

Roswell and the Russians (Previously published as 1947)

V2 cover image by

https://pixabay.com/users/mr_incognito_-61099/?utm_source=link-attribution&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=image&utm_content=1449053%22%3E%20from%20%3Ca%20href=%22https://pixabay.com/?utm_source=link-attribution&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=image&utm_content=1449053

Hammer and sickle cover image by

https://pixabay.com/users/openclipart-vectors-30363/?utm_source=link-attribution&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=image&utm_content=2028539%22%3E%20from%20%3Ca%20href=%22https://pixabay.com/?utm_source=link-attribution&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=image&utm_content=2028539

PLEASE NOTE:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright 2019 Oxney King All rights reserved.

Published by Playden Programs

B72, June 25, 1947

Begrudgingly, Captain of the first rank Goran Toporov thinks that the B72 is an excellent vessel, even though it was once a fascist war machine.

The modified type 21 U-Boat is faster and more manoeuvrable underwater than any other class of submarine; it's able to stay submerged longer too, and thanks to the radar detection apparatus attached to its snorkel, it can check for unseen prying electromagnetic eyes before resurfacing fully. All round, it's the perfect tool from which to spy on capitalist America and its development of the atomic bomb, as well as the effort to master another former Nazi weapon, the V2 rockets.

The Soviet Union's political masters fear that, if the Americans ever put A-bomb and rocket together, which is undoubtedly their aim, Mother Russia will face a threat just as grave as that posed by the Germans in the great patriotic war. Therefore, it is vital that the Politburo stay informed of the progress that the Yankees are making towards their goal, so the Soviet Union can be better prepared to respond.

Toporov has the B72 positioned in the Gulf of Mexico, some seven hundred and fifty kilometres west-north-west of Havana. From here, over several weeks, six-metre balloons, with long streaming tails, attached to which are a row of sensitive disc microphones, are being released. The prevailing winds take the rising balloons all the way over to the New Mexico desert, where Russia's opponents have their secret test facilities, and from where the balloons listen for the low-frequency sounds emitted by atomic blasts and rocket lunches alike.

These sound vibrations can carry for hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometres, and be slow to fade at the high altitudes attained by the balloons, because they are trapped, bouncing between layers of air of differing density above and below. Once the cleverly designed aerial ears have reached this critical atmospheric layer, the balloons carrying them are capable of stabilising their height, so they remain ideally positioned for their task. And, in turn, the B72 will be waiting, just sub-surface, for the transmissions from the air-borne eavesdroppers, ready to report any activity back to Moscow.

Toporov's is not a very exciting mission, staying within one limited area, only surfacing at night, to launch another balloon when contact with its predecessor is lost. But he accepts that it's a worthwhile task that needs to be done.

The B72's sister submarine, the B73, has a potentially more stimulating mission. She watches over Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean, the place where the imperialists exploded two atomic devices last year. As the second of those bombs was detonated underwater, the B73 needs to exercise great care not to become an unwilling participant, should the decadent Americans decide to carry out another test with little or no notice.

'Balloon KV12 is picking up some unusual sounds, Captain.' Vanko Krotsky, the B72's Senior Lieutenant, calls across the narrow control room. The Ukrainian is leaning over the radio, radar and hydrophone operator, Senior Seaman Shchepkin's, station, holding one of the earpieces from the receiver's headset to his left ear.

'An atomic test, or rocket launch?' enquires Toporov.

Krotsky hesitates. 'Ah... neither... I think... the sound is too... musical, Captain.' He concentrates on the sound for a few more seconds before finally saying, with a shake of his head, 'Captain, I feel you should hear this for yourself, I've never heard anything like it.' Adding, as Toporov joins them, 'Sorry, sir, I don't know what to make of it.'

'Don't apologise for asking for help when you need it, Vanko,' the Captain says, taking the headphones and putting them on properly, covering both ears, and then closing his eyes so he can listen without distraction. The sound is a series of changing tones, in the mid-to-high-frequency range. After several moments, he frowns and lowers the headphones, so they hang around the back of his neck. 'Are we recording this?' he asks the Lieutenant.

Another breakthrough made by the Germans was the use of magnetic tape for sound recording, something that they came up with during the late 1920s' but kept under tight control. They refined the technology throughout the war, and by the end were capable of very high-quality recording and playback, which they used extensively for broadcasting their propaganda during the war, and for recording intercepted allied transmissions.'

'Yes, Captain,' Krotsky replies.

'Good,' says Toporov. 'What do you make of it, Senior Seaman Shchepkin?'

Shchepkin, who is seated, looks up at his commanding officer. 'I'm not sure either, Captain, 'that's why I asked Lieutenant Krotsky's opinion, sir. At first, I thought it might be a new kind of jet engine the Americans' are testing. But I don't think it is; it's too... tranquil for that and...'

'Go on, Shchepkin,' prompts Krotsky, aware that for some reason the radio operator is reluctant to say what he really thinks.

Shchepkin flushes red with embarrassment. 'W-Well sir, as you heard, it's not the blast of an explosion or the roaring of a rocket motor.'

The two officers nodded.

Shchepkin continued, 'Besides, the intensity of the sound from either of those would have diminished by now, but this hasn't; the sound level now is the same as it was ten minutes ago, sir. And, it's just too... calm and smooth to be a jet engine. There's no whistle or rush of air, and it's definitely not the exhaust of a conventional piston-engined aeroplane... it's...'

'Out with it, Senior Seaman,' says Toporov, beginning to feel impatient.

'Um, well, sir... the only way I can explain it is that it's the sort of sound I imagine a rainbow would make, if a rainbow made any sound, that is, sir... which I know it doesn't, sir. Sorry, sir.'

There is silence. Shchepkin observes the different expressions form on the officers' faces. He can see Krotsky becoming angry, the Lieutenant's lips tightening, and his demeanour stiffening; he is getting ready to bawl at Shchepkin.

The Captain, on the other hand, is more reticent and seems lost in thought; he re-sets the headset to his ears for a few moments, before handing it back to Krotzky. ‘I’m not sure about the rainbow, um... Konstantin, isn’t it?’

Shchepkin nods vigorously.

The captain continues. ‘But if I had to guess, and it seems I do, I would say its some kind of natural phenomenon. Possibly converging air currents mixing.’

Shchepkin isn’t going to point out the flaws in the Captain’s reasoning. ‘Yes sir, could be, sir.’

‘It seems to have stopped now, anyway. Inform Lieutenant Krotzky immediately if it returns.’ Toporov nods to Lieutenant Krotzky, ‘I’ll be in my cabin if anything else happens.’

‘Yessir.’

Omen: June 28 1947

Earl Perry had read about the flying discs seen over Washington State in the local rag, reckoned it was just those army fly boys playing with them German toys that they captured at the end of the war, and thought no more of it.

Until that is, he saw strange coin-shaped objects in the sky above the ranch, one beautiful late June day, a whole bunch of them: six, seven...no, eight. Darndest thing, there they were, flying in formation, making a neat circle, then without warning, the configuration broke up, and they all shot off in different directions, like a starburst distress flare going off; except, of course, this weren’t no flare. And the speed of those things had to be seen to be believed, quicker than them jets they kept buzzing the ranch with, spooking the cattle. *God darn ‘em.*

Earl had borne witness to some mighty strange things going on around these parts over the years, including that A-Bomb test right before they dropped a couple on the Japs. So he wasn’t about to get these objects confused with a missile test gone wrong. For over a decade now he’d watched rockets being launched, with varying degrees of success, including more than a few explosive failures. Mostly by that Goddard fella, God rest his soul, over at Roswell; good American rockets too. And lately, from the White Sands Proving Ground where the army was fine-tuning leftover Nazi vengeance weapons... Ha, some of that Kraut junk even makes it into the air without blowing itself to bits; how they were allowed to march all over Europe and Russia, the good Lord only knows.

But old Earl ain’t never seen a spectacle like those discs or whatever they were. It made him think of that pre-war radio show, the one that got the folks back east so worked up, about spaceships invading from Mars; maybe that wasn’t so far-fetched after all. And come to think of it, wasn’t it the truth that the Indians around here believed their ancestors met up and partied with sky gods?

