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Detected

Christopher Knaggs

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The message told the submarine *Pintado* to return. Return to the Barents Sea. Return to observation of Soviet naval activity. Return to exhaustion, tension, and possible glory. Captain Paul Addario read the message to his officers. A collective groan grew from all then fake enthusiasm engendered by brave small talk. Addario, stoic and stone faced, ordered the sub back. The captain's calm demeanor belied an acidic stomach and intuition that their luck could not hold.

Five days ago, on an intelligence mission off Murmansk, *Pintado* ran into a submariner's dream; at least a US submariner's dream: several Soviet surface ships circling a point in the ocean. Something lost for sure. For days Addario made periscope observations, collected sonar data, took pictures, and even went under the surface ships for under-hull photography. He found evidence of an aircraft crash. Addario ran the sub west, off Norway, to safely report findings. He expected to be congratulated and told to come home. Instead, the message said go back: observe and report.

The *Pintado* ran at flank speed. 650 feet down, the ship moved only 300 feet from the bottom. Sonar was blind. The sub's own propeller noise drowned out the sound of pursuers. Battle stations had been called. Captain Addario couldn't believe he had been detected. How was that possible?

The sub's watch stations were manned. Captain Addario stood over the geographic plot crammed between the periscope stand and attack center. The executive officer and weapons officer stood opposite the captain. On the plot, tissue paper was hurriedly laid over a chart of the ship's current position. Small pencil lines marked location of the threat. Addario's butt rubbed

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against the head of the sailor manning the torpedo control consol. Addario moved closer to the geo-plot.

“Attention in the control room,” Addario barked over the noise of excited jabbering. The ship’s speed closed in on 20 knots. The ship control team did not look back, concentrating on maneuvering at a high bell. “We may have been detected. As you heard a couple active pings got us. Sonar believes those pings returned energy. One of the Soviets, a Kashin-class destroyer, turned towards us.” Addario had never been hit by an active sonar except in exercises. Twenty-five years in the navy and not once had he been detected. He had never even heard of a U.S submarine being detected. The control room was quiet, subdued, tense. 100 miles off of Murmansk, there would be no help. Addario spit out a hair chewed from his beard. “Last periscope observation showed three destroyers up there, as well as the Moskva. I intend to run at speed for another five minutes. Then we’ll do a sharp turn and go quiet. If they follow down our last track, we might be able to drift away.” The torpedo room was ordered to load an evasion device in the signal ejector.

Over two dozen pencils were sharpened and laid on the plotting table. Like surgeons ready for an operation, the officers grabbed parallel rulers, dividers, and erasers from enlisted men. These men sat at the feet of the officers to save room. Seven people wedged into the space of a small bathroom. Every man avoided touching another. On the control stand were two displays. All eyes craned to the displays. One showed broad-band noise. Addario concentrated on that one. It might be possible to see active pinging despite the noise from *Pintado*’s own propellers. The other display was used for narrow band detection. This picked up high frequency indicators from pumps, electronic devices, and rotating equipment. Both displays whited out.

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Anxious fingers pointed out potential detections. Addario knew nervous, wishful thinking when he saw it.

“Right full rudder. Make your depth 613 feet. All stop.” Addario and all of control hung on. The ship heeled over 20 degrees in the sharp turn. “Steady course 185.” Addario’s orders were repeated and acknowledged. The ship slowed with the rudder acting as a partial brake. Sonar reported hearing active pinging from three sources. Small dots appeared on the broadband detector.

“That would be our guys,” Addario said. “Start plotting. Skunk one at 345. She’s another Kashin; I’m not worried about her. Skunk two is the destroyer who turned towards us. She’s due north. That’s the bastard that hit us—I still don’t understand how. Skunk three is a warship, maybe a Burevestnik frigate type. Never got a good look at her.” Sonar reported the loud, multiple propeller noises of the Moskva. Moskva was a helicopter carrier and pride of the Soviet fleet. Sonar thought Moskva had also turned to the south. Moskva meant helos up and looking.

Captain Addario made stars on the paper to indicate an estimate of Soviet ship positions when this debacle started. The submarine could tell the direction of the pursuers, but not distance. These directions urgently plotted every thirty seconds. Speed drifted down to ten knots. The pinging could now be heard through the hull, an obnoxious two-tone whistle. The sound was different than in the World War II movies, but just as annoying and dangerous. These systems, unique to the Russians, told all onboard that hunters were smelling prey. Sonar reported bottom bounce information from the pinging. Rough distances could be determined. These were plotted. The first pencil broke. The Soviets were closing in.

