

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Shark Mutiny

Patrick Robinson

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About the Book

It is 2007, and three supertankers are ablaze in the Strait of Hormuz. World oil prices skyrocket. US Military Intelligence concludes that behind this catastrophe at the gateway to the Persian Gulf stands Iran, assisted by an expansionist China. Joined by new, young naval intelligence officer Lt. Jimmy Ramshawe, Admiral Arnold Morgan threatens the Iranian Navy with annihilation, deploying the US Navy to Hormuz along with the nuclear submarine, USS Shark, carrying two teams of Navy SEALs. With the US Navy distracted, China is able to unleash an attack on Taiwan, America's weak ally. The situation is critical as mutiny occurs onboard the USS Shark, jeopardising the entire operation by preventing the SEALs from assisting the increasingly desperate Taiwanese Air force ...

About the Author

PATRICK ROBINSON is the author of four previous international bestselling novels: *Nimitz Class*, *Kilo Class*, *HMS Unseen* and *USS Seawolf*. He is also the author of several non-fiction bestsellers including *True Blue* (with Dan Topolski) and *Born to Win*. He is the co-author with Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward of *One Hundred Days*. He can be reached through his web-site at www.patrickrobinson.com.

Also by Patrick Robinson

Classic Lines
Decades of Champions
The Golden Post
Born to Win
True Blue
One Hundred Days
Horsetrader

Nimitz Class
Kilo Class
HMS Unseen
USS Seawolf

THE SHARK MUTINY

Patrick Robinson



arrow books

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

Acknowledgements

As usual I have a list of serving officers who have no desire whatever to be formally acknowledged as my advisers. The subject is always too secretive, too classified in its nature, and my sources too senior for identification.

Do I want to be named in one of YOUR books? Are you kidding! And yet they help me every year, ensuring that I am able to tell my story, handing me advice and detail, which they believe will give the public a greater appreciation of the armed heroes of the United States military.

Mostly my land attacks are planned with the help of former Special Forces officers. My insights into the diabolically secretive Intelligence world of Fort Meade are provided by a couple of former spies who seek only to highlight the sheer professionalism of the place.

However, at sea, my principal adviser, as always, is Admiral Sir John 'Sandy' Woodward, the Task Force Commander of the Royal Navy fleet which won the Battle for the Falkland Islands in 1982.

On, and under, the surface, Admiral Sandy plots and plans with me to help bring readers right into the control room of the submarine. Without him, I could not bring reality to the subject of underwater warfare.

I did not trouble him with the final details of the court martial, but rather relied on legal sources in the US Navy, who again did not wish to be named.

They joined a whole range of new advisers who wished to protect their anonymity: the oil tanker captains who

expressed their opinions on their highly combustible cargo; the oil company executives who tried to guess what they would have done in the face of crisis; the Aeroflot exec who told me all about the Andropov, not knowing the purpose for which it was being used!

One of my rare identifiable sources is the excellent geopolitical writer, traveller and scholar Charles Stewart Goodwin of Cape Cod who provided research on the ancient Chinese fleets and the contents of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. He knows how grateful I am. His own writings on global politics provide for me an unfailing guide.

For insights and expertise on the subjects of reincarnation and post-traumatic stress, I have to thank Dr Barbara Lane of Virginia, whose own book, *Echoes from the Battlefield: First-Person Accounts of Civil War Past Lives*, is probably the best of its kind. Dr Lane's wide knowledge of these two subjects, plus a certain sure-footedness in planetary matters, provided research of the highest order. In matters of battle stress, her own views dovetailed almost precisely with those of Admiral Woodward.

I also thank my friend Chris Choi Man Tat, whose suave and courteous manner running Kite's, Dublin's best Chinese restaurant, quite conceals the fact that he was once bosun on a gigantic crude-oil tanker plying between the Gulf and the Far East. His insights on the great ships were constantly helpful.

Finally I thank my friend Olivia Oakes who thought she was coming for a quiet weekend with my family, and ended up reading this manuscript for almost 15 hours, checking spelling and punctuation. Any errors in this regard I intend, unfairly, to blame on her.

The Shark Mutiny is a work of fiction. Every character in it is a product of my imagination only, though there may be

certain College baseball players who recognize their names
but not their lives, nor any other connection with reality.