The timing got Earl wondering as well; *the A-bomb, the rockets, and they reckon it won’t be long before the Ruskies have ‘em too, it’s what those scientists have been going on about with that newfangled doomsday clock of theirs, saying we’re all about to die in an atomic war. Could be, these sky gods have come back for the entertainment of watching us blow each other up!*

‘Yes, Lieutenant, that’s what I said, one of those things changed from a kinda silver-grey colour to yellow-gold right before my eyes.’ *Lord, don’t this man listen?* ‘Sure did, and a second or two after they split up, they’d travelled so far out to the horizon they’d gone an’ clean disappeared...’

The ‘Lieutenant’ on the other end of the telephone wasn’t an Army Air Force officer at all. Twenty-seven-year-old Clayton Foster was part of a high-level team of ‘advisors’ sent by the Pentagon to, among other things, keep an eye on the German engineers working on the V2 rockets and assess the worth of their output. Although technically civilians, Clayton, along with all the other members of the unofficial and so far undocumented Project Sign, wore the uniform and blue and gold insignia of the Counterintelligence Corps while on secondment to the double bases of Alamogordo and White Sands.

‘We’ll send someone out to take your statement today, Mr Perry... Yessir, they should be with you this afternoon... Yessir, thank you for informing the army about the sighting.’

Thirty minutes later, Clayton knocked on one of the many office doors in the two-storey brick-built administration block, this one just along the corridor from his own, on the ground floor. Without waiting for a reply, he stuck his head around the door; immediately he realised his mistake, and knew what was coming. He hadn’t expected Colonel Nathaniel Rawley, to be in Keith’s office. ‘Sorry, sir, I didn’t...’

‘No you didn’t, soldier!’ Rawley snapped, wheeling around and cutting Clayton off. ‘You do not just barge in on a senior officer, you knock and wait to be called, is that clear? And stand at attention when I’m addressing you, soldier.’

Clayton hated the way that some army officers treated him like a freshman at high school. But he knew that while he was in the army’s house he had to play by its rules, and, as Colonel Rawley, or "the old man" as he was often called behind his back, was New Mexico’s Alamogordo Army Air Field base commander, this was very much his house. Feeling a little embarrassed, he stepped fully into the office and did a sloppy and awkward salute before giving his best impression of the static upright pose the colonel expected, ending up staring blankly at the large ceiling fan slowly rotating above the colonel’s head.

The colonel frowned, clearly not impressed, and turned to the other person in the office. ‘Major Weller.’ Something in Rawley’s tone told ‘Major’ Keith Weller that now would be an excellent time to join his younger team member. So he abruptly stood bolt upright, his simple wooden desk chair falling over backwards, in the process, its (slightly) padded seat coming away. ‘Sir.’

‘I realise that you and your men are only masquerading as counterintelligence officers. However, if the illusion is to be successful, then everyone in your group must conduct themselves accordingly. That includes observing the basic standards that go to making a good soldier, and you and your men fail that test badly, Major.’

‘The slapdash way your unit conducts itself sets a poor example for the enlisted men, and is therefore bad for morale. Unless you buck up your ideas and improve the general demeanour of your charges, I’ll arrange a little private tuition with one of the drill sergeants for you and your staff. Is that clear?’

‘Yessir.’

Having delivered the dressing down, Colonel Rawley snapped to attention, delivered a karate-sharp salute, wheeled through one hundred and eighty degrees with perfect precision, and marched out.

Clayton breathed out, and his body deflated as it took on a more relaxed posture. ‘Sorry, Keith, I had no idea you were with the old man.’

‘It’s alright,’ said Weller, reassembling his chair and re-seating himself behind his desk. ‘Err, it may be as well to heed what he said about knocking and waiting in the future.’

Clayton sniggered. ‘Yeah, save him exploding all over us.’ Then he noticed Weller’s expression. ‘Oh, you’re serious, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so, Clayton; I can see his point. The man is trying to run this base, and he can’t have one group of men perceived to be exempt from the regulations by the rest of the camp. We should accept his point about it being bad for the morale of the rest of the troops.’

Clayton thought for a moment and nodded. ‘Ok... Major, I get it,’ he said with a grin, ‘I’ll give it a go, I’ve got to say though, I feel stupid practising standing to attention and saluting myself in the mirror.’

Weller smiled. ‘Thank you, Clayton, Lieutenant, I appreciate it. Hopefully one day, the government will make Project Sign official, and we can go back to just being civilian scientists.’

‘Or they make us join the army, or the new air force.’

‘Very likely,’ thirty-eight-year-old Weller agreed. ‘Now, tell me, Clayton, what did you want?’

‘We’ve just received another report of flying discs, from a rancher up at Corona, and this one is a carbon copy of what the Germans have reported from their wartime experiences. The guy seemed rock-solid certain in what he saw too, even down to the silver-gold colour change.’

‘I see. Did anyone here at the base, or at White Sands, see anything?’

‘No, not this time, nothing that’s been reported, anyway. I’ve checked with the lookout towers of both bases, as well as administration. Same story from Sandia and Roswell bases too; if the reported sighting didn’t so closely resemble what the Germans reported, I wouldn’t have brought it to you.’

‘Hmm, and this was multiple craft moving in unison, then rapidly dispersing towards the horizon?’ Clayton nodded.

‘Then whoever, or whatever is doing this is spreading their wings, so to speak. Up to now the sightings have been confined to White Sands, and we’ve been able to keep a lid on things.’ Weller looked thoughtful.

‘I was thinking of taking Rocco out to see this guy this afternoon, and persuading him that it’s in his best interest not to talk about this – to anyone,’ said Clayton

‘Tell him the security of the nation is at stake, and if he does talk, we’ll throw him in a military prison until September, when the new National Security Act that comes into force. At that time he’ll be transferred to the state penitentiary, where he will rot for the rest of his days. Hopefully, that should keep him quiet.’

Revealed, June 29, 1947

‘Captain, it’s the tones, they’re back,’ said Senior Lieutenant Krotzky.

Toporov made his way to the radio station. ‘Same as before?’ The question was for Krotzky, but the Lieutenant looked to radio operator Shchepkin for clarification.

‘No, sir. This time it’s not different tones coming one after another, but two, or even three sounding together,’ said the radio operator.

‘You mean in a chord, as when a violinist plays more than one string with the bow? May I listen for myself, Senior Seaman?’ The Captain held out his hand for the headphones.

‘I guess so, sir,’ replied Shchepkin, handing over the ‘phones, then added apologetically, ‘I’ve never seen a violin and don’t know how they are played... but I think I can work it out from—’

‘Shchepkin!’ Senior Lieutenant Krotzky’s rebuke was abrupt. ‘Don’t waste the Captain’s time with your ramblings.’

‘Sorry, sirs.’

‘That’s all right, Konstantin,’ said the Captain, who many years prior had had violin lessons, and still prided himself on having something of a musical ear. He listened long enough to recognise a harmonic from three distinct tones. ‘Can I also hear the recording from four days ago?’

It took about twenty minutes for Shchepkin to dig the tape out of the store and thread it through the second recording and playback machine, which he had to retrieve from the captain’s cabin first. When it was done, Toporov listened to one earpiece connected to the tape from the 25th of June, and one from the live transmission coming from the latest balloon, KV13, high over the New Mexico desert. It was immediately apparent that the original tones, although higher in pitch than the more complex chord currently being picked up, were in harmony with it. He was going to have to reevaluate his original conclusion that the sounds were generated by random interplay between air currents.

‘Is balloon KV13 fitted with loudspeakers?’ Toporov asked.

‘Yes, Captain,’ replied Lieutenant Krotzky, looking a bit perplexed.

Added to the balloon design specification to allow for testing and calibration, the two loudspeakers of German wartime design could accurately reproduce sound transmitted to them to within a fine tolerance and at a reasonable volume.

‘Then can we broadcast the original tones through those loudspeakers?’

Krotzky made eye contact with Shchepkin, who nodded. ‘Yes, Captain,’ he said.

‘We’re picking up a secondary source of pressure waves.’ Yoklish’s datastream displayed a slight hint of yellow, indicating mild confusion.

It took the Overseer several cycles to respond. ‘There is an unpowered vessel, an atmospheric floatation device, called a balloon, within the scanning volume. This is emanating a poor copy of our scan residue from four planetary cycles past.’

‘Oh; is that another trick they’ve learned since our last visit, then?’ Idulica’s surprise was evident by the orange hue to her stream.

