The Whale Warriors

Would you give your life for a whale? For a determined crew on a tiny ship at the bottom of the world, the answer is easy.

By Peter Heller   Photo by Paul Taggart

COMMITTED TO THE CORE: Joel Capolongo (far right) and other members of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society prepare to confront the 8,000-ton Japanese whaling ship Nisshin Maru.

hat woke me at 3 a.m. on Christmas morning was the bow of the ship plunging off a steep wave and smashing into the trough. The hull shuddered like a living animal, and when the next roller lifted the stern, I could hear the prop pitching out of the water, beating the air with a juddering moan that shivered the ribs of the 180-foot (55-meter) converted North Sea trawler. We were 200 miles (322 kilometers) off the Adélie Coast, Antarctica, in a force 8 gale. The storm had been building since the previous morning. I lay in the dark and breathed. Something was different. I listened to the deep throb of the diesel engine two decks below and the turbulent sloshing against my bolted porthole, and felt a quickening in the ship.

Fifteen days before, we had left Melbourne, Australia, and headed due south on the Farley Mowat, the flagship of the radical environmental group the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. The mission of her captain, Paul Watson, and his 43-member, all-volunteer crew was to hunt down and stop the Japanese whaling fleet from engaging in what they considered illegal commercial whaling. Watson had said before the trip, "We will nonviolently intervene." But judging by the preparations conducted over the past week, it seemed he was readying for a full-scale attack.

I dressed quickly, grabbed a dry suit and a life jacket, and ran up three lurching flights of narrow stairs to the bridge. Dawn. Or what passed for it in the never night of Antarctic summer. A murky gloom of wind-tortured fog mingled with blowing snow and spray. White eruptions tore off the tops of the waves and streamed their shoulders in long streaks of foam. The sea was chaos. When I had gone to sleep four hours earlier, the swells were 20 feet (6 meters) high and building. Now monsters over 30 feet (9 meters) rolled under the stern and pitched the bow wildly into a featureless sky. The timberwork of the bridge groaned and creaked. The wind battered the thick windows and ripped past the superstructure with a buffeted keening.

Watson, 55, with thick, nearly white hair and beard, wide cheekbones, and packing some extra weight underneath his exposure suit, sat in the high captain's chair, on the starboard side of the bridge, looking alternately at a radar screen over his head and at the sea. He has a gentle, watchful demeanor. Like a polar bear. Alex Cornelissen, 38, his Dutch first officer, was in the center at the helm, trying to run with the waves. Cornelissen looks too thin to go anywhere cold, and his hair is buzzed to a near stubble.

"Good timing," Cornelissen said to me with the tightening of his mouth that is his smile. "Two ships on the radar. The closest is under two miles (three kilometers) off. If they're icebergs, they're doing six knots."

"Probably the Nisshin Maru and the Esperanza," Watson said. "They're just riding out the storm." He was talking about the 8,000-ton factory ship on which the Japanese butcher and pack the harpooned whales, and Greenpeace's flagship, which had sailed with its companion boat the Arctic Sunrise from Cape Town more than a month before and had been shadowing and harassing the whalers for weeks. Where the five other boats of the Japanese whaling fleet had scattered in the storm, no one could say.

I stared at the green blips on the main radar screen. Was it possible? Had Watson found, in hundreds of thousands of square miles of Southern Ocean, his prey? It seemed against all odds, even with the recon helicopter he'd picked up in Hobart, Tasmania, on his way south. Even with the Antarctic storm that was now veiling his approach from the unwary whalers. Even with the informer onboard the Esperanza who had secretly relayed the fleet's general position to Watson just two nights before. Because in those two days the fleet could have sailed 500 miles (805 kilometers) away. I looked at Watson in his red exposure suit and began to pull on my own. Watson turned to Cornelissen. "Wake all hands," he said.
In 1986 the International Whaling Commission (IWC), a group of 66 nations that makes regulations and recommendations on whaling around the world, enacted a moratorium on open-sea commercial whaling in response to the fast declining numbers of the Earth's largest mammals. The Japanese, who have been aggressive whalers since the food shortages following World War II, immediately exploited a loophole that allows signatories to kill a certain number of whales annually for scientific research.

In 2005, Japan, the only nation other than Norway and Iceland with an active whaling fleet, decided to double their "research" kill from the previous year and allot themselves a quota of 935 minke whales and ten endangered fin whales. In 2007 they plan to kill 50 fins and 50 endangered humpbacks. Their weapon is a relatively new and superefficient fleet comprising the 130-meter (427-foot) factory ship Nisshin Maru, two spotter vessels, and three fast killer, or harpoon, boats, similar in size to the Farley Mowat.

Lethal research, they say, is the only way to accurately measure whale population, health, and response to global warming and is essential for the sustainable management of the world's cetacean stocks. The director general of Japan's Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), Hiroshi Hatanaka, writes, "The legal basis [for whaling] is very clear; the environmental basis is even clearer: The marine resources in the Southern Ocean must be utilized in a sustainable manner in order to protect and conserve them for future generations." Though the ICR is a registered nonprofit and claims no commercial benefit from its whaling, critics scoff, pointing out that the meat resulting from this heavily subsidized research ends up in Tokyo's famed Tsukiji Fish Market and on the tables of fancy restaurants. By some estimates, one fin whale can bring in 1.5 million dollars.

