

An aerial photograph of the Falkland Islands, showing the main islands of East Falkland and West Falkland, surrounded by a dark blue sea. The land is a mix of green and brown, indicating vegetation and terrain. The sky is a deep, dark blue.

A Falklands Conflict Novel by

**Ed Zaruk**

**Falklands  
Target**

Also by Ed Zaruk

Falklands Deadline  
Altar and Throne

# Falklands Target

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Ed Zaruk

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This one is for my son Dan

He always wanted to run a bigger boat



## ONE

When the Argentine freighter issued a distress call shortly before midnight, Ross Sterling, captain of the tugboat *Southern Tide*, offered his assistance. Sailing north through Main Passage, he continued following the coast of West Falkland Island throughout the night then turned west into the South Atlantic as daylight broke under a heavy overcast. While the morning hours dragged by, a deepening depression turned the weather completely rotten.

Rising out of the storm, three separate waves merged together creating a mountain of water that rolled toward the tugboat's bow. While watching wind tear streamers from its curling crest, Ross felt *Southern Tide's* bow drop into the approaching trough spreading a panorama of pure white out each side. Pushing one foot against a bracket under the console to brace himself, he felt the reassuring rumble of twin diesel engines in the deck beneath his feet as gale force winds rattled against the bridge. The bow buried itself in the oncoming wall and iridescent green seas engulfing the foredeck rolled toward him and the base of the bridge. Tormented white sea spray shot into the air, turning to liquid as it sheeted all the windows opaque before three swipes of the wipers cleared them, revealing below a churning foam cascading over both sides as the bow rode up the giant wave. Rogue seas Ross thought, adjusting the wheel as *Southern Tide* began dropping into the following trough, the eventual undoing of every mariner.

The *Rio Carcaraña*, a freighter of 8500 gross registered tonnage bound from South Africa, had lost propulsion. While Ross raced to the rescue, building seas continued driving her ever eastward before the incoming storm. Ross had replied to the emergency while anchored at West Settlement in Fox Bay where he'd dropped off an empty container. His offer of assistance was accepted, then turned down after radio traffic from the Argentine Navy at Puerto Belgrano instructed the freighter's master that under no circumstances was he

## *Falklands Target*

to allow a British tugboat to tow his vessel.

Ross Sterling and his first mate, Ben Richardson, plotted her position. She was still outside the Twelve Mile Limit, but both agreed she'd be in Falkland waters before they reached her, definitely before any Argentine tug could come to her rescue. By late morning it had become clear that the *Rio Carcaraña* was going to drift onto one of the Jason Islands. Communication with Argentina ceased when Captain Eduardo Díaz defied the naval authorities and appealed for assistance from *Southern Tide*. That left Ross with one major problem, he'd lost his only deckhand the day before.

Ross again felt the tugboat slow as she stuck her bow into another heavy, South Atlantic wave. Making a slight adjustment on the wheel, as he'd been doing for hours to keep her straight to the oncoming seas, he drifted back to the previous day while anchored at Ruggles Bay. It was here he'd waited for a mercy flight called from Port Stanley.

Appearing out from under low, ragged clouds, the high-winged float plane had banked in a tight turn, then levelled out over two foot waves brewed up by north easterly winds in Falkland Sound. Even with flaps fully extended it was a going to be difficult landing in the choppy seas without putting a float underwater. If ever there was an aeroplane that could land in such adverse conditions, it was the Falkland Islands Government Air Services' de Haviland Beaver.

The keels of both floats sliced into the ocean. Whipped up by the propeller and carried on the wind, sea spray blew across the spreader bars, lashing the plane's belly before being carried away in the wind. Ross was about to heave a sigh of relief when a curling wave sent the tough Canadian bush plane bouncing back into the sky. Watching it hang suspended in mid-air, he curled his fingers around a handhold on the bridge console, fully expecting it to drop into the ocean. Instead four hundred and fifty horsepower from a nine-cylinder engine designed over half a century ago roared to full power, dragging the aeroplane out of danger. Engine exhaust, barking against the ship's windows, diminished when the pilot circled around for another go at it. Inside the bridge, Ross heard only a soft whistling wind that constantly crept under the port door.



Ben Richardson topped the interior companionway. "Think he'll make it this time?"

"If not, I do believe he'll keep trying until he does." Ross watched the Beaver circle out of sight. "How's young Lance fairing?"

"He's in a lot of pain, but still manages a smile now and then. Became quite excited when he heard the plane fly over."

"Good." Ross had left heavy swells rolling into Falkland Sound from the Scotia Sea for the comparative safety of Ruggles Bay, but stiff offshore winds still whipped up a formidable brew to challenge the Beaver's seasoned pilot. Both men instinctively ducked as the big radial engine roared overhead, floats barely clearing the antenna mast. The aircraft, flaps fully extended, settled over the front quarter, tentatively reaching for the ocean surface. This time, holding the nose a little higher, the pilot slowed in the headwind to the point of stalling. Ross expected it to fall from the sky at any moment. Both hands tightened on the console handrail when it dropped into the angry seas, burying the two floats in a cresting wave.

Ben swore as the nose dipped forward, sending the plane down the wave's backside. Propeller tips bit into the oncoming wave. A plume of spray spiralled out from under the nose. In the breaking seas of Ruggles Bay, the aircraft bucked wildly about as its pilot fought the floats up an approaching wave to lift the prop clear and begin turning in the choppy seas.

Ben breathed a sigh of relief. "Well he's down. Getting him alongside will be the next thing. I better get on deck."

