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The Silent Service:  
Seawolf Class

**H. Jay Riker**



**THE  
SILENT  
SERVICE**

**SEAWOLF CLASS**

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# Contents

## Prologue

Fireworks lit the night, a stuttering, popping, thunderous display of... 1

## 1

Lieutenant John Calhoun Morton, “Jack” to his friends, turned the... 7

## 2

Garrett looked across the control room at Pittsburgh’s weapons... 25

## 3

Garrett grabbed hold of the safety railing next to the... 43

## 4

“As stated at the beginning of these proceedings, Lieutenant, this... 61

## 5

Commander Tom Garrett, like many naval officers, was a student... 78

6	“Would you please step out of the vehicle, sir?”	95
7	Garrett drove his battered, secondhand Toyota down Nimitz Avenue, then...	115
8	“Commander Thomas Garrett, reporting aboard, sir.”...	131
9	“You mean the entire ROC has only four submarines?” Jack...	149
10	The locals called it Kinmen. The island had another name,...	166
11	“All clear topside,” Garrett said, walking the scope around in...	186
12	Thundering through the night, the line of Huey UH-1 helicopters...	204
13	Garrett walked onto the main concourse of Hong Kong’s airport,...	220

14	The composite SEAL–Taiwan commando team had hidden in the forest...	238
15	The sound of the old cannon banged out across Victoria...	254
16	“Jesus H. Fucking Christ!” Toyndbee exploded as he, Queensly, Grossman, and...	271
17	The war began in earnest at approximately 1730 hours, Tuesday,...	286
18	“Conn, Sonar! Destroyer changing aspect. He’s turning into us!”	303
19	At forty knots, Seawolf cruised east across the stretch of...	321
20	“Conn, Sonar,” Toyndbee’s voice said over the intercom. “Updating Sierra...	339

21  
“Conn, Sonar! We’re passing Master Four-one  
to starboard.” 356

22  
“We still don’t know that one of our subs is... 373

23  
“Bridge, Sonar.” 390

Epilogue  
“You can’t keep the Seawolf, of course,” Rear  
Admiral Bainbridge... 407

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by H. Jay Riker](#)

[Cover](#)

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[About the Publisher](#)

# PROLOGUE

Tuesday, 1 July 1997

**Russian Federation Embassy  
Beijing, People's Republic of China  
2145 hours, local time**

Fireworks lit the night, a stuttering, popping, thunderous display of light and color flashing and strobing across the sky to the southwest. Vasili Andreevitch Mikhailin sat on the veranda of the main embassy building with his guest, sipping strong black tea and pretending to admire the celestial spectacle. The portly man sitting to his left, Admiral Li Guofeng, was all smiles and camaraderie, but Mikhailin didn't trust him further than he could throw him. Given their respective differences in size, he thought wryly, that was not very far at all.

"A new age beginning, Comrade Mikhailin," Li said in badly accented Russian, raising his own cup in a toast. "To our business partnership, and to our glorious future!"

“To our future,” Mikhailin replied, but with an enthusiasm he could not feel. He did not point out that Li’s continued use of the honorific “Comrade” was not only dated, but in decidedly poor taste. Didn’t this fool know, wasn’t he *aware*, that the world had changed?

Mikhailin hated Beijing. He’d hated it when he’d been a military attaché here at the embassy fifteen years ago, and he hated it even more now. Beijing was a grand-looking sprawl of a city, to be sure, with its miles of museums, monuments, boulevards, temples, and people’s halls, but it remained a lie all the same, a gleaming facade masking the wretched poverty of the people both beyond the capital precincts and within the twisting back streets and alleyways of the city itself. It was rumored that the Beijing government had turned off the hot water for most of the city’s inhabitants for the duration of these festivities; the pollution pouring from the local coal-fired power plants was not something that visiting foreign dignitaries should be allowed to see.

Throughout that week, he and others of the Russian Special Trade Delegation had been feted by their opposite numbers in the PRC Defense Ministry. That morning they’d been taken to the Beijing Zoo, a squalid collection of tiny cages and flea-bitten animals crowded between the Olympic Hotel and the Beijing Exhibition Center. Mikhailin loved animals, loved nature and the outdoor wilderness. The sight of those miserable creatures sweltering and pacing in their filthy cages had moved him more than the squalor he remembered of the peasants out in the country beyond the capital sprawl. The two giant pandas just inside the front gate were mangy and half dead.

