

# Last Chance

By E.S. Strout MD

*\*There are no heroes, just extraordinary circumstances that ordinary men are forced to deal with.\**

*Fleet Admiral Wm. F. Halsey, USN*

1.

Tuesday 17 June, 2014. 1130 hours: On board USS Chancellorsville CG-74. A Ticonderoga Class guided missile cruiser.

“How’s it coming?” Commander Steven James, Executive Officer asked.

“In fits and starts, sir,” Lieutenant Brian Skogmo, Liaison Officer of the Coronado Island Naval Shipyard decommissioning crew replied. “Doesn’t seem right. The Chancy’s only twenty years old.”

“True, but she can’t be retrofitted for space-age armament. The new Donald P. Hall class will replace the Ticonderogas.”

Skogmo lit up a cigarette, stifled a cough. “I heard the Brits and the Russkies have scrapped their standard armament too.”

“True. Bum a smoke, Lieutenant?”

“Sure thing, Commander.” He shook a Marlboro loose from the pack, then struck a flame from his lighter.

The X.O. inhaled a pleasurable drag. “Not just the major powers either. Technology is so cheap now even Israel and Iran have subatomic particle generators. A mutual assured destruction scenario unless they can keep their fingers off the red button. I almost miss the nuke days.”

“Middle East hasn’t changed since Biblical times, sir.” Skogmo fidgeted, exhaled a soft sigh. “I’ve, ah . . .”

“Something, Lieutenant?”

“Couple of your Gunnery Department guys were grousing about delays in weapons dismantling. Thought you should know.”

“Thanks for the heads-up.”

2.

1150 hours:

“How about another beer, Charlie?” Andrew Masters, a wiry graying black Chief Warrant Officer asked.

“Comin’ up, Andy,” Chief Gunners Mate Charles Lucas, a slightly overweight dark haired man, said.

Lucas retrieved two cold Budweisers from the ice-filled metal ammunition can that served as a cooler. It sat next to the Bofors twin 40-mm antiaircraft gun mount. He dried them against his sun-faded work shirt and handed one over.

They popped the tabs and chugged long swallows. “So what d’ya think?” Lucas asked.

“We’re dinosaurs, Charlie,” Masters replied. “Advanced computers, Star Wars weapons. Way too complicated for us. Time to retire and go fishin’.”

“Gentlemen,” an unexpected voice said.

“Oh hell, Andy. The X.O.” Lucas whispered as he tried to hide his drink behind his back.

“As you were, Chief,” Commander James said. “This isn’t an official visit.”

“We were just kidding, sir,” Warrant Officer Masters said, “About decommissioning the Chancy. Damn shame. She’s special.”

“Special’s right,” Chief Lucas agreed in his Georgia drawl. “Chancy’s the only U.S. warship named for a Confederate victory. Ole Stonewall Jackson whupped up on that

Yankee Gen'ral Joe Hooker at Chancellorsville.”

Masters gave a soft snicker. “Ole Stonewall got his ass handed to him, too. Friendly fire, I read someplace.”

“History lesson. I’m impressed,” the X.O. said. “And you’re right, Mister Masters. Jackson lost an arm due to misdirected Confederate fire. Died of blood loss and infection. May of 1863.”

Masters grinned. “We’re impressed too, sir.”

The X.O. said, “I’m even more impressed that you folks were able to smuggle beer on board a U.S. Navy vessel.” Commander James perched on a hatch cover and removed his cap. “Got any more?”

“Last one, Commander,” Lucas said as he fished it from the cooler. “You’re not here just for the air, sir.”

James took a long swig, brushed foam from his lips. “Just checking around. A few morale problems, Lieutenant Skogmo said.”

“We’re understaffed, Commander. Four weeks behind schedule now, shipyard people bitching, driving us nuts,” Masters said. “We’ve got two junior seamen fresh out of boot camp. They haven’t a clue about dismantling antiaircraft weapons.”

“They can’t wait to be reassigned to one of those hi-tech tin cans with the neutron zappers,” Gunners Mate Lucas added.

James drained his brew, added the empty to the dozen lined up by the gun mount. He shook his head. “Thought I might look into that myself.”

“Can’t blame you, sir. Charlie and I both got our twenty in, figure on finishing up on this baby next week,” Masters said, giving the twin water-cooled barrels an affectionate caress. “Swedes built some damn fine weapons. Chancy got the last of their twin 40’s.”

Charlie Lucas leaned back and stretched, hands behind his neck. “We’re gonna buy us a boat, maybe hook a marlin or two.”

Commander James stood and replaced his cap. “Keep cool, men. You’re still our backbone. Thanks for the brew. That cooler is a perfect example of Navy ingenuity.” He

disappeared through a nearby hatchway.

“Nice enough guy for an officer,” Masters said.

Charlie Lucas pushed deep in a stack of life jackets where a second cooler resided. “I s’pose we could have spared him another one.”

3.