‘What I want to know is, how come they’ve been able to record the scan? I didn’t think their primitive ‘radar’ was capable of detecting such subtleties.’ Yoklish’s question added more bandwidth to the flow.

‘Certain peoples of the planet Earth have been flying unattended balloons for hundreds of their years; the recent addition to this capability appears to be the ability to record atmospheric pressure waves, or what they call sound waves.’ Va’s reply was for Idulica, as she asked the first question; the overseer preferred to do things in order.

‘We shouldn’t be surprised; when we last inspected the place they hadn’t yet learned to fly in machines, or how to shatter atoms. Recording pressure waves seems a simple task by comparison.’ Dirkot’s stream conveyed no emotion.

Va now addressed Yoklish’s question. ‘Their radar cannot yet discern sound waves. However, the scanner reveals that the balloon is transmitting to and receiving electromagnetic signals from a second vessel, just subsurface in the large, semi-enclosed body of water some distance to the planetary south-east. These radio signals, as the local humans refer to them, are now a ubiquitous method of communication, used by all the major groupings of people on Earth, including by their fighting forces.

‘From its hidden posture, it’s probable that this vessel, and by extension the balloon, is undertaking a clandestine task, very likely interested in the same research and testing facilities as ourselves. I surmise that the balloon is fitted with specialised equipment that converts sound pressure waves into radio waves and is also able to do the same in reverse, and they are using that equipment to replay an earlier recording made of our last scan.’

‘But why would they do that?’ asked Yoklish, his stream still tinged a confused yellow.

‘Because they are curious creatures,’ Dirkot stated with authority.

‘And that’s why we like them,’ added Idulica.

*

Mexican air force pilot Jerardo Gutierrez’s patrol route is longer today. He’s flying his American-made 47D Thunderbolt fighter north and east of Merida, looking for a fishing boat feared lost in the Gulf of Mexico. He’s done more flying in the past two days than since his 201 squadron, the Aztec Eagles, got back from active service in the Philippines in ‘45. However, at this point, the hours spent haven’t been very productive, though it’s not been for want of trying. He’s been up as high as ten thousand metres, sweeping the Gulf from side to side, with his gaze out to the horizon for anything that looks like it could be the missing vessel. When he’s spotted something that might be the little boat, he drops down to less than a hundred metres and circles around to get a good look, a manoeuvre that’s been repeated many times now, all without success.

The truth is, if the crew are in a tiny lifeboat, or even worse, clinging to wreckage or a life-buoy, unless they have a flare gun, the chances of Jerardo or any of the others spotting them are remote, and there are plenty of sharks in the Gulf, so if they are in the water... The thought sends a shiver down the thirty-one-year-olds back. His father still fishes these waters, has been doing so for the last forty-odd years; the pain and the worry that the families must be going through —.

Wait. Something catches the corner of his eye; a small wake is being created on the surface of the water, although at first, he can’t see precisely what’s making it. He turns towards the disturbance and descends, slowing his speed as much as he dares, to just above a stall; as he closes with the whitewater trail his

wartime training kicks in, to tell him exactly what he's spotted. It's a snorkel, a breathing tube, used by submerged submarines to draw air while keeping the bulk of the vessel's hull out of sight. After making a note of its exact position, and radioing in his findings, he heads away from the submarine as quickly as he can. You never know, they may not have spotted him.

Jerardo Gutierrez's report of an active submarine off the Mexican coast is later struck from the records.

Lift-off, June 29, 1947

Clayton Foster will never tire of anything to do with rockets. He's been captivated since the age of nine when, for the first time, one of Robert Goddard's rockets was the first to carry a scientific payload. It wasn't much: a camera, barometer and thermometer; it didn't get that high either, maxing out at the grand height of ninety feet! But, when his dad, an amateur enthusiast, explained the significance, that one day these things would go a lot higher, even to the Moon and maybe Venus or Mars, and, they'd be carrying people up there too, Clayton was hooked.

His father signed them both up for membership of the American Interplanetary Society as soon as it came into being, in the spring of 1930. Founded by some well-known science fiction writers of the day, the society had the know-how, and the means, to launch its own rockets, and Clayton and his dad were on Staten Island, New York, in May 1933, to see its first successful launch of a liquid-fueled rocket.

The society also spawned Clayton's taste for science fiction, and he read many of the stories that its founders Pendray, Lasser and Manning wrote when not involved in the development of real rockets. He was also an avid fan of the comic-book character Buck Rogers, and, from his first appearance in the mid-1930s, Flash Gordon too. But when all was said and done, the fiction was just an expression of his love for the science of rocketry, and that always came first.

After obtaining his bachelor's degree, he wanted to become a graduate student of Dr Robert Goddard, at his facility here in New Mexico, to work at his Masters on population and guidance systems. Unfortunately, for the rest of the world as well as Clayton, the war had started by then, and he'd enlisted, but he figured he could come back to it once the Japs and the Germans were beat. But, just as the fighting was ending, Dr Goddard had died, so he never got to meet his hero.

Apparently, the father of American rocketry did get to see the V2s and their component pieces as the war neared its conclusion, and allied forces advanced across Europe. He recognised many of the concepts utilised by the Nazis as being very like his own; not only in the use of liquid fuel, but in having a pump to inject that fuel into the rocket engine's combustion chamber, as well as vanes in the rocket exhaust for guidance, and the use of a gyroscope for stabilisation. Ironically, he may actually have personally helped them in the early stages of development, holding several consultations with German rocket specialists in the years before the war.

If only Uncle Sam had backed Goddard like the Nazis supported the V2 project... Thinks Clayton, looking at the forty-six-foot rocket from the safety of the well-protected blockhouse. *We'd be launching our own rocket now and not something cobbled together from foreign-made secondhand parts.*

Refuelling was completed almost an hour ago, and the gantry crane has retired to a safe distance. After a nod from the site controller, a Private steps outside and fires the three-minute warning flare. A hush descends over the twelve souls encased beneath the blockhouse's twenty-seven-foot thick blast-proof roof, except for the communications officer, who is continuously receiving status updates from the observation stations scattered around the launch site.

The launch controller announces the two-minute mark and repeats the action with sixty seconds to go; from twenty-seconds out he counts down to zero and then says, 'Rocket away,' before actually pressing the button that will hopefully send the projectile skywards. There is then a delay of perhaps two or three seconds before the frantic roaring of a rocket engine can be heard, but the noise is not yet deafening. The controller

presses a second button; this one releases the telemetry and control cabling attached to the V2's upper side casing. After another second and a half, the output volume from the rocket increases dramatically, with a bang, and the V2 smoothly lifts off.

The former wonder weapon ascends the first mile in just four seconds, and is due to exceed twenty by the time the first minute is up, and then continue upwards for over one hundred miles, leaving the Earth behind and entering the realm of space. Wordlessly, people pile out of the blockhouse to view the fast-diminishing spectacle.

But things do not go according to plan. After around twenty-five seconds of flight time, eight objects suddenly appear, shimmering in the sky surrounding the rocket, at a distance of maybe a half mile or so from the climbing projectile. Without a perceivable delay, the V2 rocked explodes in a fireball, and trails from burning bits of wreckage scar the clear blue sky as they are shot away in all directions. Within a few seconds, the eight mysterious objects blink out.

*

'Va, did we just do that?' Idulica asked, her stream green with concern.

Before the overseer could respond, Yoklish added the grey of concentration to the flow. 'The scanner may have set up a resonance within the propulsion unit.' After a quarter cycle he added, 'these early design types are quite volatile. Va, you should take more care!'

'The destruction of the human-built rocket may in part be due to a vibration induced by the scanning. This was an unintended consequence of our observation.'

'Is that an apology then, Va?' probed Idulica, now hued in the purple of amusement.

The overseer did not respond.

*

'Well, now we know,' Keith Weller said to Clayton, as they watched the burning debris fall.

Debrief, June 30, 1947

Major Keith Weller and Lieutenant Clayton Foster stood rigidly to attention in front of Colonel Rawley's sizeable and ornate Victorian desk, made from the best dark English oak. Unlike the sweltering late afternoon heat outside, the temperature in the office was a pleasantly cool sixty-eight degrees; apart from the pantries, this was the only room on the base to have air-conditioning.

