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A dramatic illustration in shades of blue and grey. In the foreground, a submarine is partially submerged in a choppy sea, with a man visible on its deck. In the upper left, the wing of an aircraft carrier is visible, marked with the number '27' and a star insignia. The sky is filled with dark, swirling clouds, suggesting a storm or a tense atmosphere.

Last Flight

By HANK SEARLS

HEAVY with her missile, the great dark shape slid southeastward, sixty feet beneath the Pacific chop. Her navigator glanced at the bulkhead chronometer: 1330 Greenwich Civil Time.

Dawn had broken above. Soon she would burst from the deep to hurl her missile eastward toward land; from surfacing to launch to dive must not exceed seven minutes. In a few hours she would try herself against her enemy, the second hand jerking implacably on the bulkhead.

Already her pangs were beginning in the accelerating frenzy of her crew. . . .

Chris Lassiter sat with his daughter at breakfast, and the only difference between this Saturday and most others was that he was in uniform, and as always Julie treated him with the awe that she saved for his monthly appearances as a naval aviator rather than as a mild and unwarlike English teacher. "You look yummy, Daddy," she said, flirting over her glass of milk. "Simply the most. . . ."

"Thanks, honey," he said. To hide his pleasure, he picked up the paper. He was, he permitted himself to think, in pretty good shape at that. His aviation greens were just a little snug over the midriff, but his brown curly hair was as thick as it had been in carrier days, fifteen years before; and at 38, his hazel eyes were as clear as ever.

And yet the Navy was dropping (Continued on page 50)

They needed his billet for one of the new, young pilots—the "tigers." But Chris hadn't bargained for a fade-out like this one. A terrific suspense story by the author of "The Crowded Sky."

Last Flight

Continued from page 13

him. He didn't really care, he told himself, but they were dropping him. He would have to tell Nita, and the prospect was distasteful, as if he were admitting that he had lost a handball game to one of his students, or was too tired to mow the lawn. It was, he guessed, foolish pride, as if being moved from his billet was a milestone on the path to middle-age. He glanced at the headlines.

"RUSS TENSION BUILDS. . . ." he read. And yet they were dropping him, with his hard-won, expensive flying skill and anti-submarine experience. He put down the paper impatiently.

Nita moved in from the kitchen, immaculate in sweater and skirt even at that early hour. She disdained a negligee or robe at breakfast, was always up before him; he had never, even in the hectic days of their war-marriage, seen her untidy in the morning.

She poured the coffee and sat opposite him, studying him with her warm brown eyes. She straightened the tarnished golden wings on his chest, merely for an excuse, he knew, to touch him; she sensed something on his mind. *God*, he thought, *how I love this girl.* . . .

"Chris?" she asked. "Why not get a new pair this weekend? Or shall I go over these with the polish?"

Well, he thought, *I might as well tell her.* . . .

"Let's not bother, honey. I may not be in the squadron much longer." And then childishly, despite himself: "Thirty-eight's too old, they tell me."

"Oh, Chris! What happened?" He shrugged. "It's normal. New JG came in just off active duty; there are only so many billets. The skipper called me at school yesterday. This may be my last weekend."

Another Reservist's wife might have welcomed the news, but Nita looked as if she were going to cry. She had learned to trust his flying in the horrible days of the South Pacific; today his staid weekend patrols in a twin-engined search plane must seem as safe to her as to him.

"It isn't fair! This is the only thing you do to get out with the boys. You don't belong to lodges, or play poker, or anything. It isn't fair at all. . . ."

He smiled, finishing his coffee. "I don't feel the need to get out with the boys. Half the old bunch have been dropped anyway." He arose and tugged at Julie's pony-tail, smiling down into her freckled face. "I'd rather spend the weekend with you two, if you want to know. No. . . . It isn't that. . . ."

He lapsed into silence, wondering why he flew. It wasn't the money; the Navy weekends brought him a hundred or so a month, but he poured most of it into insurance. No, it

reached deeper. And he couldn't explain it, even to Nita, close as they were. . . .

Were warm ashes left from the zeal he'd known in the Pacific? Nope, there was none of *that* left; the memory of the Marianas Turkey-shoot could awaken him sweating in the night.

Just habit to want to fly a little, he guessed. Almost a hobby.

For now there was no enemy. Only a vague and hardened unease. . . .

Nita kissed him goodbye in the doorway. Past her, through his book-lined den, on which she had insisted when they built the too-expensive little house, he saw his daughter at the breakfast table. The morning sunlight teased her spun gold hair into luminence as she pored over the funnies.

Inexplicably, he shivered. Then he climbed into the Volkswagen.

