he thought, obviously trying to communicate with any surviving forces they might have had left in Vostok. He was seated in the battery command post and engagement control center, one of the many tracked vehicles that made up the heavy S400 long-range SAM battery.

"Kill it," he ordered the missile operators. The command given, he looked out the vehicle's windscreen at the cold forbidden ground of the Scott Peninsula. It looked very much like home. His was the first unit to deploy here and the first he hoped to be credited with a kill.

From the vastness of the white landscape he looked back to the towering columns that were the missile containers, elevated to the launch position. They were big: eight meters long and weighing 1800 kilograms. The Grumble missiles were mostly a one-shot, one-kill scenario weapon system, with a 95-percent kill ratio against aircraft and almost 100 percent against cruise missiles. The left-most canister's lid flipped open and the big missile catapulted from its container. The vertically launched missile used a single-stage solid propellant rocket motor, which ignited in a massive plume of smoke and fire that rapidly accelerated the missile to more than 5600 feet per second.

The Australian Global Hawk targeted by the Russian Grumble system was trying to communicate with an RAAF Wedgetail, which was acting as an Airborne Communications Terminal much further north, which in turn was able to feed through to satellite coverage above the 60th parallel. The Launch Recovery Element and Mission Control Element for the Global Hawk's deployment were based in Launceston, Tasmania.

Hunched over his controls, the pilot of the Global Hawk looked with concern at the incoming track of the Russian missile. They were only just now beginning to get communications from the Hawk via the Wedgetail, but it was still rough. They needed the payload of precious information before it got killed.

"Locked?" the pilot asked the Payload Operator (PO).

"Locked. Nothing much we can do there," the PO said tracking the event on his workstation.

"Have you got the payload?"

"Not as yet. Give me some time?"

"Roger that," the pilot replied, wondering how he was going to do that, considering that the incoming missile was closing at a little less than two miles every second. "Sixty seconds," he said, the impending death of his satellite aircraft already depressing him.

The Global Hawk was a Low Observability, High Altitude and Endurance UAV, or LO-HAE. Its greatest defense was height against mostly smaller mobile systems.

"Forty seconds."

The Hawks other defense was its standoff distance from the threat, a defense traded for valuable information. He hoped the data was good. It was from the start a risky mission. He had never lost a bird before, but when the S400's target acquisition radar acquired them he knew she was history. "Ten seconds."

"Almost done."

The almost two-ton missile dived into the car-sized Global Hawk at over 2000m/s, its proximity fuse detonating the 230-pound HE warhead. The pilot didn't have to say zero. The screens fizzed. "Shit!"

中国的大厅/Great Hall of China

December 6. 1200 UTC. Yuen Xinghua laughs at Australian demand to leave.

The Central Committee Secretary General, Yuen Xinghua, laughed at the Australian communiqué and demand. After their humiliating back down on the 60th parallel their words were hollow and meaningless. But the sting of the sinking of the Taizhou still irritated him. Handing the note to General Chen Jianguo, he said, "Read this! I thought they might have learned a lesson."

"It appears not," the old General said, pondering the note. "Naturally we will not consider their demands to withdraw."

"Of course not. In fact I believe they still need to learn a lesson. You understand what I mean, General, don't you?"

Yes he did. The operational plan was already well in motion. With his latest orders given, it would just be a matter of time before they engaged the Australians.

On board the Chinese flagship, Admiral Wen Jinsong read his orders from the CMC a second time before handing them to the Captain of the Shi Lang. The print out was the confirmation of orders from Wen's earlier discussion and both the men knew what this meant; neither of them liked it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



HMAS Melbourne (FFG 05) an Adelaide class guided missile frigate.

Boston Massachusetts USA

Geophysicists work out FAB plan to snuff fire

In Boston, Massachusetts, a small team of geophysicists and chemists had been working on the wellhead problem. The last burst of data from the doomed Global Hawk had reached an orbiting Wedgetail AWACS. The data analysis was not just confirming the earlier suspicions, but revealing something even far more frightening.

It looked to be true then, he thought. The Vostok fire really was burning to hell on earth. Alexander Blake ran his fingers through his thinning hair. They could be wrong. But three men, renowned experts in thermal energies and fluid hydraulics, all working independently, had come back with virtually the same numbers. And they all nearly mirrored his own calculations. Working from satellite

imagery and Global Hawk data, his small team had been able to measure the amount of energy being released by the wellhead fire and its gaseous make up. From this they had constructed tables to help explain the melt rate and subsequently the sink rate of the hole itself. Comparing data twelve hours apart and using laser from the Global Hawk, they were able to accurately measure the depth of the holes, and then cross-reference that with their other observations. Obviously, direct access to the site would have been much better. But this was as good as they were going to get.

"A little less than four days then," he said holding the report. The men nodded in confirmation. It was just a thin piece of white reflex A4 paper but it felt like it weighed a ton. "Margin of error, plus or minus three to four hours." Blake's hand shook a little bit, but he took a deep breath and said, "All right, now we know the nature of the beast, maybe we can figure out how to kill it. How long will it take to get some ideas on controlling this thing?"

An hour later the small team had developed a short list of possible methods to put out the burn. After removing those solutions that required men and equipment on the ground, they were left with just one.

"Fuel air bomb," NASA's atmospheric and combustion expert said. "But it would have to be in the range of 55,000 pounds to put this bastard out and would have to detonate inside the hole, but before striking either the sides or the bottom. The hole will be greater than 300 feet wide at its base and up to half a mile wide near the surface. It will be anywhere between 4500 to 9000 feet deep."

"Why not a heavy conventional round, like a cruise missile?" Blake asked, looking for something simple.

"Nope," he said shaking his head. "We also need massive over pressure. The fuel it is burning uses a lot of stored oxygen. At

the same time we extinguish the flame by suffocation we have to stop the continual inflow of the lake water."

"Nuke? An air or ground burst?" That got some eyes rolling followed by more shaking heads.

"Nope. We ran simulations on every piece of ordnance we had and then turned to some more fanciful ideas like large lasers, flooding it, capping the hole - you name it and then some. Always came back to one simple answer, a fuel air bomb. Only that has the capacity to suck air out, provide over-pressure while not generating shock waves that might cause even greater problems. Daisy Cutters, I think is what they were nicknamed - FAB's."

"Yes, I know what you mean, MOAB's; mothers of all air bombs."

"Good. So we can arrange this and put it out, right? We have bases down there?"

Blake shuffled the papers in his hand absent-mindedly. "I better make some calls."

"Will anybody listen with all that's going on?" one of the men asked.

"I don't know; we have to make them listen," Blake replied. A few minutes later he dialed the CIA's David Stringer and said flatly, "I'm afraid our original assessment was a little off target."

The Great Southern Ocean/伟大的南部的海洋

December 7. Jinsong's fleet and Orion shoot down, HMAS Darwin sinking.

The Commander of the South Pacific Fleet, Admiral Wen Jinsong, separated his force into three packages. He ordered the older diesel subs to operate on the surface in order to increase the fleet's spread and its subsequent 200-kilometer security zone. It was not a plan to his liking, forced upon him by the CMC. The spread of the

fleet compromised the ability for each warship to protect the others, leaving gaping holes in the defenses.

General Chen had laughed at Wen's concerns. The U.S. fleet was still in the northern Tasman Sea and the Australians had no way of threatening China's vastly superior naval force. Wen was not nearly as confident but said nothing.

The Chinese task force, after escorting the transport vessels to the edge of the ice pack near Zhong Shan, had turned around and were steaming east beneath the 60th parallel.

Ahead of the fleet, the Captain of the Lin San Liu, an improved Kilo-class submarine, looked closely at the sonar display panel. He could sense the operator beginning to work a contact. Making way just a few feet beneath the surface, the diesel electric submarine with the hull number 366 idled through the water at just three knots. She was deadly quiet, just her optics, communication and ESM mast protruding to the surface.

"Captain, ESM room, new priority contact on bearing 117. Identifying new contact as airborne radar, strength increasing."

"ESM, do they have a return on us?"

"Negative. Range is still too great. At current closing rate new contact will have a return on us in five minutes."

"Secure antenna, drop all masts," the Captain ordered. "Weapons, Control, prioritize target as 02." The Kilo-class sub did not carry any anti-air capability. So there was nothing the Kilo could do about the aircraft other than report it.

"Target prioritized as 02," Weapons responded. The Watch Officer also replied, confirming that all antennas and masts had been retracted.

The sonar operator suddenly bolted upright in his seat, the pallor on his face unnoticeable in the reddish light of the sonar room. Despite the reliance on visual scanning, he had still slowly

scanned back and forth, listening for unusual sounds. The faint "splash, splash, splash, splash" he had heard to their port side was all too familiar.

"CAPTAIN, SONAR. SPLASHES IN THE WATER TO OUR PORT SIDE," he bellowed into his headset's mike.

Sonar buoys? The Captain thought, probably directional frequency and ranging types commonly used by the RAAF PC3 Orions. "Tell me more sonar," the Captain said, a little annoyed.

"Four splashes, Captain, from the same direction as the aircraft."

"Get ready to raise the ESM and communications masts." It was unlikely the aircraft had detected them, the Kilo Captain reasoned. It was worth the risk to get the information of the aircraft's location and activity back to the task force.