The conditions—worse, the lack of empathy for the poor beasts—appalled him. Visitors to the zoo could

actually buy toy guns that fired plastic pellets for the express purpose of letting their children shoot at the helplessly caged and tormented animals; at one point he'd watched a gang of adolescents hurling rocks at the monkeys while guards stood impassively by . . . and felt a small stab of vengeful amusement when the shrieking monkeys retaliated with fistfuls of their own feces.

The experience had soured Mikhailin completely. You could not trust a people, he reasoned, who treated their own natural inheritance in so callous a manner. Resources, money, neighbors, allies, all were mere assets to be *used* until they were used up. Granted, China was a country with extraordinary problems, not least of which were a population approaching 1.2 billion and a geography that had lost something like a fifth of its agricultural land to desertification and soil erosion in the past fifty years.

Still, to Mikhailin's way of thinking the People's Republic was a giant slowly strangling on its own filth.

"This day is only the beginning, comrade. By returning our territory to our rightful possession, the western imperialists have acknowledged that we are a world power, and one to be reckoned with!"

"Indeed, Comrade Admiral," Mikhailin replied with a blandly polite smile. "There can never be a question of that. The whole world knows and respects the might of the People's Republic of China."

"The surrender of Hong Kong to our sovereign jurisdiction," Li continued, "is only the first step. We shall soon regain control over our renegade twenty-third province in the east, and of our territorial islands in the South China Sea. And you and your people at Krasnaya Sormova, Comrade Mikhailin, will be instrumental in effecting that change."

Another crackle and rumble of explosions sounded from the sky to the southwest, above Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. Mikhailin could also hear, beneath the concussions, the heavy beat of music accompanying a troupe of ribbon dancers. Beijing was going all out to celebrate this day and Britain's long-awaited return of Hong Kong to the sovereign rule of the People.

"Our business agreement will be of immense benefit to both of us, Comrade Admiral," Mikhailin replied. "What you do with our . . . product is, of course, entirely up to you."

"With ten of your Varshavyanka and two of your new Barrakuda in our service, plus the might of our own growing fleet, the People's Republic will again become a maritime nation to be respected and feared. We will fear no foreign power, no trespass on our territorial sovereignty."

A particularly dazzling spray of red and green sparks cascaded across the sky. Mikhailin leaned back, watching the avalanche of light, and wondered how long it would be before the Russian Federation regretted its shortsighted marketing policies.

Ever since the final collapse of the Communist state, the new Federation's economy had been struggling along, never quite, as the Americans liked to say, making ends meet. Desperate for hard currency, Moscow had begun aggressively selling arms of all types to anyone with cash and the desire to play catch-up in the world arms race. MiG fighters, T-80 tanks, munitions, automatic rifles . . . the worldwide demand, fortunately for Russia's financial problems, was insatiable.

Perhaps the most lucrative trade item in Moscow's marketplace, however, was the diesel-electric submarine known as the Varshavyanka class. Small, superbly

silent, and a real bargain at only \$300 million dollars apiece, the efficient little hunter-killer had proven to be one of Russia's most sought-after exports. And as for the nuclear-powered Barrakuda . . .

Mikhailin sighed. How long before these deficit-balancing trade goods were turned against the *rodina*? he wondered. Moscow, he feared, had lost sight of the dangers in the quest for income. The People's Republic of China might be primarily interested in Taiwan and the Spratly Islands for now, but he could not forget that Beijing had longstanding territorial claims in Siberia as well. A fleet of ten Varshavyankas and a couple of the deadly Barrakudas could easily blockade Vladivostok and the approaches to the Sea of Okhotsk, cripple the weakened Soviet Far East Fleet, and perhaps even force the surrender of the Maritime Provinces.

It seemed unlikely, though, that the Americans would allow the People's Republic to take over Taiwan without a fight. Perhaps, in the long run, Moscow would find itself in a kind of strange and highly improbable alliance with Washington against the machinations of the Beijing militarists. He would need to discuss the matter with his contacts in the State Security Service upon his return home.

Home. He missed her. It would be good to be home when this round of negotiations was completed. Good to be with Masha again, and the kids and their families. He was getting too old for these international junkets, no matter how important they were supposed to be to the national economy.

