

Captain Walt Lincoln

The Seven Year Sea Fort Affair

by David M. H. Butler

The ocean guards her secrets with a murderous grip. The innocent and mesmerizing beauty of her surface disguises the hostile environment that awaits the unprepared visitor to her depths. Even that point where sky and sea meet can form one of the greatest destroyers of those whose lives are better suited for more solid footing. And even technology, that great leveler of the playing field, can only hope to prolong one's stay in this watery treasure trove, but never conquer it.

It was a young boy and his grandfather that were granted a glimpse of the mysteries held in the arms of the Pacific one early summer day as their boat slowly swept back and forth, fishing lines set; awaiting the ring on one of the lines signaling a fish had taken the bait.

The ring of one of the lines brought the old man to his feet and he jumped to the pole anticipating the battle. Quickly he realized that it wasn't a fish that he had caught but something solid and immobile on the sea floor. This wasn't a common event, but they had dealt with it before. They could just cut the line but they had another plan they would try first.

The grandson donned a mask, flippers and a small scuba tank and jumped into the ocean. Setting up a bright orange buoy to mark his position, he started his slow descent into the arms of fate.



As he closed in on the end of the fishing line he suddenly realized that it was a man-made object that had caught the line and its proportions were that of a sunken ship. As he swam around it he could make out its shape more clearly. This wasn't a shipwreck: an antennae, some escaping air bubbles from a vent, and the shape of a vessel more akin to a rocket than a sea-going ship definitely pointed towards something much more intriguing.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery



Something warned him not to interfere with the vessel. He wasn't sure if it was a military installation or commercial. In this eerie undersea world he could almost believe it was from another planet. He decided to cut the line and head back to the surface.

His grandfather agreed, they would ask the coast guard if they knew what this was about and otherwise leave well enough alone.

* * *

Walt Lincoln was visiting with the local commander of the coast guard that morning when the call came in. He'd recently signed up to conduct some training classes and the two of them were working out some of the details. The mysterious vessel had the earmarks of an interesting diversion for Walt who thrived on investigating and solving mysteries.

"Is it something of yours?" asked Walt. "Some form of training vessel or ocean bottom monitoring device?"

"It's not on any official charts that we have." Commander Atwood replied, as his finger swept over a topographical map of the area. "I will have to put in some requests up the ladder to see if we'd be stepping on any toes, but in the meantime we can at least go and check it out."

"How would you feel, Bob," he asked the commander, "If I went out and took a closer look at this vessel. I can report my findings back to you and if it does turn out to be some NASA or government installation we can quietly drop the whole thing without the coast guard being officially involved."

"Walt, you are an old schemer." Atwood laughed. "But it is fine with me if you want to do the investigating. If you want one of our men to accompany you, just say the word."

Walt smiled. "Let me take a look and if things warrant it, I'll take you up on that."

* * *

As Walt's cabin cruiser bumped across the choppy water of the harbor heading for the open ocean, he speculated once again about the purpose of the vessel. Could it be a foreign government spy facility or maybe a downed aircraft? "I guess," he thought to himself, "I just have to go down and get a good look at it."

A buoy had been left to mark the general area, and Walt quickly found it. Dropping anchor he donned a 3/4 wet suit, and the rest of his scuba gear. He also had an underwater camera and a powerful lamp. Once in the water, he tested his regulator and, satisfied that it was working properly, began his descent.

It didn't take too long to reach the vessel. It sat in about 100 feet of water. Visibility was about 20 feet. As it loomed into site, Walt felt a tingle of excitement. He worked his way into a position to get a good angle on the ship and snapped a couple of photographs. He swam down to the base of the vessel. He avoided touching it, to keep from being detected, and swam slowly around the massive hulk looking for markings. He noticed that the antennae moved several times. He didn't detect any external markings. There also were no portholes or obvious entrance hatches, which seemed very odd to him.

There were signs that the vessel had been underwater for quite a while. There were some signs of oxidation on the surfaces, and sediments around the base hadn't been disturbed in quite some time. Walt tried to make some estimates but "more than three years and less than ten" was about the best he could come up with.

He noticed the antennae make another movement and he was struck with an idea.