"Communications, prepare to send a report to fleet. State: type, range, position and heading of target 02. Report when communication confirmed. Raise the ESM and communications masts."

Once again the communication mast was raised, but for less than five seconds. The ESM room quickly took down the aircraft's track information and handed it to communications, which then fired the information off to the Chinese flagship.

"Receipt confirmed," the radio room reported.

"Drop all masts. Ship control, change depth to 400 meters, deep angle, speed three knots, rig for silent running. Steer course nine zero east," the Captain said, running a course adjacent to the PC3 Orion's last known heading.

Back on the fleet's flagship, Admiral Wen Jinsong read the report from the Lin San Liu. The Admiral ordered the Luh-class destroyer ranging to the front of his task force to head directly towards the aircraft contact. At the same time Wen ordered his northernmost destroyers to steer due north at flank speed. He then

invited the Captain of the Shi Lang to the big digital plot board that dominated the center of control room, saying, "This is the location of the P3 Orion reported to us by the Lin San Liu. I want you to position some Flankers north of that position. They carry medium range missiles, Captain?"

"Yes they do."

"Excellent." The Admiral turned to his executive staff officer. "Order one of the Mings to the surface." He pointed to the positions on the display. "That immediately places both this ANZAC frigate and the surveillance aircraft within our security zone." He turned back to the captain of the Shi Lang. "Once that is confirmed Captain, shoot down the Australian aircraft." If the General wanted retribution for the sinking of the Taizhou, then he will have it the Admiral thought cynically. "Then send a ULF message to the Lin San Liu to sink the Australian destroyer to its east."

The crew of the Australian AP-3C Orion believed they were well outside of the Chinese self-declared security zone when they picked up the Luh class destroyer turning towards them. While the Orion was traditionally a dedicated sub hunter, its new AN/APS-137B(V)5 radar also gave it excellent anti-surface warfare (ASuW) capabilities. Its long-range radar had already provided the eleven-man crew a detailed picture of the area of operations, a picture that was fed in real time via satellite to the HQJOC and any active RAN warships and aircraft. It had also momentarily detected a periscope, the same information immediately available to the Australian warships deployed to cover the Chinese fleet.

When the pilot of the long range Orion aircraft came up to the 200-kilometer mark he turned due east. It was then that Wen Jinsong sprung the trap. The old Chinese Ming Class submarine surfaced 50 miles in front of the Orion. The sub hunter immediately detected the surfacing Ming, turning north to avoid any conflict.

The first indication something was wrong was when the the ALR-2001 ESM picked up a search radar behind them, they were being hunted. The Su-33 Flanker pilot launched from the Shi Lang had been cued by the fleets dispersed sensor systems onto the target and had fired up its radar. The pilot went to burners quickly closing with the AP-3C Orion.

Two AA-12 Adder missiles dropped from the Flankers rails. The AP-3C's counter-measure systems automatically fired off flares and chaff along with powerful jamming signals as the pilot desperately threw the big airplane into a series of hard turns. But the actions were futile. The Adders were well within range and highly maneuverable with active radar guidance. The Amraamski, as some called it, was capable of taking out cruise missiles and precision-guided munitions. The big slow moving AP-3C was history before the engagement had even begun. Both missiles struck one after the other, shearing one wing off and then the whole rear section of the aircraft. Most of the mission crew were killed instantly, the remaining survivors pinned in their seats as the now flaming fuselage plunged towards the sea.

The Orion however was not the main catch of the day. Back on the Chinese submarine they were preparing a bigger dish, "Captain, new contact, prioritized as target 03. Single screw making turns for 30 knots. Adelaide Class; matches the Newcastle, bearing 274 west."

"Range?"

"Sixty Kilometers."

The 3000 tonner crept forwards at three knots; to its east, the Australian Adelaide Class frigate, investigating the disappearance of the Orion, barreled in at over 30 knots. She knew that a Kilo was in the area, but not exactly where. The captain of the Kilo had guessed that the new splashes they had heard were debris from the Orion crashing into the ocean. The ultra low frequency message received a

few minutes previously informed the Captain that the frigate was now technically in their security zone. Whether it was the frigate's fault or not, his orders were clear.

"Battle stations, battle stations." The red warning light flashed persistently with the command.

"Helm, Captain, all stop. Weapons, load tubes one and two with Ta Po and open outer doors." He waited for the confirmation. "Come to periscope depth." Running at high speed, he knew the Adelaide Class frigate would be nearly deaf. He also guessed they would slow down and go active once in the area of the crash. He had to be ready to react. The minutes ticked by. They were coming straight down the throat, a more difficult shot.

The periscope broke surface, water blurring the lens. The Kilo Captain trained the scope to the east. He increased the optic power to maximum. The Adelaide Class destroyer filled the magnified lens. He matched range, bearing and speed with sonar and then gave the order.

"Fire tubes one and two. Close the outer doors." There was the familiar hiss of the torpedoes leaving the tubes. "Helm, 300 meters, deep angle, flank speed, steer 180 degrees." The deck of the Kilo tilted forwards as it plunged into the deep. After being ejected with compressed air from the forward tubes, the Ta Po's eight small rocket motors ignited rapidly, accelerating the 6000-pound torpedo. At over 60 knots the large central rocket motor started pushing the rocket torpedo to over 200 knots. The Ta Po's were copies of the Russian Shkval, a solid-rocket-propelled 'torpedo' that achieved incredibly high speeds through water by producing a high-pressure stream of bubbles from its nose and skin, which coated the weapon in a thin layer of gas. The Ta Po flew underwater inside a giant envelope of gas bubbles in a process called "super cavitation."

The sound of these underwater rockets could of course be heard all the way back to China. The targeted vessel having just slowed down heard them immediately.

"Torpedoes in the water, bearing 260. They look like Shkval's." The warning from the sonar operator hit the ship's Captain like a hammer.

"Make maximum revolutions, steer eight zero degrees," the Captain snapped. He looked briefly at his XO. He could tell he was thinking the same thing. It was too late; you could not outrun a 200-knot torpedo.

Unlike many other torpedoes, the Ta Po was guided by an autopilot. The early version was too fast to accommodate the usual guidance and homing systems. The autopilots were pre-programmed for both the Adelaide and ANZAC Class frigates. Nearing the estimated location of the target, the torpedoes slowed, re-acquired the target and entered their terminal homing stage. Designed to attack the large U.S. aircraft carriers, the much smaller frigate FFG 06 HMAS Newcastle was literally torn apart as both torpedoes struck. The 27-foot, 6000-pound weapons, traveling at nearly 200 knots smashed through the frigates hull together. The forward torpedo knifed in below the Darwins's water line near the bow and was exiting the other side of the hull before it detonated. The other Ta Po penetrated into the engine room, exploding deep in the ship's bowels, ripping it apart. No one survived.

The Kilo Captain through his attack periscope watched the entire event, awe struck at the power of the Ta Po. Surely there was nothing that could defeat them now.

**Headquarters Joint Operations Command, HQJOC Bungendore
Response to the Darwin sinking.**

In the ops center in Bungendore Australia, the CJOPS was pacing the floor. "Any word from the Newcastle?" he asked.

"Sorry Admiral. Nothing. The last message was the notification they were being attacked by torpedoes."

"What about the P3?"

"Nothing there either sir."

Admiral Nick Jansen studied his watch. He didn't really need to; he knew what the time was the reality was just difficult to accept.

The other men in the room also looked grim faced. Rear Admiral Nick Jansen personally knew many of the women and men that had crewed the Newcastle. He had met their families, gone to barbeques with them and had shared their lives. Jansen pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind and focused on the moment. The assembled senior command watched as he quickly scribbled a note and gave it to his aide. "Send this. FLASH message." The aide quickly left. "If there is no disagreement, I have recalled the Darwin and Melbourne with immediate effect" he looked to the CDF who happened to be in the Command Centre when everything went off the rails.

General Morel nodded. "Agreed, get them both out of there Nick," Morel said. "Shkval's?"

"Yes that's what I think. Darwin and Melbourne hadn't received the UWW (Underwater warfare) upgrade either. Against that level of threat they are vulnerable."

"That's three ships out of the picture." Not the best way to start the day or a war.

CIA Headquarters.

If the oil fire reaches the lake ...well, we're ALL dead - Blake

David Stringer listened to Blake's strained voice over the phone before speaking.

"Is this like an 'oops, sorry' for causing an international crisis over a threat that doesn't really exist?" Stringer asked, wondering, for a moment, whether to be wrong and create a diplomatic holocaust was worse than Vostok actually going up in a big bang.

"I wish that were the case. If the oil fire reaches the lake ...well, we're ALL dead, not just a lot of Australians. This is the Armageddon. It's so close to the biblical description of the apocalypse as to be scary. We have to stop it at any cost." He waited for David to say something.

"Go on." David's voice was flat and neutral, but Blake had his attention.

"We requested the latest analysis on the water that had been extracted from one end of Vostok Lake. This is the part we missed the first time, thinking it was similar to the other end of the lake. Because of the massive pressure, the water has been unable to freeze. The weight of the ice on this particular piece of the earth's crust has caused it to stretch to a point where the underlying strata have been exposed. The water sits on top of this and has been in direct contact with oil and gas deposits for the last few million years. It is saturated in gases, carbon dioxides, methane and large quantities of oxygen. Under pressure these gases stay trapped in the water. The water in its current state, if exposed to lower pressure and a flame, will explode. The other complication is that any pressure release will allow the oil and gas bubble trapped beneath the lake to escape and add to the mix. David, the lake is like one massive fuel air bomb!"