His neighbor, watering the lawn, snapped to mock-attention and saluted as Chris backed down the drive. Finally he hobbled away as if he had sprained his back.

The strange discomfort passed. Chris smiled and headed for the base.

Chris, in flight gear and swinging his hard-hat, walked alone down the flight line toward the briefing room, ready for the barrier patrol. He glanced at the snub-nosed Grumann "Trackers" on the line. They waited for their four-man crews, wings folded ludicrously over their heads as if cringing from the heat. On the ground they had always amused him, but in the air they were solid, stable craft, as specialized as the pelican or the cormorant at the hunting and killing of undersea prey.

They were old friends, but friends the skipper, a harried Los Angeles stockbroker, had just confirmed with regret that he would soon leave.

Well, there was only so much money for gas and maintenance. They had to keep the billets open for younger men—the "tigers"—the boys who would fly the most if the whistle blew.

If the whistle blew. . . .

He entered the briefing room, and almost against his will wandered past the empty rows of chairs to the front. The map was still there, the map that had haunted him for months.

It was a map of the Los Angeles basin, from Santa Monica Beach to the San Bernardino Mountains, 60 miles east. An ordinary map, but labeled "Civil Defense." On it was an overlay.

Part of the overlay consisted of a large red circle in the aircraft district, where presumably analysis had determined that a reasonable enemy would aim. In that red circle, although it didn't say, Chris assumed that one died instantly. From the circle a sickening pink ellipse reached eastward, born by prevailing winds over the metropolitan area all the way

to the foothills. On it was printed: "Fallout".

The pink area interested Chris hardly at all. His eyes were on the red circle.

In it was the block on which he lived.

"Mr. Lassiter?"

He turned quickly. "Yes?"

A red-cheeked young JG was holding out his hand, a tall young man with clear gray eyes.

"I'm your co-pilot today, sir. Eddie Foster. Just got in the squadron."

Chris shook hands. This kid, he guessed, was the reason he would not fly again, but he liked him immediately. "Call me Chris." He jerked his head toward the map. "Don't know why I look at that thing. It scares the pants off me."

Foster spared it a glance and dismissed it. *A bachelor, I'll bet*, thought Chris. Joe Maguire, the squat pilot who would fly wing on Chris on the long barrier patrol, arrived, and then Chris' own enlisted men, Young and Chief Di Angelo.

A reserve squadron was an informal body. Di Angelo, a hard-eyed, gaunt Pacific veteran and a TV repairman, had flown as his radar man for years. "Eddie, this is Pete Di Angelo. Without a hangover, he can spot a snorkling sub on his radar in a forty-knot gale. With a hangover, he can't see his own scope. And this is Wayne Young, our madman."

Young was a pleasant, chubby, college student who spoke seldom. But he was razor-sharp with the delicate Magnetic Anomaly Detection—M.A.D.—gear; he basked quietly in the assurance that he was the best "madman" in the squadron.

Di Angelo and Young and Chris had learned the plane together—Chris would hate to leave them.

The skipper gave them a hurried briefing. The pattern was familiar; the long run out to sea, the turn along the border of the search area; the long run homeward through the Missile Range.

"You'll investigate skunks and photograph suspicious ones; you'll try to get a cut on rackets you hear. . . ."

Skunks were unknown radar contacts; if subs, they were always your own, of course. Rackets always turned out to be radar emissions from your own surface ships. But Chris checked each contact anyway. Why bother with the patrol unless you did?

They got the usual warning about the Pacific Missile Range.

"We still assume that foreign subs may be assigned to snoop off Point Mugu, as they did off Cape Canaveral. So be particularly alert for reconnaissance subs in that area."

He spoke without conviction, and Maguire, a tough Los Angeles police lieutenant, asked dryly: "Suppose we spot one?"

The skipper looked pained. "Relay a contact report through Stargazer," he said. "Stargazer" was the group code for the channel island radios. "Take

his picture. And *don't* lose contact. You'll be relieved on station. Even the Missile Range is international waters; we can't do anything about his being there, but we can sure keep an eye on him until he leaves."

It was peacetime; it was all they could do. To carry the deadly Lulu or Betty nuclear depth charge would be to invite incidents, Chris supposed.

Anyway, an armed, ready plane awaited their call at the base.

"Are there any friendly subs on the missile range today?" he inquired. He'd never asked before; he hardly knew why he asked now. But the low hulls were hard to identify; it would be embarrassing on his last hop to stir things up over a U.S. sub.

"I didn't see anything on it," said the skipper. When he met Chris' eye, Chris caught sympathy and true regret. A warm glow suffused him for a moment. *Anyway, the Old Man cares, he thought. It bothers him. . . .* The skipper leafed absently through a pile of dispatches and then looked up.