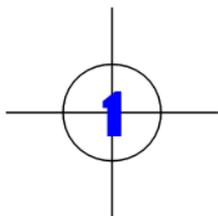
"It is nearly time, Comrade Mikhailin," Li said, glancing at his watch. "We should leave."

Mikhailin nodded. Another banquet, more dancers, more fireworks.

At least he could inform his superiors that the deal,

worth some thirty trillion rubles over the next ten years, had gone through as planned. Russia would get the money she so desperately needed in order to continue pretending that she was no longer a third-world country.

And China would receive a fleet of the deadliest warships known to man, and a free hand at last with her old enemies across the Taiwan Strait.



**Thursday, 23 September 1999**

**Operation Buster**  
**Northern Pacific Ocean**  
**48° 16' N, 178° 02' E**  
**0312 hours Zulu**

Lieutenant John Calhoun Morton, “Jack” to his friends, turned the hatch release and pushed, easing the round hatch of the forward escape trunk up and out. With MM2 Theodore Hanson close behind, he pulled himself through the narrow opening and into the ocean. Pale light spilled up through the hatchway from the caged battle lantern in the escape trunk but was almost immediately swallowed by the inky blackness of the water. The target was still distant enough that they could risk showing the light.

By that wan glow, he could just make out the vast, shadowy bulk of the USS *Pittsburgh*, a Los Angeles-class submarine, hull number SSN-720, hovering in the

midnight-black water beneath his gently kicking, flippered feet.

The other SEALs of First Platoon were already working in the near-total darkness, unshipping the pair of Combat Rubber Raider Crafts from the temporary deck housing aft of the conning tower and inflating them from the attached CO<sub>2</sub> cylinders. The *Pittsburgh's* conning tower—her “sail” in submariner’s parlance—rose like a black, knife-edged cliff above the SEAL platoon. Then Hanson closed the deck hatch, cutting off the thin mist of light from below.

The team had practiced this maneuver in total darkness many times, however, and in moments, the inflatable CRRCs were unfolding, rising rapidly to the surface as the fourteen men of First Platoon followed them up. Morton broke the surface, spitting his rebreather mouthpiece from between his teeth and pushing his mask back on his head. There was more light here than there’d been below, but not by much. The night was black and the sky overcast, with a strong wind slicing across the surface in a fine, ice-cold spray that cut his exposed skin like a knife. Without their wet suits, the water, at forty-six degrees, would have leached the heat from their bodies in minutes, and the SEALs would have lost consciousness to hypothermia.

Seven men piled into each inflatable boat . . . a close fit for large men and their gear. TM1 Czynski unpacked the small outboard motor from its case, screwed it down on the stern engine mount, and connected the waterproof battery. Morton, meanwhile, pulled out his Motorola headset and slipped it on, holding the needle mike close to his ice-cold lips. “Whalesong, Hammerhead. Radio check. Over.”

*Pittsburgh's* periscope array rose like heavy, upright pipes from the water a few yards away, almost invisible

in the darkness with their mottled pattern of light and dark gray camouflage paint. A special radio antenna mounted to the radar mast would provide communications for the team . . . so long as the *Pittsburgh* was able to remain at periscope depth. They needed that radar perched well above the wave crests to home them in on their target.

“Hammerhead, Whalesong” was the reply, barely heard above the keening wind and hissing spray. “Check okay.” There was a pause. “Objective now bearing three-five-zero, range eight-three-five.”

“Objective bearing three-five-zero, range eight-three-five,” Morton repeated. “I copy. Hammerhead out.”

“Good luck, Hammerhead. We’ll keep a light on in the window for you.”

His wrist compass showed them the correct direction, a little west of due north. When his second-in-command, Lieutenant j.g. Brad Conyers, had completed his communications check from the other CRRC, they fired up their engines and began easing away from the towering masts of the submerged *Pittsburgh*.

They moved against a heavy swell, and the wind battled them across the crown of every cresting wave. Lightning flared on the western horizon, briefly lighting the clouds in a stuttering white flash; a squall line was approaching. In part, the oncoming storm had dictated the decision to go with the op now, rather than waiting for a more propitious moment or a better angle of approach. The ocean swell preceding the storm, however, was going to make the approach a bit hairier than usual.

Eight hundred yards . . . eight football fields . . . but the objective was completely invisible in the dark and sleeting spray. If they maintained their heading, however, and a steady speed of five knots, despite the best efforts of the wind to slow them . . .