"Go on," Stringer said impassively.

"In a nut shell, the scenario is this: once the melt-hole gets close enough to the lake for the remaining ice to blow out, the hole will of course become larger. Within seconds, it'll be several hundred feet wide with temperatures hotter than the sun and will keep

expanding exponentially. This in turn creates a huge cavern under the ice, within minutes the ice dome collapses on top of the lake throwing its contents miles into the atmosphere and the bottom half of the world explodes. We will all either; burn, suffocate or be killed by the resulting shockwave or earthquake. Or we'll drown by a sudden massive increase in the sea level heralded by a tsunami several miles high. However you look at it, we are all very dead."

"Bloody hell." Stringer sounded exasperated. "I feel like I'm in some really bad B-Grade movie."

"I wish it was," Blake said. "We could rewrite the ending. What about the Russians and Chinese?" he asked. "Why haven't they figured this out?" It only seemed logical they would be looking at the same thing.

"This whole issue, their agenda, is being driven from the top down," David said. "Very little is being fed back up the command and control channel, only those things they want to hear. Their information channels pretty much work one way; I strongly doubt that anyone voicing such concerns would receive an audience, aside from being too scared to say something in the first place. The top brass don't believe a word we say. They now claim the artifact we recovered from the site is contaminated and can't be trusted, even after trying to kill your guy to get their hands on it. I think they really do believe we dropped a pulse weapon." Stringer paused, then asked, "What are the options, Alex? Can we drop a battlefield nuke on it?"

"No, we looked at that closely, too much danger of fracturing the ice. Even an airburst nuke will create too much of a shockwave. Ironically, dropping a fuel air bomb is about the only answer to prevent the world's greatest fuel air bomb from killing us all. We need to know from you, how long will it take to get this organized?"

Stringer worked the problem through in his head. It didn't look good. "We have been working on this scenario; it meant sourcing

the bombs and then an airframe to deliver it. Each scenario we created ran out of time. In order to get to the wellhead, we have to fly through hostile airspace, over exceptionally long distances and require a delivery platform that can carry something that heavy over thousands of miles at high speed." The words were clipped and anxious. "You can't just strap any old bomb to an aircraft and hope to deliver it accurately. FAB's were never designed as a weapon of great accuracy. The precision bombing in this case requires laser designation or something equally as accurate. An aerial designator wouldn't last two minutes, F22s, heavy bombers and stealth's are out of the equation, which leaves us with a ground team designating the target. This has the added problem of the flare from the burning well head obscuring the laser," He thought about that for a moment. "but if the burner is deep enough, which it will be, that won't matter." At least that was one problem was solved, a show stopper considering GPS probably didn't work down there or at least was not reliable with so many satellites out of action.

"So is anything being done?" Blake asked. "Surely we have some plan, even a long shot one?"

The Director of Central Intelligence Agency Operations consulted his electronic scheduler, visualizing the countdown. Blake deserved to know? "Alright." It was Blake after all that was on the ball while everybody else was asleep at the wheel. "As you know, when you first suggested this possibility, I took it straight up the ladder. We then spoke to the Australians. They were coming pretty close to the same conclusion. They came back and asked if I could arrange some FAB's - your Fuel Air Bombs, Alex. I did. They are now on the Clinton in the Tasman Sea, two 15,000-pound dumb bombs. The Australians have an aircraft that can deliver on target. They also have the ability to adapt the bombs with precision guidance mechanisms. To back that up we are still putting our own effort

together, but it will arrive many hours later. As you said, this is a long shot, but the best one we have."

For a moment the connection was quiet. "The President is going to convene another NSC meeting in a few hours. I will keep you posted," Stringer added.

Situation Room, Canberra NSC Crises Meeting

Australia's National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC) was meeting in urgent session in the new Situation Room located in Parliament House. Senior defense staff had joined the ranks of the NSCC to form a Crisis Management Team (CMT) - a group willing and able to make and act on decisions quickly.

The large CCPDS overhead panel that dominated the Situation Room displayed a detailed map of the Davis Station area. An RAAF Air Intelligence Officer stood in front of the digital projection with a very long old-fashioned pointer in his hand. He had never felt comfortable sitting in the back pointing with a red laser light.

"The current situation is that the Chinese task forces have entered Prydz Bay and have landed troops and heavy equipment into Zhong Shan. At the same time we have lost contact with Casey, Davis, McMurdo and Scott base, to name a few, and presume them to be overrun by Chinese or Russian forces. This has only happened in the last 20 hours and isn't public yet. But it won't take long, most of the daily communications from our bases are civilian, including a lot of media releases, the satellite blackout had them running around like fire ants. The seizure of our Antarctic bases is part of a plan to take Vostok and other potential oil fields.

"The Chinese task force, whose flag is now the Kuznetsov class carrier the Shi Lang, is setting up an extensive patrolling pattern designed to deny U.S. and allied forces the ability to establish a

forward element or beachhead before they are able to consolidate their positions. They are working closely with Russian and now other countries to keep us out.

"We face two well-armed carrier groups both complemented by ground forces and airfields. Argentina has allowed the use of its airfields in Tierra del Fuego, enabling the Russians to forward position troops into Druzhnaya and Amundsen Scott base, now under their control. The French are allowing Russian and Chinese transports complete access to their field at Dumont d'Urville." He checked the clock. "As of 20 minutes ago, we lost communication with ALL our assets in the Antarctic."

PM Gordon interrupted, sweeping his eyes over the Committee. "We have lost a frigate and an Orion, along with their crews. The Chinese objective either being pay back or to draw us into a fight. The U.S. are hesitant to commit forces any further than the forty-fifth without due cause. The choice we have is simple. We can either figure out how to run their Chinese asses out of there, or do nothing. If we do the latter we will lose our claim.

"Can we do anything about it?" the Deputy Prime Minister asked. "I mean, are we able to?"

"Whatever we do will be risky and will result in losses, most likely heavy losses. We would have to rely on the Americans coming in sooner than later and also risk triggering a nuclear exchange. The options available are all bad and getting worse the longer we delay. However, it looks increasingly likely that we have no choice. We might have to fight our way to the wellhead, regardless of the price. General Morel can elaborate."

The Commander of the Australian Forces stood up and walked to stand in front of the main screen and large topographical map of Antarctica. "The immediate challenge is that with Chinese and Russian forces on the ground, we have to fight our way past them to the

burning wellhead to extinguish it. The fire is expected to reach the lake in less than two days and the Russians and Chinese are ignoring it, Nick," The CDF said, referring to the CJOPS, "has developed some strategies to help dislodge the Chinese. I don't believe the U.S. will tolerate their bases being overrun and will deal with the Russians as well. This recent action may provide them the provocation and argument to act."

But even as the General spoke, and unknown to the crisis group, the Vostok prognosis was spiralling rapidly into something far worse than any of them had possibly imagined.

Washington, the White House

Situation Room. Move to DEFCON ONE, orders MOABs to Australia.

"George, we should now be at DEFCON ONE, correct?" The President asked.

George Perelli, the new Secretary of Defense, nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Good. George, you said that David Stringer was responsible for this, correct?" He nodded. "Okay, why don't you get him in here as soon as possible and also get that guy he's been working with, what's his name?"

"Blake, Alexander Blake."

"That's right. And Sakrov. Get 'em all down here. We are going to need them. And," the President added, "put both Blake and Sakrov on my Scientific Advisory Committee - the PSAC."

George began putting the calls through while President Blaire turned to his new Secretary of State, Madeline Price, briefing her on what was going on. This was the Security Council's second meeting of the day. After the urgent call from the Director of the CIA at 1:30

a.m., the President had convened the crisis meeting to decide their course of action.

"George, I want you to give those Australians everything they need to get this mission done. It appears our Plan B is pretty thin at this stage. We have everybody, and I mean everybody, working on this problem. In the meantime the Australians are the only ones with a workable plan and doing something about it." The President glanced across the room at the Marine holding the nuclear football. "What about that?"

"We have targeted Vostok with several battlefield ICBM's, low air burst; they just need your authorization code," Perelli said.

"Good, let's hope like fuck we don't have to use them. The last thing we want to do is initiate a trade of nukes. Any success we have with Vostok might be undone in five minutes if we escalate to that level. Even if the Australians manage to put it out, it will only take a firecracker to get it started again. Any luck on the fuel air bombs?"

"We are currently scouring our entire inventory and delivering every FAB or MOAB we can lay our hands on by fastest possible means," George Perelli said. "At the same time we have the best brains available trying to mate these devices to any system capable of delivering them accurately to the target in a high threat environment. But even at best estimates we are still outside Blake's time table."

"You never know, he could be wrong. Let's keep at it anyway; we could get a lucky break!" President Blaire said.

Canberra.

NSC still meeting. CJOPs briefs on disaster scenario and tactical hurdles and presents Daisy Cutter option..

