

Waves of Warning - Chapter Twenty Four

Surfsailing the Agulhas

The open ocean swells were twenty-five feet high out of the southwest every twenty seconds. The *Mother Carrie* was aligned bow-first into the wave trains and under half power to maintain her position. Launch conditions were optimal, and Frank Bucher had a green light from Ray Seranen to initiate the first phase of the Roaring Forties Regatta.

“Hey ho up and she rises -

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“Surfing the Agulhas!”

The crews of the *Alba_Swords* were singing lustily while putting their backs into turning the capstans connected to a series of pulleys to move their crafts from the cradles in each hull of the *Mother Carrie* to the launch zone amidships. The *Serena* was already in position aligned between the two hulls, hanging from overhead cables just above the water line, and pointed aft with her standing rigging locked down in the streamlined, “surfs up” position.

On the horizon, a wall of water appeared, followed by a dozen more.

“Initiate launch sequence,” came Frank Bucher’s voice over the loudspeakers.

The crew aboard the *Serena* double-checked their control systems and tightened the straps that held them firmly in their seats. They were ready for the takeoff. Now it was all in the timing.

The first swell rolled under the bow of the *Mother Carrie* and through the two hulls. The launch support crew saw the *Serena* was still a little too high, so they backed off their capstan half a turn, using the mechanical advantage of the system to precisely lower the *Serena* another three feet to be in perfect position for the next wave. It came under the bow and Bucher sang out.

“Launch!”

The release clamps disengaged. The *Alba_Sword* dropped into the water ahead of the slope as the wave rolled through the twin hulls. The *Serena* was lifted to the top of the wave and Captain Charles Atkins gave the propulsion units a short burst. She slid down the face and rode the wave between the hulls, under the aft transom bridge, and out to sea. Frank Bucher smiled for just a second. His son was now at sea in the Roaring Forties Regatta.

“Permission to be relieved of duty, Captain?” Bucher said to the *Mother Carrie*’s commander.

“Permission granted, Captain Bucher. And good surfing to ye!”

The morning sun was low on the horizon. After becoming seaborne, each Alba_Sword had submerged to bivouac depth about sixty miles out from the very southern tip of the African continent. The Alba_Swords were maintaining formation and waiting to begin surfsailing the Agulhas Current where the twenty second swell period would shorten to fifteen, pushing twenty-five foot swells into tubing forty footers. The *Mother Carrie* was well over the horizon. Once all the Alba_Swords had confirmed their system readiness, the mother hen had left her chicks to fend for themselves until, baring a scrub message from Ray Seranen, they would all rendezvous off the Kerguelen Islands a thousand miles and three days to the southeast.

“All vessels, surface.”

The low frequency Morse code message went out from the fleet’s flagship, the *Tom Swift*. The six Alba_Swords rose as one after a long set of swells had passed by overhead. The next wave train was fast approaching, but the crews still had time to double check everything.

Then the horizon to the southwest darkened. A large wall of deep blue water flecked with spray was moving towards the formation at about thirty miles an hour. The vessels were about fifty yards apart, their bows pointed to the east. The swell lifted them all simultaneously. About halfway up the slope of the forty foot swell, six captains hit their thrusters, and the Roaring Forties Regatta was officially under way.

“Can I get an engineering report, please?”

“Got it right now, Captain,” said Tak Kurosawa, “From bow to stern all systems integrity confirmed within specs. Nose cone sensor data stream and fleet network operational. Bandwidth capacity usage twenty-two percent. Pectoral hydraulics at full pressure. Hydrofoil deployment within spec. Forward impellers generating forty two p.s.i. per sec. Propulsion system pressurization on automatic. Forward tanks at capacity. Pectoral lateral thruster velocities within spec. Forward trim and ballast transfer times within spec. Standing rigging pressure point sensors all reporting. We need to deploy in adverse conditions to complete report.”

“Execute within the hour. Signal fleetcom our intent.”