“Sonar, do they have us?” Addario glared intently at the two sonar displays. The active pinging and propeller signatures of the surface ships showed up brightly in large traces. The

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display looked like a summer lightning hit on a clear horizon. The bearing rates of the contacts got more rapid. That meant they were closing. “Sonar, do they have us?” Addario pounded the plot.

“Captain, don’t think so, but look at the narrow band. In between the pinging, I’ve got pump noises, submerged pump noises—170 degrees.”

Everyone in view of the narrow band display stared into it. There were two slight parallel lines tracing down the screen. In just seconds, two more, slight, barely distinguishable lines appeared. At exactly the same moment, the Captain and Sonar announced, “Submarine to starboard!” A crescendo of noise increased in control. The executive officer told everyone to shut up.

“Come on, come on, Sonar,” Addario hissed through clenched teeth. He didn’t want to interrupt Sonar while they were classifying. He sent the XO to sonar to hurry things up. The surface pinging got louder, more personal.

Touching the man’s shoulder behind him at the weapons console, Addario said quietly and firmly, “What tubes are loaded?” Several around heard the request, raising eyebrows. The officers plotting immediately returned to drawing bearings on the surface ships. They put a big question mark on the paper at 170 degrees. Only two of four tubes had warshot torpedoes loaded. Still in contact with the sailor’s shoulder, Addario ordered, “I know you’ve been loading targeting information on the destroyers. Keep doing that, but your priority will be this sub once we get data.”

Still drifting, *Pintado* eased silently to three knots. The ocean was a symphony of noise. Pinging, surface ship screws, and flow transients on the broad band were now audible through *Pintado*’s hull. Narrow band showed additional traces coming from the south. The XO ran the

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fifteen feet from the sonar shack to geo-plot, tripping not once but twice. He looked alarmed. There was not one sub, but two subs. A Victor II and a diesel boat. The diesel boat probably a Tango, maybe a Whiskey; only heard because of a bad shaft rub. Distance was unknown, but both submerged together and probably outside 10,000 yards.

“Left full rudder. All ahead flank! Set course north. Make your depth 250 feet!” A chorus of disapproval erupted in control. This would take *Pintado* right at the deadly destroyers. Not only that but going shallow would make it easier for them to hear. Despite misgivings, the orders were followed crisply. No talking now. Second guessing would stay internal. Catholics made the sign of the cross. Protestants did the same, just in case. God or no God, the crew trusted Addario.

Addario left the geo-plot taking one step onto the periscope stand announcing, “Attention in the control room. Attention in the control room. We walked into a trap. Don’t know how, doesn’t matter. My intention is to aim directly at Skunk two, the middle destroyer. We’re going right under her, as close as we can get. Let’s confuse them in their own noise.” Sonar reported losing all contact with the submarines due to the speed increase. The surface ship pinging got louder and more rapid. Geo-plot said the other two surface ships were changing course. Bearings indicated a turn towards *Pintado*.

“Our problem is those two submarines. We’re being herded by them towards the surface combatants. *Pintado* is going to scream by the surface ships. Then we’ll go deep, turn 60 degrees, launch an evasion device, and go back to this north course. Then we go ultra-quiet. I don’t know their intentions, but we’re only 100 miles from Russia. We’re making a lot of noise now, so I want warshots loaded in all tubes. Do not, repeat, do not open the outer torpedo doors. If they hear that, they might start shooting. This might just be a game of hide and seek, but you

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never know with these Bolshevik bastards.” The nervousness of the watch standers eased, despite the real danger. There was a plan. It was always better with a plan.

The sub was now at full speed with an ordered depth of 112 feet. Sonar had long lost the submarines, but sonar did not need to hear the surface echo ranging. The pings of the central destroyer rattled off the sub. Those who could, covered their ears. *Ping, ping* return; *ping, ping* return; *ping, ping* return. Then, just a joined loud noise: whistling, obnoxious, scary. Every sailor looked up as if he could see the ship just a few feet above. The churning of two distinct propellers on the port side shook gauge glass. Standing men hung on, waiting for a collision.

“Okay, ease the boat down to 600 feet.” A quartermaster shouted out that the secure fathometer had only about a 650 feet depth here and getting shallower. “Okay, dive. Make your depth 590 feet.” The depth was dangerously close to the bottom at full speed. The pinging was lost in *Pintado*’s own stern noise, but the broadband display still showed the energy in the water. Geo-plot kept track of the bearings, plotting calmly and precisely. Pencil tips broke often.