Each year the IWC's scientific committee votes on whaling proposals, and at its annual meeting last June, it narrowly passed a resolution that "strONGLY urGED" Japanese whalers to obtain their scientific data "using nonlethal means." The whalers' response was silence, then business as usual.

While this resolution is not legally binding, much of the public was outraged that the whalers would patently disregard it. The World Wildlife Fund contended that all the research could be conducted more efficiently with new techniques that do not kill whales. New Zealand's minister of conservation, Chris Carter, among others, called the Japanese research blatant commercial whaling. Even dissenters within Japan protested: Greenpeace Japan's Mizuki Takana pointed to a 2002 report by the influential Asahi newspaper in which only 4 percent of the Japanese surveyed said they regularly eat whale meat; 53 percent of the population had not consumed it since childhood. "It is simply not true that whaling is important to the Japanese public," Takana said in a statement. "The whaling fleet should not leave for the Antarctic whale sanctuary."

To Watson there is no debate: The Japanese whalers are acting commercially under the auspices of "bogus research" and therefore are in violation of the 1986 moratorium. Even more contentious, the whaling occurs in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary, an internationally ordained preserve that covers the waters surrounding Antarctica as far north as 40° S and protects 11 of the planet's 13 species of great whales. While research is permitted in the sanctuary, commercial whaling is explicitly forbidden. The whalers are also in clear conflict with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). And though the killing area lies entirely within the Australian Antarctic Territory, the Australians, while protesting, seem to lack the political will to face down a powerful trading partner. It irks Watson that Australian frigates will eagerly pursue Patagonian toothfish poachers from South America in these same waters, but will turn a blind eye to the Japanese whalers.

"It sends a message that if you're rich and powerful, you can break the law. If the Australian Navy were doing its job," he says, "we wouldn't be down here."

Watson has no such diplomatic compunctions. He says: "Our intention is to stop the criminal whaling. We are not a protest organization. We are here to enforce international conservation law. We don't wave banners. We intervene."

Whaling fleets around the world know he means business. Watson has sunk eight whaling ships. To the bottom of the sea. By 1980 he'd single-handedly shut down pirate whaling in the North Atlantic by sinking the notorious pirate whaler Sierra in Portugal and two of the four ships in the Spanish whaling fleet, the Isba I and Isba II. He sank two of Iceland's whalers in Reykjavik harbor and three of Norway's whaling fleet at dockside. To his critics he says: "I don't give a damn what you think. My clients are the whales and the seals. If you can find me one whale that disagrees with what we're doing, we might reconsider."

Watson's ship radiates both nobility and menace. The ship is black, stern to stern, and it flies under a Jolly Roger. The only color is a nod to public relations—the yellow letters on the side of the ship that spell seasearcher.org. Forward of the bridge, the Farley is low-slung, and the main deck holds three fast Zoarcas, or inflatable outboard motorboats, and two Jet Skis in their cradles. In the old fish hold beneath the deck, under a steel door, is a flying inflatable boat, or Fib, a kind of Zodiac with ultralight wings and a motor, which Watson hoped to use for reconnaissance. From the main deck, the bow sweeps up to a gracefully rounded bludgeon of black steel. The hull is ice reinforced, meaning strong enough to push through moderately thick ice, and ideal for ramming. Water cannons bristle off the bow and the aft helicopter deck. They are there to prevent unwanted boarding.

Four days out of Melbourne, the Farley's two welders got busy and began to build something that looked to me like a giant blade. It was. It was called the "can opener," and it was constructed with steel I beams and welded to the starboard bow; a seven-foot (2-meter), razor-sharp cutter designed to gut the hull of an enemy ship.

I think it was then that I realized my assignment was not a game. Watson takes great pride in having never injured anyone, neither his crew members nor anyone else. The ships he has sunk have all been in port. He insists, "We are nonviolent. We disable property used in criminal activities." But his critics include prominent members of the mega-environmental organization Greenpeace, which Watson co-founded in 1972 and whose board he left five years later because, he says, "they wanted to 'bear witness' and protest. I didn't want to protest anymore. There were international laws, regulations, and treaties I wanted to enforce." Watson's dark eyes flash. "I once called them the 'Avon ladies of the environmental movement' and they never forgot it. It was a reference to their armies of door-to-door fundraisers."

Watson didn't want to lead a large bureaucracy that spent much of its energy raising money and waving banners. He wanted to get in a ship and physically intervene. He said of the Antarctic campaign, "Greenpeace has a fast ship that could stop the whalers cold. I can't see watching whales being tortured and dying in abject agony while I 'bear witness.'"