The colonel was reading a document with its bold red 'Top Secret' heading clearly visible. His eyes flickered to the pair before him, before returning to the text; he did not acknowledge either of his subordinates' near perfect military stance. 'Be seated,' he said, in a clipped tone.

Clayton and Weller exchanged a glance as they sat; both had an idea why they had been called to the colonel's office. Earlier that same day, after consulting with Clayton and the rest of the Project Sign team, Weller had telephoned a report of yesterday's incident that led to the destruction of the V2 rocket to Washington. In its conclusion, their report stated that the most likely cause of the failure was as a direct consequence of hostile action taken by 'outside forces', and that the origin of those forces was, in all probability, non-human.

At length, Rawley placed the document in one of the desk's drawers and drew a deep breath before speaking. 'Major, I've spent some while on the telephone with the Pentagon this afternoon, when I had my ear chewed out by the Chief of Staff of the Army, no less.' The colonel glared at Weller.

'Sir, is this about my report?' Weller, feeling uncomfortable, fidgeted in his chair.

'Yes, Major, the CSA is none too happy to have his political masters spooked by some barely comprehensible fairytale about men from Mars blowing up our rockets!' Rawley's face had reddened and he'd raised his voice as he finished the sentence.

‘If I may, sir.’ Clayton thought adding context might help the situation, but the Colonel cut him down with harshly delivered rebuke.

‘You,’ Rawley spat, ‘I understand, are the principal architect behind this preposterous fantasy.’

Clayton found he was left temporarily dumbstruck by the ferocity of the man’s attack, as if Rawley had cast a spell of muteness upon him.

‘Um...’

‘Colonel, a lot of consideration was given to all the available facts, and by the whole team, before submitting our – admittedly unusual – findings.’ Now Weller was getting angry too.

‘We, the Project Sign team, were sent to New Mexico, as the experts.’ Without realising it, Weller was prodding the top of Rawley’s desk with his index finger as he spoke. ‘In part to assess the merit of accounts from some of the German V2 scientists and engineers of just the type of encounter that occurred yesterday. ‘After a careful weighing up of facts and a lot of debate, we find that we are in agreement with our German counterparts, and no amount of bullying my staff or me by the army hierarchy is going to change our scientific opinion. Just because the military establishment does not care for the group’s findings, will not make them less true... Sir.’ Weller knew that he had some leeway here; the members of his team were really all civilians after all, therefore not actually in the army’s chain of command, and only wore military uniforms to maintain the anonymity of Project Sign and its mission.

‘Tell me, Major, why are you so convinced that people from another world had a hand in yesterday’s rocket failure?’ Rawley asked, still furious, but trying hard to remain composed, in spite of the Major being wilfully insubordinate.

‘Sir, if I may?’ Clayton said gently, voice recovered. He was feeling buoyed by Weller’s defence of the project team and knew he was best placed to answer the question; and besides, it would give Keith Weller a chance to cool down.

Rawley glared at Clayton for a moment, then nodded assent. ‘Very well Lieutenant, proceed.’

‘Well sir, it’s the level of technology that these flying discs display, it’s far beyond anything that we are capable of.’

‘Oh yes? Can you give me an example?’ The colonel sounded none too convinced.

‘Yes sir,’ replied Clayton, ‘more than one. The first is the lack of radar contact; we had three separate radar sets tracking the V2’s flight path after its launch, and not one of them registered any of the discs that were clearly seen from the ground.’

‘Hmm. I’ve seen various reports of the incident, Lieutenant, and every one of them states that a different number of these discs surrounded the rocket; how do you account for this inconsistency? And, as one of these... experts, can you tell me if this could have a bearing on the lack of radar contact?’

The old man was really trying to find holes to pick at; Clayton wasn’t daunted though. ‘Could be a couple of reasons for the variation in the number of discs reported, sir. Different vantage points come to mind; for some observers the rockets exhaust trail may have obscured one or more of the discs, plus eyewitnesses are unreliable sir; show ten people the same event, and they will give you ten different accounts, sir. But none of this explains why there was no radar signature at all for any of the discs, sir.’

Rawley thought for a moment. ‘Very well, continue, Lieutenant; you said that there was more than one aspect of the discs’ behaviour that is beyond our current capabilities.’

‘Speed, in a word, sir,’ Weller interjected. ‘These things came out of nowhere; there was no approach, they just appeared.’

It was Weller’s turn to be on the receiving end of Rawley’s glare.

Unperturbed, Weller ploughed on. ‘I appreciate it’s hard to believe if you didn’t see it with your own eyes, sir, but nevertheless, it happened.’

‘We’ve had other accounts,’ added Clayton, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. ‘Not only from the Germans, but from a rancher here in New Mexico, of these things moving at impossible velocities; there’s also the case of the pilot over Washington State who saw—’

Rawley cut Clayton off, again. 'Enough!' he cried, holding up the palm of his right hand in a stop gesture. 'I will hear no more of this... gibberish.' Rawley paused for a moment, seemingly to compose himself, before adding, 'I think that you are both very arrogant.'

Clayton and Weller exchanged surprised glances as the Colonel continued.

'You are so convinced that yours is the only explanation; just as some of the British "boffins" in the war were absolutely certain that the Germans couldn't have perfected the flying-bomb, or a serviceable ballistic missile, merely because they couldn't work out how to do so themselves. Like them, your attitude appears to be, if you can't fathom out how to do something, then nobody can... and you call yourselves men of science.

The Germans had the arrogance to think their cyphers were so complicated they would be unbreakable because they could not see how it could possibly be done. History shows that their error of judgement cost them very dearly.'

Colonel Rawley puffed out his chest as he drew breath. 'There is another explanation for the phenomenon witnessed by the spectators to the launch of the V2 rocket, one that is blindingly obvious to anyone with a military brain.' Rawley waited to see if either of these two "experts" would finally arrive at the logical conclusion.

Weller looked from the colonel to Clayton, who returned him a tiny shake of his head, then back to Rawley. 'I'm sorry sir, we don't understand what it is that you are getting at,' he said, completely flummoxed.

'And that, Major, is precisely the problem,' snapped Rawley disapprovingly. 'The reality of the situation points to the Russians having developed some new spying capability, one with offensive uses.'

'Sir, no, they couldn't have...' At first, Weller was shocked by the sheer stupidity of the colonel's statement, and he set out to put the man straight in no uncertain terms; there was no way that the Russians could have leapfrogged so far ahead so quickly.

But his voice trailed off as he realised that, if Rawley was correct, and the Soviet Union had in fact made some pretty dramatic technological advances, then it all made a kind of sense. After all, the United States was using every means at its disposal to try to get a bead on the Russian A-bomb and V2 projects; it would be naive not to expect them to do likewise. *Could the Russians be behind the flying discs? Have I missed what's been staring me in the face? Is it that simple?*

Clayton had no such doubts. 'Sir, to match what's been witnessed would require them developing a plane that can not only break the sound barrier, something no aircraft to date has verifiably achieved, but travel at many times the speed of sound. If they had truly developed such a vehicle, then there would be evidence of its forerunners, the stepping stones, like our own X-1 or the British M-52, but there's none, sir.'

Colonel Rawley smiled to himself and exuded confidence when he replied, 'The army has its own set of engineers and designers in the Pentagon you know, and they've come up with a different theory to explain the astonishing speeds these discs appear to be doing...'

When it became obvious that someone was going to have to ask, Weller obliged the colonel. 'We'd be intrigued to know what they came up with, sir.'

Rawley leaned back in his leather swivel chair, savouring the moment when the "experts" asked him to teach them a lesson. 'Very well, I see no harm,' he said, suddenly reverting to a clipped tone and sitting bolt upright again, all business-like. 'The Pentagon thinks that what's been thought to be a collection of flying discs are actually projections, emitted from one or more sources. This, gentlemen, explains how they could, in your words, Major, "just appear" around the rocket; it also explains the lack of radar contact, as well as the incredible speeds that they are supposedly capable of. The whole thing's some sort of light show, a mirage, somewhat like going to a movie theatre, or a magic show at the circus; it's not real.' He let that sink in for a moment or two before adding, 'We can't quite see how that can be turned into a spying capability or a weapon, but then that's the trick of it, isn't it?'

