

Chapter 2: A Drill Cut Short

As captain of the Israeli Navy's mightiest vessel, Daniel Zion rarely felt powerless and anxious. But something sinister was astir and neither his rank nor his formidable submarine could help him. Why had Admiral Rafi Levy suddenly ordered him to cut the submarine drill short and return to shore after just ten days?

This unexpected command came on the heels of two other surprising developments over the last eight days, both of which Daniel had learned from the daily updates sent to his submarine by headquarters. Eight days ago, naval command relayed to Daniel what international news channels were all reporting: that the Prime Minister of Israel had been hospitalized overseas. Then, yesterday, naval command sent him an update with another alarming piece of headline news: Iran had declared that its nuclear program was now safely hidden in Fordo and therefore impervious to any Israeli military attack.

Was there some kind of connection between these dramatic developments from the last eight days and Admiral Levy's abrupt order to return to shore briefly before a major mission? Daniel searched his commanding officer's voice for a clue. But his deep and perfectly calm voice sounded almost purposely indecipherable.

"We need to resupply the Dolphin. And we'll be hosting a four-hour picnic for the entire crew and their family and friends," Rafi said. "We've arranged quite the feast for everyone. It's the least we can do, since your next mission will commence immediately after that."

Thus, even though Daniel controlled the Dolphin submarine, equipped with eight torpedoes and ten Popeye Turbo cruise missiles that could deliver a 200-kiloton nuclear warhead 1,500 kilometers away, the captain could do nothing in the face of Rafi's command. In a simple, two-minute exchange over the submarine's high frequency radio, the admiral had summarily revoked the two-week shore leave that Daniel and his crew had been impatiently awaiting for the last ten days.

"Sir, with so little notice, we may be the only people at the picnic."

"I realize that. It was a spontaneous decision in naval command. We just have to invite everyone and hope for a good turnout," Rafi said. "Not many people can change their schedule and show up with just two hours' notice. But we should at least make the effort. So I'll need contact details for any additional guests the crew may want to invite, to increase the odds that someone will be waiting for them upon arrival."

"Yes, Sir. I'll speak to them about it."

Daniel earned his rank in part thanks to his keen instincts, and there was definitely something inauspicious about the hasty change of plans. "What mission could be so urgent that our naval exercises and two-week shore leave had to be abruptly cancelled?" he wondered to himself.

The captain knew from experience that insufficient breaks from the submarine could set his men off. Physical and mental pressure – from thousands of kilometers of water traveled in a small, enclosed space – tended to shorten the crew's temper, lower its morale, and decrease its efficacy. With enough uninterrupted time in a submarine, things had a way of deteriorating quickly and dangerously. But his superiors knew this as well as Daniel did. So there must have been a good reason for them to do this.

“Maybe this is a picnic before doomsday,” he joked darkly to himself. “One last taste of heaven before hell.” In the absence of facts, speculation could easily take over, and Daniel didn’t have the whole picture – just an uneasy gut. Even his superiors didn’t have the whole picture. Only God and History had that.

Daniel and the other 34 men who manned the Dolphin were a motley collection of extraordinary individuals whose appearance could not have looked any more ordinary. Each was of slight build and no taller than 5’10 inches for easier maneuvering within the cramped quarters of their deadly stealth ship. None of the sailors seemed associated with a vessel that could kill 20 million people in under an hour. And yet they were collectively responsible for the fate of an underwater craft with enough destructive power to vaporize entire countries.

Each of the men under Daniel’s command was certain to feel crestfallen upon hearing about the change in plan and would be looking to the captain for assurance. Daniel resolved to do everything he could to rally his men through the disappointment. Whatever baleful challenges awaited the crew on their next mission, their responses to them would have to be flawless, Daniel thought to himself, so their emotions had to be carefully managed along the way.

As the captain once remarked to an old university classmate, “Each of my men is like a musician in an orchestra that I must conduct perfectly. One false note and the entire performance can be killed – literally – when the symphony is at sea.” What he hadn’t revealed to his friend, however, was how responsible he felt for the equally complicated, non-military life that continued in each crewmember’s absence.

