

Two Commanders. Father and son. Forty years apart.
Bound by the most daring mission ever taken by America's Silent Service.

SEA OF BETRAYAL



MITCHELL SAM ROSSI

SEA OF BETRAYAL

MITCHELL SAM ROSSI

This novel is a work of fiction. I have tried to be as accurate as possible with historic events, times, and locations. However, as is the nature of fiction, some fanciful license was employed.

The characters and the story are solely creations of the mind. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. This is a revised and updated version of the author's story, *Truk Lagoon*.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, except for the purpose of review and/or reference, without explicit permission in writing from the publisher.

copyright © 2024 by Mitchell Sam Rossi

All rights reserved.

Cover artwork design copyright © 2024 by Sleepy Fox Studio
sleepyfoxstudio.net

Published by Paper Angel Press
paperangelpress.com

SAMPLE CHAPTER

3

FALO ISLAND, TRUK LAGOON, 1986

CAUGHT IN THE LAST RAYS of sunlight, the scuba diver's hazy silhouette danced across the twisted deck of the massive shipwreck. Although the waters of the tropical lagoon were renowned for their clarity, the physics of light and color painted the aquatic world a willowy shade of indigo at one hundred and forty feet below the surface.

Reaching the freighter's superstructure, the diver grasped the remnants of a handrail that once encircled the pilothouse. He pulled himself, hand-over-hand, to the forward windows. The glass that once protected the crew from the elements was gone, although he could not tell if it had shattered during the American's attack or if the windows had fallen after decades of rust and decay.

With a flick of his fins, he slipped into the wreck that, forty-two years before, had been his sanctuary in a war-torn world. He had spent three years crisscrossing the South Pacific aboard the *Kuma Maru*, but he could never have imagined their reunion would be at the bottom of the sea.

Today was the sixth time he had entered the freighter in the last week. The sixth time he had motored across the lagoon, dropped his anchor off

Sea of Betrayal

the sun-bleached islet, lowered his extra air tanks and plunged into the depths. But with each dive, he sensed he was getting closer to his prize.

Inside the bridge, the exhaust bubbles from his regulator crashed into the ceiling and, forced by the ship's odd list to starboard, skated like droplets of quicksilver into the upper corner. From there, they escaped through a jagged crack in the bulkhead.

The diver removed the Dacor diving lamp from his waistbelt and swept the expansive room with its light. The beam revealed the tapestry of life that had slowly transformed the wartime relic into an ethereal garden.

Orange sponges and purple corals dappled every surface while shy damsels and rainbow parrotfish peeked out from a myriad of cracks and crevices. The diver glanced at the cabinets that once held logbooks and binoculars, expecting to see the resident school of silvery-green jackfish that had greeted him before. But they were gone, and he wondered if his comings and goings had driven them to seek quieter lodgings.

The diver turned his light to the chart table still dominating the bridge's center. From one of its cubbyholes, a speckled green moray eel emerged. Mouthing the water as it breathed, it flashed impressively sharp teeth. The display was daring the diver to swim closer.

At the bottom of the table, just beneath the eel's lair, a human skull rested half-buried in the thick, reddish-brown silt. Where eyes had been, dark shadows stared at the intruder.

With deep reverence, the diver bowed his head. "Shimizu-san, yurushi te kudasai," he said into his regulator. It was a simple request, and he asked it of his fallen shipmate each time he entered the wreck.

He could see Lieutenant Shimizu again as he hunched over the chart table. The young junior officer with gaunt shoulders and round spectacles tucked behind his ears, his angular face etched with intensity as he calculated the best route across the southern sea.

In truth, the diver was unsure if the bones at the foot of the table were those of Shimizu. It could be Lt. Itomura or Second Officer Yokayama. It did not matter. His plea for forgiveness was meant for all of them, for all the men he had mistakenly outlived.

At the back of the pilothouse, the diver found the tied end of the yellow safety rope he had secured the day before. After so many years, and with the devastation inflicted by the American torpedoes, he was

not as sure about the ship's twisted interior. Thus, the rope was his ball of thread, his lead through the twisted catacomb of steel and iron just as Theseus had used to escape the Minotaur's labyrinth.

Entering the passage, he left the last remnants of sunlight behind and entered a world of complete darkness. Here, his dive lamp became as essential as the air in his tanks.