“Roger that. Continuing report. Main thruster system end-to-end report as follows. Main impellers at ninety five p.s.i.”

Bucher smiled. Kurosawa spent another five minutes going through the checklist. Everything was up to spec. There were no anomalies to report. The wave train was beginning to feel the opposing force of the current, and everyone was ready for “cruise mode” to end. The *Tom Swift* was up to speed, and the Agulhas was dead ahead.

“Hey L.J.! It’s blowing offshore!”

“No it isn’t, Jack. The northeast wind is blowing straight against the southwest swell. Since we’re entirely offshore and out in the ocean, the wind isn’t blowing offshore. If the wind was behind us and following up on the swell, that would still be an offshore wind. The wind is blowing against the faces of the seas - -”

“You mean the waves.”

“Jack, we’ve gone through this time and again. We’re mariners, and we call ‘em seas, not waves. We’re riding a sea right now, not a wave.”

“Ok, but we’re surfing! Nobody surf’s a sea. And if the wind was at our backs, that is a following wind. If it’s in our faces - - -”

“Jack, what’s the big deal, man? You already know all this!”

“Yeah, but this is the real thing!”

“Jack, it was the real thing every weekend for the last two months!”

“C’mon, L.J., we’re not running up and down the coast of California. We’re not in the Channel. We’re ten thousand miles from home and getting further away all the time! I’m just excited, is all, L.J. Humor me.”

“Jack, we’re on watch in a minute. Let’s continue this on the bridge, ok?”

“Ok, it’s not offshore because we’re offshore. They are seas not waves, and I’m having the time of my life out here!”

“For what you paid for it, I hope so.”

“Please L.J., let’s not talk about money.”

“Huh? Could you say that again? Did I hear you correctly? Isn’t your name John Arthur Richards - - -”

“Watch change!” said Frank Bucher. Tak Kurosawa and Chip Bell came down through the hatch leading to the bridge.

“How’s it going, guys! Hope you’re not too stoked right now, cause if you are, you’re gonna explode up there!” advised a very animated Chip Bell.

“Red watch, where the hell are you guys?”

The conversation ended abruptly. No one wanted to be on the bad side of the Captain, ever, on any ship, throughout the history of the seven seas. Aboard an Alba_Sword was no exception.

“Merrill, take the helm. Richards co-pilot. Execute.”

The able-bodied passengers did exactly as they were told. L.J. Merrill slid into the helmsman’s seat from the starboard side as Frank Bucher vacated to port. It had been practiced endlessly back in California, and Merrill had it wired. He had to, as did they all. There was no room for error in controlling an Alba_Sword on a wave the size of three story building.

“Ok, boys, I’m going below. She’s all yours. Oh, and Merrill, try not to sink her this time, ok?”

The three men laughed at the reference to the shakedown cruise. After months of training and dozens of simulated emergencies, Frank Bucher knew his passengers were ready for the challenges ahead.

After an hour Jack Richards took the helm and for the first time in months, L.J. Merrill could finally let his guard down a little. It took almost twenty minutes to let go of the focus required at the helm, and he still had to remain alert as Richards’ co-pilot. But the fleet was in formation, all system checks had been performed, all the maneuverability tests passed, and Richards had turned out to be a better pilot than anyone expected.

The wind was blowing straight against them. The Tom Swift was at one end of the formation. The wave was beginning to subside since the leading swell of a wave train was always decaying while the physics of wave motion dictated the slow appearance of a new wave at the end of the train. Before the watch was over, the entire formation would execute a loop to pick up a stronger wave two or three swells behind them. But for now, everything was steady

state, and L.J. Merrill let his mind wander, like an albatross foraging across the trackless ocean, gliding on wave after wave, sometimes for a few seconds, sometimes for minutes. He floated above the events that had brought him to this point in his life and if he was mind-surfing his ocean.

