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Win, Lose or Die

Written by John Gardner

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WIN, LOSE OR DIE

John Gardner



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Sleep, for Bond, was always shallow: it came with the job. When he woke it was suddenly, his eyes snapping open, all senses alert, ears straining for sounds. Certainly there was a soft noise, a scraping coming from below, near the french windows.

He quietly unzipped himself from the sleeping-bag, rolled away and stood up, Browning out and ready with the safety off – all in a matter of thirty or forty seconds. Crouching, he peered over the parapet at the top of the open steps leading to the rear terrace.

The moon was sinking, but still gave him enough light to see the figure, kneeling and examining the lock.

Hardly breathing, he inched towards the steps. Below, the figure rose and he could see the intruder's shape and form coming up from the kneeling position, straightening and turning carefully. There was a weapon in the crouching figure's hand, an automatic pistol, held with both hands, as the person moved with the proficiency of an expert.

As she turned, Bond stood up, arms stretched out, grasping his own pistol, feet apart in the classic stance.

'Don't even think about it, Beatrice,' he said loudly. 'Just drop the gun and kick it away.'

The figure below turned sharply, giving a sudden little gasp.

'Do as I say! Now!' Bond commanded.

WIN IN THE GULF

An hour before dawn, in the Straits of Hormuz: a dark and dangerous time and place. The air was a chill mixture of sea and sweetness, giving no hint of the heat that would be generated once day took over. The massive Japanese-registered oil-tanker *Son of Takashani* slowly ploughed its way towards the Gulf of Oman and comparative safety. Its vast deck rolled gently; the tall superstructure, rising from the stern, looking like a block of flats, appeared to tip more violently than the deck because of its height.

Every officer and rating aboard could feel a tightening of the stomach muscles, the sense of urgency, and the absurd detached feeling which people experience when they know any minute could bring death by fire, explosion, bullet or water. Many had died of these along this stretch of water over the years of the Gulf War.

Both the Americans and British had helped by minesweeping, and escorting the oil-tankers. But, on this occasion, the *Son of Takashani* had been forced to make the trip without the assistance of either the American Fleet or the Royal Navy. The Japanese did, however, take precautions.

Armed men were on the bridge, at vantage points in the superstructure, and even on the deck. Some were always there during the journey from the Iraqi oil-fields through the Gulf, but, at the hours of dawn and dusk, extra hands with weapons kept a look-out. These were the hours of high risk.

On the bridge the men carried small, lethal Beretta 12s – the model S versions, with metal stocks and a cyclic rate of 500-plus rounds per minute. The heavier General Purpose Machine-Guns were set on swivel mountings: two to port, and another pair to starboard on the deck; while four more were set in the superstructure, giving a wide field of fire, both fore and aft. These were all .50 calibre Browning M2 HBs, unequalled in their class for both range and firepower, their ammunition belts sprinkled with tracer rounds.

The *Son of Takashani*'s Master, Kiyoshi Akashi, never missed being on the bridge at this time of day. He rather enjoyed the sense of tension and danger.

The radar on the bridge searched the sea for other shipping, and the air for any hostile planes. They could do little against mines, but at least they stood a chance if the so-called Iranian Revolutionaries made one of their hit and run attacks in small motorised craft.

Reaching upwards, this same radar could pinpoint aircraft up to ten miles away at around 10,000 feet. Above that height the invisible beams could not reach, but aircraft attacks in the Gulf usually came in low. It was unfortunate that, on this particular dawn, the attack would come from the unexpected height of around 25,000 feet.

Unknown to the officers and men of the *Son of Takashani*, a giant C-130 Hercules transport aircraft was flying through the dawn sky some fifty miles east of them. The Hercules was painted an overall matt black, and bore no markings: neither serial numbers nor insignia. On the flight deck the navigator gave a terse instruction to the pilot. The seven turbo-prop engines were throttled back, and the 136,000 pounds of aeroplane began to descend from 30,000 to 25,000 feet.

The navigator put a hand to his earphones, straining to hear the constant voice which came in on their frequency, giving vital information on wind strength and direction through the various heights right down to sea level. These reports came via

an ocean-going yacht equipped with the most sophisticated meteorological equipment and radio as the vessel cruised off Khaimah, on the coast of the United Arab Emirates. The data was rapidly fed into the navigator's computer. Seconds later he was able to tell the pilot the exact points at which they should release their load. 'Exactly 25,000 feet. First stick fifteen miles behind target; second stick two points to starboard, third stick four points port.'

