

Excerpt from BEAR by Richard Murray Davis

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Chapter 1: SUNK

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The Okinawa Trough is a depression in the continental shelf in the East China Sea. It is an arc-shaped basin west of the Ryukyu Trench, where the Philippine Tectonic plate is subducting beneath the Eurasian plate. The region is notable for an arc of volcanic islands that extend north to the Japanese Island of Kyushu and southwest to Taiwan. The trough and trench are within a larger region of volcanic activity encircling the Pacific Ocean known as the Ring of Fire. Ownership of islands within the trough is contested by countries in the region. Mineral rights are at stake.

Reports had surfaced of fishermen seeing small weather balloons floating in the water northeast of Taiwan inside the Okinawa Trough. The area was claimed by China to be within their two-hundred-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) patrolled the area. Rear Admiral Navid was in command of the East Sea Fleet. He ordered the Bei-Tian, a littoral combat cruiser (LCC) that patrolled the region, to investigate the sightings.

The LCC was sixty-five meters bow to stern and carried a crew of twelve. It was equipped with four hybrid electric drives supporting forty knots in sea state two. The bridge, which was on level 02, was manned by the officer-of-the-watch and a helmsman. Most operations, including radar, sonar and weapons were controlled from the combat information center (CIC) in the ship's interior.

Wang Shen was captain of the LCC. Wang grew up on a farm in western China. He scored in the top one percent on the National College Entrance Examination and the government gave him a full scholarship to attend the PLAN National Defense University. He majored in naval engineering and upon graduation was assigned an officer post in the navy.

Wang was married and had an eight-year-old son, but the family was divided. His wife worked in a factory in Zhongzhou, and their son was being raised by his wife's parents on a farm in western China. After trying for many years, the family was able to get their hukou (residential designation affecting social benefits) changed to Zhongzhou. The couple had recently purchased a condo in a modern high rise on the outskirts of the city. They were anxious to reunite the family and experience big-city living.

Wang was one of the youngest captains in the navy. The closest he had come to combat was firing two short-range missiles during a military exercise in the East China Sea.

It was the dry season, but you would not know. The sky was an ominous timber wolf gray. The wind was twenty knots from the west. One to two-meter swells were

hitting the LCC at ten-second intervals. It was early morning, and there were no ships on the horizon.

CIC called the bridge. "Sonar is detecting an object at a depth of four-hundred meters, range six kilometers. Appears to be drifting to the surface."

Ships of war are hesitant to use active sonar because it reveals their position to submarines. Wang had authorized its use in the search for the balloons.

The officer on watch spoke into the ship-wide com, "Captain to the bridge." CIC called again two minutes later. "Second object detected, depth three-hundred-fifty meters. Two objects now streaming upward."

Wang entered the bridge, and the watch officer told him of the detections. Wang told the helmsman to change course to intercept. It took the LCC six minutes to reach the first object. Lieutenant Tsi Lee was on dogwatch. The binoculars were mounted on a pedestal on the observation deck. Lee had the elevation lock set slightly below horizon and the magnification at twenty. He had to manually slew the big eyes in azimuth. A crewman in CIC gave Lee the pointing direction.

The lieutenant saw the first object immediately after it broke the water line. It looked like a small gray weather balloon. The lieutenant called the bridge and told them of the sighting. As they got closer, Lee realized only part of the balloon was above the water line. It was being held down by what appeared to be a metallic canister attached to its base. The balloon-canister assembly was about two meters long and looked like a giant light bulb bobbing in the water.

After some discussion about its possible purpose and what the canister might contain, Wang decided to haul the assembly onboard. Not wanting to put divers in the water, he maneuvered the ship closer to the balloon and cut the engines. He ordered the crewmen to open the stern cargo bay on the lower deck. The garage, as the bay was referred to, was used to deploy small boats and cargo. The garage door was hinged at the bottom and could be hydraulically pivoted down into the water to form a ramp. There was a crane mounted on the main deck with an arm that could be rotated out over the ramp. A cable connected to a winch could be lowered from the end of the arm. The winch was controlled by a crewman in the aft control room.

Two crewmen in the garage attempted to lasso the balloon using a rope. In spite of its size, the ship was rolling in concert with the swell, which made the crewmen's task difficult. They succeeded on the second try. They pulled the noose tight and attached the rope to the cable hanging from the crane. The crewman controlling the winch began rewinding the cable.

Meanwhile OrgonBahakAzan97108, en route to pick up his cargo, witnessed the interdiction. Orgon was born on the planet Oggilea and was a member of a race referred to as the Ogg. The trailing number in an Ogg's name was his year of birth.