With his hand on the rope, the diver retraced the path he had taken the day before. Gliding along the starboard bulkhead, he carefully avoided its serrated edge that opened like a monstrous gaping jaw. He could not tell if the ruptured metal was the result of a direct hit or from a secondary explosion triggered by the ammunition stores in the midship hold. Seeing the blast had torn so quickly through the heavy superstructure, he wondered how many men were obliterated by its flash of heat and flames.

He passed the officers' quarters. His cabin was two decks below as he had yet to earn the captain's permission to move upward. Ironically, Captain Kiyohara's animosity toward him had possibly saved his life.

Finally, he reached the stairway that led to the lower decks. As the diver descended into the passage, the water seemed to abate, and he saw his crew again. Ghosts in their dark blue uniforms rushed in a frenzy along the steep ladders, their voices high with excitement and fear as alarms blared and emergency lights flashed.

At the bottom of the stairs, he carefully made his way through a web of fallen cables and conduit lines drooping across the doorway. It was as if a giant sea spider had set its trap and was now waiting in the gloom. He continued deeper into the ship.

During his first dives, he had entered the forward hold, where he found the three-man HA-GO combat tank he remembered waiting to be off-loaded. Like everything else in the freighter's belly, the deadly machine never had the chance to enter the war. It was now left to surrender to time and the elements.

The stern section had also escaped damage, allowing the diver to make his way easily into the aft hold. Inside, he discovered the wooden crates that held the freighter's last delivery of munitions had broken open and become a prickly bluish carpet of decaying machine gun rounds, each a tiny time bomb ready to set off the others.

Sea of Betrayal

Satisfied he had searched where he could, the diver turned his attention to the midship cargo bay. He had witnessed the initial attack and always assumed that was where the freighter had first been struck. The *Kuma Maru* sunk so quickly he knew the breach was massive. Yet, the angle at which the ship lay along the bottom had blocked any entry into her holds from the outside. The only way in, he realized, was through the carnage of the superstructure.

He checked his air gauge. Twenty more minutes of air. Twenty-five if he was cautious with his efforts, although lingering too long would risk reaching the fresh set of scuba tanks waiting for him along the decompression line.

Finally, he reached the bottom of the staircase. From here, the auxiliary passage was only a few yards away. It was a secondary entry into the cargo bay, and he remembered the ship's mechanics using the network of narrow corridors to move quickly from one end of the vessel to another.

As he swam to the hatchway, he felt a sudden chill and hastily swept his light across the darkness, praying there were no more ghosts to find.

At the end of the passage, the three-foot crowbar he had left the day before was waiting for him, still perched where he had set it against the bulkhead. He had managed to pry open one of the door's four dogleg latches, but the effort had taken all his strength. He hoped the remaining levers would relinquish their grip more easily.

Wedging his finned feet against the bulkhead, the diver jabbed the crowbar into the second latch. With both hands, he gripped the bar and lifted it. The force of metal against metal sent a shrill through the water as the tool clawed into the rusted steel. Spikes of pain shot across his shoulder, and his legs began to shake from his effort. The iron bar felt red hot in his hands as he strained against forty years of corrosion.

Had he been twenty years old again or just twenty years younger, he knew he would have broken it free. But for the moment, the latch did not budge.

Gasping for breath, he stopped. He grunted into his regulator and let the heavy tool slip from his fingers. It crashed against the steel deck with a hollowed clang that shook the entire ship. The sea had not weakened the mechanism but instead welded it into a solid fist of corrosion.

He checked his pressure gauge. The needle hovered at the thousand-pound mark. His jaw tightened with frustration as he realized he had no choice. It was time to go.

As he made his way to the corridor, he began planning tomorrow's dive. He would bring the oxyacetylene torch and sever the door at its hinges. Although cutting thick steel underwater was tediously slow, it was the only way he would breach the hold. The process would add at least two dives. Two dives meant two days.

He sighed. Two more days.

She was coming in three. His daughter was flying halfway around the world to see him, and he would have nothing to show her. He had been sure he would have found the crates by now, but the *Kuma Maru* was determined to keep her secrets.

The diver's disappointment was his own, as his daughter had no idea what he was looking for or why. The war meant little to her. It was an abstraction, a nightmare she never felt or dreamt.

For him, the horror he endured had become a shadow figure standing in every corner of their lives. Like an unwelcome guest with an appetite for strife, it was a wedge that severed him from his family.

It never let him get close to his daughter. Or his son. Or his wife. Not truly. And then there was the accident. It was not his fault, but it was all his fault.