-Patrick Robinson

Cast of Principal Characters

Senior Command

he President of the United States (Commander-in-Chief US Armed Forces)
ice-Admiral Arnold Morgan (National Security Adviser)
obert MacPherson (Defense Secretary)
arcourt Travis (Secretary of State)
eneral Tim Scannell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs)
ack Smith (Energy Secretary)

US Navy Senior Command

dmiral Alan Dickson (Chief of Naval Operations)
dmiral Dick Greening (Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet CINCPACFLT)
ear-Admiral Freddie Curran (Commander Submarines Pacific Fleet COMSUBPAC)
ear-Admiral John Bergstrom (Commander Special War Command SPECWARCOM)

USS *Shark*

ommander Donald K. Reid (Commanding Officer)
t. Commander Dan Headley (Executive Officer)
t. Commander Jack Cressend (Combat Systems Officer)
t. Commander Josh Gandy (Sonar Officer)
aster Chief Petty Officer Drew Fisher (Chief of Boat)
t. Shawn Pearson (Navigation Officer)
t. Matt Singer (Officer of the Deck)
t. Dave Mills (ASDV helmsman)
t. Matt Longo (ASDV navigator)

USS John F. Kennedy

Admiral Daylan Holt (Group Commander)

US Navy SEALs

Commander Rick Hunter (Team Leader, Assault Team Two)

Commander Russell 'Rusty' Bennett (Overall Commander, Assault Team One)

Lt. Commander Ray Schaeffer (Team Leader, Assault Team One)

Lt. Dan Conway (2 I/C Assault Team One)

Lt. John Nathan (High Explosive Chief, Assault Team One)

Chief Petty Officer Rob Cafiero (Base Camp Chief, Assault Team One)

Petty Officer Ryan Combs (Machine Gunner, Assault Team One)

Combat SEAL Charlie Mitchell (Electrics, Assault Team One)

Lt. Dallas MacPherson (2 I/C and Explosives Chief, Assault Team Two)

Lt. Bobby Allensworth (Personal Bodyguard to Commander Hunter)

Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook (Explosives Assistant to Lt. MacPherson)

Petty Officer Catfish Jones (Combat assistant to Lt. Allensworth)

EAL Riff 'Rattlesnake' Davies (Machine Gunner, Assault Team Two)

EAL Buster Townsend (Assault Team Two)

National Security Agency, Fort Meade

Admiral David Borden (Acting Director)

Lt. Jimmy Ramshawe (Security Ops Officer)

The Court Martial

President: Captain Cale 'Boomer' Dunning

Judge Advocate General: Captain Sam Scott

Judge Advocate/Observer: Captain Art Brennan

Legal Counsellor: Lt. Commander David 'Locker' Jones

Defense Counsellor: Lt. Commander Al Surprenant

Chinese High Command

Admiral Zhang Yushu (Senior Vice Chairman Peoples'
Liberation Army/Navy Council)

Admiral Zu Jicai (Commander-in-Chief Navy)

Civilian Oil Tanker Masters

Commodore Don McGhee (*Global Bronco*)

Captain Tex Packard (*Galveston Star*)

Fiancées

Kathy O'Brien (Admiral Morgan)

Jane Peacock (Lt. Ramshawe)

Prologue

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

It was pretty damn hot for baseball. Only a light breeze ruffled the sweltering Blue Grass paddocks in this big thoroughbred breeding farm along the old Iron-Works Pike, out near the village of Paris.

Young Dan Headley couldn't hit Rick Hunter's fastball to save his life. 'Easy, Ricky. Take something off it, I can't hit that.' But again and again the baseball came screaming in, low and away, and slammed into the base of the red barn wall behind the hitter.

The giant sixteen-year-old pitcher kept howling with laughter as his best buddy swung and missed yet again. 'You gotta concentrate, Danny.'

'On what?'

'The baseball, stupid.'

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

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

'Pete Rose coulda seen a howitzer shell.'

'Okay, one more?'

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

Rick Hunter pulled off his glove, stuck the ball into the pocket of his jeans and tied the sleeves of his warm-up jacket around his waist. He jumped over the post-and-rail

fence into a wide paddock containing a half-dozen mares and foals. Dan Headley followed him, swinging the Louisville Slugger bat, looking over at the foals, at the Kentucky-bred baby racehorses, the best of whom might one day hear the thunder of the crowds at Belmont Park, Royal Ascot, Saratoga and Longchamp. Perhaps even Churchill Downs.