In Australia, the NSC was still meeting. General David Morel looked up from reading a Critical Intelligence Message sent FLASH via DISAPAC. "Good and bad news," he said. "The Americans have gone to DEFCON ONE. Thank god for that."

"About fucking time," Air Marshal John Norton said. "Just hope it's not too late."

"Assuming that's the good news, what's the bad?" Gordon asked.

The Australian defense chief got up from his seat and walked to the overhead display. "Can I borrow your stick Squadron Leader?" he said to the Intel briefing officer, who stepped back to allow his boss room.

"Get me a geographic map of the entire continent, will you?" he said to no one in particular. The map behind him quickly changed and he placed the stick on East Antarctica near Vostok Station. "The ice here above the oil lake that was discovered is several miles thick. The entire weight of that ice bears down on the water, gas and the oil beneath. The pressure in the water/gas mix and oil is unbelievably enormous.

"The borehole the fluid now blows through is just a few inches wide. The hole the burn is creating is over one hundred meters wide. At some point, as the hole nears the lake, the ice will blow out between the lake and the enlarged hole. The trapped water/gas mix, under massive pressure, will explode out of a 100-plus meter hole at over 100,000psi, several trillion gallons per second. The sudden decrease in pressure will cause a gas separation, instantly igniting into a massive fuel-air-and-water mix, increasing the immediate temperature to something comparable to the sun's surface. This in turn rapidly increases the size of the exit point, collapsing

trillions of tons of ice into the hole, which simply explodes in the heat.

"The process rapidly increases and within minutes, the entire ice dome, over a thousand square kilometers of ice, 4000 meters thick, will collapse, throwing the contents of the lake tens of thousands of meters in the air and releasing the oil bubble beneath it. The resulting explosion could be a planet killer." He didn't need to pause for effect. Everyone already thought the situation was bad enough.

"We have really never had a choice about going to Vostok, and now neither do the Yanks, which is why they are at DEFCON ONE. Fortunately our people have not been sitting on their asses waiting to see where the chips fall and have been working on several alternative plans. Given what has transpired, we have one plan that has been in motion for over 24 hours. It looks like the most likely candidate to progress, unless someone can come up with something better."

He waited. There were no takers. "It is made up of several parts. The first being to neutralize and keep busy our Chinese friends in their quest to invade the south. The second part is actually extinguishing the wellhead fire itself. First of all I want our Chief Intelligence Officer to describe what it is that our forces are facing down there. Then I will explain the rest. Go ahead Mack."

The Air Force Intelligence Officer took his turn behind the glass lectern. "Thank you Sir." He worked the overhead remotes at the same time, bringing up an image of large missile canisters on the big screen. "Before we can do anything in or around the Chinese task force, we have to neutralize the SS-N-19 Granit threat. Until we do that, we are forced to stand off with our surface combatants to at least 600 kilometers." Mack Thompson pointed to the standoff distance on the map. "Our CIWS and guns are still not proven against real

missile threats. The Granit, or Shipwreck missile, is a mature and proven weapon we don't know enough about. They have also upgraded its capabilities; what with we don't quite know.

"We do know it's a supersonic, long-range winged missile against which most surface combatants have few means of protection. The missile can be fired from surface vessels and submarines. It has a range in excess of 540 kilometers. It is over 10-meters in length and weighs in at seven tons. It cruises at 2800 km/hr and is capable of carrying numerous warheads including nuclear. The missiles are capable of classifying and distributing targets according to importance and then they select the best tactics and plans for the attack.

"The onboard computer holds information to help it outsmart radar systems, as well as the tactical methods for outwitting air defense capabilities. They are equipped with the means to outmaneuver attacking anti-missiles. After knocking out the main target in a group of ships, the remaining missiles attack other ships in order, excluding the possibility of two missiles hitting the same target. Even if the Granit is hit by our anti-missiles, it's so heavy and fast, it will be able to preserve its initial velocity and reach its target. The kinetic energy, even without the warhead, will split ANZAC or Adelaide Class ships in two." There was silence in the room. "Until that puppy is put to bed, we don't have much of a plan. The Shi Lang has sixteen of these plus reloads, the cruisers and the other support carrier, mount these batteries as well. The next biggest threat to our ships comes from the Sizzlers, the Brahmos, Sunburn missiles with a range of 160 klicks and the Luzhou class Type C-602s with a range of 300 klicks."

"What about an air attack to take them out?"

"Their air and missile defense is excellent. They have numerous improved HongQi 9 (HQ-9) and Yezh SA-21 Grizzly with ranges

up to 200 kilometers. The Grizzly is able to guarantee hits against six targets flying simultaneously from different directions and at different altitudes. The HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles provide them multi-target handling and engagement characteristics; a capability against low altitude targets with small radar cross-sections such as cruise missiles; as well as a capability against tactical ballistic missiles, and possibly a potential to intercept some types of strategic ballistic missiles." The briefer paused, catching his breath for a moment. "The Air threat is also formidable," he continued. "The Shi Lang is unusual in that it boasts an air wing as well as an offensive anti-ship missile capability. The air wing, as far as we can tell, is made up of 12 navalised CV Flanker variants, 16 Su-34 Fullbacks, four Ka-29 Helix anti-submarine choppers, 18 Kamov PLOs and two Ka27-S rescue choppers. Many of the task force's destroyers and frigates also carry helicopters.

"The Sukhois, two of which we have already splashed, care of Squadron Leader Hamilton, are capable of carrying both air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles, specifically Moskits, presenting a long-range anti ship capability.

"Almost the entire fleet enjoys the benefits of French Aegis-like command and control systems ripped off by the French from the Americans and passed on to the Chinese. This means that between their primary assets, the system can autonomously manage fleet defense to defeat incoming threats."

The politicians in the room were by this time looking deeply depressed. The shadow Minister for defense looked stricken. "How could we let this happen?" he lamented.

The current Minister for Defence snapped back angrily. "We let this happen when you opted not to invest in cruise missile defence despite ongoing public criticism by experts."

The Labor Senator went from stricken to mortified, the Prime Minister held up his hand to stop the squabbling.

"Mack, please carry on."

"The main portion of the fleet is in the Davis Sea supporting the landing mission into Zhong Shan. The supply and logistics ships are anchored in Prydz Bay. The Shi Lang and her escorts are running a tight patrol to keep air cover and submarine defense readily available to the landing forces. It is a 2631 nautical mile flight from Hobart, 2469 from Albany, and 1454 from Scott. We haven't heard from Scott or McMurdo bases and assume they have been overrun by either Russian or Chinese forces, likewise, as you know with both Davis and Casey Stations. So we have no known airfields to deploy from other than our home bases. Our destroyers, ANZAC and Adelaide Class Frigates are currently a few hundred kilometers east of Heard Island, keeping out of reach of both Granit and airborne threats.

"Our Frigates and destroyers, with the exception of the two we have recalled, have an offensive antiship range of 240 kilometers with the Harpoon, and defensive capability against any further attacks from Shkval torpedoes from Chinese Subs, as well as the EMR HVAPFSDS."

"What the hell is that?" the Labor Senator asked.

"It's a High Velocity Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding-Sabot propelled by an electromagnetic railgun," the AIO said.

"Should have guessed," the Labor Senator said, any other time it would have been funny.

The CJOPS took over. "I think we would all agree that we need to focus all our resources and attention on a singular mission." He looked around the room, heads nodded in agreement. "Until that wellhead fire is out, it's the only mission. Prime Minister?" Morel said deferring the final solution to the PM.

"Agreed," Gordon said.

"That and we have to keep it out," Morel added. "There is no contingency plan that exists to cover this scenario. We have to get past a superior force for a primary mission of putting the flame out. We have to develop a Plan of Attack (POA), and very quickly. That POA to extinguish the flame requires the delivery of specialized explosives that will momentarily rob it of oxygen. They need to provide over-pressure for a brief moment of time to stop the explosive gas mix from pumping into the well shaft, Nick?" the General said to the Naval Commander. "You guys have worked up a plan?"

The CJOPS Admiral Jansen leaned forwards. "We have worked up an operations plan based on something like this happening," he said. "As soon as we were notified of the possibilities."

"Let's see it Nick." The General sat down. It was usual procedure to produce alternative courses of action.

"We based this on the same DSTO advice and it works with the current plan that is underway headed by Squadron Leader Hamilton."

Joint Intelligence Facility, Pine Gap Lance gets message from Brian, talks about the FAB's

As the CJOPS outlined the proposed plan of operations to the Security Committee and CMT, Squadron Leader Lance Hamilton was walking briskly into the Joint Intelligence Facility in Pine Gap Australia. From Avalon, Hamilton had made the 1900km trip in just over an hour, supercruising the Wrangler at just under Mach 2.

The DIWO (Watch Officer) was bent over a Joint Intelligence Facility Workstation, hitting the print button. A small printer next to the workstation rapidly spat out an A4 sheet of paper. He snapped the paper from the tray, swung in his seat and handed it to Hamilton. It contained just one line of text: LHcompHBBRbeer.

"It's from your brother, which is why we called you in. It was sent in the clear by HAM Radio, we don't know what it means."

The Squadron Leader read the message. His brother was alive and kicking by the looks of it. "Yes, it's for me." He looked around the large room filled with electronic and display screens. "We need a map of the Ross Ice shelf, near McMurdo."