Two minutes later, geo-plot saw the change. The closest destroyer had started turning. Rubbing his hands, Addario gave the XO a thumbs-up. “He was slow. Helm, get ready. As soon as he regains us, we turn. Prepare to launch the counter measure.” Every minute, the sub raced 1,000 yards away. The plot showed the destroyer turning to follow *Pintado*’s last bearing. The audible echo ranging returned.

Addario took a deep breath, then three more. A possible active sonar return from *Pintado* was sensed, low energy, weak. Sonar reported the destroyer going to flank speed. The captain ordered his first turn. The destroyer had a sniff. At the end of the turn, the countermeasure was launched. In the turn, the ship’s speed and burst of compressed air sent the device a few miles an hour at a right angle to the boat. A 180-degree turn now ordered away from the countermeasure.

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Sonar announced that the countermeasure had activated. The ocean filled with the sound of a thousand coke bottles with fizzies dropped in. The purpose of the device was bubbles, millions of bubbles, timed release bubbles. For miles around, there would be no passive sonar hearing at all. For a couple miles, active sonar's underwater picture looked like an endless fog.

Pintado ran at high speed as the countermeasure worked its magic. Addario estimated the sub had made almost four miles from the drop. "Rig ship for ultra-quiet. Sonar, find me those subs." In ultra-quiet the ship did something counter-intuitive. Sailors broke from their battle stations and went to their racks. Unless at a watch station and involved in the fight, you went to sleep. Shoes came off. Pockets emptied. Watertight doors, closed in case of flooding, opened. All pumps and fans secured. No talking at all except in whispers, and only when required. The reactor was set into a low power condition. Steam was allowed to leak into the engine-room to prevent accidental over-pressures.

Recirculating fans always ran in the submarine; a white noise unnoticed until it stopped. The fans turned off now. The silence was a measure, a measure of desperateness, as loud as any echo ranging. The remaining crew in control put all coffee cups, cigarettes, and manuals in a bag loaded with towels. Ultra-quiet was a big deal. Most of *Pintado*'s sailors had never done it for real. Some junior officers hung around control. They wanted to help, to be part of the action. The XO pointed them down to the next deck and made a sleep sign with his hands. No exceptions for anyone.

Sonar no longer passed word over the loudspeaker. They shuffled notes to the geo-plot. The broadband displayed solid white. Propeller noise, echo ranging, and even rudder movements were evident in darker streaks. The countermeasure began to die, but still inundating the seas with noise. Then, through the hull, came the muffled sound of explosions. Not loud. Not close. A

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series of three dull retorts, a ten second gap, then three more. The explosions were coming from the direction of the countermeasure. As *Pintado* slowed to almost zero, the bearings of the three echo ranging surface ships came together. They were attacking the device!

Turning, speaking softly, Addario told the weapons technician, “Open the outer doors on all tubes, one at a time, slowly. Tubes one and two will be for the surface contacts. Save three and four for the submerged.” Deliberately, the captain walked away from the geo-plot to a console over the quartermaster’s plot. It had a series of arming devices serviced by red, then yellow, then green lights. This would launch a beacon, activated by seawater, if control was flooded. The US Navy knew *Pintado* was lost. There were two positions on the beacon. One said *Peacetime*, the other said *Hostile Action*. Addario moved the selector to *Hostile*.

For nearly an hour, the subs sat at 100 feet off the bottom. The depth charging continued but scattered with seemingly less enthusiasm. The countermeasure died and sunk to the bottom. There was no sign of the Soviet subs. The two destroyers and frigate were easy to track from their echo ranging. The closest was 14,000 yards and opening. A note from sonar said that Moskva, the helicopter carrier, was exiting the area at high speed, probably heading back to Murmansk.

With fists now unclenched, Addario said, “That’s a good sign. The Bolsheviks don’t want to lose the pride of their fleet. The surface wanks have lost us. Damn, where are those subs?” Almost on cue, the sonar supervisor came out pointing up at the narrow band display. The display was unremarkable except for a tiny line due south. The Victor boat was coming out of the noise. Distance was unknown, but it was moving between the *Pintado* and all the theatrics to the east. If it kept going it would present its stern in less than a half hour. The Victor sub data

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was loaded into the weapons computer and assigned to tube three. No sign of the Tango or Whiskey. Diesel boats are hard to hear on the battery. No shaft noise now. Still a real danger.