"No, Chris," he said. "If you see a sub *there*, it ain't usn's. It's they-uns."

As they filed out, the skipper drew him aside. His gray, drawn face was bitter. Chris and he had flown from the carrier *Enterprise* in the startling days of Pacific defeat.

"I'm sorry, Chris. Just sick about it. After all these years. . . ."

Chris smiled. "Forget it, Ben. I can use the weekends, anyway. . . ."

But the feeling that he was being wasted still nagged him. . . .

Chris flew at 1500 feet above a thin layer of cloud. For awhile, they'd skimmed conscientiously beneath it for visual search over the Missile Range but Maguire kept losing sight of Chris in wisps of vapor, and finally complained. So now they bounced over it, occasionally glimpsing dark patches of water, but relying mostly on Di Angelo's radar.

Chris gave Foster the controls, and dug into one of the box-lunches Young had handed forward through the cockpit door. The small of his back pained him; for two hours, crammed into the seat with the chute unyielding behind his back, he had suffered increasing. A slipped disc, he had been told, and there was nothing like a long automobile ride or a barrier patrol to antagonize it.

He looked at his watch. 11:30. Another hour to go. One more hour, it seemed, in his flying career. He gnawed on an aged sandwich, reflecting that flight rations, at least, had not changed over the years.

And then it began, with Di Angelo's voice on the interphone, like a single rock that bounces down a hill, loosening a slide, releasing an avalanche. . . .

"Pilot from radar," said Di Angelo. "I have a contact bearing zero-one-zero, ten miles."

Chris pressed the button on his yoke and answered. "Roger. What's it look like, Di?"

There was no answer for a moment. Then: "The man said there weren't no subs?"

"That's right."

"Then it's a floating oil barrel, or something. But it looks like a snorkling sub."

They lapsed into silence, and Chris went on with his lunch.

"Pilot from radar," Di Angelo said. "If that's an oil barrel, it's getting bigger. And it's making about 15 knots, crosswind."

Obviously, it wasn't an oil barrel. . . . But radar could be wrong; it might be a fishing boat or a pleasure craft. Was it worth investigating?

"What do you think it is, Di?"

"I think it was a snorkling sub. Now I think it's a surfaced sub," Di Angelo answered immediately.

Well, it wasn't a sub, unless the skipper had rocks in his head.

"Pilot from madman," said Young suddenly. "That oil barrel just turned on its radar, sir. I got a racket at zero-two-zero."

Chris stuffed the sandwich back into his box. "I'll take it," he told Foster, taking the controls. He banked to the left. "Steady on zero-two-zero," he said. And to Foster: "Eddie, call our playmate and tell him we're investigating a contact."

He heard Foster call Maguire, and concentrated on Di Angelo's bearings. Nine miles. . . . About four minutes. "Get the camera up here," he told Young. And then to Foster: "Tell Maguire to stay on top. . . . We'll go down and see."

Ultra high frequency radio gear was a line-of-sight affair; leaving Maguire on top of the clouds would give Chris an extra relay in the link from himself to the off-shore island radios to the base.

"Four-one Hot Potato, this is Four-zero Hot Potato," broadcast Foster. "Maintain your altitude. We are dropping down to investigate. Relay to Hot Potato Base."

"This is Four-zero Hot Potato," answered Maguire's co-pilot. "Roger."

"Dead ahead, eight miles," said Di Angelo. Chris dropped the nose slightly, and they were cut off from Maguire, in a world of softly heaving white.

At 600 feet, the clouds turned dirty gray and then they were through, with one last wisp of fog blotting their vision, and then reluctantly falling behind. The untiring west wind was scuffing the ocean, scooping whitecaps from the surface and tossing them into the air. About a state four sea, decided Chris. . . . Twenty knots of wind.

"Dead ahead," Di Angelo reported. "Seven miles."

Chris narrowed his eyes, and Foster took binoculars from behind his seat and scanned the water. He tensed.

"There it is, Chris. Something. . . . A boat. Or a sub?"

And then Chris saw it too, a sub, slipping swiftly south through the rough seas, now visible and now seem-

ing to sink beneath the surface as a breaking wave hid her, discernible more from the constancy of her bow wave than from contrast with the white-capped surface.

A sub probably, from her southerly course, on her way from the dry-docks at Hunter's Point to her berth in San Diego; a sleek new sub making knots to be home by Saturday night.

So the skipper had been wrong. Well, someone would have to plug that hole in intelligence; in wartime, it could be fatal; there would be no time to tell friend from foe.