Wednesday 18 June. 1654 hours:

“What’s up, Captain?”

Commanding Officer Edwin Palmquist handed his X.O. a computer printout. “Came in an hour ago, Steve. Had to send it ashore to base communications for decoding.”

Commander James rubbed his forehead to forestall the impending headache. “Couldn’t be helped, sir. Our crypto geeks were all reassigned.” He read the copy, eyelids narrowed with skepticism. “Hubble II reports bogies approaching Earth? You’re kidding, right, Skip?”

“Pentagon’s not. They are still processing data, but just raised all U.S. Forces to DefCon Three.”

The Executive Officer said: “We have zero chances of getting underway. Reactor core long gone. No backup propulsion. We’re a stationary target.”

“Defensive array?”

Commander James swore in frustration. “Dammit to hell. Zero, zip, nada, sir. Our surface-to-air nukes were offloaded a month ago.”

“So we’re naked. Do we have eyes?”

“Two radarmen.”

“Put ‘em on air search. Wide scan, maximum range.”

“Got it, Captain. They can rotate in four-hour shifts.”

“Set Condition Bravo. This is a major snafu. Somebody over at Cal Tech forgot to clean their bifocals.

4.

1830 hours:

“Condition Bravo? What the hell?” Chief Lucas spluttered, his voice incredulous and wondering.

“Can’t be a drill,” Warrant Officer Masters said. “We quit those.”

“Damn. I just gave our sailors a six-hour pass. We’ll never find ‘em.”

“What could we do? One functional twin-forty AA mount, no ammo.”

Masters chuckled. “We could use foul language.”

Chief Lucas cocked a dubious eyebrow. “Let’s secure the damn hatches and have us another cold one.”

5.

1937 hours: Hubble-II installation.

“Spacecraft, you say?” Cal Tech Professor Adrienne Phillips said. “What could they possibly want here?”

“Conquest,” General Everett Mason, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff said as he peered over her shoulder. “We have good gravity, oxygen-rich atmosphere, but we’re inhabited. They want Earth for resettlement.”

“How can you know that?” Professor Phillips asked.

“Alien transmission we intercepted. Took our crypto folks two hours to translate and decode it.” He handed her a computer printout. “Just an approximation, you understand.”

She read aloud in a hushed, horrified voice. “Prepare to land field units? Terminate all sentient life? Disembark colonists? Good God.”

“Not to worry, Prof. Almost every nation on this planet has state-of-the-art laser and neutron weaponry. We’ll blast ‘em out of the sky.”

6.

2018 hours:

“Steve. We have a problem,” Captain Palmquist said. “The eggheads had it right. We just received and confirmed the war message. DefCon One. The press’s got hold of it too.”

The crew in Chancellorsville’s Combat Information Center stared in disbelief. BREAKING NEWS flashed across the TV screen. “They appeared suddenly over major cities of the world ten minutes ago,” the harassed Fox News Channel anchorwoman announced. She mopped perspiration from her nose with a tissue, ignoring the live camera.

“Not our aircraft, repeat, not our aircraft. This is a live feed from London,” she confirmed. The shaky image of a huge, copper-colored cylinder looming overhead popped to the screen. Another view showed the Houses of Parliament reduced to smoldering rubble.

“The Brits have second-generation proton cannons. Why aren’t they returning fire?” Captain Palmquist asked.

“They are, sir,” The X.O. said. He handed the Captain a sheet of hardcopy. “This just printed out.”

“From Joint Chiefs to all Commands,” he read. “All neutron and laser fire ineffective. Enemy has impenetrable alternating frequency subatomic particle shields. Damn. All communication with the Pentagon was just lost.”

“Wait one. This just in,” the Fox News anchor gasped as a sheet of copy was thrust into her fist. “The Pentagon under attack. U.S. Air Force squadrons destroyed on the ground. The Russian aircraft carrier VLADIMIR PUTIN in flames, sinking. Pretoria, Shanghai, Sydney in ruins . . .”

The screen gave a sudden flash and went black.

“I’ll be with our antiaircraft crew,” the X.O. said.

## 7.

2030 hours:

“We’re it,” Commander James said.

Lucas balled his fists in frustration. “Dammit, sir. No ammo. I don’t want to die sitting on my hands.”

“Goes for me too, sir,” CWO Masters said.

“Might as well enjoy the show. Couple of beers, gents?” Lucas muttered in resignation as he rummaged beneath the stack of life jackets. “Got another cooler here somewhere . . .”

“Watch it,” Masters warned as the pile disassembled.

Charlie dusted himself off, kicking loose life jackets across the deck. “I’m okay, Andy. Got it.” He flipped the catch, stared in disbelief.

Masters’s shocked voice rose half an octave. “Antiaircraft rounds. I thought we’d offloaded ‘em all.”

“Inventory was one short,” Charlie Lucas admitted with a shrug. “I fudged a number.”

“Four five-round clips,” Masters said, grinning with satisfaction. “40-mm armor piercing rounds. We’re in business.”

