

AGAINST ALL ENEMIES by Thomas M. Wing EXCERPT

After a brief stop in the wardroom for a fresh cup of tea, Bill walked into the dim, blue-lit Combat Information Center and took his seat.

The brown padded leather chair, like the one on the bridge, sat mounted on a cylindrical steel pedestal right next to the Tactical Action Officer. As the only person aboard with the authority to fire weapons in the absence of the captain, the TAO was responsible for defending the ship.

The amber glow of electronic displays showed the status of sensors and weapon systems, radio circuits being listened to, callsigns of other ships in the strike group, and a plethora of other information of use to those who stood watch there day and night. The men and women at various computer consoles monitored radars and other sensors to track nearly every man-made object that floated or flew around the ship. Their headsets kept them in constant quiet communication. The low hum of cooling fan motors hovered just below the threshold of hearing, and the smell of warm electronics competed with the scents from a dozen or so cups of coffee set in cup holders throughout the space. The CIC Watch Officer — the CICWO, or “sick-wo” as the sailors pronounced it — supervised it all and ensured the TAO and CO had all the information they needed.

In front of Bill, three Large Screen Displays showed what the ship’s own radars saw, augmented with surface and air contacts that came in via computer data links. The latter currently included tracks from the MQ-4C Triton Unmanned Aerial Vehicle in an orbit over the central South China Sea. The Triton could remain on station for up to thirty hours, its radar and other sensors identifying, tracking, and reporting surface vessels over nearly the entire South China Sea. Augmenting the Triton’s data was an intelligence broadcast that showed all the information that national intelligence assets had on the various colored air and surface tracks.

Nicholas's own sensors were limited by the fact they were only a few dozen feet above the sea surface and exclusively detected things in their line of sight and a little beyond. For floating objects, that meant perhaps twenty-five miles. But the Triton orbited above 40,000 feet, giving it a detection range far beyond *Nicholas's* relatively short radar horizon.

On the counter at which Bill and the TAO sat were two sets of three computer monitors, fed by both the ship's combat system and the desktop computers mounted on the deck at their feet. Bill had Third and Seventh Fleet, and the Carrier Strike Group command chat windows open, as well as his Navy e-mail and message traffic.

As he sat down, the TAO on watch, Lieutenant Commander Andy Pettibone, looked up. "Morning, Captain."

Pettibone was the ship's Combat Systems Officer. He took his job very seriously. Though not a "screamer", in the eleven months he'd been aboard he'd displayed little sense of humor on duty or off. Today his face carried an even more serious mien, eyes roaming rhythmically from his computer to the systems' status displays above his head, then to the large screen displays.

"Anything change, Andy?"

Pettibone leaned back and stretched, arms behind his head. "Not really, sir. Got yesterday's daily activity summary from PACFLT. Last night's surveillance flight along the north China coast got escorted a bit too closely. They narrowly avoided a mid-air collision. Looks like it got pretty hairy for a couple of minutes. Someone in Beijing must've thought better of it, 'cause the Chinese fighters suddenly pulled back a few hundred yards, like normal. But no change to the Rules of Engagement."

Bill grimaced as he donned his headphones. "One of these days, somebody's going to make a mistake and someone else will take a missile in the face." He sat back, took a deep breath, and faked a yawn. "But it didn't happen, so let's get on with our job. No ROE change is good. What's the count to liberty call in Singapore?"

Pettibone gave him a rare smile. "Nine days, sir. Ops keeps trying to tell me I've got duty the first two days, and I keep telling him what he can do with his duty." Pettibone's wife would meet the ship in Singapore, so he planned to take leave.

Bill grinned and sipped his tea. Idly, he rubbed the tip of his nose.

Yes, life is good.

"Vampire! Vampire! Bearing one two six. I say again, vampire bearing one two six."