"Is Karl with you?" Ross asked.

"He's downstairs in the galley waiting until the last minute." *Southern Tide's* first mate started down the stairs. "You know Karl."

Ross did. Quiet, introverted Karl. Preferring his warm engine room, he was about as sociable as a bat, but Ross felt secure having him around, there wasn't anything mechanical he couldn't repair or rebuild.

Buffeted by gusting winds, the aeroplane completed its turn. Ross admired the skill and courage it took to navigate a floatplane under such adverse conditions. From his own experience, he knew

## *Falklands Target*

that turning anything, even a ninety-one foot tugboat in heavy seas was no easy task. Under these conditions it had to be a real handful with a light aeroplane.

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Driving *Southern Tide* hard to reach the stricken freighter drifting toward the Jason Islands, Ross settled into the monotony of fighting the South Atlantic storm. He had long ago found that, by shifting around in the black leather captain's chair, wind moaning through the rigging and the constant whistle from under the port door would diminish considerably. It wasn't long before he again drifted back to the container destined for Fox Bay breaking loose on the back deck. If a sixty-foot wave had washed over the stern, he could have understood it, but see it start shifting about in the moderate seas of Eagle Passage because of a faulty cinch was just plain bad luck. The event re-played real as life. The ship rolling with each wave, sliding one end of the lone forty-foot container side to side. It had become a race to secure the container before its constant shifting broke the stern chains.

First one out on deck was Ben. Young Lance Philips, the new deckhand, following close on his heels. "Grab a short chain."

Lance waved an acknowledgement to Ben's words as the container hammered against the starboard rail. Running back inside, Lance opened the rigging locker, took out a three-foot long chain with hooks on each end, and dashed out onto the rear deck. Ben was disengaging the clutch on a work winch, running out some light cable and looping the bight through a pulley which he had hooked into a deck ring.

"That one," Ben yelled, pointing to the nearest corner, pulling more slack as Lance scrambled along the slippery deck after the moving container, trying to feed the chain through both lower corner holes while it slid away from him.

"Hook it?" Lance hollered in the wind.

Ben shook his head, then hunched over as the crest of a wave slapped against the ship's side, sending a plume of fine spray shooting skyward and fanning overhead. Steadying himself on the sloping deck while cold seawater rained down on him, Ben twisted

and hunched his shoulders to prevent it from running down his neck. Still holding the cable eye in his right hand, he turned to see Lance kneeling by the container as the surge of water rolled under the tugboat. Grinning, the kid held out both chain hooks in one hand while wiping wet hair from his eyes with the other. When Ben reached over for the chain, *Southern Tide* rolled back, shifting the container away from him, slipping the chain from his grip.

“I’ll get it.” Standing up, Lance took the cable from Ben’s hand and ran after the wayward chain as Ben pulled slack. While slipping it through the cable eye he had been distracted by Ben’s shout that something was amiss. There had been no time to hook the chain together.

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Ross closed his eyes to blot out the vision of what had happened next, opening them when *Southern Tide* once again shuddered against the gale-swept seas of the South Atlantic. Answering another call from the stricken freighter, he offered words of reassurance but knew the gods had conspired against him when the storm broke after losing Lance. As a mortal in the face of such power, he now felt very small indeed.

Leaving the lee of Pebble Island, it had taken them all afternoon to reach the Jason Islands. While traversing Hecate Passage, Ross had heard the radio operator of *Rio Carcaraña* pleading with him to hurry as their situation had taken a turn for the worse. It seemed the drifting ship was now in danger of being driven ashore on Jason West Cay. Ross could visualize this small outcropping of rock exposed to the open ocean. Submerged reefs with bits and pieces of land scattered about, always in the wrong place. What had promised to be a quick salvage job was now turning into a life or death rescue; or disaster, Ross thought considering he was short on manpower. Lance was now in Port Stanley, flown out on the aeroplane he could picture back at Ruggles Bay.

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The Beaver had turned sideways to the wind, the floats were one at a time riding over the wave crests, then dropping into the trailing trough. It always scared him turning *Southern Tide* in heavy seas. He

## *Falklands Target*

couldn't imagine what feelings the pilot was going through as the wings rose and fell while the aircraft wallowed from side to side.

One wingtip dipped into the water. A sudden burst of power from the engine lifted the offending wing, completing the turn. With both floats riding the back of a wave, the bush plane taxied around the stern and into calmer waters on the lee side of *Southern Tide*. The pilot killed the engine allowing the right wing to swing in over the tug's aft deck. Ben and Karl both took hold of the wing strut, struggling to keep a firm grip on its slippery surface. The last thing they needed was a bent up aeroplane.

Ben looked inside the cabin to see Fiona, one of the hospital nurses, staring back at him. Last time he saw her all she had on was red lipstick. Today, those same lips were between clenched teeth and her face looked pale under her white nurse's hat. Ben jumped down onto the float with a line to tie off the front strut, then smiled while opening the door.

"Fiona! Good to see you, luv."

A look of disdain came over her when he reached for her hand. Instead of taking it, she picked up a small paper bag from her lap and threw it over Ben's shoulder into the ocean. He watched as vomit drifted from its open top.

"This better be worth it," she said.

"I'll make it up to you next time we're in port."

"Last thing I need now is a sailor." With that she accepted his hand as he helped her down the two rungs attached to the forward struts. They stood together on the float as someone from inside the cabin passed out her medical bag. Ben took it while at the same time helping her climb aboard *Southern Tide*.