Now, he wanted to make amends. To tell his daughter of the nightmares that chased him into dark alleys from which he could never find escape. And how, even in his drunken stupors, the torment did not stop.

Of course, there were some confessions he would never share.

The Americans had killed only a fraction of the men who would die on the islands. In the months after the attack, when he and the other soldiers realized their emperor had forsaken them and their provisions were dwindling, the diver began to envy Shimizu for perishing aboard their ship. It had saved his friend from engaging in the vile atrocities needed to survive. Unforgivable crimes the diver could never tell his daughter.

Following the rope through the serpentine passage, the diver recalled the last time he had seen her but stopped himself as the memory

came. They had squared off like adversaries, slinging spiteful words and callous accusations. It was not a day he wished to relive.

Exiting the bridge, the diver bid his friend farewell, then continued out the window. He followed the arc of the hull to where he had lashed the decompression line to the freighter's stern railing.

Tied to the small skiff that had brought him across the lagoon, the line hung in the crystalline waters with two sets of air tanks. Positioned separately at different depths, the tanks designated the timed stops required for the diver to ascend safely.

The first stop was eighty feet below the surface. He would exchange the empty tanks for the new set, pause there for seven minutes, rise to fifty feet, and wait fifteen minutes more.

The last set of tanks dangled only thirty feet beneath the surface, but the diver had to remain at that depth for nearly forty-five minutes.

Although tedious, if he rose too quickly, the nitrogen molecules his body had absorbed during the dive would accumulate into microscopic bubbles that would clog his veins and rupture his organs. The diver knew that miscalculating or rushing the protocol would likely be fatal.

As he continued through the blue haze, the diver's mind wandered. What will she say when she steps from the plane? Will she smile? Grant him a hug or a kiss on the cheek? Or will there be a salvo of harsh words? He doubted their reunion would be warm, but he hoped the islands were too far for her to bring bitterness.

The diver tilted his head back. Against the shimmering surface, he saw the silhouette of the first scuba tanks above him. He checked his pressure gauge. It was leaning toward zero.

As he reached the fresh air supply, he slipped off his empty tanks and secured them to the line. He pushed the new regulator across his lips.

It took unexpected effort to retrieve the first breath. Worry seized him. Not panic, not yet.

He checked the valve at the top of the steel tanks. It was open fully. Quickly, he fumbled for the pressure gauge and saw its thin needle resting against the red zero.

He was fifty feet from the next set but chanced a third breath, filling his chest with all that remained in the regulator hose. Then, fighting against fear, he kicked upwards.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mitchell Sam Rossi is an American novelist, screenwriter, and journalist. Growing up in the beach culture of Southern California, he spent most of his youth in or on the water. An avid sailor, scuba diver, and mediocre surfer, Mitchell first pursued a career in marine biology, which gave him the opportunity to explore the Caribbean and the South Pacific. But a long-held desire to write became his calling and ultimately led to a thirty-year career as a journalist. He has written about ships, classic cars, outdoor travel, and most recently on environmental issues. When not at the keyboard, or searching for his next excursion, Mitchell is usually sailing the waters of Northern California, where he lives with his wife and daughter.

EXPERIENCE THE ADVENTURE

SEA OF BETRAYAL

by Mitchell Sam Rossi

Two men. A father and a son. Their destinies separated by forty years, yet secretly bound by the most daring covert operation ever undertaken by America's silent service.



Available from Paper Angel Press in
hardcover, trade paperback, and digital editions
paperangelpress.com/sea-of-betrayal

Two men. A father and a son.
Their destinies separated by forty years, yet secretly
bound by the most daring covert operation ever
undertaken by America's silent service.

When Brian Bovan, a gifted Naval officer, is denied the command of a U.S. ballistic missile submarine and forced into early retirement, he finds his dismissal is not the result of his own failures, but that of his father who was branded a traitor during World War II. Growing up idolizing the man as a heroic submarine commander, Brian is stunned to find his father betrayed his country.

Determined to right his father's legacy, Brian becomes a target of violence as his search threatens to reveal long-hidden corruption and greed amongst the powerful men who once commanded the military forces of the Pacific. He soon travels the same path across the Pacific taken by his father on the most secretive mission ever devised by the U.S. Navy. A covert operation to send an American submarine into the Imperial Navy's most formidable naval base to do the unthinkable—rendezvous with the enemy.

To prove his father's innocence, Brian must find answers amongst the ghosts of war and the forgotten wreckage at the bottom of Truk Lagoon.

