

Content



Jerri Ellen





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CONTENT

By Jeri Ellen

PRELUDE:

Tanaka Shipyards, Sasebo, Hokkaido, Japan.

The construction superintendent stood on the port wing of the tankers' bridge. The sun was shining and there was a slight breeze blowing. It wouldn't be long before the September rains would come. He had always preferred the bright, warm summers.

The five-day sea trial of the refurbished tanker Eastern Star around the Japanese home islands had been completed. Aside from a few minor problems that could be expected on the ships' trial run everything had gone well. The weather had co-operated too making the five days at sea very pleasant.

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The all Japanese crew had put the ship thru her paces and except for the captain had now disembarked. Representatives of a Middle Eastern investment group and the new crew were due shortly. When their business was finished he could go home.

The superintendent was happy to sign off on this project. It was a relief to him that it was finally finished. He was looking forward to having two weeks off with his family before starting the next job.

With a job like he had, there had been few times like this that offered a break between the end of one job and starting the next. Usually the company's management had scheduled their work much closer together leaving little free time in between jobs for the employees to enjoy a brief respite.

At home he would have an ice-cold glass of Kirin beer, maybe even two if his wife wasn't home yet. His health was still good but he had cut back on his beer drinking on the advice of his doctor.

He had quit smoking too but now he could use a couple of drags as he waited for the sign off to the ships new owners to take place. Today was one of the few times in his career that he found himself getting a little impatient as he waited for the new owners to arrive and take possession of the refurbished ship.

The next job was going to take less than a year but the one after that was going to be about a year and a half maybe even two years. Those two would be his last. He was going to put in for his retirement. He then would have more time for his wife and their grandchildren.

His father had started with the company just after the end of World War Two. He had started with the company working summers while he was still in high

school and then all the way thru college. After graduation with his training in marine engineering he was hired right away.

For some unknown reason his boss had been pushing completion of this project more than others. It would be interesting to know just what was behind this push on what seemingly had been a project that was not much different than so many others.

The early completion bonuses would be most welcome by him and his crew. He had no doubt the single men would be leaving most of theirs with the girls and bartenders in the city while the married men would be checking with their wives to see how best to spend it.

He wondered idly why this investment group had spent the money to save this aged tanker from the scrap heap and refurbished her for sea duty. To him it seemed to be a waste of money.

There were plenty of ships available in this size that were in much better shape than this one was when they took it in for refurbishment. Their cost, depending on the ships size and capacity wasn't a whole lot more than the total cost of this rebuilding job.

It seemed to be a rather strange way to be doing business that's for sure. Maybe the investment group had different plans for this tanker other than transporting crude oil to refineries. If that were so just what purpose would this ship serve?

But then it wasn't his place to question the client about that any more than it was to question why a special section in the middle of the tanker had been constructed.

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In all his years he had never seen this type of thing. It was a first for him and that was what made this job more memorable than any of the others he had worked on.

The special section was sealed off from the rest of the tanks that would hold crude oil. He couldn't imagine for what purpose, other than some special cargo, it had been constructed, especially with a ship that was this old.

Once again it wasn't his business to know. Giving the client what they wanted, on time, and keeping the project under budget was all that mattered. That's what they were all getting paid to do and it was finally done. All that remained was to get payment and turn the ship over to the new owner's crew.

Shortly a limousine followed by a charter bus drove down the pier and stopped near the gangplank just behind his company's limo. He watched as several well-dressed men in suits got out of the limousine and walked up the gangplank.

Turning around the superintendent walked back inside to the ships' radio room. He, his boss, and the Japanese captain were soon joined by the men in suits. His boss made the introductions and the men shook hands all around.

The Japanese captain handed one of the men a notebook contained the results of all the tests that he and his crew had put the ship thru during the five-day sea trial. With no complications the captain knew he was handing over a well-built ship that was ready for sea duty.

The man thanked him and set the book aside. The captain then shook hands with all the men and left the radio room leaving them to finish their business of

transferring the funds for payment of the refurbished vessel.

One of the men in suits opened a laptop and plugged the connection in the control board. After entering a series of numbers and a password the superintendent's boss oversaw the transfer of money from the Middle Eastern investment group to the Tanaka Shipyard's account.

When the transaction was completed the men shook hands with each other and then they all left the radio room. Both parties felt a sense of relief as they headed for their respective limousines. The men in suits got their rebuilt ship and the shipyard got paid for their work.

After they walked off of the gangplank the new crew of the Eastern Star began boarding the ship. The construction superintendent was surprised that the crew was so small consisting of only six crewmen, two officers, and the radio operator.