“Wait a sec, Andy. Look here.” Lucas hefted one of the ammunition clips and pried out a round. He scraped a thumbnail across a discolored patch on the shell casing. “Rust. It could jam the barrels, cause an explosion.”

“Oh,” was Masters’s dismayed response. “All of them?”

“Every one,” Commander James noted after a quick inspection of the remaining rounds. “These must be thirty or forty years old,”

Charlie pulled a couple of metal rasps and some emery cloth from a tool box and handed them around. “Let’s fix ‘em.”

“Let’s hope the old powder hasn’t become unstable,” James said with a disingenuous grin

as he attacked the rusty casing. "Could be dangerous."

"You shoulda been a swabbie sir," Masters said with a chuckle. "Ready to give it a go, gents?"

"We have no electronic targeting gear," the X.O.said, "but if you two can man the pointer and trainer seats, I can load."

"Let's do it, Commander," Warrant Officer Masters affirmed, giving the X.O. an enthusiastic high-five.

"Oh, oh," James said. "Look over there."

Exploding ammunition depots, ships and fuel reserves lit up the horizon in a cascade of earsplitting sound and light. "San Diego just got hit."

8.

2040 hours:

"Here they come," Masters yelled. A huge batlike shape blotted out half the sky. "Big S.O.B. Twice the size of the ones on TV. Moving slow, out for a walk in the park. Arrogant bastard."

"Less than eleven hundred yards, Andy," Lucas noted with his keen gunners eye.

"Perfect, Charlie. They're in range. We can't miss. Neither can they." Masters tossed steel battle helmets to his crew.

"Let's kick ET's ass," Chief Lucas snarled.

"We can piss 'em off a bit," Commander James said as he snapped the first clip in place. "Shoot!"

Nothing happened.

"Dud rounds!" Chief Lucas yelled in dismay. "Ejecting clip now."

"Fresh one in place," Commander James shouted over the cacophony of explosions. "Fire!"



“Misfire! Hit the deck, people,” Lucas screamed as he scrambled over the side of the steel gun tub. The others were close behind as a deafening blast showered them with metal debris.

“They missed us,” James said in a wondering voice as he sat up and inspected the shards of steel embedded in his helmet.

“Not them, X.O.,” Masters said. “Defective rounds. Old, unstable powder charge. Like you said, sir.”

One of the 40-mm guns had exploded. The flash suppressor was gone, the muzzle curled back on itself in twisted, smoking metal shards. “Breech mechanism blown out, too. We were lucky,” Masters said. “The steel wall of the gun emplacement absorbed the blast.”

“We got bigger fish to fry,” Charlie Lucas said. “We’re on their radar scope now.” The off-world craft made a lazy 180-degree turn. “Comin’ back to finish us off.”

“We’ve got one cannon left, Commander. If we gotta go, let it be in flames,” Andrews screamed, shaking his fist at the sky.

“Damn! More duds. Ejecting now.”

“Last clip in place. Please be good,” Commander James prayed as Lucas hit the firing switch.

Four bright muzzle flashes split the twilight. The AA cannon shuddered in recoil as the armor-piercing rounds rose through a haze of smoke and mist.

“Hang fire!” Chief Lucas screamed. His makeshift crew hugged the steel deck of the obsolete missile cruiser Chancellorsville once again. Then the remaining barrel exploded as the last 40-mm round lit off prematurely.

“Too bad,” Warrant Officer Masters opined as he rose and dusted himself off. “They got us pinpointed now, for sure.”

“You got that right. Incoming!” CDR James yelled as a cacophony of light, sound and metallic projectiles enveloped them . . .

Friday, June 20. 1330 hours:

“Captain Palmquist, perhaps you could explain to me what the hell happened before I appear before the Joint Chiefs?”

“Yes, Admiral. Four armor-piercing rounds from our only Bofors 40-mm antiaircraft cannon impacted the alien craft.”

“Its sensors ignored them. So did their alternating frequency subatomic particle shields. They weren’t set up for slow missiles.”

“Damn. Ancient 40-mm rounds.”

“We did have casualties, Admiral. The Flagship exploded directly overhead. Killed everybody topside, then splashed down just off our starboard bow. My X.O. and AA crew tried to duck inside an adjacent hatchway but caught the full force of the exploding alien craft. Their remains have been identified by DNA testing.”

The Admiral said, “Last report from Professor Phillips at Cal Tech says the alien fleet hauled ass from our solar system at faster-than-light speed, headed for the galactic rim.”

"That's very good news, sir."

“Warrant Officer Masters, Chief Gunners Mate Lucas and your Executive Officer Commander James will receive posthumous awards,” the Admiral said. “The Navy Cross for each of them.” He took an envelope from his uniform pocket and read it aloud to Captain Palmquist.

"The first of the new hi-tech missile frigates will be named the USS James Masters Lucas, in honor of your extraordinary antiaircraft gun crew."

The End