

Chapter Four

IN REFT

*U.S. Naval Submarine Base
Kings Bay, GA*

The USS *Wyoming*, one of eighteen Trident nuclear submarines built, was the pride of the U.S. Navy's Fleet Ballistic Missile (FBM) submarine program. She was also the pride of Submarine Squadron Twenty. And there was no doubting that fact in the eyes of her current crew, either. Ever since the USS *Wyoming* was commissioned in 1996, the Ohio-class sub, officially known as SSBN-742, had never failed to make the grade. She and her crews always departed for patrol duty on time. Together, sub and crew had always excelled in training and maneuvers. The *Wyoming* was regarded as the Navy's benchmark for fleet ballistic missile submarine operations.

Without fail, for the past ten years, the *Wyoming* and her crews had stood guard in the silent depths of the Atlantic. In the cold, dark waters of that ocean she had waited for an order the crew hoped never would come. If received from the U.S. Strategic Command, the launch order originating from the National Command Authority would permit the "boomer," as the Navy's nuclear subs were called, to unleash a nuclear arsenal of 120 warheads atop twenty-four long-range missiles.

The *Wyoming* was a marine engineering marvel, with a submerged displacement of 18,750 tons, an overall length of 560 feet, a beam of 42 feet, and a draft of 38 feet. She could cruise submerged at a top speed of over twenty knots and remain un-

derwater and virtually undetected for up to six months at a time. With her complement of torpedoes, anti-ship Harpoon missiles, Tomahawk cruise missiles, and twenty-four Trident II missiles, the USS *Wyoming* was an impressive underwater arsenal and therefore truly a leviathan.

To permit her to spend more time on patrol, the *Wyoming*, like all Fleet Ballistic Missile submarines, was assigned two full crews. Called Blue and Gold, each had its own skipper and full complement of officers and enlisted men. They rotated patrols, each crew giving the other a chance for training, family time, and much-needed rest. As one boomer returned to Kings Bay, another one sailed to take its place, ensuring that the silent sentinels of the deep would be ever present, ever watchful.

Today, the *Wyoming* was in homeport. She was almost done with refit. It was a grueling three-and-a-half-week process between patrols that consisted of routine maintenance, repairs, refurbishment, and crew rotation. It was never any fun. Of course, the next seventy days spent silently patrolling at the bottom of the ocean weren't going to be much fun either. But once out into the deep waters of the Atlantic, there was no Navy bureaucracy to deal with, no day in, day out distractions to have to brush aside, and no real focus other than the *Wyoming's* peacetime mission.

The sub's Gold crew commander, Navy Commander William C. Murphy, stood on the dock alongside his boat while watching his crew scurrying about. He thought there was a terrible irony in the phrase "peacetime mission." After all, the country hadn't known any real peace in years. It was only few years ago that terrorists had struck at the heart of America on the morning of that clear, blue-sky day in September.

Commander William C. Murphy was an eighteen-year career officer in the Navy. The "C" stood for "Church." It was an old New England family name that had accompanied him and many of his relatives before him throughout life. He had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis with a degree in engineering. The modern nuclear Navy of today liked engineers.

But Murphy knew exactly what he wanted to do from the time he first saw a picture of a submarine when he was a young boy. One day, he was going to command a submarine.

He set his sights on it as a youngster, and never once thought of doing anything else. He was a good student in school. He read all sorts of books on military and naval history. He excelled in math and science. He played baseball. He made the honor roll. He even ran for class president in his senior year and won. But most of all, he envisioned himself as the commander of a U.S. Navy submarine.

“Murph,” as he was known to his friends and those closest to him, had earned the reputation as being one of the best. He had graduated from Annapolis at the top of his class. The engineering programs were tough. But he worked hard at it. He managed to play sports for two of his four years there. He quickly ascended to key leadership positions within the cadet corps. Therefore it was no surprise when he chose submarines as his assignment prior to graduation.

He was good-looking, fit, and trim. In keeping with Navy tradition, he always told himself. In reality, it was to set an example for the crew. Submarine crews tended to gain weight when leading a more sedentary existence while submerged for almost three months.

Bill Murphy had closely-cropped hair that had turned gray prematurely. It made him look distinguished. He had squared facial features that were set off by sparkling blue eyes. Put a beard on him, friends would say, and he’d be a knock-off for Chuck Norris. Murph rather liked that comparison.

Two days remained until the *Wyoming’s* patrol departure. A lot of work still needed to be done—there always was. But Murphy knew that the chiefs and the enlisted men would pull it off again just like they’d always managed to do before. The crew made all the difference and could make or break a sub commander’s career. Murphy had commanded the *Wyoming* for the last three years. His efficiency reports were a glowing testament to the harmony that existed among the *Wyoming’s* crew.

A constant parade of vehicles streamed in and out of the area. Sailors tending to the *Wyoming* scurried about the pier in the early morning light. He checked his watch. It was a few minutes after 7:00 A.M. and everything appeared to be on schedule. *I've got the best damned Trident crew in the Navy*, he thought. *I'm one lucky son of a bitch!*

A familiar voice called from behind, "Skipper?"

As he turned, he saw his executive officer coming toward him.

"Yes, Hansen. What is it?" Murphy asked, returning the XO's salute.

"Sir, I've got the update on the *Wyoming's* refit status," Hansen replied. "The leak in the reactor's cooling system has been successfully repaired and tested. The propulsion shop has signed off on it."

"Have you had a look for yourself?"

"As a matter of fact, I have, sir. The chief engineer and I personally inspected it during second shift yesterday."

"And the chief engineer is satisfied?"

"Yes, sir. We both reviewed the repair logs and the inspection report," Hansen stated. "We're both confident that the reactor is safe and mission ready—so sure, we'd be willing to bet on it!"

"Very well," Murphy replied, studying the junior officer's eyes. "So, there will be no associated delay and nothing to affect our patrol departure schedule?"

"Absolutely nothing, sir," Hansen affirmed, his pride showing through with a nearly imperceptible smile. "The repair team and the boat's crew have been working around the clock to get the repair completed. The chief of the boat told me the men didn't want it to affect their reliability rating. They aren't the Gold crew for nothing, Skipper."

"Great job, Mr. Hansen. Pass along my appreciation to the crew. And I'll tell them personally during afternoon report."

"Very well, sir. I'll be glad to," Hansen acknowledged, as he popped a salute and turned to leave. He stopped suddenly and pivoted around to face Murphy again.

“I don’t know if you’ve seen the news yet, sir,” he added, “but I was watching CNN in the day room a few minutes ago. It looks like the Iranians are stirring things up again. Something about economic support to Cuba. We’ll probably have to monitor developments while we’re on patrol.”

Murphy nodded. “I appreciate the heads-up. I’ll stop by the intel shop later to see if I can find out more. I’ll let you know.”

Hansen saluted again and began walking toward his dock-side office, a small, gray, trailer-like hut a short distance away.

Murphy watched Hansen walk away. After a few moments, he shoved both hands in his pockets and stared down at the concrete. *Just what the hell are the Iranians up to? I wonder what’s going on?* He zipped up his jacket and headed for his car. *There’s only one way to find out.*