Clayton went to speak first, but Weller put out his hand, stopping the younger man; Clayton could get very passionate when debating, and he didn't want his associate to get himself into trouble. He chewed over

what the colonel had said for a few moments; there was no denying that there was some logic in Rawley's hypothesis. But he wondered just how thought through it really was. 'Sir, if these things are projections, then the beams from whatever apparatus was doing the projecting would be apparent in the sky, and none of the witnesses, myself included, have reported such.'

It was more than a frown; Rawley had a look of extreme disapproval about him, 'I'm going to tell you something now, against my better judgement.' He held eye contact with Weller and Clayton in turn, to emphasise just how much he didn't want to tell them this. 'However, Washington insists that the Project Sign team are kept informed. We think we know how the discs are being choreographed, and most importantly where they are being controlled from.'

Air Raid, July 4, 1947

'It's the multiple tone chord again, sir,' Shchepkin told Captain Toporov; he now felt comfortable addressing his commanding officer directly and had grown more confident in doing so.

'The last time this happened was immediately before the Americans launched the last rocket – the one that promptly exploded,' added Lieutenant Krotzky.

'Hmm,' said Toporov, thinking, 'the tones do seem to be somehow related to the V2s; they are probably generated by some new high-altitude monitoring apparatus they have developed to keep an eye on their rockets as they ascend – very clever.'

'But how would that work, sir?' asked Shchepkin, furrowing his brow. That earned him a very sharp look from Krotzky, who was about to reprimand him for questioning the captain.

Toporov chuckled and shook his head at Krotzky, 'I've absolutely no idea, Konstantin,' he said.

*

Old man Rawley stuck out like a sore thumb in the blockhouse; he was the only one who wasn't doing anything. Most of the occupants were either poring over the dials of equipment showing information on the status of the rocket; plotting out its projected trajectory, talking by radio or telephone to those ground crew still on-site while the gantry was being pulled back, or to one of the radar or observation field stations. Anyone that wasn't actively involved in the launch procedure was glued to binoculars at one or other of the sighting positions that peppered the front wall, facing the launch site.

Rawley stood, bolt upright, hands behind his back, between the mapping table and the central launch console, right in everyone's way, though nobody was about to ask him to move his butt. 'Ah, Major,' he said in a voice loud enough to break the concentration of all around him, when he saw Keith Weller and Clayton enter the blockhouse.

'Crap,' Clayton muttered as the colonel purposefully made his way to the radar position, and beckoned them both over. The pair had only been officially informed of the launch yesterday, but Clayton had learned of it beforehand through his contact with the German engineers, who also told him that new "instruments" had been fitted in the nose of the rocket by a team sent directly from the Pentagon.

'There, you see!' Rawley said, with what sounded something like glee, pointing at a ten-inch screen showing the thin outline of a circle, in a greenish shade of white, almost out to its edges. Clayton and Weller peered into the screen; there were a few scattered dots inside the circle, in the same off-white as the outer ring, standing out from its black background. Rotating clockwise, taking two seconds to complete one revolution, and anchored in the middle like the minute hand of a clock, was an almost invisible pointer, brightening the intensity of the of the dots and the circle's edge for one-quarter of the screen as it swept past.

Next to the main radar display, there was another, smaller screen, with a series of wavy horizontal lines along the bottom jiggling about, the odd one or two of them spiking upwards before plunging downwards

again. The radar operator turned a knob above this screen, stabilising one of the peaks, so it made a triangular mountain shape in the middle of the screen.

‘I can see we’ve picked up some contacts, sir. I guess you’re saying that at least one of them isn’t ours?’

The Colonel answered Weller’s question with one of his own. Turning to the radar operator, he asked, ‘Sergeant, what’s the altitude of the target that you have zeroed in on?’

The man considered for a moment, looking closely at the two screens before him. ‘It’s as close to one hundred and five thousand feet as make no difference, sir,’ the man replied.

Rawley nodded, saying, ‘That’s well above where any of our aircraft can go, Major.’

‘It well above where anything we have can go, sir, except, of course, the V2s,’ replied Weller.

The Colonel continued. ‘We’ve been monitoring the object for several days now, and it’s been hovering around this high constantly, which translates to thirty-two thousand metres, or nearly twenty miles up. It wasn’t picked up before because we weren’t looking for anything that high; that, and the fact that it’s also approximately fifteen miles downrange and not right overhead. The Pentagon is sure it’s a Russian balloon, and that it is carrying the projection equipment for your “flying discs”, and whatever else is required to carry out its surveillance mission.’

In the days that had passed since their debrief with the colonel, Weller, Clayton and the rest of the Project Sign team had debated the Pentagon’s “projection” explanation for the flying discs at great length. They had unanimously reached the conclusion that it was very doubtful that the Russians could have developed this capability, and therefore the whole group stood by their original assessment that the flying discs had a non-human origin. However, Clayton and Weller both knew better than to argue the point with Colonel Rawley.

‘So, is the plan to observe this object as the V2 launches, sir, and see what it does?’ asked Clayton.

Not for the first time, Rawley glared at Clayton. After several seconds he said forcefully, ‘No, Lieutenant, that is not the plan. We intend to destroy the balloon. We can’t have the Soviet Union peering into our most secret facilities from above; we’d never be able to conceal anything from them, so we’d risk losing our advantage.’

Clayton chose not to point out to the colonel that if what he said about the flying discs being projections, that could somehow report back to the Russians on all America’s secret military projects, oh, and also destroy a rocket moving in excess of twelve-hundred miles per hour, was correct, then perhaps the advantage was already lost. Instead, he asked, ‘How do you intend to take the balloon out sir, as nothing we have can get up to its altitude to shoot it down?’

‘We’re going to use the V2 rocket,’ answered Colonel Rawley.

Before Clayton could ask, Weller jumped in. ‘Sir, trying to hit something twenty miles up is going to be all but impossible; how many V2s do you plan to fire at this thing?’

‘Just the one, Major, that is all that will be required. You see, the V2 has been fitted with a new type of air-burst pyrotechnic warhead. I’m told that at that altitude, if we can place the rocket within a half-mile of its target, one or other of the pyrotechnic charges should literally burst the Soviet’s balloon and bring it crashing down in the New Mexico desert.’

‘You mean that the whole thing’s a giant 4th of July firework?’ laughed Clayton, I’ve got to admit to being very impressed.

Rawley Frowned, ‘It’s not being done for your amusement, Lieutenant; this is a deadly serious matter, and I’ll thank you not to be so flippant.’

Asshole, thought Clayton. ‘Sorry, sir,’ he said.

‘I see,’ said Weller. ‘And what of the submarine that you told us at our last meeting was controlling the surveillance balloon?’

Bubba Jordon hadn't seen any action during the war; the army air force captain had been assigned to Harlingen Army Airfield, on the gulf coast of Texas, close to the Mexican border, as a training officer in 1942, instructing recruits in the subtler points of anti-submarine warfare using B-24 Liberators.

That was until the navy got handed the problem of dealing with Jap subs and German U-boats, at the end of '43. Since then he'd been the lead instructor for the B-17 flying fortress and its big brother the B-29 Superfortress, teaching the tactics of bombing ground-based targets from very high to extremely low altitudes.

Now he's back on anti-submarine duty, but this is no training exercise, and it's so secret that outside of the base commander, Colonel Maynard Boyle, and the crews of the five planes engaged in the mission, no one knows of it. And, as if that wasn't enough, he's flying an aircraft that until two days ago he'd never seen before, a brand new Lockheed P2V-2 Neptune, fitted with a nifty device called MAD, for Magnetic Anomaly Detector. The MAD can detect the tiny fluctuations in the Earth's magnetic field caused by the presence of metallic objects – like submarines.