In 1977 Watson started the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and for the past 25 years has been running almost continuous
campaigns at sea to stop illegal whaling, drift netting, long-lining, dolphin slaughters, and sealing. The Washington State-based organization spends no money on fund-raising but gets donations through media attention and word of mouth. Pierce Brosnan, Martin Sheen, and Christian Bale are generous supporters, as are John Paul DeJoria, CEO of the Paul Mitchell hair products company; Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia; and Steve Wynn, Las Vegas hotel and casino operator. Watson quipped, "With James Bond, the President, and Batman on my side, how can I lose?"

We sailed out of Melbourne on the morning of December 10, and it didn’t take long for me to realize that the campaign was quixotic, even anachronistic. The 50-year-old Farley was ready for retirement and could average only a paltry ten knots. She crawled and rolled into the roaring forties. The ship’s first engineer, Canadian Trevor VanDerGulik, ran a test of the water cannons and one dribbled, while the standpipe of another burst, gushing water over the bridge. I looked more closely at the crew. Three of the deckhands, Justin, Jeff, and Joel—"We’re the J Crew," they’d told me—would be among the frontline soldiers in any battle. Though they were brave and dedicated animal rights activists, they’d never been to sea and were prostrate with motion sickness on the two-day run to Tasmania.

Not to say that some of the crew weren’t skilled and experienced. Chris Aultman, the helicopter pilot from Orange County, California, was a tried and excellent pilot when taking off from solid ground—he’d just never flown off a moving deck. VanDerGulik, Watson’s nephew, was a master ship’s engineer used to supervising large dry-dock repairs with 500 mechanics under him. Marc Oosterwal, another Dutchman, was a top-notch welder. And Dave DeGraaff was a master electrician from Melbourne and a shop steward for his union, responsible for dozens of electricians. He and other workers had seen the Farley docked from a high-rise construction site nearby and got curious. DeGraaff took a tour of the ship and promptly signed on. Soon more construction unions in Melbourne were lining up behind Sea Shepherd, and thousands of dollars’ worth of steel, welding rods, and expensive rubber for the heli-deck was showing up daily.

As for other crew members, the razor edge of their commitment scared me a little. Allison Lance Watson, the captain’s wife, a lean 48-year-old blonde from Orange County who had once been married to an outlaw biker, had recently gone before a grand jury in connection with the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a radical animal rights group that is in the sights of the FBI’s domestic antiterrorism units. She refused to talk but was charged with perjury. Two years ago, she and first mate Cornelissen were arrested for leapfrogging with knives into a frigid, net-caged bay in Taiji, Japan, where locals corral and slaughter an estimated 23,000 dolphins every year. They freed some dolphins and were promptly carted off by police. Both claim they would sacrifice their own lives for the life of a whale without hesitation. Julie Farris (whose alias, or “forest name,” as she calls it, is Inde) was a 26-year-old deckhand who, in her other life, spends weeks at a time dangling 150 feet (46 meters) up in Douglas-fir trees as part of Earth First actions against logging. Many of the crew had been arrested while protesting in support of their beliefs. It was a committed bunch. Oh, and the food, three meals a day, was strictly vegan. No meat, no cheese, no eggs. One cold morning I loaned the gentle 22-year-old cook, Laura Dakin, a pair of shoes. A former Australian equestrian endurance rider, she had come to the Antarctic with only flip-flops, a flowing print skirt, and a lip ring. Before taking them, she asked, "Are they vegan?"

The Sea Shepherd’s courage and rashness began to dawn on me. Watson was taking this rusting hulk into the most dangerous, remote seas on Earth to wage a kind of war. A place where a man overboard had minutes to live. Half of his troops had no training at all. Before leaving, his only plan for finding the Japanese whaling fleet in the vast Southern Ocean was to run helicopter reconnaissance flights and hope crews supplying the various Antarctic research stations would give him intel. Contact with Greenpeace’s two pursuit ships was the best hope, but the organization responded to Watson’s repeated pleas for cooperation by keeping its ships’ coordinates off its Web site. Watson believed it was a deliberate attempt to foil him and his radical methods.

What Greenpeace wasn’t counting on was that some of the rank and file onboard their ships were also frustrated and disgusted by what they were witnessing every day. The killing of a whale by the most modern methods is cruel beyond description. An exploding harpoon, meant to kill quickly, rarely does more than rupture the whale’s organs. The animal thrashes and gushes blood and begins to drown in its own hemorrhage. It is winched to the side of the harpoon ship, a probe is jabbed into it, and thousands of volts of electricity are run through the animal in an attempt to kill it faster. The whale screams and cries and thrashes. If it is a mother, its calf swims wildly beside her, doomed to its own motherless death later on. Often the electricity fails to dispatch the whale, so it takes 15 to 20 minutes of this torture before it drowns and dies. No matter what one thinks of whales’ high intelligence, the advanced social structures, the obvious emotions, and the still mysterious ability to communicate over long distances, this method of slaughter would not be allowed as standard practice in any slaughterhouse in the world. This is what the Greenpeace crew had been watching day after day and were constrained from stopping. One of the crew had had enough and began to e-mail Watson with sporadic updates of the fleet’s position.