As the Victor got closer, the narrow band trace grew stronger. Shortly, that trace was joined by other traces. Each trace corresponded to a pump, generator, and particular steam noise. Sonar thought they heard pots banging in the Victor's galley. The sub's propeller noise showed up on the broadband. Range now estimated to be 6,000 yards with strong confidence; a dead-on stern shot. The Soviet would never hear the torpedo. The boat would just implode. The officers on the geo-plot would support the captain in anything. Unspoken was a disbelief that it had gotten to this point. Addario gave them a half-smile and shook his head. There would be no shooting, not now at least.

The biggest threat to *Pintado* moved quickly away. The Victor never knew how close to vaporization it had been. In that gave *Pintado* a chance to get away. A suggestion was made by the XO to move further north, ease up the contours of the bottom. Once more, distance had been put between the surface ships. Then, gradually, move east and then south to safety. Captain Addario agreed. With the Russians now shooting, it was important to get that info back to Washington. Addario wanted to wait until night. Nighttime always cut down on the aggression of skimmers. Subs lived in the dark—cherished it. Warfare today was largely electronic, but humans still hated fighting in the dark. In the back of Addario's mind was also that diesel boat, still unlocated, still dangerous.

Pintado sat quietly for the next eight hours. Some of the ultra-quiet restrictions relaxed. A trim pump, needed to keep depth, turned on. The cooks were allowed to serve cold food. Sound tapes continued to run in sonar; every second of a sub's deployment captured on tape. These would be used by the spooks to analyze contacts, local sound conditions, and even the biologics

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encountered. When declassified, the tapes were often given to oceanographic institutions to track whales and dolphins. The captain and sonar team listened to the tape made prior to the detection. No singing screw, no loud noises, no transient that should have alerted an enemy. In the meantime, new tapes recorded the pinging destroyers and the dying traces of the Victor.

The sonar team finally picked up the diesel boat surfacing and snorkeling. A few slight maneuvers by *Pintado* put this Soviet sub well outside thirty miles. *Pintado* powered up and began a slow, quiet transit around the area of interest. Torpedo tubes doors closed, and the regular watch section set.

Captain Addario bounced a fist off a knee. Up nearly thirty hours, but no sleep came. First, he had to compose a succinct message of the day's events to SUBLANT. All hell was going to break loose, an administrative and political one. Second, all the charting used during the encounter required labeling and interpretation. An inquiry would ensue. A US sub being detected was almost unknown. Being detected in a Russian sea was worse. The event would be classified at the top-secret level, but word would get out to some congressman and an inquiry inevitable. There would be need for a scapegoat. Forty-eight hours ago, Addario thought making admiral was a lock. Now he felt the possibility of a court-martial. In six hours, the message could be sent in safety off Norway.

The last classified briefing Addario ever attended was the inquiry he had dreaded. Analysis of the tapes did not indicate a noise problem on *Pintado*. The escape was considered clever but risky. An incredible amount of intelligence had been collected. Yes, a Russian Bear bomber had crashed there with nuclear weapons aboard. The Soviets could not allow the possibility of a US recovery. Depth charges had been dropped to get *Pintado* surfaced and even,

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possibly, destroyed. It appeared the diesel boat, confirmed as a Tango, wandered into the evasion device, and got attacked by friendly forces. Still, *Pintado* had been detected. There must have been a lapse in periscope discipline; possibly too much time in one spot. No one knew for sure, but faith in the technology was absolute. If *Pintado* had been caught, the fault could only be human. That human was responsible.

Captain Addario wanted to dispute the findings of the inquiry. The problem was, they could be right. Also, it was lucky the matter had been settled at inquiry rather than a court-martial. As a company man, Addario accepted his fate. At his change of command and retirement ceremony, the *Pintado*'s crew was bitter, but accepting. The big boys lived in a strange world. Captains came and went. Good ones sometimes got screwed, bad ones sometimes got promoted. The sailors never got a vote.

Addario walked down the pier with his family. He no longer had a ship. In eight hours, he would no longer have a navy. At the same time in Washington, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was making an arrest. John Anthony Walker, a retired navy communications specialist, was arrested for spying. He had been a Russian spy for over 20 years, specializing in compromising radio traffic and submarine operations. The *New York Times* reported, "It's been estimated by some intelligence experts that Mr. Walker provided enough code-data information to alter significantly the balance of power between Russia and the United States."