The headland in Western Australia. The handshake with Clark. The library in Fiji. The porthole of the turbo-prop. His surfboards in the dumpster. His parents. The video camera under his bed. The Chapel. The crash of his high on a moonlit night in the Santa Barbara Channel. Standing next to Jack Richards hearing that they'd been accepted.

“Mr. Merrill, what depth?”

Richards had noticed a change in the handling of the *Tom Swift*. The wind was blowing more spray skyward. Forward speed had been reduced, yet the wave was now becoming noticeably more vertical.

“200 meter contour – continental shelf up ahead.”

“Prepare to receive exact surfsailing instructions. We're coming into it.”

“Aye-aye sir. Notifying watch below.”

“Captain! Helm reporting sea-change!”

“Aye-aye, Merrill. Blue watch, follow me to the cockpit. Red watch, stay up there. You'll want to see this.” Within minutes all five men were squeezed into the cockpit and it was time to get down to business.

“Where's the *Eden*?” asked Frank Bucher.

“Chasing the *Ostrova*, of course. They're about ten miles back. Picked up one of our albatross guides and decided to follow her while she forages.”

“Tube rides?”

“Three. Even a doubleup for the *Ostrova*. Those guys are laying into it, that's for sure.”

“Well Tak, good for them, but shall we show 'em how its done?”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

Chip Bell was riding shotgun to Tak's piloting, keeping an eye on the display showing the sea-surface topography for twenty miles all around them. In consort with the nosecone sensors in the other five *Alba-Swords*, the fleet shared a three dimensional, real time map of the sea state all around them as all the computers on the *Alba_Sword* exchanged information simultaneously. Bell was studying the sets ahead and astern to determine where the energy was focusing as the wave trains collided with the Agulhas Current. He knew what Bucher wanted to do, and he soon spotted just the place to do it.

“Tak, get us to port on my mark. Tight trim for about a minute. Then pull out and we'll jump wave to wave back out of this set. Frank, there's a big peak in the next set behind us. Just what you are looking for.”

“Thanks, Chip. Gentlemen, everyone strapped in tight?”

Jack Richards and L.J. Merrill nodded as if they were about to leave the loading zone of the heaviest roller coaster anyone could ever imagine.

“Mark!”

Tak Kurosawa laid her over into a sharp turn. The *Alba_Sword*'s starboard pectoral hydrofoil extended, the inside fin bit deep, and the *Tom Swift* came around on a dime. He went

high for a bit of speed, and then down to the trough for another bottom turn. He touched the thrusters for two seconds, and off they went, charging down the line trimmed up high and tight against the wall of water forty feet high propelling them forward.

Richards and Merrill were about to get their first taste of the power and speed of an *Alba_Sword* in full flight. Bucher turned around and grinned from ear to ear.

“Ok, Jack, time to start giving you your money’s worth. Take every tube you’ve surfed, roll ‘em all into one, and I’ve got you covered in about two minutes. That’s confirmed, Chip?”

“Affirmative, Frank. Here, take a look.”

Bell hit a button and the infrared image on his display was duplicated on the inside of the cockpit dome for all to see. He used a pointer on his screen to show the crew of the *Tom Swift* where they were going.

“There she is. Could be the wave of the day. And looks like we’ll be riding her three up.”

Two small icons were moving across the display coming in from different directions and obviously headed towards the same wave. The *Chicama* and the *Seeadler* had been soloing on the same set as the *Swift*. Once they saw the *Swift* change course, they quickly saw the wave Bell had identified and read Bucher’s mind perfectly.

“Oh man, are those guys gonna be on it, too?” asked L.J. Merrill.

“Sure, why not? These are not one-man tubes, or one-boat, I should say. C’mon, L.J., this is the fun part!”

L.J. Merrill smiled, a bit chagrined that, though the days as the lone surf scout were well behind him, he still had to get used to sharing the stoke of surfing freely without reservation.

“Kick out to port on my mark. Mark!”

Kurosawa hit the thrusters and brought the helm over. The *Tom Swift* went up the steep wall and came completely out of the water, all except her two rear stabilizers. She set down and immediately jettied towards the next wave in the set.