This is how Watson knew, within a few thousand square miles, where the fleet might be on Christmas morning.

At 3:50 a.m. on Sunday, December 25, 220 miles (354 kilometers) north-northeast of Antarctica’s Adélie Coast, the Farley labored up the back of a 35-foot (11-meter) wave and plunged down the other side. Green water poured over the bow and flew up in a white explosion that battered the windows. We were running with the gale. It howled out of the south-southeast. The ship creaked like frozen trees in a blow. I was wedged against a small chart table and a bulkhead on the port side of the bridge, straining to see into the fog and thinking that my family on the other side of the dateline was just now gathering for Christmas Eve lunch. In the midst of the storm’s fury, an intense and eerie quiet had come over the bridge. After many months of preparation and planning, Watson was sneaking up on two vessels in a vast, empty sea in a near hurricane. The radio was silent. No one spoke. Hunter had become hunted and the bridge held the taut expectation of ambush.

Ahead I saw a dark shape in the murk. It was Greenpeace’s Esperanza, a former Russian fire-fighting ship, moving slowly with the waves, under seven knots, riding out the storm. As we closed and passed, I could see the bright blue of her hull and her festive rainbow paint job. She looked like the Life Aquatic ship on steroids. We left her behind and she was swallowed in the fog.

A few minutes later we saw it. Through the mist the huge bulk of the factory ship. First just a dark shape, then the spillway ramp cut into her stern where they winched up the dead whales, the tall white superstructure of her cranes, and the words Nisshin Maru, Tokyo. Running down the length of her hull, visible when she corkscrewed on a swell, was research, in large block letters.

She was a sitting duck. Almost idling at 6.8 knots, riding it out. They had to have seen us moving up on the radar, but they must’ve figured we were the Arctic Sunrise, Greenpeace’s other boat, a matter of no concern. Nobody had even bothered to look.
I couldn't believe it. We were pulling alongside her stern.

Cornelissen, at the helm, looked level at his captain. "Do we want to ram them? Punch a few holes in their ship?"

"No, we'd sustain a lot of damage. I think the best tactic here, Alex, is the prop foulers," Watson said he didn't think the Nisshin could go too much faster in these seas. He wanted to cut across her bow and deploy the prop foulers—long strands of rope, steel cables, and buoys that would slip under her hull and catch and tangle her propeller.

"We could ram her up the spillway if you want. What do you say, Paul?"

"No, we're gonna do this."

He turned to VanDerGulik. "Tell them to get the prop foulers ready on the stern. Tell them to stay down, stay hidden. Don't deploy them until I blow the horn."

I looked at Watson. He seemed to be protecting his crew. No sane person wanted a collision in these seas.

Just then the whalers woke up. I can only imagine how the Farley must have looked materializing out of the fog and mountainous seas: an all-black ship running under a gale-stiffened Jolly Roger. It was as if the Nisshin Maru jumped in surprise. Someone put the hammer down and she began to pull away off our port side.

"OK," Watson said to Cornelissen. "Do it if you can. Up the spillway."

It was too late. VanDerGulik, the first engineer, had the engines tweaked, and the Farley was straining with all she had, 11, 11.6, 12 knots. But the Nisshin was too powerful. She came up to speed and began to flee at 14 knots.

And then her skipper seemed to snap. Captain D. Toyama had been whaling in the Antarctic for decades. He had been harassed for weeks by Greenpeace. Its Zodiacs swarmed his killer boats. His harpooners had shot whales right over their heads. And here, out of the fog, was a ship with a terrifying reputation. He'd had enough. A quarter-mile (half-kilometer) away, I watched in amazement as the Nisshin turned to starboard, angled across our bow, and slowed down. Toyama seemed to be saying, "OK, you wanna mess with me? Bring it on."

Cornelissen matched the turn, about 30 degrees of it, so as not to fall behind the Nisshin's stem, and set a collision course. I watched him. He was completely calm. So was Watson, who stood with a hand on the lever that controlled our speed looking relaxed. This wasn't his first rodeo. He had been shot at and depth charged by the Norwegian Navy. And he'd faced down a Soviet frigate off Siberia, refusing to halt with the Soviets just yards away and about to let loose with machine guns; the sudden, miraculous appearance of a gray whale surfacing between the two vessels defused the standoff.

Now we caught the crossing seas on our starboard side, and the Farley slammed over to port in a 40-degree roll that sent a videographer crashing across the bridge. The Farley righted and slammed to the other side. Cornelissen looked at the radar. He turned to the boatswain, Kalifi Ferretti-Gallon, a fey 22-year-old from Montreal who happened to be his girlfriend, and said, "Tell the crew, collision in two minutes."

Most of the crew was gathered in the mess in their exposure suits, aft of mid-ship, below the deck, and a long hallway away from the main hatch exit.