The pilot acknowledged, levelled out at 25,000 feet and repeated the instructions to the jumpmaster, who, like the twenty other men in the cargo bay, wore a woollen helmet, goggles and an oxygen mask. A throat mike carried his query to the pilot – 'How long, skipper?'

'Five minutes. Opening cargo doors now.' There was a whine of hydraulics as the doors slid back and the loading bay went down like a drawbridge. At 25,000 feet dawn had already broken, the pink pearly light visible behind them. Below there was still darkness, while at the Hercules' altitude it was freezing cold in the thin air. Every man in the cargo bay had any bare flesh covered against frostbite.

The jumpmaster gave a signal, and the twenty men who sat, facing inwards on the hard metal benches stood up, responding to hand signals. They were dressed in black: black jump suits, boots, gloves, helmets and the oxygen masks and goggles, together with an assortment of weaponry, including AK47 Kalashnikovs, Galil automatic assault rifles, and Skorpion sub-machine-guns; grenades and, in two cases, clumsy grenade launchers, all firmly clamped onto black webbing covering their chests.

Above them, running the length of the cargo bay, what looked like huge black bats hung from oiled tracks which ended twenty feet short of the cargo ramp. The men now formed a line under these sinister shapes, which were large hang-gliders, unpowered and with near-rigid wings made of strengthened canvas, impregnated with a high-powered, long-lasting solution of de-icing fluid. From each set of wings hung a light alloy framework

onto which each man now strapped himself, using a harness specially designed with a quick release lock, similar to those used on parachutes. The harnesses had been adjusted before take-off, and allowed for interchangeable hanging and sitting positions on the light frameworks.

These men had rehearsed and practised with the craft over deserts and lonely tracts of land in all kinds and conditions of weather. They were a hand-picked and well-trained band who could, after their six months of hard testing, launch themselves from heights of 25,000 feet and spiral down to land within a carefully marked and prescribed area.

The cargo bay was filled with noise, the clamour of the engines and the rush of air filtering back through the open doors. Instructions were reduced to hand signals and the jumpmaster banged his right palm flat on his chest, then lifted both hands, spreading the fingers wide – ten; then five; followed by another five.

The men, standing in the framework of their hang-gliders, bent their heads to the small altimeters attached to their right wrists, setting them to 25,000 feet. In a minute or so their lives would depend on the accurate settings above sea level. Most of them also glanced at the small compasses attached to their left wrists. These two simple instruments were the only devices which would assist them in the long glide down to the sea, and in what they had dubbed Operation WIN.

‘Prepare for stick one.’ The pilot’s voice filled the jumpmaster’s ears, and he signalled for the first group of ten men to stand by. They walked steadily towards the open doors at the rear of the aircraft, their gliders moving above them smoothly on the twin tracks of rail.

‘All sticks stand by,’ the pilot said. Again the jumpmaster signalled and the further two groups of five men took up their places.

‘Stand by stick one. Stick one go.’

The jumpmaster’s hand came down and the first ten men launched themselves, at ten-second intervals, into space.

The Hercules banked sharply to the left.

'Stand by stick two. Stick two go.'

Another signal and five men glided down towards the film of darkness below as the Hercules banked right. Stick three went out smack on time, at the jumpmaster's signal. The cargo doors closed as the aircraft turned and climbed steeply, heading back to its secret home.

The hang-gliders fell away, dropping for 1,000 feet or so until the wings bit into the air, and their pilots shifted their bodies so that they slowed, made contact with other members of their particular stick, then, in a loose formation, began to glide towards the first streaks of dawn below. The men's bodies seemed to hang motionless in the thin air, and, during the early stages of the descent they were all forced to bring up their gloved hands to wipe the ice and rime from their goggles, altimeters and compasses. It was an exhilarating business, but they were hardly aware of the motion until they passed through the 10,000-foot level. There, the air thickened and they all had greater control of their flimsy craft.