The General who had entered the room simply nodded to the Duty Officer who quickly brought up the area of operations on the main monitor that dominated the command and control center. The Squadron Leader walked up to the screen and pointed to an area just northwest of McMurdo. "Zoom in here and overlay the names."

The picture quickly zoomed in and feature names painted themselves over the map. "Dell Bridge." He pointed to a spot on the Ross Ice Shelf over 50 kilometers from McMurdo. "Brian's saying he's going to try for Dell Bridge; that will be the DZ/LZ. The computer he has is a Dell. We have argued Mac versus PC for years. He has always bought Dells. The 'Br' is just an abbreviation for Bridge, not too hard. Beer means beeroclock, 5pm local time, so that will be our NLT (No later than). The HB is the scary part. He's suggesting the human bomb."

"What's all this getting to Squadron Leader? The human bomb?"

"Dell Bridge is in the shadow of Erebus relative to McMurdo. It's also the Point of Closest Approach to Vostok. Somehow Brian has cottoned onto the fact that the best way to snuff this flame is with an FAE (Fuel Air Explosive or FAB) device. He's figured out someone has to designate because none of our satellites can provide guidance or telemetry, and it looks like he's volunteered for the job. He's provided us a relatively secure LZ, pickup time and an insertion technique into Vostok. It just so happens, my brother is the only one qualified to use the Special Forces, Experimental Stealthy Delivery package. The SFESDP."

"I thought we had run out of acronyms; how the hell could you remember that?"

"Most of the time I don't. Which is why we call it the Human Bomb or the HB pencil, and not meaning to be smart, it's the Australian outback version of the British EXINT (Extraction/Insertion) System."

"Got you. So go on. How can this help?"

"The HB has a range of 300 kilometers and is essentially a stealthy cruise missile gutted to fit a man inside with basic steering controls and equipment. Dropped from an F-111, it can get a man on the ground undetected."

"I don't need to ask about your brother's capabilities, do I Hamilton?"

"No Sir you don't."

"He is becoming somewhat of a legend. I hope between the two of you that you add to that. Make it happen Hamilton, and do it fast, we are flat out of alternatives."

A little over an hour later, Lance Hamilton, 10 Squadron, 82 WG, read the brief they had just received from David Stringer before tucking it back into the Combat Mission Folder. He was still unzipping the front of his flight suit to let some blessed cool air in after the return flight from the Australian interior. The MOAB information had been secreted into the rest of the blurb that made up the Daily Intelligence Summary Cable. He had instructed the duty intelligence officer to watch out for it. The MOABs or FABs would be aboard the USS Clinton. David said Brian would know the skipper. Hamilton looked at the name; Captain Chris McKay. Sundog you old dog he thought, it was nice having familiar names around.

"What about the Daisy Cutters?" Jake asked. Like Lance, RAAF Squadron Leader Jake Purcell, Hamilton's Weapons Officer, was also shedding some of his flight gear and stowing it in his locker.

"Ready to go it appears, but I don't know about us," he said.

"I don't get you; why not?" Purcell asked.

"Our two 15,000 pound FABs are being modified with an upgrade from the Israelis." This turned FAB's standard iron bomb casings into a stand-off delivery munition, enabling the attacker to keep at least some distance from air defense systems, the Point of Impact, and then get out before the weapon detonated. "But without any GPS or SATNAV assistance, we need laser guidance. The whole area will be crawling with Russian ground forces and you can bet there will be more SAM systems around than bristles on a brush."

"Okay, I'm still listening," Jake said.

"Target designation. With the loss of all of our bases and airstrips, we are running thin on ways of getting in there to laser the wellhead. We need someone on the ground. Designation from the air won't work either," Lance said.

"Why not use a cruise missile, or even a nuke?" Jake asked.

"That won't guarantee snuffing out that flame and could just complicate it. We only have one shot at this," Lance said,

"The Russians are going to view this as a major escalation." Jake replied.

"I know. But I would far prefer to duke it out with the Russians or Chinese later than argue the point as we get drowned by a tsunami, suffocated by a global cloud of smoke so thick you could walk on it or simply blown to kingdom come."

"I see your point."

"It's a risk we have to take."

"So who's going to be the COLT on this mission?" Jake said referring to the Combat Observation and Laser Team.

Lance was in the process of hanging up his helmet when he stopped in mid track. "Brian." He said simply.

Jake thought about that a moment before speaking. "Well, while I wish it weren't your brother mate, knowing how important this is, I wouldn't want anyone else on point." He smiled. "I know from having a few beers with some of his SAS mates, that if you have to take a trip to hell and get back, Brian is the one to get you back."

As the two men spoke, far to the south, Russian and Chinese forces were making their way to Vostok with heavy air transports. In the Tasman Sea and southern oceans U.S. and Russian naval forces were beginning to converge, preparing for battle. Time was running out. Lance's brother looked at his watch, this was no time to waste time, he had to move.

Vostok Station.

December 7 0400 UTC. Russians land at Vostok.

"Prepare to jump."

"Jump!" On command, men and equipment streamed from the rear of the massive Condor aircraft. In its second pass with its giant ramp dropped, the aircraft flew low and slow over the white vastness, tracking between the ground flares set up by the path-finding team. With parachutes streaming from the rear, the Russian version of the western 'hot extraction' pulled tons of heavy equipment from the rear of the aircraft on specialized pallets that fell to the hard ice surface absorbing the shock of impact.

"Get those bulldozers going, quickly. The main force is just 40 minutes out!" the Russian Colonel screamed into the wind. Mikolai

Nabialok looked at the scene of devastation around him. The cruise missiles had done a great job. But it wasn't just the wind that made him shout to be heard. It was the infernal roar of the burning wellhead. You could still see the flames through the massive heat wave of steam and smoke, making it impossible to get within 300 yards of the hole that it spewed from. That was not his problem however. Building an airstrip in 30 minutes was.

Once again the Russian Candid proved it's worth, dozens landing into a hastily built and very rough ice field carved out by just a handful of dozers in less than 40 minutes. Minutes later, in a finely tuned dance of combat forces and logistics, supplies from the Pacific Fleet via McMurdo and Russkaya flowed into Vostok station.

HQJOC Bungendore Australia.

December 8 Sat. 1130hrs UTC. Jensen comes up with the idea of using HSV. Longreach ordered south.

Admiral Nick Jansen, the Chief of Joint Operations was leaning on his elbows rubbing the back of his neck when the idea came to him. He snatched the phone up and punched in the direct line to the CDF. He quickly outlined the idea.

"I think it's worth a shot. Buys us some time without committing our main force," the CDF agreed. "Do it. But we are going to have to get permission from USACOM."

"I think they will agree. Since Blaire has taken over, we are getting co-operation plus, but we need a decision fast. Longreach is near Darwin but heading south at flank."

"You're right, we don't have time. No time for the chain of command to process the request. Let me call Perelli direct. I will call you back in a few minutes." The CDF hung up the call and from his comms terminal dialed a direct line to Perelli. A few minutes later he called back the Australian JTF commander.

"Yes Sir."

"Perelli is sending a direction to USSTRATCOM; the air wing will be temporarily transferred to the theatre CINCPAC. The operational control to yourself," the CDF said. "They are all yours. Are we going to be able to do this in time?"

"Yes Sir, even if I have to paddle myself."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



High speed catamarans are now pivotal in both rapid transit and combat roles.

Tasmania, Australia.

December 8 0630hrs UTC. Lance prepares in Tasmania for Daisy cutter.

It was surprisingly cold. A large high had settled over the Southern Ocean extending all the way to the southern states of Australia. While the sky was cloudless, the big anticyclone had rotated the bitterly cold air from the Antarctic Ocean into the waters southeast of Tasmania, Australia's smallest state, an island located beneath the southeast edge of a continent that masqueraded as an island.

It was here that RAAF Squadron Leader Lance Hamilton had decided to launch the last minute dash to snuff a flame that threatened human extinction. It was also the closest step off point to the Clinton and the munitions they needed to finish the job.

It was without doubt a long shot. But he and the Australian command knew they were fresh out of options. There were a whole bunch of things that could go wrong. Brian might not show up; the carrier part of the mission was almost crazy; and whether they could even mate the damn munitions to the F-111 on a bare piece of ice in the middle of the frozen wilderness with half the Russian Navy breathing down their neck was insane. Was the ice field smooth enough? Would the HB work?

Like his brother, Lance hated complicated plans. They spelled disaster. This plan was not only complicated, it was unrehearsed and unfortunately the only one they had. Most of the world was oblivious to what was potentially the most catastrophic and destructive event in human history. Lance looked into the night sky, they were lucky, the thought of what lay before him and the consequence of failure made him sick to the stomach.

Back on the ramp a lone C130 and F-111S sat side-by-side, air force and MacDowell Aviation technicians and maintenance crews climbing all over the airframes.

Saturday December 8 0920hrs. Hercules C130 takes off for Carrier.

Several hours later the Hercules C130 started engines and taxied to the end of the strip. In the dark it took off. An hour later the F-111S also taxied to the end of the runway. In moments it was in the air chasing the big bird before her.

A few minutes later the F-111S passed the Herc deep in the southern extremity of the Tasman Sea.

"Do we have something to land on yet?" Jake asked.

"You mean apart from water?"