Walking out the bridge door, Ross noticed the letters VP-FAT on the wing overhanging his rear deck and sighed. He should have known. With wind rustling in his ears, he descended the outside companionway. "Good of you to come, Fiona."

The nurse waved dismissively. "Where is he?"

"Inside. Second cabin on your left. Jimmy Wok is with him."

Accepting her bag from Ben, she walked toward the doorway. Ross noted her steps were a little shaky. Steve Philips climbed out of

his plane.

Ross walked up to help the pilot up on deck. "Hello, Steve."

Refusing his offer the pilot stepped over the gunwale. "How's my son?"

"I'm terribly sorry about all this, Steve."

"I want to know how serious it is, Ross."

"I can't say for sure. We know he has a broken thigh. Karl thinks his hip or pelvis is hurt. I'm sure Fiona will tell us what's really wrong."

"Well, if he'd been working on shore, this would have never happened."

"It was his choice to work for me."

"You could have found some excuse not to hire him." The pilot's ears went red. "You knew how I felt."

"I'm not going to argue over this, Steve. What's happened, happened. Surely you must want to see him?" Ross gestured toward the open doorway.

The man strode off. Ross looked at the deck, then shook his head in disgust as he followed him. Living on the Falkland Islands brought its own dangers and everybody lived with them, but it was small consolation to Ross as he tried to deal with Steve's hostility.

"Dad." Lance winced with pain.

"Hello, son. Don't worry, I'll get you out of this."

"Dad, its not Captain Sterling's fault."

Steve reached out to touch his son's shoulder. "If you were at home where you should be it would never have happened."

Lance wriggled from under his father's hand. "It's nobody's fault."

"I think it is," he said looking at Ross.

Fiona stepped up to the pilot. "Let it rest, Steve."

He was about to say something back, when she snapped at him. "I said, let it be."

The big man closed his mouth, but shifted his stare back to Ross. Ignoring him, Ross listened to Fiona commend Jimmy Wok, *Southern Tide's* cook. "You did exactly the right thing, Jimmy, packing him in ice. The swelling is not at all what I expected it to be."

## *Falklands Target*

Extracting a pair of scissors from her bag, she cut away Lance's trousers.

"Hey," Lance said when she started in on his boxers.

Pausing only briefly, she gave him a matronly look. "I've seen it all, kid." Then snipping the leg completely open, she pulled the material free. His hip and inner thigh were various shades of purple, from yellowy-mauve to a deep violet.

She began poking around. "This hurt?"

"Yeow." Lance jumped.

"Right. This?"

He screwed his eyes shut. "Not as bad."

"This?"

"No."

"Here?"

"No."

"Here?"

Lance screamed with pain.

"Oh, dear. Sorry, love."

She pulled the blanket back over him then turned to Steve. "The hip's fine. There's something wrong with his pelvis but I can't be certain how bad, or even if there is a problem until it's x-rayed. We'll have to transport him lying down."

Anger clouded the pilot's face. "I'm holding you responsible, Ross Sterling."

"That's quite enough," Fiona said, capturing the pilot's eyes. "I'm going to give him a shot of morphine. It will be most painful moving him from here to the plane, not to mention all the bouncing about you'll give him when you take off." She turned her back on the lad's father.

"I'll go and get the plane ready," Steve said, mumbling under his breath.

"You need a stretcher?" Ross asked Fiona after he had gone.

"Yes." She took out a needle. "Preferably a basket one, if you have it."

"We do."

"Good."

Ross left as she drew morphine from a little bottle.

Drugged up, Lance still moaned with pain from the bumping and jostling required to load him over the ship's side and through the aeroplane's cargo door. It was tough work for Ross and Steve, with Fiona doing what she could. Ben stood with Karl holding the aeroplane steady by the wing struts while Jimmy Wok handed down Fiona's medical bag. She waited for Steve to enter, then followed him up the ladder rungs on the rear struts and climbed over the stretcher, now secured along the right side of the cabin.

Ross opened the front passenger door and reached over with his hand. Steve refused it. "He won't be back."

It took Ross all he had to remain civil. "Godspeed." After closing the door, Ross threw off the ropes then climbed back aboard his tugboat. To the sound of a whining starter, the big radial grudgingly turned over, then coughed to life as a cloud of blue smoke boiled away in the wind.

The Beaver pulled away from *Southern Tide's* lee then Steve began opening the throttle to takeoff around the bow and into the wind. Only half visible in the flying spray, the engine was running at maximum power when he hit the heavy waves. Two hard bounces put her up on the step. The plane clipped along the wave tops then launched off a curling wave and climbed into the afternoon sky as streams of water ran from the float bottoms. Steve pulled hard around and headed for Port Stanley.

Watching the plane disappear in the sky, Ross had kicked the offending container. It did nothing to relieve his feeling of guilt and frustration.

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*Southern Tide* slammed into another mountainous South Atlantic wave. Water smothered the fore deck. Rolling against the bridge it rose high in the air before lashing against the windows. Ross felt the anger from yesterday's events drain away as wipers cleared the glass. His next deckhand wouldn't be from the Falklands.

### TWO

Seated in his chair on a raised section of the bridge deck, Ross commanded an all-encompassing view of the early autumn storm through seven thick, glass windows spread across the curved bridge. Behind him, twin exhaust stacks running up the rear corners of the bridge, straddled five rectangular windows with a more confined view of the tugboat's long working deck. Before him all the controls were at his fingertips, including a small wheel placed conveniently ahead, slightly to the right. The idea of a man standing before a big wooden wheel with spokes, taking orders, was quickly becoming history. Ross ran the ship by himself from his comfortable black leather captain's chair. Originally built to tow log booms for a giant lumber company in British Columbia, the *Haida Riptide*, as she was called then, had become the victim of high inflation and a downturn in Canada's economy. She had been put up for sale after only thirty months of operation. Ross had outbid two other interested parties at a Ritchie Bros. auction in Vancouver to become her new owner.