"With a few bits of electronics I have on my cabin cruiser." Walt mused, "I can probably rig up something that lets me hear inside the capsule. At least enough to give me a clue as to whether anyone is in there and, with a bit of luck, why they are there."



It only took an hour for Walt to assemble the pieces he needed and get back down to the vessel. Carefully working so as not to make any noise he clamped the listening device to the hull and ran some wires up the side of the vessel, taping them at intervals, to act as an antennae.

* * *

Back on his cabin cruiser, Walt grabbed a sandwich and some juice from the galley and sat down at his radio to test out his equipment. At first there were just some unidentifiable sounds, maybe caused by onboard equipment, maybe someone moving. It was hard to tell. Walt adjusted the set to filter out most mechanical noises.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

Definitely one of the noises seemed to be footsteps, and another tapping-clicking sound that Walt tried to place. It would stop for several seconds and then restart with a rapid staccato. Then Walt heard his first voice. Actually just a whistle followed by a single “YES!” A different voice said, “What’s your score?”

“I’ll bet someone is playing some sort of computer game!” Walt laughed.

Another hour of listening and all Walt could really be certain of was that there were at least 3 people, his guess was 3 men, and that he was pretty sure he’d heard the name Lee or Leo. Things seemed to have settled down in the capsule and since the time was about 9:00 PM he guessed that the trio had gone to sleep.

Walt checked his weather channel and, seeing that a calm night was forecast, he called his wife Jackie to let her know he would be spending the night on the cabin cruiser.

“Walt, you are too much!” She teased him. “You leave to do a nice safe teaching job and turn it into an under sea mystery.”

Walt laughed. “I’ll update you tomorrow when I know a little more.”

After hanging up he set up a voice-activated recorder to capture any noises from the capsule. With things in good order he settled back with a book and, after reading a couple chapters, shut off the lights and turned in for the night.

* * *

The morning brought the clue that gave Walt his break-through. He plainly heard the words “One more day down, three weeks to go.” While he was mulling that statement over and trying to think what might be coming up in 3 weeks he heard someone say the phrase “Statute of Limitations.”

“Bingo!” he shouted. “That gives me something to work with. If these fellas committed some crime and are trying to thwart the justice system by remaining unfindable for 7 years that could provide an interesting scenario for what is going on down there. It also gives me a place to start some research.”

Walt’s shipboard Internet link wasn’t the fastest, but it would do the job. He set up his laptop and within a few minutes was connected to the central police records. As he typed his password he chuckled. He’d often been referred to as “Tall, Blond and handsome” and on a whim had made his password “shortdark&rumped.”

Walt knew he could focus his search around the 2 or 3 weeks either side of this time seven years ago. A bit of patience and few bits of intuition and he soon had his answer.

* * *

That afternoon at Coast Guard Commander Atwood's office, Walt laid out his findings and his theory.

"I found that there indeed was a major heist in San Diego just shy of 7 years ago. Two banks were robbed within minutes of each other. There were three men involved, they eluded the police and there wasn't even a good description of any of the men. Now something that gets real interesting is the next day a Marine construction firm reports that one of its project managers, a man that it was secretly investigating for embezzlement, has gone missing. There was no reason to connect the two incidents at the time.



But the guy's name was Leon Harrison. I heard someone say what I thought was Lee or Leo, maybe a nickname, maybe I just misunderstood."

"Your description and these photos you had developed tend to back up that idea. I mean, why else would someone build something like this without any visible means of entry or exit." Commander Atwood agreed.

"I'd like to continue on the case. I'd like to go back down and see if there isn't some way in." Said Walt, "But I was wondering if you would like to come along and check this out first-hand?"

Atwood picked up his phone. "Robin, this is Bob. Could you sit in on this afternoon's coastal waters meeting? Yeah? Great, thanks." Turning to Walt he replied, "You got yourself a partner!"

* * *

On their way back out to the site, they discussed different options for either getting into the vessel or tricking the people inside to come out.

"I wonder if there is anyway we could trick them into thinking the seven years was up? Maybe by adjusting their clocks, sending a phony radio transmission. Something like that." Atwood mused.