The Nisshin Maru was on our port side, and the two ships approached each other at an acute angle. In a typical collision situation, the law of the sea dictated that we had the right-of-way, as we were on her starboard. I watched with awe as the Nisshin's bow, as tall as a three-story building, lunged off a 35-foot (11-meter) wave, airborne, and crashed down like a giant ax. The hole it tore out of the sea vaporized, the spray driven downwind. The gap closed. Three hundred yards (274 meters), 200 yards (183 meters). Now we could hear the blare of the Nisshin's horn through the tearing gale. Repeated blasts, short and long, enraged.

"Collision, one minute."

I remember reaching down and tugging on the waterproof zipper of my dry suit and having one very clear simple thought: You're going to be wet and cold in about 20 seconds. The hammering bow loomed, 200 feet (60 meters) away, aimed midships, at our belly.

It was the most impressive sight I've ever seen. Cornelissen glanced at the radar, then at the juggernaut, and held his course. He was focused, intent. A deadly game of Antarctic chicken. One hundred fifty feet (46 meters) away. He blew the horn, which was the order to unleash the prop foulers. A squad on the stern stood, braced themselves, and whipped several hundred feet (couple hundred meters) of mooring line off a big spool, enough to tangle any propeller.

And then the Nisshin blinked. Whoever was at their helm threw it hard to port. For an agonizing second the two ships ran parallel, and then the Japanese were pulling away, fleeing back into the fog. As they ran, Watson pulled down the mic on maritime channel 16, and barked, "Nisshin Maru, Nisshin Maru, this is the Farley Mowat. You are in violation of an international whale sanctuary. We advise you to get out. Time to go now, you murdering scumbags. Now move it! And run like the cowards you are."

I looked at my watch: 5:42 a.m.

Everybody breathed. Later I pulled Cornelissen aside.

"If we had collided," I asked, "Would we have been badly damaged?"

Cornelissen is always in motion, but when he stops, he gives you all his attention. "A ship that's ten times as heavy as your own ship," he said, "that hits you midships with its bow—it's gonna basically slice your ship in half. It will completely destroy your ship in a matter of seconds. Everybody inside would have had a very hard time getting out."

I nodded. "There was a point there where it was up to him whether we were T-boned or not."

"Yes, he definitely had that choice and he didn't take it. If he would've ended it there, that would've probably ended commercial whaling. But I still believe that not sacrificing people for that, in that way, is probably a better choice."

"But personally for you as an activist, you're willing to make that choice every day? You're willing to make that trade-off: your own life for, say, stopping whaling?"

"Absolutely. But I'm not going to engage in a suicide mission. It's gotta be a calculated risk."

I turned to the captain. He said, "We've won every game of chicken we've ever played."

Peeling off my dry suit, I let the adrenaline wash through me. I thought, Watson is the anti-Ahab. More bearish, more charming,
but just as terrifying in his fearlessness and in his willingness to put everything on the line, including our lives, to save the whales.

By 6:05 a.m. the ever media-savvy Watson already had a press release posted on his Web site that began: "No whale will be killed on Christmas Day."

A certain somberness took over the ship. The storm raged. Watson showed me the weather fax. "Looks like a freight train," he chuckled. "Never really seen one like it." A line of five I's for "low"—tightly packed storm systems—marched one after another west to east along the 62nd parallel. We turned south again, both to shake the storms and because Watson knew that the Japanese would eventually return to the edge of the ice cap, where the whales were most numerous. The skies lifted a little, and we sailed into a landscape that reminded me of Monument Valley, except that the flat-topped monoliths scattered across the horizon were great blue-shadowed icebergs.

That night in my bunk, I lay in the dark and thought about the exchange the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society had just invited the whales to make: all hands for the end of Japanese whaling. I knew that to much of the world, Watson would be deemed insane. Maybe he was. Certainly, from the bridge of the Nisshin Maru, watching the much smaller ship hold its course to the brink of destruction must have sent a chill of cold horror through her officers. Honor was one thing, murder and suicide on the high seas another. But I also thought about the whales, swimming tonight in their pods through the islands of ice, families and groups of families, in numbers that for many species are just a tiny fraction of what they were just a hundred years ago. I thought about a whale Watson had tried to save years ago. I thought about a whale Watson had tried to save from a harpoon off Siberia, that in a struggle for life had crashed down beside his Zodiac. Just before death, the animal pulled itself deliberately away so as not to crush the little boat, protecting Watson as if it understood that he was there to help. I did not think Watson was exactly insane.

Countries around the world pledged to protect the whales and codified that promise in treaties and regulations, and yet the protections were all on paper. In reality the whales of the Southern Ocean, of all the oceans, were as vulnerable as if there had been no treaties at all. The Japanese whalers allotted themselves whatever number they wished to kill, endangered and nonendangered species alike, and they came down and took them. They shot them right over Greenpeace's head. The whales could not advocate for themselves. They had no ally on the entire planet that was willing to intervene at all costs, even death, except Watson and Sea Shepherd. Human beings are willing to lay down their lives for territory, resources, national honor, religion. Why not for another species?