"Well I hate to get fussy, but I was hoping for something solid. If I remember correctly, there is nothing else out here but salty H2O."

"Theoretically there should be something out here somewhere - solid, smooth and long enough for us to stop on without getting hurt. But that's just the theory."

"We really are landing this thing on the Clinton, aren't we? Of course you have all the qualifications so I don't have to be a baby and cry uncontrollably right?"

**The Tasman Sea, U.S. Southern Task Force, USS Clinton.
Saturday December 8 0930hrs UTC. F-111 inbound to land on Clinton.**

"Yes Sir." Captain Chris McKay of the USS Clinton hung up the bridge phone. "This should be interesting." He said.

"The F-111?"

"Yes, it's definitely a go."

"Means we really are out of ideas then."

"Yep"

The Bridge phone rang again, the Captain snapped it off its hook.

"Chris," the voice on the other end said. "Forgot to mention, the mission leader on this is Squadron Leader Lance Hamilton."

That stopped Captain 'Sundog' Chris McKay in his tracks. The last time he had seen Buckshot was on the Reagans flight deck, standing beside a very broken Hornet.

"Hamilton's flying the F-111 himself," the voice continued. "His Navigator is Squadron Leader Jake Purcell. I think you know him as well."

He certainly did. If anyone was to fly this crazy mission he couldn't think of anyone better. The day got more interesting every minute. The Captain of the Clinton put down the handset.

"Captain!"

"Yes?"

"FLASH message." The Comms officer handed him the transcript, which he read and smiled. "All right then," he said, a gleam in his eyes. "Bring her about boys and give these Australians anything they want. I mean anything!"

The carrier and her escorts turned into the wind. Across the deck, the urgent voices of the Air Boss and his assistant boomed over the public address system amidst the chaos of sound and action. From seven stories above the flight deck, the Air Boss looked out from his tower. Everyone was now aware something special was happening. The dramatic re-spotting of aircraft on the carrier decks, the special instructions to the arrestor crew and the clearing of all non-essential personnel from the flight deck meant something was going down.

After making sure the Landing Signal Officers were on their platforms, the deck/safety crew ready and plane guard helicopter overhead, The Air Boss and Mini Boss turned on the lights of the landing system.

On the tower side of the deck the Air Boss was making no mistakes. A huge black man from Alabama, Commander Peter Adams, was talking on his radio phone to the hydraulics operators on the deck below who controlled the arresting wires, one of which would grab the big bomber, slowing it down to zero speed in less than two seconds flat.

Ensign Junior David Beaumont, the duty Arresting Gear Officer, had already ordered the controls set to withstand the Aardvark's 70,000 pounds slamming into the deck at over 160 knots.

The four arresting wires, each consisting of two-inch thick wire cables connected to hydraulic rams below decks, drag landing aircraft going as fast as 150 miles per hour to a stop in less than

400 feet. High in the island, the Air Boss and his staff coordinated the entire operation, which was also carefully monitored from the flight deck level by the Captain on the ship's bridge. The deck was busy with rush hour traffic as numerous crew in different coloured shirts went about their jobs. The various functions of the flight deck crew are identified by the colors they wear: yellow for officers and aircraft directors; purple for fuel handlers; green for catapult and arresting gear crews; blue for tractor drivers; brown for chock and chain runners; and red for crash and salvage teams and the ordnance handlers.

Beneath the landing deck and inside a busy office of valves pumps and hydraulics, Aviation Boatswain's Mate Kenneth Martin of the USS Clinton, looked at the division's leading Petty Officer. "Seventy five-thousand pounds! Damn, what are we landing?" The V-2 arresting gear division was charged with the responsibility of pulling the big metal birds to a stop in a real hurry. Martin had already trapped 2500 birds on this tour alone. The cables he was responsible for were set to stop each individual aircraft at the same place on the deck, regardless of the size or weight of the plane. Four 1.375-inch-thick steel cables ran two to five inches above the deck at 35 to 40 foot intervals and connected with a hydraulic cylinder below the deck, which served as a giant shock absorber.

As an aircraft approached, all four wires were set to accommodate that aircraft's weight. When the aircraft's arresting hook snagged a wire, the wire pulled a piston within a fluid-filled chamber. As the piston was drawn down the cylinder, hydraulic fluid was forced through the small holes in the cylinder end, absorbing the energy of the aircraft and breaking it to a stop. An arresting wire can stop a 54,000-pound aircraft travelling at a speed of 130-150 miles per hour in a distance less than 350 feet. When the aircraft drops the wire, the piston is retracted and made ready to recover

another aircraft in 45 seconds. Today it was a 75,000 pound airplane they were about to trap.

Ten miles southwest of the carrier the F-111's weapons officer squinted into the distance. This was going to be nerve wracking to say the least, Purcell thought. It was hard to tell whether Hamilton was even worried, the pilot's hands on the stick and the throttles were steady as ice. His voice had been calm, going about the business of landing on a carrier deck like they did it every day. The only problem was, Jake knew an F-111 had not landed on a carrier deck for over 40 years. For good reason; it was too damn heavy, he thought.

Landing any aircraft at sea, on a narrow, angled 750-foot-long pitching deck in the near dark remained a critical test of skill and nerves for any pilot. That was assuming you were trained and experienced to land a particular aircraft in the first place. Jake felt the Wrangler throttle down as Hamilton banked to the left, feeling the familiar pull of the slowing jet working his shoulders against the straps and the yaw of the aircraft.

Hamilton held the speed down to 280 knots indicated, and began a long turn with the airbrakes extended and throttle up to give him extra power if he needed to dump them. The Wrangler heeled over at an angle of almost 90 degrees, the engines growled behind them like beasts ready to tear themselves through the fire wall. Lance could no longer see the carrier up ahead, the low wisps of cloud obscuring his vision.

The big U.S. carrier and escorts were steaming into the wind. Squadron Leader Lance Hamilton spoke again to the carrier's flight controllers.

"Tower this is Buckshot two three zero at eight miles." Again Hamilton eased back on the throttles shedding more height as he began

reaching for the deck ahead. At 1200 feet he 'dirtied up,' sweeping the wings forward and lowering the landing gear, flaps and tail hook.

"Roger, Buckshot two three zero. Coming up on glide path. The deck is clear...we have you visual, watch your altitude and line-up. Winds gusting to 30 knots, 38 plus across the deck and occasionally cross winds over the deck from the southeast."

"Roger tower...six miles."

On the carrier they were ready. "Standby for F-111, two minutes," the Air Boss said, earphones on and yellow jacket standing out brightly against the dark background. He was yelling down the phone to the hydraulics team below, his eyes sweeping the deck for even the smallest speck of litter that could be sucked into a jet engine and spell disaster. Below the giant hydraulic piston was ready in position to stop the 75,000 pound aircraft in what was not much more than a controlled crash onto the stern of the carrier.

At the controller's "three quarters of a mile, call the ball" transmission, Hamilton looked up from the AOA (Angle of approach) indicator and saw the yellow visual landing aid called the 'ball' on the port side of the landing area. He took a quick peek back inside the office to make sure his rate of descent was pegged and called "I got it" to the controller, who keyed his mike in response. The LSO acknowledged the ball call.

"Roger ball call, decks steady 38 knots."

Back out on the exposed and windswept deck, the Landing Signal Officer radioed instructions to the pilot and could see that F-111 301, call sign Buckshot, was about 45 seconds out. In all his years as an LSO, he had never seen an F-111 touch the deck of an aircraft carrier. But there it was. Its wings swept forward, the ugly undercarriage slung below and the triangular shape of its tail hook hanging out from beneath the tail. As it got closer, the size of the aircraft made him shudder slightly.

The LSO, a lanky F18E fighter jock out of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, was now standing on the exposed port quarter of the carrier, his binoculars trained on the Bone Yard Wrangler A8-272. The wind plus the forward speed of the carrier created a constant 50-mile-per-hour blast of air across the flight deck, snapping his green jacket hard in the wind. The F-111 pilot was good. He flew straight down the ball.

Hamilton held the big aircraft on the glide slope like it was welded to a rail. But inside, every instinct was telling him to get ready to flare the airplane out. He guided the big airplane through the turbulence behind the aircraft carrier and crossed the fantail headed for the deck.

"Groove!" bellowed the Air Boss to the hydraulic crew, a code word meaning, "She's close, stand by."

"Short!" Another key command, meaning "everyone away from the machinery." And now, as the Pig thundered in towards the stern, the Boss yelled, "Ramp!"

Every eye, from the deck to the top of the 10-story island, was looking at the hook stretched out behind the aircraft. It was impossible to talk above the howl of the engines. At 160 knots indicated airspeed the Wrangler's heavy undercarriage slammed onto the deck and right behind them the hook grabbed the third cable, the cable rising from the deck as it took the weight of the big airplane stopping it in its tracks.

The F-111 barely flinched as it was driven to the deck, catching number three wire in a perfect ballet with the engines roaring under full power, spooling immediately to full thrust before being throttled back once the trap was complete. It was standard procedure for pilots to throw their aircraft's engines into full power so that if they don't trap a wire, they can fly around and try again. It was

a thing of beauty. Hamilton and his navigator were abruptly thrown forward into their straps as the hook caught the arresting wire. Hamilton quickly pulled the throttles back to idle and killed the external lights. On a signal from the taxi director to his right he raised the hook and swept the wings fully aft as he rolled to his designated parking spot. He then yanked the engines to cut-off and watched the instrument read out wind down. He and the Navigator released their straps and climbed stiffly to the deck. He looked aft over the fantail; it was time for the second act.