She went up the moving wall, banked off a graybeard cascade of white water, carved a bottom turn, and then another kickout. Kurosawa’s rhythm was perfect. They covered hundreds of yards in seconds. He repeated the process for the last two waves of the set. They came down easy after the last one and saw the Peruvians and the Germans coming up behind them into the flat zone between sets. All three *Alba_Swords* were in the right place at the right time.

The next set was maybe a third again as big as the swells they had been riding. In the set, the fourth wave looked to be the one they wanted. The current rushing against it was pushing up peaks like a row of pyramids as far down the wall of the wave as the eye could see.

The *Alba_Swords* came into formation as the captains of the *Chicama* and the *Seeadler* let the *Tom Swift* take the lead. Though nobody in OSOM ever claimed priority when it came to riding waves in the Roaring Forties, everyone was happy to defer to Frank Bucher on a wave like this, knowing he was always good for a lesson or two when it came to surfsailing the Agulhas.

The *Tom Swift* jettied forward, her crew pushed back into their seats. Kurosawa now had the peak in his sights. A check turn to port, then a hard carve to starboard. The swell rose up behind them and the *Swift* stalled a little until she was within ten feet of the peak. Kurosawa paused for a moment of rest at the top, then a touch on the thrusters, and down she went like a big rig truck on the first hill of a roller coaster. Richards and Merrill were completely terrified. The *Swift* was

going about sixty miles an hour at a fifty degree angle, the pectorals retracted for maximum speed. They didn't know what was going to happen next, but when they saw Bucher and Bell already leaning over, they quickly followed suit, using their legs to gimbal the seats at the most severe angle possible against the g-forces just as the *Swift* came to the trough. Kurosawa hit it on the button and the controls responded perfectly. The starboard pectoral fully extended and the *Swift* shot forward into a waiting cavern almost fifty feet high from top to bottom. He slowed her down a touch, and the sky disappeared above the *Tom Swift*.

Richards and Merrill were awestruck tourists entering a cathedral. The roof folded over the *Alba_Sword*. The tunnel was only open a few seconds, but it was long enough for the *Tom Swift* to squeeze through perfectly.

"Jack, L.J.! Take a look astern!" said Frank Bucher.

The wave re-formed, and another crest came over, collapsed, and spit out the *Chicama*. Ten seconds later it did it again, and out came the Germans. A triple tube, and everyone made it with room to spare, all on the same wave.

"Formation, Tak?"

"Yup, let the Germans lead. Frank, semaphore, if you please!"

Bucher tapped out the code for reverse field, tail boat becomes lead, execute at will. The bright semaphore light on the *Tom Swift* blinked on and off in a short series of dots and dashes. Confirming signals came immediately from the other *Alba_Swords*. The *Seeadler* turned hard back to starboard, followed almost simultaneously by the *Chicama* and the *Tom Swift*.

The wave was a monster almost four miles long, with peaks coming over and creating large caverns that enveloped the three boats time after time. For the next forty five minutes, the *Alba_Swords* went back and for the shredding the wave. Once or twice a boat was a little late on entry, resulting in a very wet exit. But forward momentum saved the day every time.

"Well, I wonder where they've been?" said Kurosawa.

The *Serena* suddenly pulled into the formation behind the Germans.

"Typical surfers! Always late!" laughed Chip Bell.

But Charles Atkins was having the last laugh as he signaled, "You shoulda been here an hour ago!"

Now there were four *Alba_Swords* carving turns and finding tunnels all up and down the line of a wave sixty feet high and three miles across. The Agulhas Current never stopped, and the wave continuously re-formed again and again until, after almost an hour, the swell began to lose some strength as subsequent waves in the train gained power and momentum.

"Gentlemen, anybody getting hungry?"

Frank Bucher felt it was time to grind and get in a nap before the afternoon session. Then it would be time for the able-bodied passengers to take a turn at the controls and see what kind of surfing they could do in a realm most surfers couldn't even dream of.