Friend from foe. . . .

Why had the sub been snorkling beneath the surface, if it was only in transit? A drill, perhaps?

Or suppose it wasn't ours? Suppose it was a snooper?

This was ridiculous, he told himself, and yet. . . .

"Young, break out the camera and give it to Mr. Foster. And check our sonobuoys. . . ." He stared at the distant shape. "Hey! What's that?"

He sat for a moment in shock. A huge, dark-blue shape, a thing of the sky and not of the sea, rode the fore-deck of the sub, lethal and needle-nosed pointing just off her starboard bow.

A guided missile?

His mind rejected the obvious, the catastrophic obvious. *We* had missile subs, several by now. He'd seen pictures of them, their bows thickened with the tubular hangars in which the weapons were stored. Surely a missile above decks could only mean a test. No foreign sub skipper in his right mind would expose one this close to the U.S. mainland. Not off the Los Angeles defense complex. Not until the whistle blew.

Or could the whistle be about to blow?

He jammed his thumb down on the microphone button. "Hot Potato Four-One," he began. The hell with code. . . . "Maguire!"

His earphones crackled: "This is Maguire. Go ahead."

"There's a sub down here with a missile on deck. Tell the base!"

He heard Maguire call Stargazer, faintly heard Stargazer relay the message, heard no reply from beyond the horizon. What now? He could only wait. . . . He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. They were over the Missile Range; it must be a test; the sub was, after all, heading south, not toward Los Angeles; the missile was actually pointing safely to sea.

But if it were a test, why hadn't he been briefed? Why hadn't he been told?

"Sonobuoys set," reported Young suddenly.

"Roger," he said automatically. What good were sonobuoys, bobbing with dangling microphones in the water, their tiny radios transmitting engine noises of a sub that had already slung its nuclear dart and dived?

What good was anything?

"Five miles," said Di Angelo.

"We see it," Chris said irritably. He had another decision to make, and quickly. Did missile subs carry anti-aircraft? He could see none, but they could be hidden in the conning tower. How close should he come, until he knew?

He banked, playing for time. "Maguire," he said impatiently. "You get an answer?"

Maguire's voice snapped back. "Negative. Just 'wait.'"

All right. He had done all he could. It was a U.S. sub, it *had* to be, testing the missile topside in rough seas, probably not intending even to fire it. But when he completed the circle, Foster, glasses to his eyes, gripped his arm.

"Chris!" The voice was a whisper, an incredulous whisper on the interphone, "They're turning toward shore. . . ."

The dark black hull *was* turning, the missile bearing shoreward now, squatting parallel to the deck like a live thing about to spring. Chris' mind darted frantically, bird-like, searching for an explanation. Hadn't he read that the impact area was some dry lake in Nevada? Near Tonopah? So it could be a test firing, even shoreward.

At a Nevada desert? Or the Los Angeles metropolitan area? Or International Airport?

Or the red circle hugging his home, and Nita, and Julie?

"Maybe it's a dry run," he said hoarsely. "A rough-water test, or something. . . ."

Foster looked at him bleakly, and shook his head. "Take a look," he said, handing Chris the glasses and taking the yoke.

Chris put the glasses to his eyes, bracing his elbows against his chute straps, training the powerful lenses until startlingly, the sub leaped into the circle of his view.

He gasped. This was no dry run.

This was no careful, leisurely test of a new weapon. This was no intricate count-down, with all the delays he had read of. He had heard that U.S. subs could surface, sling a missile, and dive in less than ten minutes; this sub looked as if it intended to do it in five. And he didn't really know how long it had been up. . . .

A group of blue-clad figures were fighting the spray by the missile's nose, clinging to a platform. One man was sprawled half-way up the fuselage, making an adjustment. Another was yanking lines from the weapon, snaking them aft toward the conning tower.

At four, five miles, he sensed more frenzied haste than he had seen since the Pacific. The frigid, awful truth dawned.

It was hostile; it was going to fire!

And he had no weapon. . . .

The group by the missile's nose

broke suddenly, scrambling aft to the conning tower. The man hanging amidships stayed, intent on his job.

Chris found his eyes, mouth, head engulfed in throbbing heat. He had to think, and fast, or it was too late; he cursed the moments he had wasted circling. But what could he do? Desperately, knowing it was useless, he called Maguire.

"Maguire! You hear anything yet?" "Negative."

And even more uselessly. "You're not armed? Rockets, or anything?"

"Armed? Negative."

Chris swallowed. For a moment he closed his eyes, trying to draw strength, and Nita was very near. He pressed the microphone.

"Maguire? I think it's hostile. And it's going to fire. We got to go in. . . ."