The Neptune also boasts state-of-the-art surface-scanning radar, but, according to Colonel Boyle's briefing, that won't be of any help as it's suspected that the quarry is a former Nazi type 21 U-boat. Which means its snorkel apparatus will likely be covered with a radar scattering substance, and even worse it also acts as a radar detector, warning the enemy of our approach. So the surface-scanning radar is switched off. The colonel didn't actually say it, but the crew are all convinced that the prey has to be under the Soviet flag; no one else would have the balls to come this close to the US! So this could be the start of World War Three. Bubba thinks that's a good thing: *knock 'em out before they get the A-bomb.*

For the last few days, they've been searching an area of the Gulf much closer to Mexico than the US; he reckons that's why they haven't sent in the destroyers as well to help deal with the sub... or maybe they have, and just haven't told him. Anyway, while the target hasn't yet been located, he has dropped a few dozen hydrophone buoys in the water, in the areas they told him. They don't last long, those things, 'cause the batteries go flat pretty quick, so you've got to be pretty sure just where, and when, your quarry is going to be, before going to all the trouble of deploying them. Well, someone up top knows what they are doing, because a couple of the buoys have picked up the sound of something, and, according to the Colonel, the brainboxes who know about these things, say it's the U-boat. So, Bubba, along with the pilots of the other four Neptunes that he's flying with, is under orders to pinpoint the thing with the MAD and then drop his full load of twelve three-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound depth-charges right down its throat.

Imperative, July 4, 1947

'Now, you're not going the break this one, are you, Va?' Idulica's addition to the flow was meant as an instruction rather than a question.

'New protocols have been initiated,' the overseer replied. 'Human-made rockets will no longer be actively scanned as they ascend, and we will retire to a position well above their observational range and away from the projected trajectory of the vehicle, to gather data passively.'

'Better get going then,' infused Dirkot. 'It looks like they are about ready to launch; they've just set off the sky-fire that indicates blastoff will be in less than a ronogluh.'

With a short delay, less than a cycle, Va activated the field thrusters to lift the saucer from its observation position, seventy-five metres above the blockhouse where Colonel Rawley was still proudly explaining to Clayton and Major Weller how the U-boat was going to be dealt with.

Once they were above Earth's atmosphere, and after completing a forward scan of the volume of space they were about to enter, Va turned off the stealth cloak. This device, while activated, ensures that the saucer is concealed, not only from the human-visible wavelengths of light, but also from radar, magnetic anomaly, and mass displacement devices.

‘Multiple events are underway, resulting in a requirement that we intervene,’ outpoured Va into the flow, almost as soon as the V2 was launched.

Passive scanning had revealed that the rocket was veering from its expected course to one, quickly calculated by the overseer, that would take it very close to the balloon belonging to the other remaining world power.

‘Itemise with synopsis,’ instructed Yoklish, his stream running with the violet colour of efficiency.

‘Item one,’ Va began without delay. ‘It is likely that the Americans are aware that their activities have attracted the interest of their rival, the Soviet Union, and they are currently engaged in taking action to preserve the confidentiality of their endeavours.’

‘Is that why the rocket seems to be heading for that other thing?’ enquired Idulica.

‘It’s not going to hit it... although it will pass very close.’ Dirkot’s stream was hued in the grey of concentration.

‘It may be fitted with a proximity fuse, so getting close is all it needs to achieve to set it off,’ added Yoklish.

‘Item two:’ Va continued, not put off by the crossflow generated by the others, ‘the Soviet vessel submerged in the body of water to the south is about to be attacked, and probably destroyed, by a combined force of five aircraft and an approaching flotilla of three military surface ships.

‘It is possible that this will be perceived as an act of war by the Soviet Union. They may view the event as an opportunity to take offensive action of their own on the continent of Europe, where the two powers have armies deployed, with the Soviets having the advantage, outnumbering the Americans significantly, and then blame the Americans for starting another war.’

‘But we’re not going to let that happen are we, Va?’ Idulica insisted in her questioning way, her stream a deep blue, affirming the compassion she felt for the people of the planet below. ‘They’ve already lost so many with all the fighting in the last two conflicts, and then there was that disease between the two that killed so many more. We must do something this time, we really must...’

The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 to 1920 had been particularly cruel. Europe, still at war when the outbreak began, was in the process of losing nearly twenty million lives, either directly, as a result of the conflict, or because of infection and disease brought about or exacerbated by it.

This vicious virus, spread around the world, specialising in attacking otherwise fit and healthy young adults, killed more than twice as many as the 1914-18 war, with some estimates placing the figure as high as one hundred million.

Va responded to Idulica’s compassionate plea. ‘We have not acted in the past to prevent conflict among Earth’s warring factions, because the potential for planet-wide devastation arising from these disagreements has always been minimal, and because wars tend to speed the evolution of technologies, and so, in the long run, are advantageous for the species as a whole.

‘However, that situation has now changed. One side, the Americans, have learned of the tremendous amount of energy that can be released by splitting atoms, and turned that knowledge into a weapon, one that they have shown a willingness to use.’

‘Just think of the damage they could do when they start crushing atoms instead of splitting them, and make significantly bigger bombs,’ said Dirkot.

‘That is not the primary danger,’ explained Va. ‘There is a high probability that if another war in Europe did break out, the Americans, faced with a military defeat because of the Soviets’ greater numbers on the ground, would deploy their current atomic weapon technology repeatedly, with long-lasting destructive consequences well beyond the battlefield.

‘In addition, we must assume that the Soviet Union are on the brink of perfecting an atom-splitting weapon of their own. If they do so while there is an ongoing conflict with the Americans, they will undoubtedly use this to strike at their enemy, who in turn will retaliate in kind. A series of escalations could then ensue, ending with a significantly reduced world population, and a highly polluted planetary

environment, with reduced global temperatures from the resulting prolonged nuclear winter; this is likely to mean that anyone left alive would struggle to survive as crop failures and the effects of radiation took their toll. This in turn could halt the upward evolution of humanity, perhaps permanently.'

Idulica, Yoklish and Dirkot contemplated Va's emanations for several cycles.

'So, what else?' asked Yoklish.

'What else, what?' retorted Idulica.

'Yoklish refers to the itemising of events, combining to necessitate our intervention into human affairs,' injected Va, who, without further ado continued with the list.

'Item three: scanning has detected a medium-sized object on an intersecting course with the planet below.'

'I concur,' said Dirkot, after sampling the scanner data. 'It's some way out still, but will definitely hit.'

'Calculations suggest,' continued Va, 'it will impact the planet at an unusually steep angle, just outside of the American capital, after another four planetary rotations.'

'It's not going to do a lot of damage, though,' added Dirkot, the grey of concentration returning to his stream as he assimilated Va's deliberations.

'Agreed,' confirmed Va. 'However, because of the object's uncharacteristic near vertical descent, its fiery trail created as it heats up re-entering the atmosphere, could be mistaken for a rocket's exhaust, and, in the context of the tensions between the Americans and the Soviet Union, it's likely that will be interpreted as a Soviet attack.'

'To which the Americans may well respond, and start the whole descent into chaos,' Idulica finished, the green of her stream having its root in sadness rather than fear.

Rock Bottom, July 4-5 1947

Glass from a burst light fitting sprayed down into the control room, as the concussion from another depth charge shook the B72 to its core, the delicate tinkling of the broken shards in stark contrast to the violent boom coming from the explosions above and to the sides of the submarine.

A lot of the crew were elsewhere, sitting on the floor of the dorm room, backs against the sides of the lower bunks, curled into a brace position, or with their hands above and behind their heads gripping the side rail that ran the length of the cots for support. Those that were left standing held tightly onto the sturdy grips scattered around the work areas, securely attached to the sub's superstructure by its German builders, for just this purpose.

'Sir,' Senior Lieutenant Krotzky leant forward and whispered to Captain Toporov, 'we've had no success in unjamming the bow planes, and we think that the forward trim tanks are ruptured too, meaning we are unable to level the down angle. We could partly blow the main tanks to compensate and arrest our descent, but we would still be tilted downwards, and, if any of the aircraft are still up top, they could spot the disturbance on the surface and drop more depth charges on our position, sir.'

They'd been drifting downwards since one of the depth charges from the air raid, packed with nearly one hundred and fifty kilogrammes of torpex, came perilously close to ripping the forward section of the sub away at the bulkhead and killing them all. The B72's active radar hadn't picked up the incoming attack until it was almost too late, giving them scant time to get below the surface, Toporov surmised that the aircraft had to have approached them with their radar switched off, otherwise the sub's radar detection apparatus would have picked them up much further out.

'Hmm,' said the Captain, rubbing his stubbly chin, going over the sequence of events. *The aircraft were picked up just as contact with balloon KV13 was lost, seemingly after a close encounter with a V2. Obviously, none of this is a coincidence.* 'They knew just when and where to find us, which means that

they'd spotted us sometime before, possibly days ago or even weeks ago, and have been keeping tabs on us ever since.'

