“It’s Over”

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MARSDEN WHARF
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
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Whump!
A large shiver went through the entire ship and woke me from a dead sleep. I didn’t so much hear it as feel it. Disoriented and in the dark, I tried to make sense of what had just happened. As the captain of the Rainbow Warrior I knew that whatever that whump was, it wasn’t good. My sleepy mind slowly began to run through the possibilities. The adrenaline hadn’t hit me yet.

Had we collided with another ship? Possibly. Were we at fault? I looked out the porthole in my captain’s cabin. We were tied up at the dock—Marsden Wharf, in New Zealand—so if there had been a collision, at least we weren’t responsible. Well, that’s a relief, I thought, glad to know that whatever had just happened
wasn’t my fault. Even though I was only partly alert, at least my career survival instinct was intact.

What had caused that sound? It definitely wasn’t part of the routine noise of the ship. In fact, none of the normal sounds of the ship could be heard. The generator, which supplies electricity to the ship, was strangely silent. The comforting, ever-present hum wasn’t there: another sign that something was seriously wrong. The generator is a lot like your pulse or breathing—a ship’s basic sign of life. The Rainbow Warrior’s heartbeat had stopped. Still, we were at the dock, so how bad could it be?

Strange . . . I reached up in the dark for my glasses, which for the past four years had always been stowed on a small bookshelf just above my pillow. They were gone. That’s really weird. They’d remained in that exact location through storm-tossed seas and all kinds of actions (“actions” are Greenpeace’s term for engagements with the “enemy”), yet they had been dislodged by the whump. Another sign of something wrong, but what?

I reached for my clothes, which I had slung over the back of my chair next to my bed, but they weren’t there either. I fumbled around in the dark looking for them for a few seconds. I stumbled over the toppled chair. What the fuck? Earthquake? Clothes or no clothes, as captain I had to find out what was going on, so I grabbed a towel for modesty and dashed out of my cabin into the hallway.

The emergency lighting was on in the hall in the main companionway—another very bad sign. The five-watt bulbs cast a dull light that was just enough to see by. At the engine room door, a small group of the crew was standing near the doorway and looking down. Davey Edward—our chief engineer—was there. He had rushed to his engine room—right after what seemed to him to be an explosion—worried that
something down there had caused it. As I came up to him, he said the last thing I expected—or wanted—to hear. “It’s over, she is done with, finished.” When your chief engineer says that, you can be pretty sure it’s a fact.

Looking down into the engine room, I could see water had almost filled the compartment, and was already rising dangerously close to the main deck where we were standing. It made no sense at all. The ship had a massive steel bulkhead door to prevent flooding between the hold (the wide, open cargo area belowdecks) and the theater. At sea, that door was always closed as a safety precaution. At the dock, however, it was always left open, and something had caused massive flooding in an incredibly short period of time.

Whatever the cause, the effect was clear. Davey and I locked eyes and I knew what had to be done. I said in my command voice: “Let’s get everyone off the ship and onto the dock, and then we’ll figure it out from there.” Even as a relatively young captain, I knew that the safety of the crew was the first priority. Davey and I both realized that if the engine room had flooded, the lower accommodations—which were on the same level—would be underwater too. I hoped like hell that no one was down there, but I had to walk back aft toward the lower accommodations to see for myself.

As I got to the stairs going down, I saw Martini Gotje at the bottom of the steps. He had arrived there first, and had immediately gone to the crew’s sleeping quarters in the area that seemed to be in the most danger. Andy Biedermann had gone down right before him, and gotten our temporary cook, Margaret Mills, out of her bunk. I felt, rather than heard, the ship lift under my feet.

Whump!

Another shock wave—less than two minutes after the first.
Was the New Zealand navy firing at us? At the dock? It was the only thing I could think of, and that didn’t seem very likely. Whatever was going on, it didn’t make sense and it wasn’t over. I looked down at Martini and told him to pass on the word to abandon ship. Abandon ship!? At the dock!? It seemed like a strange order to both of us, but he did not argue.

I went forward with the thought of trying to go down to the theater. With the water already this high, there was a good chance someone needed help. As I went past Grace O’Sullivan and Nathalie Mestre’s cabin and took my first step down, I went up to my shin in water. Not good. Not good at all.