Now, because he was a man short, Ross dearly wanted to reach the stricken freighter before dark. After Lance's operation the previous evening, King Edward VII Memorial Hospital had radioed *Southern Tide* with an update on his condition. He'd be off his feet for six weeks and out of commission for six months. A full recovery was expected, and he wouldn't even limp. Well, Ross thought, in a few days the lad would be home eating his new bride's cooking. He didn't envy him that, preferring Jimmy Wok's meals any day.

Still, that didn't solve the problem of his being shorthanded on a high seas salvage operation at night in a wicked storm. He wondered how the freighter was fairing. Having an engine fail wasn't all that serious, unless you only had one. To have it happen with a storm brewing, and close to land, was the stuff that turned hair grey, and made old men out of ships' captains.

Chilling air swirled about the bridge as the port door opened



letting in wind and rain. Ben stepped inside, dripping all over the floor. “Bloody nasty out, Ross. Why do these chaps always break down in the middle of a storm?”

“I do believe it’s because the money is better.”

“Because we’ll damn well break our necks, that’s why. I can’t say as I envy doing this short-handed. The gods picked a poor time to send young Lance home and lay about with his new bride, even if he is packaged in plaster.”

“Look at the bright side, Ben. We’ll have a lot more excitement here than he will in the sack with a cast on.”

“I hope he falls out of bed.” Ben whipped off his hat and brushed back what should have been curly brown hair, but now looked more akin to a long-haired cat fished out of a millpond. Water dripped in his eyes. He grabbed a towel from the pile Jimmy Wok kept on the bridge.

Ross nodded toward the radio. “The old boy hasn’t called for fifteen minutes. Give him a shout.”

Ben dried his face, then with one hand towelled his hair while picking up the radio microphone. “*Rio Carcaraña, Rio Carcaraña*. This is *Southern Tide*. Do you read, over?”

“Si, señor. We are still here. Over.”

“Just checking, old boy. What’s your present position?”

“The radar, it says we are fourteen kilometers from Steeple Jason.”

Ben threw the wet towel in a wicker basket. “Your drift has increased then?”

“Si, my friend. We are coming to shore much quickly.” The channel remained open but quiet for a moment. “My captain, he wishes to confirm that his ship will very soon be close on the rocks of Jason West.”

Ben looked at Ross. “Jason West Cay?”

Ross nodded. “Only found out myself from his last call. I was waiting for confirmation.”

“He won’t miss it?”

“Doesn’t appear to be the case. I was hoping for a shift in the wind. We’d have him in tow easily before he came up on East Cay

## *Falklands Target*

or Steeple Jason.”

Ben swept his arm around the bridge. “All this ocean around and he has to bloody drift smack into that little rock. How much time do we have?”

“We could use three hours. It won’t be that.” Ross nodded to the mike. “Ask him.”

Ben looked at the clock then called the freighter again.

The reply was not encouraging. “Señor, we will not miss the small island. We have only two hours.”

Ben turned to Ross, waiting for his reply.

“Tell them we’ll be there in one hour.” Ross reached out and nudged the throttle levers, both already set full ahead. “One hour, Ben.” *Southern Tide* drove into another heavy wave and both men felt the ship shudder. “I suspect it will be closer to an hour and fifteen minutes, but don’t tell them that.”

Ben keyed the mike. “*Rio Caracaraña*, at present we are behind Steeple Jason. Our ETA is sixty minutes. One hour, mate.”

“My captain, he says we wait only one hour for you. He does not want to abandon the ship so close to the shore when it is dark.”

“Tell him, that’s not an option. We’ll be there in one hour. Please have a crew ready to receive the heaving line.” Ben set the mike down, not at all pleased deceiving the endangered sailors. He was about to say something when Ross cut him off.

“They need hope more than anything else, Ben. We had to offer it.”

“Quite so.” He dropped the matter. “I’ll need help on the deck.”

“I know. Our only option is to get Karl out to assist you.” Ross hated leaving the engine room unattended under such dangerous conditions, but knew there was absolutely no way Ben could handle the connection alone.

“Hello, Boss.”

Ross turned to greet his cook. “Jimmy Wok, old chap.”

Dressed in white pants and t-shirt, the little North Vietnamese cook stood against the ship’s swaying motion balancing two mugs of tea. “Very hot, Boss.”

Ben took his from Wok's hand. Cold fingers stung against the steaming mug. "Ah, hot, hot." He quickly set it on the chart table.

Ross waited for his to be placed in the right-hand holder on his seat's armrest. "Thanks, Jimmy."

"Yes, thank you, Wok, my good man." Ben returned to blowing on his fingers. *Southern Tide* began a roll to starboard, sending Ben's mug sliding across the Admiralty chart. "Oh no you don't." Wok and Ross laughed as he burnt his fingers a second time.

Ross turned serious. "Wok, we're going to be dreadfully busy in an hour or so. What can you whip up for us on short notice?"

"Beef barley soup in a mug and sandwich."

"What, no roast beef, gravy, and Yorkshire?" Ben asked in jest.

"This not Sunday."

"Oh, very well."

"Could you bring it up, Wok, please?" Ross turned the wheel, correcting *Southern Tide* as she dropped over an oncoming crest. "Don't forget Karl."