'Seems that way, sir,' agreed Krotsky.

'Then it's likely that surface vessels are heading our way too, destroyers I've no doubt, to finish us off. If there are still any of our attackers circling above us, and I'll wager that there are, even if they are out of munitions, any clue we give away as to our exact position will be relayed to the warships, and seal our fate. What's our current depth?' asked the captain.

'One hundred and eighty metres, sir.'

'Flood the rear trim tanks, slowly, until we level out,' ordered Toporov.

'But sir, that will speed our descent, and we are almost at our maximum depth now; if we exceed that, the hull could fail under the pressure...' Krotsky was not one who panicked easily, but the captain heard the edge of fear in his voice.

The Germans had designed the type 21 U-Boat to have a maximum safe depth of two hundred and twenty-five metres and a crush depth of well over three hundred. In practice, however, mainly due to hurried production right at the end of the war, being carried out by companies with little or no experience of submarine construction, structural failure could occur at much shallower depths, even at less than two hundred and fifty metres.

'If luck is with us, Vanko, then Campeche Bank is still beneath us, and we will come to rest on the bottom at around two hundred or so metres. That's why I don't want the B72 pointing down, we don't want to ram into the sea floor, especially if the bow section is already carrying any damage,' says the captain.

'And if luck's not with us, sir? We are, or were, when the attack began, very close to the bank's edge, close to the point where it falls away to a depth of two thousand metres; if we've drifted over that line...' Lieutenant Krotsky did not finish the sentence, as the captain motioned him to be silent by raising his hand.

'Yes, Senior Seaman Shchepkin,' the captain said quietly.

Krotsky turned, surprised; he hadn't seen the senior seaman approach.

'The hydrophone has picked up the sound of propellers coming our way, captain.'

*

'Commie bastard's down there somewhere,' said Captain Gerold Schwartz, commander of Destroyer Squadron 42. His three Fletcher-class ships, the Vincent, Pickering and Albert, had been guided by the army air force to the last known position of the suspected Soviet submarine; their mission was to ascertain if the sub had survived the air assault, and if it did, kill or capture it.

Schwartz's preference was to capture it; that would ensure his fame inside the navy and out, and should mean he'd find it a lot easier to get a job in television or working for a newspaper when he left the service at the end of the year. He'd always fancied himself as a journalist.

'The MAD is picking up a small magnetic inconsistency, sir; we've pinged it with the sonar, and are pretty sure it's sitting on the bottom at nine hundred feet,' said Columbus Felton, the USS Vincent's executive officer, and the only crewmember in the whole squadron of African American decent.

Schwartz considered for some while before responding, eyes fixed, looking out from the bridge over the gulf, his mind churning with the problem of how to deal with the submarine, deep below its placid surface. 'I want to take this slow,' he eventually told his XO. 'I'd rather force him to the surface than blow him to bits, it's better... for the navy; capturing the Russian sub intact will give Washington some useful propaganda and show the public that the Soviet threat is real.' The Captain paused for a moment. 'Each destroyer will take turns to drop one pattern of depth-charges every hour over the inconsistency. Set the first pattern for four hundred feet, and increase the depth by fifty feet with every pattern. Whoever's down there will soon get the idea, and there'll be enough time for his crew to understand the situation, and pressure him into surrendering.'

*

The control room, and everywhere else onboard, was starting to smell like the inside of a sewer. No one could use the toilets at this depth, because if they did the pressure bearing down on the sub from outside would make them work backwards, and flood water would pour in. The regulation was that under circumstances such as these, empty containers be used to store body waste; inevitably though, there weren't enough containers readily to hand when needed, and in high-stress situations like this, the need was frequent.

To add to the misery, the water was now above the deck plates, the bilge having been overwhelmed after the pumps were switched off, lest their noise gave away the B72's exact position and the fact that they were still in one piece. Everyone was soaking from a combination of sweat brought on by the humidity and fear for their safety, as well as the condensation that dripped from the cold metal ceiling and inner walls of the submarine.

The creaking from the hull had increased markedly after the last attack, the closest yet, which came nearly ten hours after the air raid and seven since the surface vessels began their intermittent barrage. Constant sonar pings from their tormentors on the surface added to the tension, pushing frayed nerves even closer to the edge. There had been one or two rumblings from the crew about surfacing and surrendering to the Americans, but Senior Lieutenant Krotzky had clamped down hard, and discipline was holding.

They didn't need the hydrophones to hear the propellers, now that the destroyers were close. Every hour the sound intensified, as one or other of what Senior Seaman Shchepkin was convinced were three ships, passed directly overhead, and then there was a dreadful pause, during which time captain and crew prayed to whatever gods they believed in before explosions rattled through metal and flesh alike. So far, all the prayers to keep them safe had been answered.

Captain Toporov tried venting compressed air and ejecting odd bits of detritus through the torpedo tubes, and releasing some fuel oil after one of the attacks, attempting to fool the hunters into thinking that their depth-charges had breached the hull and the B72 was no more, but they didn't seem to be deceived, as one hour later they attacked again.

'Here they come,' said Toporov. 'Lieutenant Krotzky, you know what to do.' The captain had calculated that there would only be a small margin between the B72 sitting on the bottom at two hundred and seventy-five metres and the expected detonation depth of the next salvo of depth charges at around two hundred and fifty metres, meaning that if this assault didn't kill them, then the one after that would. So he planned to make a break for it while the next attack was underway.

It was likely their assailants wouldn't have their hydrophone headphones on during this time, and risk burst eardrums when the charges went off, and other methods of detection were known to give random and unreliable readings while registering the aftermath of underwater explosions. He saw losing themselves in the confusion as the only opportunity they had to get away. Sure, he expected that the Americans were likely waiting for him to try something like this, but he also knew the B72 couldn't stay put; if they did, he and the rest of the crew would die. Toporov decided it was better to go out trying to get away than cowering on the bottom.

*

'They're trying to make a run for it, sir,' ship's XO Columbus Felton reported to Captain Schwartz, within minutes of the last pattern of depth-charges going off. 'I guess they figured they'd overstayed their welcome; wonder what gave them that idea?'

'Hmm, are you sure that the sub's not making its way up to the surface, and that they are definitely trying to get away?' Schwartz wanted clarification before giving up on the idea of capturing his prize intact.

'They are staying pretty deep at eighth hundred and fifty feet, sir, and making five knots, silent running speed for a type 21 U-boat, as well as heading due east out of the Gulf. If it weren't for the new equipment that we've gotten since the war, they'd be hard to detect; I guess that's what they're banking on, sir,'

Shit! Thought Schwartz; feeling his prospective hero-hood slipping through his fingers, he sighed heavily. ‘Ok, they’ve had their chance, let’s go kill the sub.’

*

‘It didn’t take them long to relocate our position,’ said Captain Toporov, as much to himself as anyone else.

The whole crew could hear the approaching propellers. This time, though, the sound was louder than it had been when the Americans were dropping a single salvo at a time on the B72; this time all three surface ships were bearing down on them.

‘Lieutenant Krotsky, on my mark, increase speed to seventeen knots, change course ninety degrees to the south and bring us up to a depth of one hundred and eighty metres.’

The captain waited until he thought the propellers were almost, but not quite, overhead before giving the order.

‘Now, Lieutenant Krotsky.’

They had been creeping away from their hiding position resting on the bottom, running quiet, hoping to avoid detection; that strategy had clearly failed. However, all was not lost; the former U-boat could put on quite a turn of speed underwater, and was agile enough to make quick turns while submerged, much quicker than the surface ships above. Toporov was hoping that in the minute and a half it was going to take the depth-charges to reach them, they would be clear of the blast area.

*

‘Captain, sonar reports they changed course, as we passed overhead,’ said the XO.

‘Direction?’

‘Due south, sir; they’ve moved up a bit too.’

Schwartz smiled. He’d had the USS Pickering approach from the south, deploying its munitions, a little further out and after the USS Vincent, in anticipation of the Ruskies trying to run for the shelter of the Mexican coast. He’d also had them set the detonation depth for six hundred feet, reckoning they would come up a notch as they fled. It looked like something good was going to come out of this encounter after all. Any second now...

