

Shot by a Laser

An invisible beam flashed up from the Russian ship ... and into the eyes of the helicopter crew

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

THE SEA WAS CALM ON Friday, April 4, 1997, as a Canadian Armed Forces CH-124 Sea King helicopter skimmed across the 15-mile-wide strait separating Washington State from Canada's Vancouver Island.

"Looks like we've got a boomer on the surface," pilot Capt. Patrick Barnes announced on the intercom.

Sitting on the flight deck, U.S. Navy Lt. Jack Daly radioed back, "Let's take a look." Barnes swung the Sea King toward the "boomer"—the Trident submarine *USS Ohio*, armed with 192 nuclear warheads and headed toward the Pacific Ocean.

THEN, IN THE DISTANCE, Barnes spotted a suspicious freighter. Leaning out the Sea King's open door, Daly looked through the viewfinder of his powerful digital camera. He recognized the white-and-sky-blue insig-

nia of the Far East Shipping Company (FESCO), on the smokestack. The ship's name was painted on the stern in Cyrillic characters. "That's her, all right."

Daly was directing a joint U.S.-Canadian mission to monitor Russian spy ships, and *Kapitan Man* was one of several vessels suspected of tailing American submarines and aircraft-carrier groups in the Pacific. (FESCO denies *Kapitan Man* is a spy ship.) In the event of war, sinking those subs and carriers would be a top Russian priority.

Daly aimed his surveillance camera at unusually large antenna arrays above the ship's bridge. As he began squeezing the shutter, there was a flash from below the bridge that was captured on his film: a red halo with a yellow ring inside, and a white center.

The helicopter took a few passes over the ship, then returned to a nearby airfield before heading to Esquimalt, a military base on Vancouver Island. Daly handed the camera to Chief Petty Officer Scott Tabor, a highly trained imagery analyst, to process and interpret the photos. He went to his office to prepare for an upcoming conference, then returned to see the pictures.

Tabor rushed out of his lab. "Lieutenant, are you having any problems with your eyes?"

"Well, yeah," Daly replied. "My right eye is sore."

"Do you have a headache?"

"Actually, I do—on the right side of my head. Why?"

Tabor showed him one of the pictures—the one with the halo. "The



Coverup—The U.S. government refuses to acknowledge the cause of Daly's injuries.

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signature of this light doesn't look right. I think you may have caught a laser. Get your eyes examined."

Lased: the high-tech terror of all airmen. A laser beam passing through the lens of the eye can burn the retina just as sunlight focused through a magnifying glass burns a hole in a leaf. Daly knew that the Russians had developed lasers to disable or destroy the eyesight of enemy pilots.

Even so, Daly was doubtful. The Russians would never try that in peacetime. The U.S. government wouldn't stand for it. But as he drove home that night, oncoming headlights shot needles of pain through his eyes. He made it to a local hospital, where a doctor instructed him to see a specialist the following day.

Daly awoke to intense pain the next morning, and in the bathroom mirror saw that the bottom of his swollen right eyeball had been bleeding. Later helicopter pilot Pat Barnes called. "Jack, my right eye is all screwed up!" Daly felt a wave of dread as Barnes told him, "I found a blob of blood in the white of my eye."

"Pat," Daly replied, "get to a doctor. I think we've been lased."

The Canadian and American military chains of command were notified of a possible hostile lasing. A secret message to the Pentagon contained these words: "Impact: incident took place inside U.S.A. territorial waters." Canadian authorities were warned that, "given the nature

of incident, media interest could be high if details were to become public knowledge."

At the Pentagon, the Operations Directorate of the Joint Chiefs of Staff quickly handed the matter to the State Department and the National Security Council (NSC). But White House policy was apparently to avoid embarrassing Russia. James Collins, a career State Department official whom President Clinton would name ambassador to Moscow, along with the NSC, spearheaded the effort to come up with a response. Collins personally delivered a diplomatic protest—but verbally, in secret.

They would never try that in peacetime, he thought. The U.S. government wouldn't stand for it.

BY THIS TIME the U.S. Coast Guard had tracked the *Kapitan Man* to the port of Tacoma. The State Department was reluctant to detain the ship; only under Pentagon pressure did it agree to a search. But according to testimony by Lieutenant Daly and Canadian military documents, the Russian embassy in Washington was notified that a search party would board the vessel the following afternoon, giving the Russians nearly 24 hours' warning.

The *Kapitan Man* is 570 feet long, 80 feet wide and 35 feet deep, and the Coast Guard told the Pentagon that

U.S. Customs and Immigration authorities discovered hidden caches of equipment that could be used for submarine detection.

In response to unwelcome press attention, the Pentagon readied its own report. According to Daly's testimony, the head of the team writing the report had no experience in lasers, but ONI's sole analyst with laser expertise was told to stay out of the investigation. Key witness Patrick Barnes was not interviewed. The Navy says the team was qualified.

The report's concluding statement, released to the press in June 1997, was blunt: "ONI cannot link the eye damage to the surveillance of the *Kapitan Man*." The red light "has been conclusively established to be the port running light." In broad daylight? Buried in the text, in a paragraph not made public, the report said the laser "cannot be conclusively ruled out."

Then Pentagon spokesman Bacon released a copy of Daly's photo of the *Kapitan Man*. Blurry and darkened, the running light no longer had the telltale yellow ring and white center. Now it looked like a running light.