Whatever one said about Watson's methods, they were relatively effective. His campaigns against the English, Irish, and Scottish seal hunts in the early eighties helped shut them down for good. His battle against the Canadian seal hunt, which brought Brigitte Bardot to the ice for her famous picture, helped end the slaughter of baby harp seals in 1987. Still, Newfoundland sealers killed more than 300,000 adults last year, 98 percent of those under three months old. Watson is philosophical and dogged in his fight for threatened species. He says, "The victories are always temporary but the defeats [extinctions] are permanent."

January 2, midnight. The constant harassment was getting to the whalers. They had been running for eight days, ever since the encounter on Christmas. The informer on the Esperanza said the Nisshin Maru was moving erratically, generally west, and that they were not whaling. There was no sign of the killer ships. He said they seemed afraid.

The black Farley was lumbering steadily westward along Antarctica's frozen edge, in a world of fog and ice where squads of Adélie penguins swim with great speed. When the skies cleared, Chris Aultman took me on a three-hour chopper reconnaissance along the ice edge. The world below was black-and-white. Pure and lonely. That's what it is about Antarctica: You are either hot-blooded and hungry or you are a cold element. You are water or ice. There is no middle ground here, no compromise. It seemed apt. In Watson's war on the whalers, there were no conditions for truce.

A week before, Hatanaka of Japan's Institute of Cetacean Research sent an open letter to the head of Greenpeace Japan: "The Sea Shepherd boat, the Farley Mowat, has already foolhardily tried to approach the Nisshin Maru and deployed a mooring line with the intent of entwining her propeller. These are extremely dangerous actions. It is widely known that Sea Shepherd has engaged in criminal and violent activity in the past, such as setting fire to and sinking whaling vessels in Iceland and Norway and fishing vessels in Spain and other countries. Sea Shepherd is a terrorist organization. . . ." The Japanese government was rumored to be sending down a warship.

Ian Campbell, Australia's environment minister, said Watson's threats to attack the Japanese fleet reflected poorly on legitimate antwhaling groups and "risk setting back the cause of whale conservation many years."

Greenpeace disavowed any link with Sea Shepherd. In a press release, Watson countered that "the enemy of my enemy is my ally" and that it was the whalers who were the criminals, violating, by his count, at least six international laws. Claiming authority under the UN World Charter for Nature, he ordered the whaling fleet to return to Japan. Articles by the Associated Press, and in the Washington Post, the Guardian, the Australian, and the New Zealand Herald, among others, trumpeted all sides of the developing whale war.

Watson was in his element. With every media and government attack he seemed to get friskier, firing off press releases that said, "The [Australian] government says that the Japanese do not recognize the Australian claim to the Antarctic Treaty. In 1942 they did not recognize Australia's claim to Australia." Talk about hot buttons. If he wanted to stir the pot, he was.

On the chugging Farley, the pace slowed. Laura Dakin, in the kitchen, cooked up vegan sausages and chocolate cake while the crew assembled in the lounge to watch Miss Congeniality and Forces of Nature in surround sound. (The ship's artist, Geert Vons, had a crush on Sandra Bullock.) The deckhands sorted smoke bombs and manufactured prop foulers. The J Crew, who, it turns out, were all semiprofessional gamblers from Syracuse, New York, played endless rounds of Texas Hold 'em. We even had a haiku contest to pass the time. The winner, by Kristian Olsen, described the overloading of a Zodiac in Hobart on a run to get cases of beer: "Hobart. Beer falls in. / Splash. That's rum. Lost one boat too. / Saving whales is hard."

During these quiet moments, Watson enjoyed torturing the young officers of his watch by blaring Celtic and Canadian folk music from the bridge. He sat in his captain's chair, feet up on the sill, and read from his own writings. Raised on the rocky coast of New Brunswick, Canada, Watson is an autodidact who ran away to join a Norwegian merchant ship when he was 17. He has published five books and is in the process of writing four more. One of his works in progress is a scholarly history of the papacy, another a treatise on organized religion, called God's Monkey House.

On January 5, Watson got a message from his insider on the Esperanza placing the fleet at 63° 45' S, 72° 20' E, along with the simple message, "They're killing whales today."

There were several astonishing things about this news. One was that the whaling fleet was so far to the west. They had run to the very western edge of their "research area," which was at 70° E,
north of Cape Darnley. Watson said, "They can't go much farther. They've run for 3,000 miles (4,828 kilometers). I can only think they're running from us." The second startling inference was that the Japanese had not whaled since at least Christmas Day. For 11 days no whales had been killed. Third, they were more than 700 miles (1,127 kilometers) from our current position, and we were running low on fuel to keep VanDerGulik sounding the tanks and repeatedly calculating the distance to Cape Town—about 20 days. The safest thing would be to return immediately to Perth, about 18 days away. But Watson rarely did the safe thing. "Two and a half days and we'll get 'em," he said, then ordered Cornelissen to keep moving west.

On January 6, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence detailed the Farley Mowat's run-in with the Nisshin Maru on its piracy watch. Online I found the ONI report: There was Sea Shepherd on the Civil Maritime Analysis Department's communiqué titled "Worldwide Threat to Shipping Mariner Warning Information."