Quick as a cat, the cook was gone.

An hour later, they were losing the daylight. Ben looked at the clock. Ross made no move toward the radio.

Two minutes ticked by before the freighter called. "*Southern Tide. Southern Tide. Over.*"

Ben answered into the mike. "We're here, *Río Carcaraña*. How are things on your end?"

A new voice came on the radio. It spoke with more bass in a strange mixture of authority and fear. "*Southern Tide. This is Captain Eduardo Díaz. Your hour is finished. You are not here.*"

Ross took the mike. "I'm no more than fifteen minutes away." Ross checked the radar for confirmation. It looked good. Two minutes later, he swung out from behind the rocky cay. "Will you stay with your ship?"

"Si, si. Your ship, she is on the radar now. We will be ready."

Now comes the serious part, Ross thought. He would see what type of businessman Captain Díaz was. "Will you accept Lloyd's Open Forum?"

There was an unusual pause from Captain Díaz. "You will tow

## *Falklands Target*

by charter.” Ross noted it was a statement, not a request.

“Charter?” Ben said. “Who does he think we are, Americans?”

Ross hadn’t expected an overly enthusiastic reply, nobody likes committing money to an unknown venture, and considering the present dangerous circumstances, quite out of character. Ross thought of other Lloyds’ settlements for similar salvages, the compensation was always reasonable for both parties. “Why a charter?” Ben shrugged his shoulders. In this case it would be expensive, but not exorbitant.

“I don’t like the idea.” A frown crossed Ben’s eyebrows.

“I’m not at all in favour of it.” Ross keyed the mike again. “Captain Díaz, am I to understand you are asking for a charter?”

“No, señor. I am telling you, we will employ you by charter.”

“They’re trying to short us,” Ben said while looking at the phosphorescent green picture left by the radar screen’s sweeping arm. The image of Jason West appeared as a blob of fuzz off their starboard beam; a single speck of white crept closer to shore with each sweep.

Ross held the mike in his right hand, studying the freighter’s lights now discernible in the storm. “Captain Díaz.” He paused for emphasis. “Study your radar screen very carefully.” Ross eased back the throttles. *Southern Tide* slowed. “You really have little choice but to accept our offer. The wind has you sideways. You are without propulsion and barely two kilometres from going on the rocks.” Ross figured Díaz had enough time to observe *Southern Tide’s* reduced speed.

“My owners will pay you well for charter services.”

Ross played a hunch. “Will your shippers be happy with their cargo spread along the shores of the Jason Islands? I ask you again, will you accept Lloyd’s Open Forum?”

No answer.

“What’s he carrying that’s so valuable, Ben?”

Thirty seconds went by. Forty-five.

“Come on, mate, give us an answer,” Ben said under his breath, diminished engine vibrations barely discernible under his feet. “He keeps this up we’ll sail home empty-handed.”

The radio came alive. “Captain Sterling, I accept your terms.”

Ross shook Ben’s hand. “We’re in business.” He opened both throttles. Lightning flashed in the darkening clouds ahead. Moments later a long range Neptune reconnaissance aeroplane bearing the Argentine Air Force insignia appeared out of the storm and flew directly toward *Southern Tide*.

“Now what?” Ross said as the plane flew low over the tug.

Ben watched out the rear windows while it banked left and turned a lazy circle under angry dark clouds. “He’s inside the Three-Mile Line.”

“So it would appear.” Both men followed the aircraft as it settled into a circuit around the tug and freighter. They hit another wave. “Don’t think I’d like to be flying about in weather like this.”

“Especially in that old relic,” Ben said.

“Why the company?”

“Search and Rescue.”

“Flying into Falklands territory?”

“It’s got to have something to do with that ship.”

“I agree, but what?”

Ben just shrugged his shoulders as the plane completed another circle of the freighter. Ross went back to steering the tug.

### THREE

The scene before Ross was enough to strike fear into the heart of even the Ancient Mariner. Broadside in heavy seas, the freighter lay at their mercy. When each wave drove into the ship's side, she shuddered momentarily before water rose skyward and fanned out in an iridescent plume. Blown over her decks, sea spray looked like rain in an old black and white movie as it angled across the shadows of her lighted superstructure. The helpless ship then heeled wickedly as the wave rolled underneath and another slammed against her windward side.

Directly east lay their nemesis, Jason West Cay. An outcropping of rock, that even in this weather was home to hundreds of seals; a cauldron of white, where twenty-foot seas spent their last moments in a witch's brew of wild water and white sea foam. The only thing between the *Rio Caracaraña* and disaster was a thick bed of kelp. And *Southern Tide*.

The drama would have one act, there would be no time for a second go at it, and no margin for error. Ross had instructed the ship's master to quickly connect the towing hawser directly to his ship. Once away from danger they would re-rig using the anchor chains. Approaching the freighter's stern, Ross surveyed the rocky shore, awestruck by its wild fury. He caressed the throttles while coming up on her windward side. Below decks, twin twelve-cylinder diesel engines each producing over twenty-five hundred horsepower, faithfully responded to his commands. Keeping fifty yards between himself and the stricken ship, Ross could see men in life-jackets mustered by the lifeboats. All looking to him for salvation, he thought. Some waved. Most appeared terrified. Ross could well understand why as a wall of white rose up the side of their ship, billowed into the sky, and rained down over them.