Somewhere along the way, my towel had slipped off. I hadn’t noticed, and apparently no one else had. Still, I did not want to hit the dock in my birthday suit. As I got back to my cabin, I felt the boat roll toward the nearby wharf as her bottom slipped down and away from the dock into deeper water. She was definitely sinking, and there was no way of telling how far and how fast she was going down. Fuck the clothes, I’m out of here, I thought as the water poured over the doorsill. It was now flooding the upper deck. I headed aft to where there were more cabins, shouting “Abandon ship!” as I felt the boat under my feet leaning over even farther. It was just like The Poseidon Adventure, but sickeningly real.

We were berthed at the end of a large pier dominated by a sizable warehouse in a remote corner of the harbor. A few small sailboats had been tied up alongside us before the explosions—sailboats that were part of the Pacific Peace fleet that was planning to sail with us to the Moruroa Atoll to protest France’s nuclear weapons testing. The Rainbow Warrior was going to accompany the fleet as a supply and support vessel. After the explosions, the sailboats had quickly moved
a short distance away. There was nothing around us that could conceivably have caused our ship to explode and sink.

The ship had already sunk to the point where I had to climb up off the ship’s deck to get onto the dock. As soon as my feet hit the pier, I began counting heads — taking a mental inventory of the crew. Several, I knew, had been onshore, taking some time off before we left for the three-thousand-mile sail to Moruroa. From what I could tell, only Hanne Sorensen and Fernando Pereira were missing. I wasn’t worried about Fernando as he was normally a late-night person and loved to go ashore. Hanne was more of a concern.

There is a saying among captains: “In an emergency, no one rises to the occasion. You fall back to the level of your training.” I was functioning, but still badly stunned. It all seemed surreal, but it was real all right. I was turning back to look at my ship when Davey grabbed me and told me, “Fernando’s down there!”

Fernando was our snapper — the ship’s photographer — who had joined the crew in Hawaii four months earlier. I hoped to hell Davey was wrong, and told him that I thought Fernando was still out on the town, but Davey was emphatic. *Shit,* I thought. If he’s down there, he is way down under that mix of diesel fuel and cold, black water. Davey confirmed that Fernando had gone down with him to the mess (the crew’s cafeteria) for a nightcap, and after the whatever-the-hell-it-was happened — like any good photographer in a crisis — Fernando had gone down to his cabin to get his camera gear. Fernando’s cabin, starboard and forward, was now deep under the seawater that was quickly filling the ship. Air bubbles were still hissing and boiling as they escaped the hull and emerged through the slowly spreading slick around the boat.

Part of me desperately wanted to find some scuba gear so
I could dive down into the ship to find my shipmate, but it seemed both risky and practically hopeless. (Later, when the police showed up, even their trained divers couldn’t make it down through the fuel oil. It took a team of highly trained New Zealand navy divers to retrieve the body, and even they had to wait until the fuel had dissipated. To this day it still haunts me that I didn’t make an attempt, but realistically it probably would have meant that the navy divers would have had to bring up my body as well.)

“Peter, I did not know you were so . . . chunky.”

I had been so focused on Fernando that it had completely escaped my mind that I was still stark naked. Of course, Margaret—the assistant cook—didn’t know that Fernando was most likely dead, and was trying to make light of the situation. I borrowed a sweater from Davey. Both of us were still half-naked (the only clothing I had on was Davey’s sweater, and Davey was wearing only pants) but the two of us decided to go back to make sure that Hanne wasn’t still on the ship. The *Rainbow Warrior* was continuing to settle and roll over, and water was already pouring into the bridge deck—one of the upper decks. Davey and I clambered up to the top of the stack—one of the highest points of the ship—and removed the aluminum top plate. Normally we should have been able to see almost forty feet straight down into the engine room. Instead, the water was now a mere six feet from the top, covered in a thick layer of oil. Full stop. The diesel fumes, and the reality, hit us full in the face. There was nothing more we could do. It was a terrible feeling.

Still worried about Hanne, Davey and I climbed back down and carefully picked our way over the crazily tilting ship and back to the pier. We still had no idea about what had caused all the damage. No other ship could have collided with us. The fuel oil was diesel, which isn’t explosive. The
only explosive materials onboard were the oxygen and acetylene tanks used for welding, but those were stored well forward and far from where the damage had occurred. I was thoroughly mystified. Davey was too. At first he wondered if he had screwed something up in the engine room and had caused the explosion. The second explosion, in a different location, was a good indication that it was something else entirely.