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

'Danny, we been havin' this particular conversation for the biggest part of three years and my answer ain't varied none. I just ain't interested. 'Sides, in my judgement, this bull market for thoroughbreds ain't here for ever.'

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

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

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

'Well, you're planning to leave with me, right?'

'Sure I am, Ricky. But, Christ, my daddy's just the stud groom here. Your ole man owns the whole place. And you don't even have any brothers and sisters. It's all gonna be yours. All 2000 acres of it and all them goddamned blue-chip brood mares.'

'Come on, Danny. You understand the horse-breeding business better'n I do. You could make a real go of it

yourself if you wanted. Your daddy's got a coupla mares of his own. Everyone has to start somewhere.'

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

'Raisin' horses bores you too, don't it?' said Rick, grinning, in the sure knowledge that he had a soulmate.

'Some. But I just don't have the advantages.'

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

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

'Who's that chestnut filly by?'

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

'Yeah. She's gonna have a backside like a barmaid when she grows up.'

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

'That's real local, right. Nashua's next door and the Big Horse is just up the road.' Kentucky horsemen always referred to the 1973 Triple Crown winner as the Big Horse, despite his unspectacular performance in the stud.

'Dad owns the mare, swears to God Secretariat's gonna be a great sire of brood mares. We'll be keeping that filly for sure.'

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

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

'Guess the dark gray is by the Rajah, right?'

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

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

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

They walked on to the fence, climbed it and came around into the main yard, walked right into Bobby Headley, hurrying down to the feed house. He was a slim, hard-eyed Kentucky horseman of medium height, not so instantly handsome as his dark-haired sixteen-year-old son, and he had a deep, resonant voice, which seemed out of place in a man so lacking in bulk. 'Hey, boys, how you doin'?' he said, looking at the baseball bat. 'Still gettin' that fast ball past 'im, eh, Ricky?'

'Yes, sir. But it ain't easy. Lose your concentration and that Danny can really hurt you.'

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

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

'In five, right?'

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

The big stallion, just a tad under seventeen hands and almost milk-white now with the advancing years, did not have a head collar on and he was not tethered on a long shank to the sturdy iron ring on the wall. This was a bit unusual for a stallion of his hot-blooded breeding. The massive ex-California stakes winner was a grandson of the fiery Red God, out of a fast daughter of the notorious English sire, Supreme Sovereign. To a professional horseman this was an example of breeding made in hell, a recipe for a truly dangerous stallion. Supreme Sovereign was so unpredictable, so lethal to any human being that they kept a high-powered fire hydrant in his box in case of an emergency. Red Rajah himself had several times attacked people, but he'd been a high-class miler in his time, a good, tough battler in a finish, and he was a highly commercial sire, standing for \$40,000. In the last couple of years Bobby Headley seemed to have him under control.

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

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

Right then Red Rajah attacked, quite suddenly, with not a semblance of warning. He whipped his head round and slammed his teeth over Danny's biceps, biting like a crocodile, right through the muscle and splintering the big bone in the upper arm, and he didn't let go. He dragged the boy down, pulling him on to the straw, preparing for the killer stallion's favorite trick, to kneel on his prey, like a camel or an elephant, crushing the ribcage. The

thoroughbred breeding industry is apt to keep this kind of savagery very quiet.

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

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

Rick Hunter was by now pounding across the grass quadrangle towards the boxes. He heard his friend's second scream and flew over the ground straight to the first box where Red Rajah lived. When he got there he searched instantly for a weapon and saw the trusty Louisville Slugger against the wall. Grabbing it with his right hand, he whipped open the door and faced with horror the scene before him: Danny, blood pouring from his smashed right arm, trying to protect himself against the onslaught of the stallion glowering over him, preparing to kneel. Rick never hesitated, wound back the bat and slammed it into Red Rajah's ribs with a blow that would surely have killed a man. It did not, however, kill Red Rajah. The great white horse swung his head round, as if deciding which of the two boys to attack first. So Ricky hit him again, with all his force, crashing the bat into the ribs of the stallion, simultaneously yelling, 'Get out, Danny! For Christ's sake get out. Shut the door but don't lock it.'

Dan Headley, half in shock, maddened by the pain, rolled and crawled out of the box. Still flat on the ground, he kicked the door shut and sixteen-year-old Rick Hunter turned to face the raging killer horse again. By now he was in the corner fifteen feet from the door, watching the Rajah backing off a stride or two. Rick held the bat in both hands, not daring to swing in case he missed the head and the horse came at his throat, or, much more likely, his testicles.