The general feeling among the flight deck handlers and officers was amazement. The last time an F-111 had landed aboard an aircraft carrier was 42 years ago on the USS Coral Sea - most of the ship's complement of some 6000 crew had not been born. The Landing Signal Officer (LSO) picked up the hand set, clearly very impressed. "That's an OK3, 272. Pretty damn good!"

OK3 is a grade received by a navy aircraft carrier pilot for his or her landing. "OK" is an excellent landing; the "3" referred to the arresting wire. Usually the pilot shoots for the three wire, the third of the four arresting wires on the aircraft carrier deck. Catching the three wire means the aircraft's tail hook landed right in the middle of the four wires, a very precise accomplishment. OK3 represented utmost skill and precision in one of the most demanding environments that man places himself. The LSO of course, assumed he was guiding a 'current' carrier pilot in, even if it was in a strange aircraft.

Even as the sound of the F-111's engines died away, the flight deck broke into apparent pandemonium as the deck crew raced to haul the big jet into its parking space. The Air Boss shouted into the phone to haul in the cables and clear the decks. Everyone except the LSO, selected yellow shirts and rescue crew stayed topside. The LSO could feel the deck beneath his feet begin to tremble as the aircraft

carrier increased to flank speed. He looked up to the ship's center island. Ten stories up, hidden behind the reflection of glass, he could imagine Sundog, watching with intense interest.

Like the F-111, the next aircraft was even less familiar with the deck of an aircraft carrier. Far out over the wake of the big ship, the telltale wisps of kerosene smoke trailed behind the big airplane - too big to land on an aircraft carrier. The four wisps of smoke were trailing behind four large Allison turbo props. Fat Albert was designed to land on airfields not carriers. Images of the aircraft's wing slicing into the ship's island, the fuselage on fire and sliding across the deck invaded the LSO's thoughts. Yet, like the previous aircraft, this had been done once before, but not as heavy as today. Christ, he hoped this guy was at least as good as the last, because he really needed him to be.

Still, it bore down on the carrier. The LSO faintly hoped to hear some one call it off. But the big bird looked good. Could she stop in time? Instead of running straight down the approach deck, they had cleared the forward deck to allow the big aircraft to land across the two and make the use of the full length of the flight deck. If it went bad, it was really going to be ugly.

The LSO, the Captain and every man and woman watching the event, collectively held their breaths as the huge airframe thundered over the rear of the deck. Australian C130 pilots had trained hard over the years to master STOL operations in the worst of conditions; they were really good at it. The C130, all 130,000 pounds of her that day, touched down hard and firm, just 70 feet inside the rear of the aircraft carrier. Full reverse thrust and the antiskid brakes engaged as the first bit of rubber kissed the carrier's deck, the four Hamilton Standard electro-hydromatic, constant-speed, full feathering propellers, going to full power, bringing the trembling airframe to a stop in less than 280 feet. Like their counterpart on

the Marine Corps KC-130F landing aboard the USS Forrestal in October 1963, the jubilant pilot and crew held up a small card against the cockpit window saying 'Look mum, no tail hook!' a full 45 years later. There were huge cheers from the crew that had assembled to watch this amazing spectacle. Those who could not get into a position to watch on deck, cheered below as they viewed the deck cameras that were tracking the day's most exciting event, ensuring that wherever a sailor was on the ship - the galley, engineering or logistics - they were all part of the team that made the floating city that was a war machine, work.

Back on the bridge the Captain fidgeted. As quickly as they could, he needed that big Mother Fucker of an airplane off his flight deck. It sat there, blocking the ramp and two catapults, a huge impediment to deck movement. Carrier Captains coveted their deck space. If the shit hit the fan now he would have to push it over the side. But Stringer and Shotgun deserved their chance. They were not men given to lie or exaggerate. If they were worried, there was something to be worried about. Besides, the Australians were already in the fight and the Captain of the Clinton knew they would be too before the day's end. Not a matter of 'if' just 'when.'

Both the Herc and the Aardvark were refuelled as quickly as possible. While below decks, Commander Mike Duffy, the chief ordinance officer, checked the biggest conventional bombs in the ship's arsenal that had arrived on board after many years of storage. This was a bomb he really never thought would go anywhere, except perhaps a museum one day. He wondered who was going to be on the receiving end. This was not the bomb so eagerly reported about in the earlier part of the first decade. This was the streamlined version of the big MOAB, now called the BLU - bomb live unit. Not anywhere near as catchy as the phrase 'mother of all bombs' but it

was at least 5000 pounds heavier, was laser guided, and the two of them weighed in at a humungous 30,000 pounds of war load.

All they had to do was load them on the C130 that was receiving a hot refueling on the deck above. He and his team of red shirts quickly winched the monsters onto a weapons trolley, which was then pulled by a small tractor unit to the forward elevator. A few minutes later and it was driving up the rear of the C130. It looked to Duffy like he was about to lose a tractor unit in addition to the bombs.

After climbing down from the Wrangler and having a quick chin wag with some of the deck crew, Hamilton was invited to the bridge.

"That was some fancy flying Squadron Leader," the Captain of the Clinton said evenly, eyeballing the F-111 pilot. "And you have never landed one of these on a carrier deck?"

The Bridge went deadly silent. Did they hear that correctly?

"No sir," Hamilton said.

They had heard that correctly. Apart from the noise of the air conditioning, the bridge was absolutely quiet.

Captain Chris McKay's face broke into a broad grin. "Last time I saw you land on a deck it was not a pretty picture! "For the benefit of those listening he pointed at Hamilton, "if it hasn't clicked yet, this is the buckshot from the Reagan!" For quite a few the penny did drop, they had heard of that incident and looked at the Australian with even greater respect

Sundog smiled broadly. That was some damn good flying he had just witnessed. Hamilton made it look like it was easy. He knew damn well it wasn't, especially with a 75,000-pound airplane landing on a rolling deck a few hundred feet long in diminishing light. And Christ! What about that Herc driver; that was one ballsy son of a bitch. If he had stuffed that up there would have been no go around for him. No wires to catch and no safety net that would hold him. That was guts and nuts and some of the best flying he had ever seen

in his life. He walked up to Lance and spoke quietly. "You do that just to make us look bad don't you?"

Lance Hamilton smiled. "No sir, just wanted to prove Pigs can float and fly!"

Leaning to look out of the angled windows, the Captain looked at the lethal outline of the F-111 on the deck below. "Well I'll be damned if it doesn't." Suddenly the Captain was all business. "Sorry to see you under these circumstances, Lance. Give my regards to your brother. While I would like to crack a tinny with you, unfortunately I need your aircraft off my deck ASAP. But if you need some gas...give me a call, I will deliver it personally." He extended his hand. As Lance left the bridge the Captain called after him. "Buckshot! I'll expect that beer when you get back." He tipped his hand in a salute.

Unlike the new DDG destroyers, the Clinton did not boast an all electric system, but she was not far from it. The technologies driven out from the new generation of U.S. warships were frequently small and easier to retrofit into older hull designs. Such was the case with the Electro Magnetic Rail Catapult Launch System.

The old system relied on steam compression to power the catapult down the rail with an aircraft attached. It had its limitations and was a complicated system to operate. Catapults were high-maintenance, complex, high-risk pieces of equipment. Though the technology behind them was simple enough, the size of the tubes and the magnitude of the forces involved made designing and building them hugely difficult. This was why only the British and Australians opted to use the technology. Even the arrogant French admitted they needed to buy them from the Americans to install in their new super carrier Charles de Gaulle.

Outwardly, the new system looked exactly the same. The launch procedure had not changed nor the experience. Where the steam rail

used to be, there was now an "EMR," or electro magnetic rail, which drew its electrical power directly from inertial generators driven by the ship's nuclear reactors. Gone was the myriad of pipes and heavy steam pistons. The EMR was simpler, more powerful and far more reliable, with virtually no moving parts other than the catapult shuttle itself locked to the nose gear of the launch aircraft. Gone was the familiar scene of steam whipping across the deck with each launch. Hollywood directors would really miss that.

Two sailors ran under Hamilton's jet and pulled the landing gear safety pins, rolling them and stowing them in a small compartment under the belly of the F-111. Hamilton brought up some power and taxied the big jet forwards. The entire flight deck and tower were lined with crew, keen to witness something that they would probably never see again. Hamilton was motioned towards Cat 2. The red light on the island signalled four minutes. Following the director's signals he eased onto the tracks and stopped just over the humps of the turtle back shuttles. Behind him a green-shirted crewman ducked under the airframe and attached the steel cable, or 'bridle,' from the shuttle to two huge hooks on the fuselage near the wing root, while another attached the hold back to the rear of the plane. The light turned to amber. A crewman crouching next to the fighter's nose wheel signalled the aircraft forward and locked on the catapult wire. The shooter, his eyes fixed to the pilot, saluted, bending to his knees and touching two fingers of his left hand on the deck.