A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“Interesting idea,” replied Lincoln, “but they seem to have fairly sophisticated equipment on board. Even if it is seven years old, I’m betting they have some form of computer link and may even be tracking several external clocks. If they are smart they would add a day or two just to be sure.”

They were bobbing in the vicinity of the marker buoy and getting ready to go back down. As Walt picked up his air tanks he realized he hadn’t refilled his tank after the last dive and he started up his compressor to refill the tank. As the live-giving gas flowed into his tanks, Walt turned and looked at the Commander.

“You know...” he mused, “If they ran out of air suddenly, I would imagine that they would suddenly feel like cutting their stay short.”

“I think you may have hit on an idea. We had just better be very careful that we don’t kill those fellows. The Courts would not find that amusing.”

“Point taken.” Walt smiled.

* * *

Like a submarine, the men in the capsule had to regularly send up an air hose to replenish their tanks. Walt decided that if he could just fix it so that the hose wouldn’t work, that would be a safe way to scare the men out of the capsule. Surely they would have reserves, maybe aqualungs. But if their main supply suddenly broke down, they would have to act pretty quickly before those reserves got depleted.

Carrying a cargo sack with a few tools and some extra weights, the two divers plunged into the ocean. They did a quick check of each other’s equipment, gave each other the thumbs up sign and started down to the capsule. Once again, as they drew closer, the vessel seemed to materialize before their eyes. Enveloped in the grey-green depths it had more the look of a shipwreck rather than a living, working vessel.

Lincoln motioned towards the top of the vessel where several tubes stuck up from the capsule. They swam in closer paying attention for any viewing device such as camera or periscope. If they avoided touching the capsule or making much noise they hoped there would be no reason for the inhabitants to be watching them. Though there was always the possibility they were watching just out of boredom.

Spotting a periscope head they came in from behind it and decided to do their work from there. While Commander Atwood treaded water and prepared to hand over tools, Lincoln eased himself slowly into position next to the air hose.

Walt fastened a cap over the head of the hose and attached a white balloon as well. When they sent up the air hose, the balloon would make it easier to detect it. And then

they would be ready for whatever might ensue.

As they swam back to the surface, Walt wondered how long they might have to wait. It was his guess that they probably replenished once a day. But he couldn't be certain. His instincts told him they would wait for dark.

* * *

Like the last time Walt had listened in on them, things settled down about 9:00 PM and the balloon hadn't appeared and no signs of excitement came from below. Toward midnight Walt's listening device picked up activity inside the capsule. They heard some sort of hiss and a rattling sound and guessed that it was the sound of the men releasing the air hose and its unraveling from its housing.

They started sweeping the ocean with their searchlight looking for the balloon to confirm their suspicions. It took a while to locate the balloon since they weren't right over the vessel. So it was almost at the same time as they saw the balloon, they started hearing sounds of agitation come from the capsule.

Walt got his gear on.

"If you hear anything important, you can radio me." said Walt, " I won't be able to respond, but I want to get down there in case they have some back up air hose. I want to be able to react right away."

* * *

In the capsule all three men were on their feet standing in front of their computer. One of them was typing madly trying to figure out what was going wrong.

"The hose is at the proper height but the suction pressure seems to point to something blocking the aperture." He said.

"Jeez-us, Hal! What do we have for reserves?" asked one of the others, "Can we get the hose back inside and repair it?"

"That's what I'm going to do right now, Leon. I'll haul it all the way in and we can see what's up. We've got easily 5 hours of air in our tanks, and then another hour in our aqua lungs."



A Captain Lincoln Mystery

“Let’s hope this can be repaired. But just in case, Tom make sure our re-entry vehicle is ready for the worst case scenario.”

* * *

Walt heard a crackle over his head set. He was floating just next to the hose watching for activity.

“Walt. I just heard them say something about hauling the hose in for repairs. They also mentioned aqua-lungs. But like all the messages we are getting everything is a bit fuzzy. I also heard someone say Leo or Leon.”

If they could haul the hose in and repair it, that would foil Walt’s plan. He needed to do something to keep that from happening. He pulled out a screwdriver from his utility belt and headed down to the capsule. Reaching the port where the hose was being pulled back in, he wedged the screwdriver between the hose and the side of the hole. The hose made a jerk as it came to a halt. To assure that the hose would go no further, he clamped down on the hose with a pair of vise grips, catching both the hose and the screwdriver in the jaws of the tool.