“Are there any more bombs aboard?” asked the fire chief who had just arrived on the scene. Bombs? Who said anything about bombs? Greenpeace was—and is—very much against the use of any kind of weaponry, violence, or property destruction. There was absolutely no way that we had bombs aboard. Still, we were all asked to go with the police to the station right across the road. Great, I thought. My ship has been sunk. Fernando is probably dead. The police think we did it, and they’re going to interrogate us. And I’m not wearing pants.

Thankfully, a woman from one of the three small sailboats that had been tied alongside the Rainbow Warrior reported seeing a very bright flash under the transom of the ship when the second explosion occurred. (She also brought me a pair of pants.) To me, that sure sounded like a bomb. Set by whom? And why?

Certainly, Greenpeace had already made a few enemies who were against protection of the environment. But New Zealand was generally in agreement with our principles, and was definitely supportive of our no-nukes stance, the whole reason we were there. When we arrived in Auckland three days earlier it had felt like a homecoming to all of us. New Zealand was moving toward becoming a nuclear-free zone (it became official a short time later), and we were greatly encouraged by that. We all felt very welcome there.

The police separated the crew around the police station,
and interrogated both Davey and me with some intensity. I wouldn’t say that we were being harshly questioned as suspects per se, but when a terrorist act occurs a hundred yards in front of a police station, you can bet your ass the police will be tense and giving you a good grilling.

Each of us was questioned multiple times over the course of an hour. First they asked us to retrace our steps during the sinking of the boat. The more pointed questions were asked later: “Where were you when the explosion occurred?” “Have you seen anyone suspicious near the ship?” “Have you seen anything suspicious onboard?” “Are you carrying any materials that have been used, or could have been used, to make a bomb?”

A short time before dawn, I was brought back to the dock to identify a body. It had taken a team of five navy divers to work their way down into the wrecked ship to retrieve Fernando. He had been in his cabin for about twenty seconds when the second explosion had gone off directly underneath him. The explosion’s shock wave had jammed his cabin door closed so that, while he had survived the second explosion, he had drowned shortly after. To make matters even worse, while most of the Greenpeace crew were either single or childless, Fernando would be leaving two young children behind.

My glasses were still in my cabin somewhere under the water, so I had to ask the divers to bring the body closer to the dock and under the lights to identify him. In the faint light of the morning, through the dark oil and shadows under the pier, I had to get practically nose-to-nose with him to be sure. Even then, face-to-face with my dead colleague, what was happening still hadn’t completely sunk in. At the moment, however, I had to focus on making sure the rest of the crew was OK, and finding out what the hell was happening and why. The first explosion had occurred under the middle of
the ship, and the second had gone off near the rudder and propeller all the way aft. The fact that there were two explosions—just a few minutes apart in two different locations—indicated this was a deliberate attempt to sink the Rainbow Warrior.

At least Hanne was alive, which was a relief. She had gone for a late-night walk and arrived back at the dock after the explosions. She was being kept apart from the rest of the crew. She was distraught, but at least uninjured. I told the police that she was with us, and they let her accompany me to the back room where I solemnly confirmed for everyone that Fernando was dead.

Around four o’clock in the morning the crew was released and everyone went to the homes of various friends around Auckland. The local Greenpeace office also had the presence of mind to take up a collection of clothing for the crew. I was taken to police headquarters downtown.

After police headquarters, I was brought to the harbor-master’s office and then escorted back down to what was left of the Rainbow Warrior. She was laid over entirely on her side, three-quarters submerged. Davey had been right—twice. My ship was dead and Fernando was dead. Twelve hours earlier something had happened and everything had changed.

At about 10 A.M., I was standing on the dock when the New Zealand navy divers reported that they were able to survey the damage near the bottom of the overturned ship. They could tell from the way the twisted and torn hull was bent inward that the explosion had occurred outside the hull. This, and the fact the explosions had occurred on the side of the ship facing the dock, was confirmation the ship had been bombed by an unknown enemy. The hole from one of the bombs was more than eight feet wide—wide enough to swim through. Hell, it was wide enough to drive a car through. (We found out later that the hull had filled in about twenty-five
seconds, at the rate of seven tons of water per second.) Whoever had done this was far more sophisticated than a mere vandal or casual vigilante. That meant that Fernando had been murdered. Murdered! Satisfied now that we were victims and not perpetrators, the attitude of the police toward us softened considerably. Little did I know that, right about the same time, the pieces of the puzzle were already beginning to fall into place.