The light turned green. The 'shooter', a Navy Lieutenant, kneeled against the wind across the deck, pointed his right hand to the pilot, raised his left hand and extended two fingers: 'Go to full power.' Then palm out 'Hit the after burners...' Hamilton rolled the throttles all the way forward to the indents, released the brakes, checked his engine readouts carefully and formally saluted the Cat

Officer, leaning forward at the same time, tensing for the impact of the catapult shot. The shooter gestured 'Forward' and a crewman kneeling on the catwalk just to the left of the bomber, hit the button on Catapult 2, ducking as the EM rail hurled the F-111 on its way, screaming down the deck, engines roaring on full afterburner, leaving a massive pulse of hot air in its wake.

Hamilton had seen the Cat officer's arm come down and then everything blurred with speed. When the acceleration of the stroke ended, Hamilton reeled in the wheels and sucked in the flaps and slats at the same time, commencing a right hand turn to clear the aircraft carrier. In the event of an engine failure it was a bummer to survive a splash and then get run down by over 100,000 tons of steel moving at over 30 knots. Ahead of them was their precious cargo, bombs and fuel, secure in the belly of the C130, ahead of that a rather dodgy landing on the ice.

HQJOC

Saturday, December 8. 1130hrs UTC. Briefing.

The senior duty officer a J3 Navy Captain, wanted a measure of the mood. The audience included key political decision makers and senior defense personnel. Behind the Captain on the main screen, the Australian flag snapped against its lanyard. It was real-time imagery of the flag flying above Australia's Parliament house.

"The Chinese Task Force is substantially superior numerically and is at least on par technologically. However, because we are the attacker in this scenario, we have the initiative of tactical discretion, while they are forced to defend a very large front. This allows us to concentrate our forces and to feint." Behind the Captain the screen changed to show a large map of Australia and the Antarctic.

"Unfortunately, neither the Russians nor the Chinese have taken seriously the Vostok oil fire threat. They think we are lying. On the other hand this translates to a strategic advantage. We know they will believe our force package will have the primary objective of getting men onto the ground or, at the very least, to establish a beachhead or to retake our stations. ... We will do neither. The clock is ticking.

"To take them head on, to be able to concentrate a force package to take and hold ground, will allow them the opportunity of focusing their fire power. Doing this, we rapidly get ourselves into a battle of attrition, which they will win. They are hoping we will do this. Because once we have thrown ourselves on their swords, we are a depleted force. They will have achieved their objective and their ambitions would barely go contested. What we propose is not without risk. There is full expectation of heavy casualties. Squadron Leader Hamilton is now in the first phase of our operation. The Americans have some backup plans that are rolling as well, but time isn't on the side of these efforts. In the meantime the U.S. is going to give us all the support they can.

"The Joint Task Force's primary mission is to extinguish the Vostok wellhead fire. The second part of that mission is to prevent it from restarting. This is made harder by the fact we are operating well below the ISTAR threshold, but so are the enemy." ISTAR meant Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance. A force's ISTAR threshold is the level of enemy activity it can detect in a given environment. "We now find ourselves in a dis-aggregated, ambiguous, lethal and highly complex battlespace. The operational plan underway includes substantial deception and transition actions. At this point of time we have only two Fuel Air Bombs in theater available for deployment. These are to be strapped onto the Squadron Leaders bird on the Ross Ice Shelf."

This last comment was met by surprised looks and murmurs around the table.

"Yes, it sounds and is pretty hairy any which way you look at it. The first part of the mission required one of our C130s and the Pig to land on the deck of USS Clinton."

The room exploded with 'holy shits' and several "fucking unbelievable!" type comments. There were obviously some pilots in the room.

"Both the landings went flawlessly. They will soon be in the air for the final part of the mission. This is where we come in. Hamilton will be the main shooter. Our whole concentration will be to give him the greatest chance of success. We have to keep the bad guys away from his ground support, knock out any anti air and ground threat in front of him and, with the Americans, keep the fighters off his back. This precludes an immediate direct attack, which will just advertise our intentions. The deception plan involves drawing the Chinese fleet's attention elsewhere, where they expect it."

Checking the time again he referred back to the map. "This part of the operation kicks off with HMAS Longreach." He pointed to the north of the Chinese fleet. "She is now moving into a position to launch a UAV strike package on the easternmost Chinese task force led by the Shi Lang."

HMAS Longreach, Southern Ocean.

Longreach heads south. CUAU's launched on first mission.

The HMAS Longreach was virtually invisible to the thousands of electronic eyes that continually scanned the southern ocean. Capable of over 50 knots fully loaded, the wave-piercing HSV catamaran was already 1200 nautical miles south of Western Australia, a little over 800 nautical miles from the Chinese fleet. RAN Lieutenant Commander Michael Hudson didn't need to walk outside to know it was cold. He

was still wearing his tropical uniform, as was half the crew. The fast cat, after receiving her operational orders, had raced from Darwin to Perth. There she had quickly on loaded the mission equipment and supplies and got underway again.

The huge vessel had looked out of place among the small yachts and sailboats in the shallow water of the Swan River. Neighborhood folk on their morning jogs and dog walks looked amazed at the towering 130-meter HMAS Longreach. Most wondered how the 20,000-ton behemoth could be moored so close to the riverbank. A look down at the depth mark on one of the vessel's unique-style catamarans showed it was floating in less than nine feet of water.

The inside of the Longreach was cavernous, designed to carry a fully armored brigade, she was the epitome of ready reaction capabilities. It was just this characteristic, the big flat heavy roof and her speed, which made her ideal for the mission.

Unlike most of the navy's latest combatants, whose command and control centers were buried protectively in the bowels of the ship, all the work on the Longreach was still done pretty much from the bridge. The HSV was a fast transport; the space aged bridge sitting on top of the upper deck stood 20 meters above the water. From there Commander Hudson had supervised the loading of what he hoped was going to be a bad surprise for the Chinese.

Packed into the lower deck was the 11th Reconnaissance Squadron, 57 Wing, from the U.S. Air Warfare Center - a U.S. Air Force Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) team, expert in their deployment and operation.

Now, after a full and very quick resupply, they were rushing towards the southern extremity. Weight wise the big cat was virtually empty, her cargo barely noticeable. With a belly full of fuel, she easily paced along at nearly 50 knots, the two Allison gas turbines producing over 65,000hp, driving four massive water jet-propulsion

units. Hudson once again thought what a lucky son of a bitch he was to get such a command. He stood near the rear of the expansive flat roof of the Longreach, with Colonel Paul Cyrus, U.S. Army. The stern was just a few meters behind them. The wind tore at their clothing. The Southern Ocean rapidly sped past them either side, a long boiling white wake left behind.

"It's huge!" Cyrus shouted. "Perfect in fact."

"Reinforced heavy gauge aluminium." Hudson thumped the roof with his foot. He was standing on it.

The area was large enough for a Sea Predator to launch from. This was made possible by angling the launch track and extending it like a carrier to one side of the ship.

Below deck the group's maintenance wings were rapidly assembling the UAVs. The group was split into three operational units, each operating different aircraft.

The Air Operations Center (AOC) for the UAV tasking was based on the middle upper deck of the Cat. It looked like chaos, organized chaos. From the AOC, Cyrus also controlled his Global Hawk and Dark Stars, seconded as part of his command to the Southern Ocean Joint Task Force, the SOJTF. Both Global Hawks and Dark Stars needed to operate from land bases with long concrete runways, the systems and airframes not suited for EM catapult launches. Because of the Joint Defense Information System called JDISS, really the same and part of the GIG (Global Information Grid) Cyrus was able to manage the Global Hawk and Dark Star assets in real time from his location on the Longreach. This would also extend Global Hawk coverage below the 60th parallel.

While the officers on the HMAS Longreach went about their jobs, in the combined forces headquarters in Australia, their respective commanders were discussing both Cyrus and Hudson.

"They tell me Cyrus is pretty good, true?" Admiral Jansen said.

"And them some; what he doesn't know isn't worth pissing on. He has a lot of operational experience to fall back on as well." The U.S. Pacific Commander replied. "If you don't mind me asking, what's your operations procedure going to be on the deployment of the UAVs?"

Jensen knew what the General meant. "Both the Longreach commander and the Colonel have their mission briefs. Unless that changes I'm leaving it up to them to decide how best to achieve their mission objective."

"Good call, Admiral," the big American two-star general replied. "A lot of command folk become very possessive about this stuff. I can see I am going to like working with you."

"Cyrus always ride shotgun on missions like this?"

"Not always. This one really counts though. It's what I would be doing."

The Australian Commander believed he would too. The two-star had a hell of a reputation. He wasn't wrong, the American General had to constantly fight down the urge to run out of the command center and jump the first transport to take him into the middle of where all the 'real' stuff was happening.

Back on the Cat, USAF Colonel Paul Cyrus was busy pulling his command together, getting it ready to fly. The space on this thing was enormous, he thought; the Air Observation Posts looking like a bunch of forgotten boxes and supplies left in the middle of an aircraft hangar. But as they progressed in setting up the equipment they were able to soak up the room and make sense of it. Still, when finished, they occupied less than a quarter of the deck, and in the big steel shell their voices would resonate in the empty hollow space. He almost felt guilty not using it somehow.

On top, the 51st Air Wing's maintenance specialists had teamed with the Australian engineers to install phased array radar and