"Roger, that, Captain, unless someone wants to give it a go right now?" said Tak Kurosawa, directing his comments to L.J. Merrill and Jack Richards.

"Thanks, but we can wait till our watch this afternoon," said L.J.

"Yeah, I never thought I'd say it, but I've had enough tube rides for the moment," laughed Jack Richards.

“Signaling the formation,” said Frank Bucher.

Five minutes later, all four vessels were submerged inside the body of a fifty-footer, riding the core energy like broadbill swordfish. Inside each Alba_Sword, there was just the barest sensation of motion and indeed it was somewhat quiet except for the booming of the wave breaking again and again, and the focused conversations of the crews methodically re-counting the high points of their morning session of surfsailing the Agulhas. Specific maneuvers and tube rides were the topics, and the banter of good-natured, yet constructive criticism left everyone ready for more that afternoon.

“You know what that reminded me of, Frank?”

“Kinda like Waikiki or something, Jack?”

“Yeah, or San Onofre, or that place up in Ventura, what’s it called?”

“Yeah, Armandos.”

“That place. One wave, tons of turns, sections, this way, that way, reforming, getting steep, backing off.”

“But with twenty times the size, ten times the speed, and ride a wave for an hour, not a minute!” said L.J. Merrill.

The lowering sun was astern of the fleet, shining directly into the spray of the seas ahead. Richards and Merrill had surfed all afternoon, and now they could see dozens of rainbows in the spray ahead of them, lifting out of the back of the waves, dying and reforming to create a fantastic panorama with no equal anywhere else on earth. The six Alba_Swords had reformed into a delta formation on three waves, with the Aussies in the lead, followed by the two California boats, and the Peruvians, Germans, and Russians coming up behind. The formation was spread out across half a mile, and the rear boats could sometimes see the ones ahead sailing through the rainbow arcs. The symbolism was not lost on the mariners. It had been a rare day of perfect conditions in the Agulhas, and they were scheduled for more during the next forty eight hours.

Captain Cooper of the *Eden* signaled for fleet submersion. She peeled off her wave, did a large loop, and joined up with the second file. Cooper signaled her intent to repeat the maneuver. Both the California boats concurred. The three all looped out of their wave, timing their arcs to synch up with the following wave and insert themselves into perfect trim matching the speed of the *Chicama*, the *Seeadler*, and the *Ostrova*.

All six Alba_Swords were now on the same wave as the sun lowered behind them and the rainbows became fainter. There were two waves in the set behind them. On signal from the Aussies, all six looped back one wave, rode it for a hundred yards, and then looped back one more.

They were on the last wave of the set, and the next wave train was almost five miles behind them. A final signal from the Aussies, and the fleet of the Roaring Forties Regatta extended their forward pectoral units while beginning to fill their ballast tanks. The six Alba_Swords came to a rest and then, one by one, slowly submerged. By the time the next set of waves came through, the fleet was snug for the night after a day of surfsailing at its best.

Jack Richards and L.J. Merrill knew they'd just had a day of surfing unlike anything they'd ever known, but in contrast to the aftermath of countless surf sessions during years gone by, they were not chattering away about their experience. The silence of their shipmates was a reminder to the greenhorns that an unspoken tradition had to be upheld. To talk too much about their good luck and what they'd just experienced, or worse, to hope they'd be just as lucky tomorrow, was to incur a sailor's jinx that the seven seas never failed to inflict upon the greedy.

Throughout the fleet, the crews were all just as quiet, and no one dared speak of what the morrow might bring, one way or another. Two men, however, though keeping the tradition like all the other mariners, were indeed pondering the future. The captains of the *Serena* and the *Tom Swift* were no less exhilarated by the day they'd just had, but both Charles Atkins and Frank Bucher were thinking about what might await them if Ray Seranen could determine the true extent of the power building over Antarctica.