DALY WAS ORDERED to see more doctors. One Navy physician said the pain in his head and eyes was caused by migraines, diagnosing him incorrectly with Graves' disease. Daly says he was ordered to lie to another doctor—telling the man he didn't know how he got his eye injury. The Navy denies this.

to become a civilian helicopter pilot. He will never fly again.

As for Jack Daly, his career has nose-dived. Year after year his fitness reports had been outstanding: "One of the premier aviation intelligence officers in the Navy today." "Honest, forthright. Superlative naval officer with a brilliant future." Repeatedly he was recommended for promotions.

Since the *Kapitan Man* episode, Daly's performance reviews declined. One supervisor complained he took too much time off for medical exams; another said he was not being cooperative enough with the extra exams designed to refute the diagnosis of laser injury. He was accused of leaking classified information to the press. To protect himself, Daly retained a lawyer, 24-year Navy veteran Robert B. Rae.

Because he has spoken about a coverup, Daly has been pressured to have a psychiatric evaluation—"a tool to do him in," according to his attorney. On Rae's advice, Daly refused. Now, just three years from retirement, he's been passed over twice for promotion, and under standard Navy policy must leave the service. Without a medical discharge, the Navy won't have to treat him any longer for his condition.

Daly, like Barnes, is plagued with

eye pains and headaches. "Some days he feels like he's been hit in the right side of his face with a baseball bat," says his wife, Wendy. On other days "the pain is like someone stabbing him in the eyeball with an ice pick."

AND SO, EVERY FIVE WEEKS the *Kapitan Man* sails into Puget Sound, past the Navy's carrier base in Bremerton and the Trident submarine base in Bangor. After a day or so it steams back to Russia, passing the routes of American submarines. FESCO says the Pentagon's investigation found nothing to support the allegations against its ship.

In any event, our vulnerability to espionage should be apparent. But as Rep. Duncan Hunter (R., Calif.) notes, the Clinton Administration "does not concede the obvious: Russian anti-submarine-warfare ships have the run of U.S. territorial waters near some of America's most important submarine bases."

Meanwhile, the American and Canadian militaries have left Daly and Barnes to twist in the wind. "You know you might take one for the home team some day," Daly told Readers Digest. "But you don't expect the team to leave you alone on the field."

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AIRS APPARENT

License plate on a Swedish sports car spotted in an upscale Connecticut neighborhood: "SNAAB." —Contributed by CONNIE BRANCATO

a complete search would take two to three days. Nevertheless, according to Congressional testimony, State gave the Navy and Coast Guard two hours—with all but the ship's "public areas" off-limits to the search party. The State Department denies that any restrictions were imposed.

On board, the crew refused to open the ship's locked library. The second mate claimed he couldn't find the key. Following a confrontation with the crew, the chief inspector, a lieutenant, gave up.

After the "search," the Pentagon wanted the *Kapitan Man* detained until tests were completed on the helicopter crew. The State Department and NSC overruled the military, ordering that the ship be allowed to return to Russia with no further inspections. After midnight, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Collins and two other Administration appointees had a private teleconference "to decide the issue," according to a secret memorandum. Talbott and Collins won't say what they decided, but the result was clear: the Russians would not be publicly accused of lasing.

The Navy, meanwhile, had rushed Daly and Barnes to the U.S. Army Medical Research Detachment at Brooks Air Force Base in San Anto-

nio, Texas; a team headed by Dr. David Scales, one of the world's top laser eye injury experts, was waiting. The initial exam found a string of tiny dotlike lesions across Daly's retina—evidence, in the words of the medical report, that there was a "high probability" of "multiple laser exposures." A follow-up evaluation found that Daly's complaints of eye and head pain "are consistent with those reported following laser exposure during flight." After more tests Dr. Scales found "the injury is permanent and may be progressive as well." Barnes, too, was found to have been lased.

Later Daly read the Coast Guard/Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) boarding report. He was shocked that critical areas of the *Kapitan Man* had not been searched. In a heated conversation, one officer told him, "You don't know the pressure I'm under just to sweep this thing under the rug." The officer denies saying this.

BUT THE MATTER could be kept under wraps for only so long. Six weeks after the episode, someone leaked the news to Washington *Times* national-security correspondent Bill Gertz, who later published the telltale State Department documents in his book *Betrayal*.

As CNN, newspapers and wire services jumped on the story, Clin-

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Grounded—Canadian helicopter pilot Capt. Patrick Barnes will never fly again.

Nicholas Burns admitted that a medical report on Daly and Barnes "determined that there was a laser shot at the helicopter," but "we don't know from whom."

Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon told reporters that "upon examination, many naval and intelligence officers believe the red dot is the port running light." But a military memorandum to the Canadian Minister of National Defense obtained by Reader's Digest states unequivocally, "The analysis eliminated the possibility that the light source was benign, e.g., port running light, and suggests a red laser produced the flash shown on the photo."

And other ambiguities were suggested. Two anonymous Pentagon officials, for example, expressed their view that the *Kapitan Man*'s presence so close to an American nuclear submarine "was probably just a coincidence." A nameless White House source insisted that the *Kapitan Man* wasn't a spy ship at all: "It's a normal cargo vessel. It's absolutely legitimate."

In fact, the vessel had long been suspected of espionage. And a few years earlier, an unrelated search by

State Department spokesman Patrick Barnes will never fly again. ton Administration officials applied "spin": the Russians could not be blamed. One NSC spokesman told reporters, "There is reason to believe that a laser was pointed at them and they suffered temporary eye damage." Temporary? Other officials speculated that the laser was a range finder to help the *Kapitan Man* crew determine how far the helicopter was from the ship.

State Department spokesman