“Hammerhead, Whalesong.”

“Whalesong, Hammerhead. Go ahead.”

“Hammerhead, be advised target is changing heading to one-eight-zero at twelve knots. Recommend you come to new heading . . . make it three-one-zero to intercept.”

“Coming to new heading three-one-zero. Copy.”

Morton could just make out the second ISB to port, with Lieutenant Conyers at the tiller. He switched to the tactical channel. “Hammer Two, this is One. You copy that, Two-IC?”

“One, Two, I copy. Coming over now.”

Together, the two inflatable boats nosed to the left, coming onto the new heading that, according to the plot board in *Pittsburgh's* CIC, would let them still intercept the target. A course change. Damn . . . did they suspect? Morton wondered. Had they picked up a radar pulse . . . or the encrypted, low-wattage comm signal and been warned off?

Minute followed bone-chilling minute with no new change of course from the target. Apparently, they were altering course in an attempt to stay ahead of the weather, which was growing steadily worse.

“Contact!” RM1 Schiff called back from the bow of the rubber duck. He was holding a portable radar gun, a smaller, waterproofed combat version of the device used by state troopers to catch speeders. “He’s dead ahead!”

An instant later, as the CRRC crested the next wave, the objective emerged from the darkness . . . a ghost ship, blacker than the surrounding night, with only running lights and a red glow from her bridge to reveal her shape through the mist.

“Whalesong, Hammerhead. We have visual, repeat visual . . . dead ahead, range fifty yards. Request permission to execute Plan Victor.”

“Roger that, Hammerhead.” There was a lengthy pause, filled with static. “You are go for Victor. Execute, I say again, execute.”

As they motored silently closer, the hull of the target ship loomed huge above them. She was an aging freighter, rust-streaked and battered, with a dead-weight tonnage of 4,700 tons, a length at the waterline of ninety-nine meters, and a beam of thirteen. She had the look of a small oiler, with bridge and superstructure well aft and two mast-slung cranes forward. She was the *Kuei Mei* out of Shanghai, and her destination was the port of Los Angeles.

The freighter was plowing steadily south now, at a speed of eight knots. From Morton’s low-to-the-water vantage point, it looked as though she’d changed course to better take the heavy following seas on her quarter. It didn’t appear that any alarm had been given. No one was visible on deck and there didn’t seem to be any excitement or haste. The two rubber raiders shifted their angle of approach slightly to stay ahead of the target vessel; at best, the raiders could manage eighteen knots, but the seas were heavy enough to slow that best considerably, and there was a real danger that the *Kuei Mei* would cruise serenely by, just out of reach.

On this line of approach, the target’s port side was visible. The plan of battle called for Morton’s boat to take the target from the starboard side, while Conyers’s team hit it from port. Morton spent several minutes carefully studying the freighter’s movement, trying to judge whether the slower CRRC could cut under the target’s stern to reach her starboard side . . . or whether it would be better to have both teams assault from port. Morton tended to be conservative, unwilling to push the all too fragile combat asset of luck, but

it looked to him as though there would be plenty of room and time to spare.

If the freighter maintained her heading and speed. She had a top speed of only about twelve knots, and a CRRC could easily outsprint her, but in a long chase the advantage lay with the quarry. In this heavy sea, though, her skipper was keeping her speed to an easily controlled wallow, and the *Pittsburgh* had vectored the team in at just the right angle to maximize their chance of a clean intercept. It looked good.

Judging wind and wave carefully, Morton put the helm over and gunned the battery-powered engine to full throttle. The other six SEALs grabbed hold of the safety lines looped along the rubber boat's gunwales as the flat-bottomed craft slapped and jounced over the cresting waves. Icy spray drenched them all, and visibility was reduced to a wet blur that stung their eyes in salty blasts.

The *Kuei Mei* loomed huge and high to the left as they cut beneath the leviathan's stern and bumped hard through her wake . . .

### **USS *Pittsburgh***

**48° 16' N, 178° 02' E**

**0402 hours Zulu**

“Conn, Sonar!”

Commander Thomas Frederick Garrett picked up the intercom mike beside the periscope housing and held it to his lips. “This is Conn. Whatcha got?”

“Conn, we have a possible contact, bearing two-nine-nine, designated Sierra One-two.”