Lightning flashed in the deepening night as Ben stepped out into the storm, closing the bridge door behind. He heard no sound of

thunder, only the wind's full fury driving at him as sea spray and pelting rain blew under his protective gear. Even while standing in a sheltered area where he could usually hear the diesel engines rumbling in the exhaust stacks, the constant moaning of the wind drowned out all other sound. Against the dark clouds overhead Ben could see, but not hear the twin-engine Neptune as it continually circled above them.

He made a last minute check of the rope heaving line he would send over to the drifting ship. Karl stepped out of the aft door as Ben repositioned the line to keep it from fouling. *Southern Tide's* engineer huddled by the winch as the tug tilted to port and green water broke over the side rushing across the deck ankle deep. Using hand signals, both men worked together laying out the messenger cable on the rear deck while water spilled back into the sea.

Another wave rolled the tug over to starboard. Ben lost his footing as water washed him against the gunwale, the light steel cable followed, bunching up against him in a tangle. He was struggling to his feet when the deck rolled the opposite direction, sending him and the line back across the slippery steel. Ignoring the snaking cable he scrambled up next to Karl.

"Damn, this is impossible," he yelled.

Karl hollered back, "We'll connect it right off the winch."

The ship rocked sideways as water shot skyward. Pouring down on the two men, it drowned out Karl's last words about Ben having a better idea.

From his bridge, Ross looked up to see sailors standing along the freighter's railing, watching the activity below. He glanced out back to see his two crewmen struggling with the wayward cable amidst streams of water surging across the deck. Karl seemed to be yelling at Ben who was fighting to drag one end of the messenger toward the winch by himself. Young Lance's job to assist, Ross thought, intermittently watching the scene unfold through the rear steering windows. The kid should have been out there, soaking wet like the rest of us and helping Ben pull the wire instead of laying about in a hospital bed doted on by his new wife.

Karl had ten feet of heavy hawser spooled off the main winch

## *Falklands Target*

and was holding it with both hands for Ben. “The pin’s in my pocket,” Karl yelled as Ben slipped his cable eye into the towline shackle. Water rushing across the deck threatened to pull the line from Ben’s grasp. He placed one of Karl’s hands on the messenger cable eye. Whipping off his right-hand glove and holding it in his teeth, he reached into Karl’s pocket. Another wave coming over the side caught the wire, slithering it across the deck. Ben shoved the pin home as the wire began slipping out of their hands. Three turns and the connection was secure. After Karl wound all the steel cable onto the main winch, Ben attached the heaving line.

Ross ignored the struggle his two deckhands were having against the breaking seas and concentrated on approaching the freighter’s bow, slowing then swinging *Southern Tide* into the storm. Holding her motionless in the towering seas, he let her slip astern, easing to within yards of the steel hull, and aiming for a spot just back of the anchor where Ben would fire the line-throwing gun.

Chancing a quick glance to his right revealed part of Jason’s jagged shore, a line of churning white foam. Locked in the ocean’s grip, both ships continued drifting toward the waiting rocks. Ross was sure he could hear waves breaking above the storm, he was that close.

Forward, the view was even more fear-inspiring, waves rising together, their crests curling over to be torn into streamers and strung across the raging ocean before engulfing the bow and dropping tons of water on the deck. Wind and seas continued pushing *Southern Tide* into the freighter; Ross constantly feathered the throttles to compensate.

On the stern deck, outlined by flood lamps in the driving rain, Ben stood with the line-throwing gun in his right hand, poised for his one chance to send the light nylon rope arcing over the freighter’s deck. Ross fought to keep *Southern Tide’s* bow straight without widening the gap. Ben raised the gun to his shoulder, picked a moment when the freighter’s side was clear, and pulled the trigger. A loud pop was lost to the storm as the shot heaving line curled upward then, blown by gale force winds, carried over the freighter’s railing.

Fighting his backward drift into the big ship, Ross eased away



from the wall of steel overshadowing him. Someone, out of sight on the deck above moved the line to the freighter's bullnose where it was threaded through the bow chock. Ross eased *Southern Tide* ahead of the freighter to better allow the rope to line up with the freighter. The tug rolled viciously into oncoming quartering seas, defying Ross' efforts to hold her steady off the port bow. The messenger cable now coming off the main winch drum started across. Karl fought to spool it off under steady tension. The last thing he needed now was a parted cable hanging off each ship. *Southern Tide* then dropped her stern into a trough and the messenger cable came singing tight. Karl released a little too much brake and slack line spooled out into the ocean. He feathered the winch controls and tension came back on the messenger, shedding water as it rose out of the sea. The sound of the Neptune passing above them not two hundred feet in the sky, quickly disappeared on the wind as did the plane into the night.

Despite his best efforts to hold the vessel steady, the distance between both ships continued to grow. The messenger swayed and sang in the wind from the strain placed on it by the heavy two and one-half inch tow wire.

Ross adjusted the throttles. He knew a mistake on his end could part the line at any moment, whipping it back and possibly fouling the propellers, not to mention losing the freighter on the rocks. Feeling his ship rise and fall with the waves, he watched Karl expertly continue to hold just enough tension on the main winch to keep the heavy steel hawser moving toward the freighter.

Ben headed to the stern just as a quartering wave broke over the port side. Water surging across the heeling deck spilled into his boots, breaking loose his footing. For a second time that night, he slid over the slippery steel, once more piling up against the starboard gunwale. Before the main towline eye disappeared through the freighter's bow chock, Ben had scrambled to his feet and closed the stern gate.

Above him in the bridge, *Southern Tide's* radio came to life. "Señor Sterling, the heavy wire is aboard. My men are connecting it at this moment. Please stand by."

"Roger that, *Rio C*," Ross said, then waited.

