

The guided-missile destroyer Hatakaze was three hundred yards away from a berth at Yokosuka Naval Base pier when the communications officer buzzed the bridge on the squawk box. A flash-priority message from headquarters had just come out of the computer printer: "Russian submarine attacking ships Yokohama. Intercept." Hatakaze's captain was no slouch. He ordered his crew to general quarters, waved away the tug, and steamed out into the bay, working up speed as quickly as the engineering plant would allow.

Hatakaze had been continuously at sea for two weeks. She participated in the destruction of the Russian fleet rusting in Golden Horn Bay and helped shell troops on the Vladivostok neck that were trying to impede advancing Japanese forces. During all that shooting, her forward 127-mm Mk-42 deck gun had overheated, which caused a round to explode prematurely, killing two men and injuring four more. Her aft gun was working just fine. As soon as she could be spared, the force commander sent Hatakaze home for repairs. Due to the shortage of ammunition, most of Hatakaze's remaining 127-mm ammo was transferred to other ships, yet she still had a dozen rounds on the trays for the aft gun.

Hatakaze was making twenty knots when the radar operators picked Admiral Kolchak from among the clutter of ships, small boats, and surface return. The Russian submarine was making fifteen knots southwestward toward the refinery. That merely made her a suspicious blip; her beaconing S-band radar made the identification certain.

Although the submarine lacked the excellent radar of the Japanese destroyer, the destroyer was a bigger, easier target. The operator of the sub's radar saw the blip of a possible warship--a fairly small highspeed surface target coming out of the Yokosuka Naval Base area--and reported it to Captain Saratov as such.

Pavel Saratov pointed his binoculars to the south, the direction named by the radar operator below.

The rain had stopped; visibility was up, maybe to ten miles.

There was the destroyer, with its masthead and running lights illuminated. After all, these were Japanese home waters.

Saratov pounded the bridge rail in frustration.

The destroyer would soon open fire with its deck gun. If the sub submerged, the destroyer would pin it easily, kill it with antisubmarine rockets--ASROC.

He had known it would end like this. Entering the bay had been a huge gamble right from the start. A suicidal gamble, really.

He looked southwest, at the blazing refinery and the LNG tanker moored at the end of the pier. He had been intending to use the sixth torpedo on that tanker. A maneuverable destroyer, bow-on, would be a difficult target.

Another glance at the destroyer. "What is the range to the destroyer?" he demanded of the watch below.

"Twelve thousand meters, Captain, and closing. He has turned toward us, speed a little over thirty knots."

"And the tanker?"

"Two thousand five hundred meters, sir"

"Give me an attack solution on the destroyer."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And keep me informed of the ranges, goddamnit"

"Yes, captain."

Submerging in this shallow bay would be suicidal. Saratov dismissed that possibility.

He looked longingly at the LNG tanker, a target of a lifetime. She was low in the water, a fact he had noted as he entered the bay and steamed by her. She was full of the stuff.

"We'll run in against the tanker and cut our motors." The Japanese destroyer captain wouldn't be fool enough to risk putting a shell into that thing.

With the tanker at our back, Saratov thought, maybe we have a chance. At least he could get his men off the sub and into the water.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Come thirty degrees right, slow to all ahead two-thirds."

He heard the order being repeated in the control room, felt the bow of the sub swinging.

"Destroyer at eleven thousand meters, sir."

Saratov looked back at the oncoming destroyer. Why doesn't he shoot?

The refinery was blazing merrily. At the base of the fire, he could just make out the silhouettes of fire trucks. The Spetsnaz divers certainly had done an excellent job.

Saratov swung the glasses to the tanker pier. Several fire trucks with their flashing emergency lights were visible there. He wondered why they were on the pier; then his mind turned to other things. He checked the destroyer again. Why didn't he shoot? They most certainly were in range.

"Twelve hundred meters to the tanker, Captain."