At the same time, Watson's mole on the Esperanza reported 13 minke whales and one endangered fin whale killed that day. In New Zealand the whaling controversy took center stage on the top story of television news, and the minister of conservation, Chris Carter, said, "the program the Japanese are undertaking in the Southern Ocean is not about science, it's about hunting and killing whales to supply meat markets." He added that New Zealand would be upping the pressure on Japan to stop whaling and that the New Zealand Air Force would be sending Orion surveillance aircraft to monitor their activities.

I went out onto the main deck to clear my head. The engine throbbed. The fog had lifted and the seas were as calm as they'd been the entire trip, a gentle roll out of the southwest. Then I saw it: a plume of mist just off the starboard bow, and another, smaller. A long, mottled lateral fin gestured out of the water, and I saw the two gray and dark backs, mother whale calf, dive under the boat, the mother's articulated, graceful fluke disappearing last. Farther off starboard were three more blows, the hot mist trailing after them. All the way to the horizon, where two flat-topped icebergs marked the edge of the world, were humpback whales swimming slowly east. Pairs and small groups rolled around each other, showing fins, flukes, eyes, and then moved on. They swam past the boat on both sides. Hundreds of whales. Could they know? Could they be swimming away from their hunters to the west? They were not concerned with us at all.

January 8 was a good day to die. For the crew of the vegan pirate ship the Farley Mowat, that was the consensus. The morning brightened over a sea of silk and glass. On the port and starboard Zoarcas, the tarps were off, the prop foulers hoisted and stowed; the crew had been manufacturing them night and day. The Jolly Roger was raised and flapped lazily over the bow. At 10:15 a.m. the main radar was lit up with ships. At 10:59 the Jolly Roger was raised and flapped lazily over the bow.

Greenpeace was bearing witness to the transfer and protesting by maneuvering the Arctic Sunrise near the Bluebird and sending in Zoarcas to paint her side with long-handled brushes: whale meat from sanctuary, in big white letters. The Japanese ignored them and continued loading—until Sea Shepherd came into visual range. Then they panicked. They dropped the lines, and in the ensuing rush to disengage and run, they rammed Greenpeace's Arctic Sunrise. An e-mail from the informer on the Esperanza to Watson said, "Very frustrating indeed. All of this right under our noses, because they know we will not ram or endanger them. At least when you show up, they run like cowards!"

They did. They ran. From the bridge, Watson watched the Nisshin gather speed and charge north, the Oriental Bluebird fled east. From a window he yelled, "OK! Get moving!" He slowed the Farley long enough to let the port and starboard Zoarcas into the sea, then throttled ahead as soon as the 18-foot (5-meter) rubber boats unhooked and sped away. He liked to blast Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" from the big outside speakers in times like these, but the gale had shorted the speakers. Two minutes later the helicopter lifted off the heli-deck, tilted hard forward and accelerated toward the fray. Up ahead we could see Greenpeace's two orange Zoarcas in the water and its Hughes 500 chopper circling overhead. It was a melee. At 9.5 knots all the Farley could do now was follow and watch as the fastest Zodiac ate up the distance. The Nisshin was clearly expecting a fight—its water cannons were blasting steadily over the stern and sides.

"Our Zodiac is going 30 knots," Cornelissen said from the main radar screen. The second, slower Zodiac, came behind it. We watched as the first caught up to the Nisshin, skirting the veil of blasting water from the cannons. The second reached the side of the ship. Its crew threw two prop foulers against the hull, and then the temperamental old outboard began to balk. For a ship the size of the Nisshin, there is no way to replace a fouled prop; the parts are too massive. In the event one was disabled, the ship and her crew would have to be towed to the nearest port. The process could take weeks, and the rest of the fleet, devoid of a cargo ship, would have to return home. That was Watson's hope. Wessel-Louis Jacobsz, 24, a South African master scuba diver and captain of the first Zodiac, was going to do whatever he could to make that happen. Through binoculars I watched as he ran the Zodiac up under the bow of the ship.

Even on the smooth water there was a low swell, and the outboard hit those waves and skipped airborne. The prow of the Nisshin towered over the little boat, pushing up a bow wave that the Zodiac rode. The whalers tried to stab the inflatable with flensing knives on long poles (for processing whale meat), but couldn't; Jacobsz and crew were under the overhang of the bow and too far away. At times the Zodiac was no more than a man's length from the Nisshin's nose.

J. Crew Joel Capolongo, 29, and former 101st Airborne soldier Steve Sikes, 31, deployed the prop foulers. When they'd released them all, they tied a piece of scrap steel to a buoy with a long cable and threw that over as well. Then Jacobsz slid the Zodiac away in a swooping arc and circled to the stern where they picked up the buoy and sped forward to deploy it again. A false move and they'd be flattened under the Nisshin Maru like so much roadkill.