As Daniel delivered the new orders from headquarters, he tried his utmost to ignore the dejected reactions of his men. Experience had taught the captain the power of concentration: With enough intensity, mental focus could quickly divert the mind from the upsetting to the practical. The sooner his commands moved on from the disappointing news, the more likely he was to deflect the crew from their most natural and immediate reaction to it.

“Naval command is already inviting each of your family members, but if there’s anyone else you want them to invite, I need to know right away,” he explained over the public announcement system. “The sooner I have an updated list, the more notice your additional guests will have, and the more likely they are to show up in time.”

It wasn’t until the 1,700-ton Dolphin was finally advancing towards the Haifa shore that Daniel allowed himself to relax a little. He relished the sight of the submarine’s 60-meter-long, aqua-green hull glistening under the splashing water of the Mediterranean Sea. Uplifted by the crews’ cheers at the sight of the assembled guests in the distance, Daniel finally surrendered to the giddy anticipation of reuniting with his family. No matter how many times he and the other submariners had experienced a homecoming, those final few hundred meters before arrival were always exhilarating.

Daniel wondered who from his world would show up on such short notice. He was fairly certain that his wife Sivan would be there with their youngest daughter, Esty. He couldn’t wait to see the four-year old, who was turning into quite the character. “All sweetness and light,” he chuckled to himself, “with her adorable manipulations!” His mood dimmed slightly as he predicted that his two older children would probably be unable to leave their high school classes.

Standing atop the mast, Daniel peered out across the water at the shady lawn near the

base, trying to spot Sivan among the distant faces of the gathered guests. Within a few minutes, he could finally make out her dark, wavy hair and the outline of her figure. She crouched down next to little Esty so that she could point out the part of the submarine where she might be able to spot Daddy. They waved to him, not knowing for sure that it was he on the mast. He waved back and breathed a long sigh of relief. “I wouldn’t trade the next four hours for anything,” he thought to himself.

Protocol requires that the captain disembark first from the submarine, in symbolic homage to his rank and because there was often a military or political VIP waiting to greet him on land. So once the Dolphin was moored to the pier and placed into a safe standby mode, Daniel was the first of the submariners to climb down the accommodation ladder from the top of the hoisted mast to the land base. The other 34 sailors were standing on the outer deck, queued up and waiting for permission to go ashore. At the head of the line was the deputy captain, Yisrael, who stood at the top of the accommodation ladder, waiting for Daniel to finish his exchange with Admiral Levy so that he could go down next.

As each man descended from the final rung to the safe and sturdy pier beneath his feet, he experienced a joy that only a submariner could truly grasp – elated by the endless room to run around and move freely without calculation or contortion. The guests who had gathered on such short notice to visit their loved ones were buoyed by seeing the crewmembers relish the mundane pleasures that most people take for granted. For those submariners lucky enough to see visitors waiting for them on the fenced lawn nearby, their next steps, after respectfully greeting the admiral, quickened to a restrained run ending in a joyful embrace.

On the far end of the lawn, facing the sea, were several long picnic tables full of delicious food for the guests and – most importantly – the submariners who hadn’t tasted such delights in weeks and were expecting to be deprived for many more weeks. Just as they reveled in the pleasure of unimpeded movement, the men would equally savor the gustatory gratification of fresh food. The cuisines waiting for them were as diverse as the crew: Indian, Vietnamese, Persian, Ethiopian, and Druze dishes, along with an abundant variety of Middle Eastern dips and meats, salads chopped from vegetables fresh from local farms, and plenty of chocolate desserts and fresh fruits. The men would soon be gorging greedily and guiltlessly, trying to compensate for the ten days of culinary mediocrity that had just ended and the even longer period ahead. The delectable spread would also ensure that some mingling among the crew and their guests would take place, even as each sailor re-connected with his own private world for a precious few hours.

The younger, unmarried submariners would be visited by parents, siblings, girlfriends, and friends. The senior officers would be greeted mostly by their wives, and in some cases also by their children. The six crewmembers whose family and friends were too far away to visit on such short notice would use the time to call their loved ones by phone, kick around a soccer ball, have a beer, and indulge in some truly carefree relaxation.