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

Outside, Dan Headley had passed out with the pain.

Now Rick was on his own. Again the Rajah moved away a stride, his ears flat back, his wicked white-rimmed eye still flicking back and forth. Rick's mind raced back to a conversation he had once with an old local hardboot, who had told him *there's only one way I know to stop a stallion who's bent on killing you*. Rick Hunter dropped down on to all fours, knowing that if this ploy failed he might be as dead as Danny would have been if he hadn't arrived in time.

Rick flattened himself into the pose of the horse's most ancient and feared enemy, the lion. He tried to assume the crouched, threatening stance of a big cat preparing to pounce, trying to reawaken thousands of years of unconscious phobia in the psyche of the horse. He burrowed his boot into the straw, made a scratching noise on the concrete beneath, snarled deeply under his breath, staring hard into the horse's eyes. Then he moved his head forward, let out a roar and then another, crawling one step nearer.

Red Rajah stopped dead. He moved a half-step backwards, a slight tremor in both shoulder muscles. He backed up some more, dipping his head as if to protect his throat. It was an instinct, not a reaction.

Rick roared like a lion again, all the while trying to get the warm-up jacket from around his waist. The fight seemed to have gone right out of the Rajah, who was now standing stock still. He was not prepared when the 6ft 4in heir to Hunter Valley jumped up and dived at his head, ramming the jacket hard down over his eyes and face. Red Rajah was in the pitch dark now and no horse likes to move

when he's unable to see anything. He just stood there, stock still, trembling, blind, with the jacket over his head. Rick carefully edged towards the door, eased it quietly open and made his escape, slamming the lock shut as he went.

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

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

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

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

One

January 23, 2007.

The White House, Washington DC.

ADMIRAL ARNOLD MORGAN was alone in his office contemplating the two major issues in his life at this particular lunchtime. The first was his decision to stay on as the National Security Adviser to the President for one more year, against all his better judgement. The second was a Wagnerian-sized roast beef sandwich, fortified with heavy mayonnaise and mustard into a feast he would never have dared to order had his secretary and wife-to-be, the gorgeous Kathy O'Brien, been anywhere near the precincts of 1400 Pennsylvania Avenue. Happily she was out until 4 p.m.

The Admiral grinned cheerfully, circling his desk like a mountain lion poised to pounce upon his prey. He saw it as a richly deserved gastronomic reward for having succumbed to weeks of being badgered, harassed, coaxed and ultimately persuaded to remain in this office by some of the most powerful figures in American politics and the military.

His decision to hang in there had been wrung out of him, after nine weeks of soul-searching. The decision to hit a roast beef sandwich *el grando*, before Ms O'Brien came sashaying back into the office, had been made with much less anguish: nine weeks' less. The Admiral, sixty-one years old now, was still, miraculously, in robust health and not more than eight pounds heavier than he had been as a nuclear submarine commander twenty-seven years

previously. Immaculately tailored, wearing a maroon and gold Hermès tie Kathy had given him for Christmas, he tucked a large white linen napkin into his shirt collar and bit luxuriously into his sandwich. Through the window he could see it was snowing like hell. The President was, shrewdly, visiting southern California, where the temperature was a sunlit seventy-eight degrees and here, in the West Wing of the White House, there was absolutely nothing happening of any interest whatsoever to the most feared and respected military strategist on planet earth.

'I still have no idea what the hell I'm doing here,' he muttered to himself. 'The goddamned world's gone quiet, temporarily, and I'm sitting here like a goddamned lapdog waiting for our esteemed but flaky leader to drag himself out of some fucking Beverly Hills swimming pool.' *Flaky. A complete flake.* The words had been used about the President, over and over at that final meeting at the home of Admiral Scott Dunsmore, the wise and deceptively wealthy former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Arnold Morgan could not understand what the fuss was about. Plenty of other NSAs had resigned, but apparently he was not permitted that basic human right.

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

President's second term was over. A few weeks previously, at the conclusion of a particularly dangerous and covert naval operation in China, the President had demonstrated such shocking self-interest and lack of judgement, that he could no longer be trusted to act in the strict interests of the USA.