Two hours later, lagging farther and farther behind, Watson called the Zoarcas back to the Farley. None of the prop foulers had engaged. By 3:30 p.m. (16 minutes 29 kilometers) away and fleeing at 14 knots. The Japanese fleet doubled their quota from the year before, they did not have enough room on the vast Nisshin to store the tons of meat they were harvesting. It was a startling illustration of the scale of the hunt.
had vanished in all directions. The sun began its slide to the horizon and reefs of clouds lowered in from the north and east. The seas doubled in height every hour.

That night, steep swells churned in from the east. Whole wheat chapatis and poker chips slid off the tables. Snow blew horizontally across the decks. Sleepers were thrown from their bunks. Watson came on watch at 8 a.m. and the Farley moved gingerly into a sea of scattered icebergs and fog. At 9:05 the captain was lecturing the bridge on the fall of Jerusalem during the Crusades. "The Templars and the Knights of St. John couldn't take it. The guy who finally took Jerusalem was an excommunicant from the church . . . ." When the quartermaster reported the new blip on the screen Watson swiveled in his chair. "Range?"

"Sixteen miles [26 kilometers], sir."

"Speed?"

"Ten knots."

The fog was so dense, it wasn't until we were 1.6 miles (2.6 kilometers) away that we could see the black shape extending from behind the island of ice. I scanned with binoculars and made out the white letters that I knew said whale meat from sanctuary along the starboard side. The Oriental Bluebird.

They never moved. I'll never know why. Cornelissen was woken up and took the helm. He turned to his girlfriend, the boatswain: "Tell everyone we're gonna hit. Seven minutes." The crew was ordered to the higher decks and armed with smoke bombs and bottles of butyric acid, which are mega stink bombs. I thought how Sea Shepherd actions always seemed like a strange mix of a Jack Aubrey attack and Animal House.

A few hundred yards from the freighter Watson took over the helm. He aimed midships and charged full speed. We were bow to bow, starboard to starboard. Just before contact he threw the wheel over to port so the can opener—the seven-foot steel blade on the starboard bow—raked the Bluebird's side. The Farley lurched with impact. There was an agonizing claw-scrape of steel and then another shove as the stern swung in and hit. The can opener crumpled, leaving a long scratch in the Bluebird's thick hull like a keyed car. Watson picked up the mic: "Oriental Bluebird, or should I say, the S.S. Whale Meat, please remove yourself from these waters. You're in violation of international conservation regulations. You are in a whale sanctuary, and you are assisting an illegal activity. Remove yourself from these waters immediately."

At the same time he swung to port in a tight arc and came back across the freighter's bow. The prop-fouling squad was ready to run out mooring line off the stern and lay a tangler across the ship's path. By now the Bluebird was fleeing. Again I watched in awe as Watson drove the Farley within 60 feet (18 meters) of its high, hammering bow. It was like running a red light in front of a moving semi. Had the Bluebird kept up her speed, she would have T-boned and sunk us. It was as if that's what Watson was templing her to do. But their skipper, in all prudence, jammed his engines into reverse and groaned past our stern. The deckhands released the fouling line, but it did not get sucked up. By the time Watson could get around again, the Bluebird was running due north at 15 knots. He turned to the officers on the bridge. "We need to come back with a faster ship," he said.

The international reaction was immediate. The Japan Whaling Association's president, Keiichi Nakajima, accused Sea Shepherd of being "circus performers" and "dangerous vegans." The Age newspaper out of Melbourne reported that Japan was considering scrambling police aircraft to the Antarctic to defend its whaling fleet and might ask Australia for protection. The Maritime Union of New Zealand announced that it would not service any Japanese ships having anything to do with whaling. On a live round table broadcast shown across Australia with Watson (participating via satellite phone), Australian Environment Minister Ian Campbell, and others, Watson was aggressively unrepentant.

"It is a criminal operation, it's illegal, it has no business being there," he railed.

"There's no difference between them and ivory poachers or drug traffickers."

Campbell fired back that Watson was a "lunatic" and a "rogue pirate on the seas." Watson dispatched a press release that he would stop his attacks if the governments of New Zealand and Australia would initiate legal action to stop the whaling. Campbell scoffed. Watson issued a press release saying, "Let's get serious; this guy is lame."

But the truth was, Watson had no more attacks to launch. His old ship was nearly out of fuel. VanDerGulik came onto the bridge in his blue coveralls, decibel-reducing earmuffs propped on his head, and said, "We might make it to Cape Town on fumes if we don't encounter too much bad weather."

On January 10 the Farley Mowat turned away from the whales and limped northward into another gale. There was nothing more she could do. The Japanese could hunt again without intervention. I spent days by the stern chains watching the acrobatics of the petrels and albatross. The rougher the weather got, the more fun the birds seemed to have. I thought they were like Watson. One image from the trip kept coming back to me. It was when Chris Aultman took me up in the chopper, and we ran along the desolate false coast of the ice edge. Returning to the ship, we climbed to 4,000 feet (1,219 meters) and ran across open water into a sheen of low sun. Then I saw the ship, a jaunty, compact, black shadow on the taut blue sea that curved to the horizon. It looked so completely self-sufficient and alone.