Walt felt the men would be more likely to exit the craft if they didn’t realize someone was there, so he moved away from the vessel to avoid detection.

“Whoa!” came the voice over his radio link. “I’m not sure what you did, but you sure stirred up a bee’s nest down there!”

Walt smiled to himself and headed back up to the boat.

* * *

“Now the hose it jammed!” cried the man named Hal. “I can’t get it to play back out or come all the way in.”

“Okay, Okay. Let’s not panic.” Leon commanded. “Our time is almost up. I say we head back to the surface and get ourselves back to shore while its still dark and find a safe house for the next couple weeks. If necessary we’ll make repairs later.”

“I’m with you, Leon.” Said Tom, “ I’ve had enough of these little scares and this eternal wait.”

“Sonar does show a boat in the area.” Hal called out to the other two who were already moving towards the escape vehicle. “I’d feel a whole lot better if they weren’t there.”

“We have to take the chance.” Leon said. “We’ll guide the escape vehicle at an angle to the surface to keep us from coming up near them. We need the darkness of night to get to shore safely.”

“Well, I’m bringing a gun. We’ve been here too long to want to be captured now!” Hal retorted.

* * *

As Lincoln climbed into the boat, Atwood was there to meet him.

“I’ve called in some support from one of my coast guard teams. It will take them about half an hour to get here. Meanwhile, I heard these guys say that they had seen us on sonar.”

“Luckily we didn’t anchor right over them.” Lincoln said. “Still, I can see that they might try to wait for us to leave.”



“Oh no!” Atwood laughed, “They are pretty anxious to go. I heard them say they wanted to get out under cover of the night “

They headed back into the cabin. The radio attached to the listening device on the undersea vessel gave a couple cracking noises. It sounded like they had set off some charges.

“Let’s get the sonar tracking these guys.” Lincoln shouted, jumping to the controls. Adjusting the settings he pointed to the screen and added. “There! Something separated from the main vessel. She’s moving off in an east-south-easterly direction.

* * *

It was only a matter of 5 minutes before the escape vessel broke the surface. Lincoln and Atwood had tried to hang back as much as possible so as not to attract their quarry’s attention. But as soon as they were visible they brought the cabin cruiser up to within hailing distance and shown the spotlight on them.

Using a bullhorn, Lincoln hailed the small craft. “Leon Harrison. This is the Coast Guard. We know who you and your friends are. Give yourselves up!”

In the escape vessel, Hal pulled out his gun. “We can’t out run these guys. We have to take them out.”

A Captain Lincoln Mystery



Walt could see the nose of the gun. He wondered if they could be so crazy as to add to their crimes and that gave him an idea for his next hail.

“Don’t make it worse, guys. You’ve already served a self-imposed seven-year sentence. There is no statute of limitations on murder.”

Leon reached over and took the gun from Hal. “He’s right boys, we’re licked.”

It was a dejected group of three men, nearly in tears that were lead onto the Coast Guard cutter a quarter hour later.

* * *

The next morning after searching both the escape vessel and the underwater sea fort they found the bulk of the money that had been stolen from the banks. The thieves had decided to leave it in their fort as an added precaution, not knowing for sure that anyone knew of the forts whereabouts. They had only taken a couple thousand to use for finding a safe house.

The Marine construction firm was notified and they confirmed that the materials used to built the fort were ones that Leon Harrison had quietly been diverting for his own use.

Walt sat on the gunnel of his cabin cruiser staring out over the sea and trying to imagine the mind-numbing sameness that each day must have been like for the three men. And that by comparison jail might be a breeze. Of course they wouldn’t have all the money from the bank robbery waiting for them when they got out. He stood up. The ocean wasn’t going to give him the answer; it was time to go home.

The End

Written: July / August, 2000. Adapted from Book 380 written in summer of 1967.

Thanks to Robin Nelson, whose interest in Captain Lincoln inspired me to revisit my old friend and to Bob Bringhurst who gave me some pointers on the world of scuba.