## *Falklands Target*

Seconds dragged by. “Captain, the line is secure. You may begin the tow.”

“Roger, roger, roger.” Ross fed power to the big diesels. *Southern Tide* pulled away from the freighter’s bow. Karl operated the big winch brake in concert, allowing the mainline to run out.

The intercom buzzed. Ross picked it up and listened to Ben’s voice. “It’s a bloody miserable night to be about, governor.”

“Do up the top button on your slicker or you’ll end up with wet boxers.”

“They’re already draining into my boots.”

“We’re in shallow water. String a hundred fathoms of cable, Ben.”

“Right.” The phone went dead.

When Karl had wound off the requested six hundred feet and set the brake, Ross saw the line tighten. Adjusting the throttles, he began the business of building forward momentum with the freighter on a short tow. There was plenty of time to pull the vessel across the face of West Jason and into the open sea.

Ben came up the interior companionway, rubbing his wet hair with a towel. “Well there, that should keep the bitch off the rocks.” Ben pointed to the freighter falling astern. “You’re not pulling away from shore, I see.”

“I don’t think we have the sea room to arrest her drift.”

“So you plan on towing parallel to shore?”

“Well, I’ll place a little angle on it, but I want to get her north of the island and out to sea.”

Ben walked over to the radar and set it for five miles then moved over and laid out Admiralty chart number 2514. What he saw sent shivers up his spine. “You know where we are?”

“West of Jason Cay.”

“Correct. Have you consulted the chart?”

Ross thought a moment. “I’m familiar with it, but haven’t studied it tonight.”

Ben stared at the chart.

Ross watched him a moment. “What am I missing, Ben?”

“Jason West is just barely on the northwest corner of the chart.”

Ross pictured the Jason Islands in his mind. “Jason West, Jason East, Steeple and Grand Jason. Correct?”

“Ross, it’s not what is east of the Cay that’s important. Outside the border someone has pencilled in the words, reef reported to extend northwest by west.”

Ross didn’t need to consult a chart to visualize where the line of submerged rocks ran. It was dead ahead.

## FOUR

Prior to 1795, the Admiralty in London retained an accumulation of charts, surveys, reports, books and atlases of the earth's oceans. When the Hydrographic Office was established in that year a serious effort was made to organize and update the collection. Today there are over 3000 Admiralty charts available to mariners the world over. As the oceans continue to be explored and surveyed, these charts are regularly updated, but even still could lack information.

Such was the case with Ross' chart. It didn't show the reef, but that was no assurance the rocks weren't in front of him. If he didn't turn the tow seaward soon, and the reef was there, he'd tear the freighter's bottom out. Even *Southern Tide* might not clear the line of rocks in these seas. Ross nudged the throttle open and with his right hand turned the wheel slightly to port.

Ben touched Ross' hand briefly. "Easy, a parted wire is of no use."

Ross returned the throttles to their original position. "Read me some depths."

Ben adjusted the echo sounder and watched it for a moment. "Twenty-one metres."

Looking ahead, all Ross could see through the driving rain, was blackness. "How far are we from Jason West?"

Ben calculated it as the radar finished another sweep. "Fourteen hundred yards, fine to starboard." That told Ross all he needed to know. He turned the wheel a bit more knowing the tug tethered to the freighter would angle seaward. Somewhere directly ahead, a phantom row of submerged rocks quite possibly barred his path. He was prepared to believe *Southern Tide* would clear them. As for the freighter that was a different matter. Probably not, otherwise why the notation pencilled on the chart. He had to assume the reef was there. Sailing straight ahead was out of the question. It remained to be seen whether they could bring the dead ship about in time.

“Radar says we’re moving at a knot, possibly more.”

“Not enough.”

“I agree.”

Ross stole a glance out back. The main hawser disappeared into the ocean about two hundred feet astern, four hundred feet farther back followed the Argentine freighter, her deck lights dimly glowing in the dark. All those lives hanging on a single steel cable, and his decisions. Well, his and Ben’s, for he knew from years together that these decisions were made as a team.

“I do believe we’re making a knot and a half,” Ben said.

“How much sea room?”

“With the wind still pushing her, I’d say he’s down to a thousand yards.”

“Five-eighths of a mile,” Ross said, willing himself to hold everything steady. Scanning the sea, he could find no evidence of the reef. “I don’t suppose there were any depths marked on the chart?”

“None, but it has to show up soon.”

Thirty seconds later Ben began reading off the decreasing depth. “Thirteen metres... six and a half. This is it!”

Ross sailed on as the ocean floor shallowed. “Six metres. Drop into a deep trough and we’ll bang bottom.”

“Speed?”

“Barely over a knot and a half.”

“Not enough.” Ross held steady.

“Less than six metres, Ross. God, you’re right on top of it!”

Ross waved his concern aside. *Southern Tide* continued over the reef.

“Six again. Needn’t remind you, old boy, that freighter draws eight metres. Pull her over these rocks and she’ll draw two less.”

Ross held *Southern Tide* straight for another minute but knew he’d have to turn soon to avoid dragging the tow cable on the ocean floor.

“Ross, you’re cutting this awfully fine,” Ben said, his voice edged with concern. Rubbing the back of his neck, he stared astern, waiting for Ross to turn seaward. When he did, Ben breathed a sign of relief. Using a combination of *Southern Tide’s* pull and the freighter’s

## Falklands Target

momentum, Ross swung hard to port and headed out to sea.

The bow came around. Angling out of the stern gate, the main towline came under increasing strain. Farther astern, the freighter was slow to respond as the tow line pulled into a big arc.