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The captain of the Hatakaze could see the burning refinery with his binoculars. He could not see the black sail of the Russian submarine that his radar people assured him was there, but he could see the blip on the radar repeater scope just in front of his chair on the bridge. And he could see the return of the tanker pier and the tankers moored to it. The range to the sub was about nine thousand meters.

ASROC was out of the question, even though the target was well within range. The rocket would carry the Mk-46 torpedo out several kilometers and put it in the water, but the torpedo might home on one of the tankers.

Captain Kama elected to engage the submarine with the stern 127mm gun. Not that he had a lot of choice. He was already within gun range, but he would have to turn Hatakaze about seventy degrees away from the submarine to uncover the gun. Of course, if the gun overshot, one of the shells might hit a tanker. If the LNG tanker went up, the results would be catastrophic.

He decided to wait. Wait a few moments, and pray the submarine didn't shoot a torpedo.

"Prepare to fire the torpedo decoys," he ordered. "And watch for small boats. Tell Sonar to listen carefully." Listen for torpedoes, he meant.

What a place to fight a war!

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The refinery fire was as bad as it looked. The conflagration lit up the clouds and illuminated the tanker pier with a ghastly flickering glow. Numerous small explosions sent fireballs puffing into the night sky. These explosions were caused when fire reached free pools or clouds of petroleum products that had leaked from ruptured tanks or pipes.

The firefighters had no chance. There was too much damage in too many places.

As the fires grew hotter and larger, the glow cast even more light on the sea.

The submarine approached the LNG tanker, which was limned by the fire behind it. Saratov could see people moving about on the decks, probably trying desperately to get under way. He imagined the tanker skipper was beside himself.

"All stop," he told the control room.

The submarine glided toward the tanker, losing way. Two hundred meters separated the two ships.

"Left full rudder."

The nose began to swing.

"Looks like another destroyer, sir. Coming out of Yokosuka. Bearing one nine five, range thirty-two thousand meters."

"Keep the boat moving, Chief, at about two knots."

"Aye aye, sir. Two knots."

The deck of the submarine was barely out of the water. He had never ordered the tanks completely blown. "Secure the diesels. Switch to battery power."

"Battery power, aye."

Saratov kept his binoculars focused on the Japanese destroyer, which was closing the range at about a kilometer per minute.

The throb of the diesels died away. He could hear the rush of air and the crackling of the refinery fire. Somewhere, over the refinery probably, was a helicopter. He could hear the distinctive whopping of the rotors in the exhaust.

"We have the first destroyer on sonar," the XO reported.

"Be ready to fire tube six at the destroyer at any time."

"Aye, Captain. We're doing that now. Destroyer at seven thousand meters."

"How long until the first reload is ready?"

"Another twenty minutes, Captain."

Terrific! We have exactly one shot. If we miss...

He must have seen us! "You ready to shoot?"

"Yes, sir."

Saratov waited, his eyes on the destroyer. He wasn't shooting, which Saratov thought was because the tanker lay just behind. He could hear voices, shouts, in a foreign language that Saratov thought might be English. It certainly didn't sound like Japanese, and it sure as hell wasn't Russian.

"Six thousand meters, and he's slowing."

Saratov had been waiting for that. The Japanese skipper wouldn't hear much on his sonar at thirty-two knots, yet the high speed was an edge in outmaneuvering the torpedo.

"Tube Six, fire!"

The boat jerked as the torpedo went out, expelled by compressed air.

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Aboard Hatakaze, the captain was watching the tiny radar blip that was the submarine's sail. If only he would submerge, clear away from that tanker!

The destroyer's speed caused too much turbulence and noise for the bow-mounted sonar, so he had ordered the ship slowed. Way was falling off now.

"Torpedo in the water!"

The call from the sonar operator galvanized everyone. "Right Full rudder, all ahead flank," Captain Kama ordered. "Come to a new heading zero nine zero. Deploy the torpedo decoys. Have the after turret open fire when their gun bears."

The deck tilted steeply as the destroyer answered the helm.

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