*

It happened too quickly to take in. There was, for a fraction of a second, the beginnings of the sound of an explosion, very close by; instinctively everybody flinched, too late for goodbyes now. Then there was nothing, no sound from outside the sub at all, no continuation of the blast, no violent shaking as the B72 bore the brunt of the pressure wave that would have split her hull wide open; even the pings from the sonar had stopped. Everyone was contemplating what had just happened or rather, hadn’t happened, bemused.

‘Sir!’ Senior Seaman Shchepkin shouted excitedly, into the silence.

All eyes turned to Shchepkin; Lieutenant Krotsky was about to yell at him.

‘What is it, Konstantin?’ asked the captain.

‘It’s the tones, sir, they’re back.’

Toporov thought for a few moments. ‘I didn’t think we could pick up radio signals from the balloons underwater, especially at depth,’ said the captain, confused.

‘No, no, sir, this isn’t coming from the radio, the sound is in the water, it’s being picked up by the hydrophones; it’s very faint, and I have to amplify the signal to hear it clearly, but it’s definitely them, sir.’

*

‘Well done, Va!’ Idulica’s stream was running a joyful purple.

The overseer had encompassed the B72 with the saucer's impact shield at the very instant he determined that the exploding depth charge was about to fatally damage the submarine's hull.

'He didn't do it to save those particular human's,' added Dirkot.

'Dirkot is correct,' emanated Va, 'our actions are directed at preventing a potentially devastating conflict between the two dominant planetary powers, one that may prevent the humans achieving our goal for them. The individual humans inside the subsea vessel are irrelevant.'

The flow was stable for several cycles.

'Well, I'm still glad that they are safe.' Idulica injected before terminating her stream.

Va maintained the impact shield while the submarine made good its escape. At one point it released a dark liquid into the water. Va, realising this was intended to float to the surface, simulating the vessel's demise, to be seen by the warships above, allowed it to pass through the shield.

*

'Oil's been spotted on the water, sir, looks like we got him,' reported Columbus Felton.

'Yeah, he's tried that trick before, and he was alive and well then, and he could be now,' responded Schwartz.

'Back then we had sonar and magnetic contacts to confirm he was in one piece; those vanished when the Pickering's charges blew. I think she's gone, sir,' said the XO.

'Hmm,' said Schwartz thoughtfully, 'have the Albert continue on the sub's last course towards the Mexican coast, and send the Pickering due east; I want to make sure the sub isn't sneaking off.'

Columbus wasn't convinced all that was necessary, but then, Schwartz was the captain. 'And us, sir?'

'The USS Vincent is going to stay put for a bit. Switch the sonar off, and kill the engines; let's listen to the hydrophones for a while, see if we can't catch us a big metal fish.'

Impact, July 7, 1947

'Is this wise?' asked Dirkot, his stream tinged with the green of concern.

'You know what Va thinks, that when this thing impacts the Earth, so close to the American capital, it will be misinterpreted as an attack by the Soviets,' replied Yoklish without emotion.

'And start them fighting again,' added Idulica.

'No, that's not what I meant,' retorted Dirkot, a little frustrated red creeping into his stream. 'I mean is it a good idea for us to ram into the meteor to change its trajectory?'

'We have no weaponry at our disposal that we can use to dislodge the object from its current course,' Va interjected into the flow. 'The humans have not detected its presence, and even if they were aware of it, they lack the means to divert it.'

'Couldn't we just tell them that's it's a natural event and not an attack by the other side?' Yoklish added his thoughtful grey musings to the flow.

'Contacting one side and not the other may have unpredictable consequences, and could itself lead to conflict between the two powers. It is safer for the human's if they are not involved,' pronounced Va.

'Besides,' added Idulica, 'after our little mishap with their last rocket, the Americans may think that we are working for the Soviet Union.'

'As I previously stated, unpredictable consequences.' emanated Va.

'So we are back to ramming into the meteor then?' persisted Dirkot.

'We will not ram into anything,' Corrected Va. 'We will match the object's course and velocity and use the impact shield to make physical contact with its surface in a controlled manner. Once this has been achieved, sufficient force from the field thrusters will be applied to alter its course, sending it in a slingshot manoeuvre around the planet and finally away, towards the local star, where it will be consumed.'

*

‘Contact has been made with the object,’ Va informed the others some while later.

‘How exciting!’ added Idulica.

‘Applying lateral force from the field thrusters.’

It took a sustained effort, using all the surplus energy that Va could muster, even tapping the pulse drive, before the course of the meteor began to deflect, but then Va, having calculated the power requirements beforehand, knew that this would be the case.

It was not the size of the mostly iron object that made it difficult to control, although, at roughly three hundred and thirty feet at its broadest, it was big, and heavy, enough. The thing that made it really dangerous was its momentum, its weight combined with its speed.

If someone thirty feet away shouted ‘catch!’ and threw a tennis ball directly at you, most people could pluck it from the air relatively easily, and without injury. However, if the thrower had fired the tennis ball from a high-velocity gun it would probably be wise just to duck out of the way rather than try to catch the ball, because any object coming towards you at one thousand two hundred meters per second could hurt. It puts the hundred miles per hour serves at the Wimbledon tennis tournament in perspective, anyway.

Now imagine the force Va had to apply to influence a chunk of metal, over three hundred feet wide, not just travelling as quickly as a rifle bullet, but sprinting along at a rate twenty-five times faster than our speeding munition. If Va’s saucer had sweat glands, it would be coming out in buckets!

Events were proceeding in line with Va’s projections; the meteor’s trajectory had changed enough that it would miss the Earth, and Va was counting down to cutting the force being applied from the field thrusters, when the unexpected happened. A second meteor, or rather a chunk of the original that had broken away from its parent in the distant past, and had spent the intervening aeons following it around, smashed into the back of the iron rock, opposite the spot where Va’s saucer was applying pressure. The additional strain from the fragment that had previously been hidden in the shadow of its forbear, undetected by the saucer’s scanner, tested the impact shield beyond its safe limit, and it began to crumple.

*

Captain Schwartz kept the USS Vincent in the area where he thought the Russian submarine was still hiding until he was ordered to return to port after a couple of days. Initially, he was hopeful of success when the hydrophones picked up some faint sounds at unexpectedly high frequencies, but these turned out to be nothing and were put down to geological forces by Pentagon experts when consulted.

With neither the Pickering or the Albert making contact with anything that could be the U-boat, Schwartz was forced to concede that the sub had either been blown apart by the Pickering’s depth charges, as his XO had asserted, or had escaped.

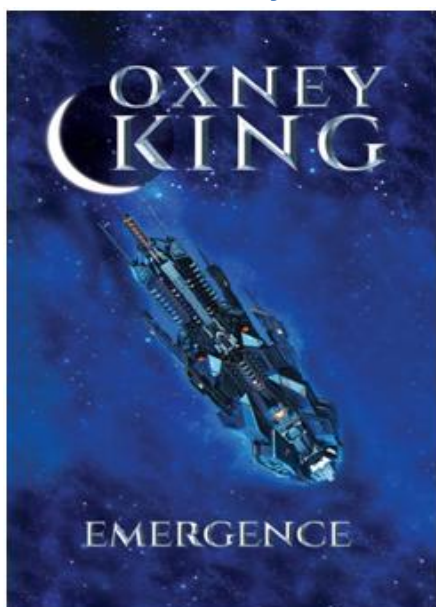
*

Colonel Rawley gave instructions that any enquiry from the press regarding the downing of the Soviet balloon was to be dealt with by him personally, and definitely not by any of those buffoons from Project Sign, as this delicate matter needed to be handled correctly.

And so it was, that at just after 10am on July 7, he took the phone call from a journalist working for the local Roswell newspaper. The last thing the colonel was going to tell the man was that wreckage found by the rancher came from a Soviet spy balloon; that would confirm to the public that the Russians could penetrate deep into the United States with ease, spreading fear and consternation, and the people needed to feel safe in their homes. Likewise, he wasn’t going to say that the parts were from the German-designed rocket used to shoot down the balloon; after all, that would infer that the army couldn’t defend its own territory without resorting to foreign-made weaponry. No, much better to throw them off the scent entirely.

‘Yes, that’s right, a flying disc...’

If you liked 1947 why not read the follow-up novel



[Checkout the YouTube trailer here](#)

[Available from austinmacauley.com](http://austinmacauley.com)

[Also from Amazon](#)