“*Southern Tide. Southern Tide.* Answer, por favor.” The Spanish voice was clearly agitated.

Ben took the call. “*Southern Tide* here, over.”

“Is Captain Sterling there?”

“He’s listening.”

“Captain, we are in very shallow water. I have only seventeen metres of water.”

Ben held the mike for Ross to speak into. “We’re working you offshore now, but I’m afraid we’re very close to a reef. Come hard to port.”

“You must not allow my ship to go aground in British waters.”

“Ah, ha,” Ben said, “she is carrying something valuable.”

“Or sensitive,” Ross said. He spoke again to the freighter’s master. “You’ll not ground.” Ross hoped his words would prove true. “What’s your present heading?”

“Three, zero, six degrees and slowly bearing west.”

Ross glanced at his compass. *Southern Tide* was on two, six, one, and still coming around. Ross eased out of the turn, endeavouring to lessen the strain on the hawser where it angled out the stern. “We’re pulling your bow west at this moment, bring your rudder hard over.” He glanced at the tow wire disappearing aft into the darkness. A little voice kept telling him he’d cut it too fine. “You’ll have plenty of ocean beneath you as we come about.”

Ben looked at Ross. “Bloody lie.”

“Señor, we are down to eleven metres. In these seas we could hit the ocean floor.”

Ross snatched up the mike. “Give me your bearing.”

“Two, nine, zero.”

Ross reached for the throttle.

“Eleven metres.” The master of *Rio Carcaraña* was near hysterical. “I will ground at seven metres.”

Before he could move a throttle, Ben touched Ross’ hand. “Let

me.”

Ross withdrew it, not too proud to acknowledge his mate had a finer touch. Never interfering unless he doubted his boss, Ben adjusted the engine speed, both men watched the wire. Motioning Ross aside, Ben took the wheel then slipped into the captain’s chair. He worked the throttles until the mainline started rising out of the seas, then eased off slightly to continue pulling the freighter from danger.

“Twelve metres,” the radio voice said. Neither Ross nor Ben responded. “Thirteen.” A pause. “Fourteen.”

Ross slapped his first mate on the back. “We did it.”

Ben let out a holler.

“Twenty metres, señors. We are in deep water again.”

Ross instructed Captain Díaz to settle on a bearing of two, six, five degrees.

Ben steered starboard to line up both ships. Having lost all forward momentum in the turn, he barely held the freighter from drifting backwards onto the reef. *Southern Tide* fought for two and a half hours to ease the ship to safety, then had the freighter rig chain stoppers and attach the heavy hawser to both anchor chains. After running out a two hundred foot chain bridle, they lengthened the towline and settled on a heading for Buenos Aires.

**FIVE**

Two days later the storm blew itself out, leaving only long rolling swells as evidence of its fury. Progress had been slow but with the freighter safely in deep water, Ross was content to let the cable's catenary do its work. He knew from experience that at its lowest point, quite possibly a couple hundred feet deep in the ocean, the steel cable acted like a big spring reducing the risk of a parted line. Every three hours, Karl reeled out a few feet to reduce chafing on the wire. There was, however, nothing that could be done to prevent the stern plate from wearing.

By the fourth day they were sailing under bright sunshine without a cloud in the sky, or a care in the world. A cool breeze swept the bridge when Ross relieved Ben at the helm, who stretched after giving up the captain's chair. Filled with Jimmy Wok's cooking and tea, Ross was content to stand the six to midnight watch knowing the little cook would appear about eleven with hot cocoa and milk. He always slept well on that.

Ross disengaged the auto pilot and steered the ship himself as the sun dropped from the sky turning thin high clouds developing in the west to ember red. Red at night, sailors delight, he thought. A good omen. Sterling Marine could use one about now. In an effort to protect his suppliers, he'd fallen behind one payment on his ship. This tow would see him through.

Night had fallen when Ross broke out of his thinking. The compass showed his deviation to be worse than a novice helmsman. A noticeable movement in the wheel returned *Southern Tide* to her plotted course. Ross glanced through the rear windows to see the tow following obediently, slightly to starboard.

Precisely at midnight, Ben entered the bridge with a mug of tea in his right hand.

"Evening, Captain."

"It's a beautiful night, Ben. Storm's gone, stars are out." His



first mate made no move to take command, instead he sipped his tea while staring out the forward windows. “Seas are calming. Should be a pleasant run into Buenos Aires. Red sunset tonight. I tell you, Ben, it’ll be a perfect day tomorrow.”

Ben just grunted.

Ross felt letdown that his friend didn’t share his feeling for the natural beauty about them. “Well, you’ll have an easy go of it tonight.” With that he slipped out of the captain’s chair, holding the wheel with his right hand.

Ben slipped into the worn leather seat, set his half-drunk tea down, accepted the wheel, and re-engaged the auto pilot. “Ross, you’ve been at sea long enough to be aware that there’s no easy go of it.”

“Two days from now you’ll be in some pub on the Buenos Aires waterfront with a señorita under each arm.”

“One señorita. I’ll need the other arm for drinking.” A boyish grin broke over Ben’s face.

“Hold that thought. I’ll see you in six hours.”

“Good night, Ross.”

“Good night.”

*Southern Tide’s* captain stopped by the galley. Although empty, it was warm, heat still radiating from the big stainless-steel range, a dim light illuminating the grill. He helped himself to one of Jimmy Wok’s fresh baked buns before retiring to his cabin and was asleep moments after hitting the pillow.

Entire book is available at HAAKON PUBLISHING