It took only seconds for the space-faring vessel to reach the surface ship. The balloon, with attached canister, was hanging precariously from the cable attached to the crane. The crewmen were attempting to jockey the wobbling assembly into the

garage. The sea was choppy. Orgon told the D-Org (a designer organism) to use the maglift. The lift was a helical beam, which produced a strong magnetic field. The metalized balloon and canister were pulled upward in the field. The assembly rose about five meters, but the maglift was not strong enough to pull it free from the cable. Rather than increasing power to the lift and getting into a contest with the cable and winch, Orgon opted to use the cutter.

The cutter was employed in surface mining. There was an alignment problem because of the small angle between the cutter beam and cable. Orgon told the D-Org to cut the arm on the crane holding the cable. The cutter sliced through the arm but, in the process, cut off a section of the garage door and severed a corner of the stern, leaving it dangling in the water. Heat from the beam and molten metal, which had dropped into the sea, raised the temperature of the water near the bay door. The garage was engulfed in a cloud of steam.

The D-Org re-engaged the maglift. The cable and part of the winch arm, which were now dangling from the rope attached to the canister, were heavy enough to pull the rope free. The severed winch arm with attached cable and rope dropped into the sea. The spaceship was mostly invisible except for a region surrounding an opening into which the balloon-canister assembly was being drawn.

Wang Shen witnessed the bizarre event from the bridge. The LCC had a rapid-fire cannon (five thousand rounds per minute) on a rotary mount, but the gun was programmed to only fire against incoming targets. Wang could override the programming, but the target was too close. Fragmentation could reflect back, endangering the ship and everyone topside.

Wang called the CIC. "Are you seeing that aircraft, or whatever it is, hovering directly above us?"

"Yes, sir, we have a definite infrared (IR) signature. Never seen anything like it. It's huge. Forty meters—maybe more."

"Whatever it is, it just attacked us and cut off a section of the stern. Target it with the missile as soon it moves off."

The missile had a forward-looking infrared (FLIR) seeker. The warhead was a conventional high explosive. The starship began moving off when the balloon-canister assembly cleared the opening. CIC fired the missile. The intercept occurred six hundred meters from the LCC. Light from the explosion arrived instantly. The sound arrived about two seconds later. The starship was undamaged.

Meanwhile, the crewmen in the cargo bay could not raise the garage door, and there was a gaping hole in the floor and side bulkhead where the stern had been severed. The sea was flooding the lower deck, and the crewmen were losing the battle with the gushing water.

They could have made it. The hybrid drive was undamaged. But OrgonBahakAzan97108 decided to erase the evidence. He believed in the golden rule:

“Do unto others as they have done unto you.” He also believed the indigenous earthlings were barbaric.

Orgon walked over to the station where the D-Org was and said, “I’ll do this.” He reset the crosshairs on the cutter beam, increased the intensity, and sliced the ship in half. The beam went through the steel hull and aluminum superstructure like a band saw cutting through a two-by-four. The ship would go down in over two kilometers of water and probably never be recovered.

The cutter beam hit one of the lithium-ion battery banks in the belly of the ship. Water seeped into the batteries, making contact with the lithium, which immediately ignited, setting the entire area ablaze. The searing heat swept through the compartment encompassing the adjacent battery banks. Two of them exploded. The sailors in the garage were thrown against a side bulkhead when the batteries exploded and drowned when they could not get to the ladder leading to the main deck. The crewman manning the winch in the aft control room made it out the side door, but fell and slid down the deck toward the molten splintered hull. He was fatally burned as he went over the edge into the breach.

Lieutenant Lee, who witnessed the preceding events from the observation deck, was thrown onto the main deck when the batteries exploded, breaking his neck in the fall and killing him as the bow canted upward. The sea was boiling and steam rising from the crevice. Two crewmen in CIC and three in their bunks in the interior of the ship drowned in their compartments.

Wang Shen saw the beam slice through the hull and turned to his compatriots on the bridge. “Get out,” he said, pointing to the door.

The crewmen made it out the bridge door while Wang yelled into the ship-wide com, “Abandon ship.”

Wang turned and hit the red Mayday button, which automatically transmitted the distress signal. But the signal never made it off the ship. The cutter beam, which splintered the hull, also destroyed the communications antenna on the weather deck.

The helmsman and officer-of-the-watch got out the bridge door, but fell and slid down into the fissure amidships never to be seen again. Wang was last to exit the bridge. After witnessing the fate of the helmsman and watch officer, he lunged out the bridge door, grabbing the handrail on the side of the deck, which was at about a forty-degree angle. He swung his legs over the top and hung from the rail as the bow went into the froth.

The burning lithium had set the sea afire. It was a bewildering sight. Wang released his grip as his legs went into the water. He began frantically swinging his arms in a hopeless battle to escape the undertow and swirling burning sea. The boiling water seeped into his life jacket and through his clothes. He gasped for breath. Wang didn’t think of his wife or son until he gagged on the brine, knowing he was going to die.