Foster stared at him open-mouthed. "Go in?" he blurted. "With what?"

Chris ignored him. "Stand by to bail out," he said on the intercom. "I'm starting a climb."

At least he could give the crew a fighting chance. If there was time. . . .

"Chris," Foster said tightly, as if forcing out the words. "Listen, will you? Listen, I'll stay. I think you're nuts but I'll stay. . . ."

Chris shook his head, but then they saw the last tiny blue figure sprinting aft along the deck, heading for the conning tower.

"Hatch jettisoned," said Di Angelo from the after station. "Standing by to bail out. . . ."

The missile lay in lonely majesty, pointing a few degrees above the horizon, poised for flight. A fuel line, actuated from somewhere in the hull, jerked loose and slithered aft, and Chris knew that for better or for worse his men must ride with him.

"Get back in your seat, Di," he groaned. "There's no time." And uselessly: "Strap in. . . ."

"Tell Maguire to call Stargazer," he told Foster. His own voice sounded distant in his ears. "Tell him we're going to try to ram. . . ."

And then his whole being focused on the distant sub and its spawn.

They lost the sub once in the dive, as they bored through a low-lying cloud.

When they burst through the lacy fog, Chris saw the black hull glistening in a patch of sunlight 2,000 yards ahead. The missile seemed to his acute senses to be throbbing with life, as if straining at its lashings. A thin wisp of vapor streamed downward from its base.

"Not yet," he breathed. "Please God, not yet. . . ."

"Dead ahead, three-quarters of a mile," chanted Di Angelo, in exactly the tone he would have used in a drill. "One half. . . ."

Half a mile. . . . 15 seconds. . . . Please, hold it 15 seconds! . . . He dropped the nose, leveled off at 15 feet, skimming the water, afraid that at the last moment he might pull up instinctively, deliberately trapping himself for fear that he would flinch.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Foster's lips move as if in prayer. . . .

And in the last moments his own lips moved too. He whispered, "Nita . . . Nita . . ." From his great throbbing fear and grief came a vision of her and Julie, playing like two children on the lawn, days or months or years ago. "I have to," he told them. "I have to. . . ."

And then he heard it. With the dark shape lengthening before them, he heard the call, the panic-stricken howl from Maguire.

"Lassiter! Break off! *It's ours!*"

He would never know how close they came, but he would remember an agonized grunt from Foster, arm upraised to protect his face, as they passed over the massive rocket, a grunt as if he had braced for a blow to the pit of the stomach.

And remember, as they banked to look back, the hellish cascade of fire from its engines, the smoke hiding its mother ship, and its stately climb, faster and faster into the torn and mottled eastern sky.

And he would remember the long, silent flight home. . . .

Chris cut the engines and crawled stiffly after Foster from the plane. The skipper faced him.

"Chris, I think I know what you were going to do out there. Do I have it straight?"

Chris shrugged. "I don't know." The enormity of what could have happened hit him suddenly. He found that his knees were shaking. "I should have been able to identify it, I guess. . . . Thank God you got us word. . . ."

"I had something else on my mind this morning, but it was my fault."

Chris strongly suspected that his own billet had been on the skipper's mind, but remained silent.

The skipper looked away. "It was my fault," he repeated. "And I'm making a report. I'm recommending that they keep you flying if they have to fire half the junior officers in the squadron."

Chris looked past the idle props. Foster and Young were passing down the line of planes, very close together. They walked slowly, but there was no weariness in their motion. Young said something; Foster threw his head back and laughed, punching the air-crewman's arm lightly.

To Chris, who could not have dredged a laugh from his whole racked system, they looked as if they could have taken off on another flight without so much as a cup of coffee.

He glanced into the skipper's eyes. "No, Skipper. I think not," he said, working his shoulder muscles. "No. . . . Find me a desk on the wing staff, maybe, but flying's getting to be for the birds."

In a few hours he would be home. . . . A hot shower, a Manhattan with Nita, an evening of TV, perhaps. The prospect cheered him and he came up with a grin.

"For the birds," he said. "And the tigers. . . ." ●

Blue Notes

*Some assorted background facts
on who wrote what, and why, in
this issue of Bluebook*

Readers of modern aviation fiction will need no introduction to Hank Searls, author of "Last Flight," which appears on pages 12-13. Hank is the guy who wrote the very popular "The Big X," a selection of The Readers Digest Condensed Book Club, and the even more widely-read "The Crowded Sky," chosen by The Literary Guild. In a word, Hank knows his flying, and that's all we have to say about "Last Flight" or its creator. After all, you want *cream* on your strawberries?