The world was presently a volatile place and no one needed to remind Admiral Morgan of that. But the man in the Oval Office was prone to appoint 'Yes Men' to influential positions and now, in the final two years of his presidency, he tended to think only of himself and his image and popularity. Without Admiral Morgan's granite wall of reality and judgement in the crucible of international military affairs, the men in Admiral Dunsmore's house that day were greatly concerned that a terrible and costly mistake might occur.

Looking back, Arnold Morgan could not remember precisely who had put into words the hitherto unspoken observation that the President was a 'goddamned flake, and getting worse'. But he remembered a lot of nodding and no laughter. He also remembered their host, Admiral Dunsmore, turning to his old friend the Senator from Massachusetts and saying, 'The trouble is he's interested in military matters and we cannot trust him. Talk to Arnold, Teddy. You'll say it better than anyone else.' He had, too. At the conclusion of a short but moving few words from the silver-tongued sage of Hyannisport, Admiral Morgan had nodded and said curtly, 'My resignation is withdrawn.'

Now he was 'back at the factory', ruminating on the general calm that had existed in the world's known trouble spots for the past month. The Middle East was for the moment serene. Terrorists in general seemed still to be on their Christmas break. India and Pakistan had temporarily ceased to threaten each other, and China, the Big Tiger, had been very quiet since last fall. Indeed, according to the satellite photographs they were not even conducting fleet

exercises near Taiwan, which made a change. As for their new ISBM submarine, *Xia III*, there was no sign of it leaving its jetty in Shanghai.

The only halfway interesting piece of Intelligence to come Admiral Morgan's way since Christmas was a report put together by the CIA's Russian desk. According to one of their field operators in Moscow, the Rosvoorouzhenie factory on the outskirts of the city was suddenly making large quantities of moored mines. This was regarded as unusual since Rosvoorouzhenie's known expertise was in the production of seabed mines, the MDM series, particularly the lethal one-and-three-quarter-ton ship-killing MDM-6, which can be laid through the torpedo tubes of a submarine. Rosvoorouzhenie was now, apparently, making a lot of updated, custom-made PLT-3 mines, moored one-tonners, which can be laid either through torpedo tubes or from surface ships. The CIA man had no information where the mines were going, if anywhere, but their man had been certain this was a very unusual development. Most Russian-made mines these days were strictly for export.

Admiral Morgan growled to himself, *now who the hell wants a damn large shipment of moored PLT-3s, eh?* He would have growled it out loud, but for the fact that his mouth was full of roast beef and mayonnaise. As it was, he chewed and pondered silently. But on reflection he did not much like it. *If the goddamned penniless Russians are building several hundred expensive mines, someone has ordered 'em. And if someone's ordered 'em, they plan to lay 'em, right? Otherwise they wouldn't have ordered 'em. Where? That's what we wanna know. Who's planning a nice little surprise minefield?*

He finished his sandwich, sipped his coffee and frowned. When Kathy came back he'd have her call Langley and make sure he was kept up to speed on Russian mine production. And if the overheads picked up any large mine

shipments leaving any Russian seaports, he wanted to know about that. Immediately. *Just don't want some fucking despot in a turban getting overly ambitious, right?* The Admiral glared at the portrait of General MacArthur which hung in his office. *Gotta watch 'em, Douglas. Right? Watch 'em, at all times.*

0900 (local) January 23, 2007.

*Renmin Dahuitang, The Great Hall of the People
Tiananmen Square, Beijing.*

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

Inside, there were more guards, patrolling the endless corridors. Sixteen of them stood motionless, with shouldered arms, in a square surrounding the only elevator which travels down to the brightly lit Meridian Gate, the spectacular entrance once reserved for the Emperor alone. Tiananmen Square itself was under an immense blanket of white. The total absence of thousands of government workers gave the heart of Beijing a look of abandonment. It was windswept, quiet, deserted, like a great stadium after the games were over.