The harbor was normally pretty quiet. Recently, however, a rash of thefts aboard several yachts there caused a few of the owners to set up a nightly crime watch. Late the previous night, just before the explosions, the crime watch had been puzzled to see two scuba divers in a Zodiac inflatable boat approach the beach. As the boat neared the shore, the divers were observed dropping the outboard motor over the side and dragging the boat up the beach where they left it untied. All highly unusual. The divers then climbed into a waiting van and drove off. Amazingly, one of the alert crime watchers had written down the van’s license plate number.

The next morning, a Swiss couple stepped into the local airport car rental agency to return the van. The two tourists seemed to be in a hurry, but were insistent on getting back one day’s rent on the van. They explained they were flying out a day early because the woman’s uncle was sick. Unbeknownst to them, the clerk was staring at a large sign under the desk with an order to call the Auckland police if that particular van turned up. The clerk politely asked the couple to wait while their refund was processed.

The police arrived in short order to bring them in for questioning. The report by the crime watch, including their observation of the divers entering the van and the subsequent explosions, tied the couple to the bombing and Fernando’s
death. Although they had not confessed, the police knew they were involved in some way. But instead of locking the pair up, the police made a reservation for them in a nice hotel where they could stay before their flight back to Switzerland the next morning. The police were more than gracious, practically apologetic, to the couple. “Please, order room service, use the phone, anything you want. But please do not leave the room, and in the morning we will even drive you to your plane.”

Shortly after settling into their room, the couple made a phone call to the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, or DGSE. The DGSE is part of the French defense agency in charge of external paramilitary missions and counterintelligence. The couple apologized for missing their flight, and said that they would be on the next one. The police got it all down on tape. They had tapped the line.

The “Swiss couple” were, in reality, French intelligence agents: Captain Dominique Prieur and Major Alain Mafart. The New Zealand police arrested them immediately on passport fraud and immigration charges. Later they were also charged with arson, conspiracy to commit arson, willful damage, and murder. As part of a plea bargain, they pled guilty to manslaughter and were sentenced to ten years in prison (of which they served just over two).

The inquiry also found that a total of at least thirteen French agents had been involved. Operation Satanique (no translation necessary) was a large and complicated mission. The explosives had been smuggled into New Zealand in a moderate-size sailing yacht. Another French agent had infiltrated the Greenpeace office in New Zealand as a volunteer. She had kept the DGSE informed about our timing and plans. She had even used our phones to arrange for the boat and scuba gear used in the attack. Before the actual bombing,
the men who had sailed the yacht from New Caledonia to deliver the explosives had sailed back out and rendezvoused with a French nuclear submarine. The submarine had picked up the yacht’s crew and then scuttled the yacht. The resulting international scandal led to the resignation of French defense minister Charles Hernu. (The conspiracy went much higher than that. On the twentieth anniversary of the bombing and Fernando’s death, a Paris newspaper published a memo by French admiral Pierre Lacoste in which he declared that he had personally double-checked with President François Mitterrand and had gotten the green light for the attack.)

When the news hit that the French government was behind the bombing, the entire country of New Zealand rallied around us. Besides supporting our no-nukes advocacy, they were incensed that the French government had violated their sovereignty with a deadly attack on their soil. The Kiwis brought us clothes, and the car agency that had rented the van to the French agents even granted us use of two of their cars.

A few days later, I was in the courtroom watching the arraignment of the two agents. Unfortunately, I still didn’t have my glasses, so all I could see was fuzzy blobs. But I could hear the proceedings clearly, and while I was angry, it still felt surreal. Hell, it was surreal.

So what, exactly, had we done to threaten the French government so much? The answer is we were planning to stop a nuclear weapons test in Moruroa, the atoll in French Polynesia where—in the preceding twenty or so years—the French had already exploded dozens of nuclear weapons. As a result of their attack and the death of Fernando, I wasn’t about to let the French stop us. Going ahead with our protest was now more important than ever. If the French had attacked us, it was only because they were afraid of the effect we were having. We had seriously pissed them off, but that meant we
were making a difference. Rather than scare me off, this strengthened my resolve to fight for our environment.

Within two months, I was heading off to Moruroa, un-daunted in carrying out our plan to confront the French and their nuclear testing.