The *Son of Takashani* had no warning. True, the radar operator caught a sprinkle of minute blips on his screen, but they meant nothing to him. Birds possibly, or specks of dust or static on the screen.

At exactly 1,000 feet above the tanker, the three groups brought their hang-gliders into the attack position. The two men armed with grenade launchers were well to the rear of the tanker, hanging in their harnesses, hands free to manipulate weapons. Two grenades arched from the air, one smashing its way into the bridge, the other exploding further down the superstructure, leaving a gaping hole.

The explosion on the bridge was like a sudden blast of white hot flame. Everyone died instantly.

Seaman Ogawa, one of the gunners on the superstructure, could not believe his eyes and ears. He heard the double explosion, felt the ship quake under him, then saw, for'ard, two

creatures that looked like prehistoric birds approaching the bows. Flame leaped from them and he saw one of the deck gun crews scattered like a nest of mice hit by a shotgun blast. He squeezed the Browning's trigger almost as a reflex action, and his mind registered surprise as he watched the two incoming birds turn into mangled flesh, blood and shattered canvas as the heavy bullets tore them apart.

The two men who had started everything, exactly as planned, by releasing the grenades had also come to grief. Once they had established hits on the superstructure, both men dropped the launchers into the sea and, swinging violently, unclipped Skorpcion sub-machine-guns from their chests. In a matter of seconds they were streaking down towards the *Son of Takashani's* stern, manoeuvring their gliders, pulling them into a more shallow and slower descent, ready to release their harness the moment their rubber-soled boots struck the deck. They were only some fifty feet away from landing when a short burst of fire from another part of the superstructure took off the legs of the man on the right. He sagged in his harness and the wings above him tilted so that the entire glider side-slipped into his partner.

This second man was thrown to one side, knocked unconscious, swinging out of control so that the angle of attack of his wings increased sharply, and he smashed into the stern of the tanker.

The initial shock and surprise were gone in less than two minutes. The gunners who were left, both on deck and in the battered superstructure, were now assessing the situation. The drills that the Master had insisted on paid off. None of the crew of the *Son of Takashani* showed regard for his own safety. Several big hang-gliders, spitting flame and death, circled the ship, looking for openings to land on the main deck while desperately trying to maintain height. Two swooped in from starboard, knocking out another heavy machine-gun crew as they came, only to be mangled and ripped apart from fire directed from the

superstructure. Four men actually managed to land safely on the stern, seeking what cover they could abaft the superstructure, unhooking grenades from their webbing equipment. Three more died as they rode the air down onto the port side.

Both the gun crews for'ard on the deck were now out of action, and, with a withering fire, another pair of hang-gliders reached the deck. The remainder were now either blasted out of the sky, or killed by smashing into the ship's hull. The seven who remained fought on.

Smoke grenades gave some cover to the trio who had landed on the for'ard part of the deck, while the four men who were attacking from the stem managed, with grenade and gun, to gain a foothold in the superstructure itself.

The fighting lasted for almost half an hour. At the end of that bloody dawn there were several bodies of the glider-borne force strewn around the tanker, eighteen officers and men of the *Son of Takashani* were dead, and a further seven wounded.

The radio officer had continued to put out a distress signal throughout the whole battle, but it was an hour later before a US Navy frigate arrived at the scene, and by then, the Japanese, being an orderly people, had tipped the bodies of the attackers overboard, washed down the deck, seen to their own dead and wounded, and reorganised the tanker so that it could continue on its way.

The most senior officer, twenty-two-year-old Zenzo Yamada, who had taken the place of the dead Master, was able to give the American frigate's captain a graphic, blow by blow account of the action. The American officer was perturbed by the lack of evidence left by the Japanese crew, but Yamada did not appear to be worried. 'I helped one of them die,' he told the frigate's captain.

'How?' The US officer was thirty years of age, a Lieutenant-Commander called Ed Potts, and a man who appreciated order himself.

'He was dying. I finish him off.'

The American nodded. 'He say anything?'

'One word, only.'

'Yeah?'

'He say, *win*.' The Japanese officer laughed at the thought.

'Win, huh? Well, he didn't, did he?'

'Man not win. He lost, and died.' The Japanese officer laughed again, as though it was the funniest thing he had heard in a long time.

Later, others did not find it so amusing.