Inside the ops room there was an atmosphere of high tension. Standing at the far end of the room, next to a ten-foot-wide illuminated computer screen, was the formidable figure of Admiral Zhang Yushu, recently resigned from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the People's Liberation Army/Navy and now installed, by the Paramount Ruler himself, as the senior of the four vice-chairmen of the all-powerful PLAN Council. Eight weeks previously Admiral Zhang had leapfrogged clean over the other three highly

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

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

Admiral Zhang's three elderly colleagues on the Military Council, all ex-Army commanders, were in attendance. The new Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, Admiral Zu Jicai, was there, seated next to Admiral Yibo Yunsheng, the new Commander of China's massive northern fleet. The Navy's powerful Political Commissar, Vice-Admiral Yang Zhenying, had arrived the previous night from Shanghai in company with the Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Sang Ye. The most influential of the Chinese Navy's deputy commanders-in-chief, Admiral Zhi-Heng Tan, was seated next to Zhang himself at the head of the broad mahogany table. Behind them was a single four-foot-high framed print of Mao Zedong, the great revolutionary whose only wish was for a supreme China to stand alone against the imperial West. The print was a replica of the giant portrait of Mao which gazes with chilling indifference across the square from the Tiananmen Gate. Today, it served to remind the Chinese High Command in this brightly lit room precisely who they really were.

The other three men in the room were Iranian: the most senior a black-robed, bearded ayatollah, whose name was

not announced. The two naval officers accompanying the holy man were Rear-Admiral Hossein Shafii, Head of Tactical Headquarters, Bandar Abbas and Rear-Admiral Mohammed Badr, the Iranian Navy's Commander-in-Chief Submarines.

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

'Gentlemen,' said Admiral Zhang Yushu. 'As you are all well aware, the new Sino-Iranian pipeline from the great oilfields of Kazakhstan will come on stream within a few weeks. Thousands of barrels will flow daily out of Russia, right across your great country, south to the new Chinese refinery on the shores of the Hormuz Strait. 'This, gentlemen, should herald a new dawn for all of us, a dawn of vast profits for Iran and, thank God, an end to China's endless reliance on the West in the matter of fuel oil. The alliance of the past ten years between our two superb nations was indeed made in heaven.'

Admiral Zhang paused and opened his arms wide. He walked round to the right side of the huge table and stood beaming at the men from the desert. The Ayatollah himself stood first and took both of the Admiral's hands in his own, wishing everyone the everlasting peace of Allah. Then the two Admirals from Bandar Abbas stood up and embraced the legendary Chinese Navy Commander.

Zhang walked back to his position at the head of the table and glanced briefly at his notes. He allowed a flicker of a frown to cross his face, but then he smiled again and continued, 'I have no need to remind anyone of the enormous cost of building this 1000-mile pipeline and the construction of the refinery. It ran, of course, into billions of

US dollars. However, as of this moment, there is but one dark cloud on our horizon and that is the extraordinarily low cost of a barrel of oil on the world market. Last night it was down to \$13 and falling towards a ten-year low. The Arab nations cannot be controlled because of their reliance on American protection and commerce. Which leaves us to sell at a half, or even a third, of our oil's true value. Now, Iran is earning twenty per cent of every barrel to reach the new refinery and at present that's under three dollars. It will thus cost your country millions and millions in unearned revenue every month. Gentlemen, I ask you. What is the solution? I must remind you this is a *plot*, a diabolical Western PLOT to devalue our great economies, to allow them to dominate us, as they have always tried to do.'

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

The Ayatollah seemed genuinely perplexed and looked up quizzically.

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

Admiral Badr looked up sharply and said immediately, 'My friend Yushu, you have become a tried and trusted confidant of my nation. But I feel I must remind you that we have considered many times a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. We have been frustrated for the same three reasons every time: one, the far side of the Strait belongs to Oman, a country which is totally influenced by the American puppets in London. Two, we could never lay down a minefield quickly enough without being seen by the American satellites, which would surely bring down upon us the wrath of the Pentagon. Three, well, ultimately the

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

Admiral Zhang nodded and asked for the forbearance of the meeting. 'Mohammed,' he said. 'All your reasons are correct. But now times have changed. The stakes are much higher. You and I have different oil both to sell and to use. We also have an unbreakable joint interest, our own oil routes from the Strait to the Far East. You, Mohammed, have the entire backing of the People's Liberation Army/Navy. Together we could most certainly lay down a minefield, using both submarines and surface ships, and we could achieve it so swiftly that no one would have the slightest idea who had done what.'

'But they would find out, surely?'

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

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

'So has mine, Mohammed. But they are not invincible and in the end they are a godless society interested only in money. They will raise heaven and hell to free up the tanker routes to the Gulf, but I think they will see it as a business problem, not cause for armed conflict. Besides, they will not want an all-out shooting war in the Gulf because that will just compound the oil problems and send prices even