In the back of his company's limo the construction superintendent relaxed as the lines of the tanker were being cast off. Now that ship was no longer his responsibility.

He was glad the job was completed, and he felt very much relieved that the transfer had gone so smoothly. As the limo pulled out of the shipyard and into traffic he smiled to himself as he looked forward to his time off.

He knew his boss and the owner were pleased not only with the quality of the work they had done but that it had been completed ahead of schedule. He

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would now have two weeks off to enjoy being with his family.

Aboard the Easter Star the captain looked ahead as the last of the lines were cast off and the tanker put out to sea. It would be smooth sailing as they were going to have good weather for their trip. He was glad to be underway. Sailors belong on ships and ships belong at sea was the old adage.

Everything was going according to plan. In two and a half days they would be in Wonsan, North Korea to pick up the top secret cargo that was going to be placed in the special compartment that had been constructed in the center of the ship.

The weather had been quite pleasant. There was seldom even a slight breeze. At 14 knots the tanker had made good time. The captain of the Easter Star was happy that they had arrived at Wonsan, North Korea earlier than they had expected.

He had no doubt that the North Koreans would be happy to get rid of the cargo as well. They were going to be paid very well for this single item as well as for keeping it a secret from the outside world.

As the ship's lines were being tied up to the pier the captain noticed that along both sides of the pier was a contingent of grim faced North Korean soldiers for security. This was no time to be taking any chances for either a disruption of their schedule or word of their cargo to leak out.

A flat bed semi with its' canvas covered load and a large mobile crane were waiting on the side of the pier next to the ship. When the word to begin was given the crew could start loading the cargo.

When the ship's gangplank was lowered a group of technicians left their bus. They immediately went below decks to the special compartment that had been built in the center of the ship where they would make preparations for the cargo to be loaded and then armed for use.

After dark the canvas cover over the flatbed trailer was removed. The cable from the crane was hooked to the top of the black steel cylinder. The cylinder was then lifted off of the trailer. Slowly the cylinder was swung over the center of the tanker and then lowered inside the compartment.

When the cylinder was secured below the truck and crane left the pier. Below decks the technicians got to work. When everything was completed they left the ship. They and the contingent of soldiers boarded their buses and left the area. The lines were cast off and once again the Eastern Star put out to sea.

Standing in the radio room the captain was happy as he transmitted the news of their departure from North Korea. Everything had gone according to their plan.

They were ahead of schedule and though the trip to Indonesia would be longer the weather forecast was still very favorable so once again they would be able to make good time.

The trip was uneventful. The Eastern Star took on 92,000 barrels of crude oil. As they left Indonesia the captain radioed their departure. They were still ahead of schedule. He knew his superiors were pleased that

everything so far had been completed without any complications.

From Indonesia the tanker, weighted down with its cargo of crude oil, would make a slower voyage to their final destination, the Panama Canal. At the canal there would not be more than a 24 hour wait to enter the locks according to their schedule.

Now there was no real hurry. The weather forecast was for calm seas. All systems on board the ship were operating smoothly. Everything was in place. They still had a margin of about 36 hours or so in the event of any unforeseen occurrence.

At this juncture the captain of the Eastern Star couldn't begin to imagine whatever that might be. He felt certain that there would be nothing that was going to stop them now from the completion of their mission.

A moderate sized storm had crossed the course that they would be taking so the weather would be fair for the rest of the trip making the long voyage a little more pleasant. The crew could relax. Everyone had done their jobs. There was no reason for concern on anyone's part.

If everything continued to go as they had planned they would be in the locks or in Lake Gatun on September 11. It would be a fitting date. One the world was going to remember again. Allah be praised!

CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia.

The young ensign collected the papers in front of him and stapled them together. He was happy that the CIA was his first assignment out of the academy. Intel-

ligence was to be the focal point of his career and he had been surprised in getting the CIA as his first duty assignment.

He got up from his desk, walked out of the office and down the hall to another office. Before entering the office he straightened his tie with one hand. At the front desk he stopped and cleared his throat.

"Is the commander in?" he asked.

"Yes ensign. You may go right in," replied the receptionist.

"Good morning sir I believe I have found something that may interest you,"

The commander looked up from his computer screen at the young Ensign standing before him.

"What is it?" he inquired.

"Over the last three months there has been a moderate increase involving stock trades in shipping companies. There weren't many trades at first, just a few here and there but in the last week or so the volume is up almost ten times. There has been quite a lot of money invested in these companies in that short period of time,"

"Most of the investments have come from Middle Eastern, Soviet, and North Korean investment firms, hedge funds, the Asian market and holding companies. I know this is a long way from potential terrorist activities but judging from where the money is coming from I thought I should bring it to your attention."