

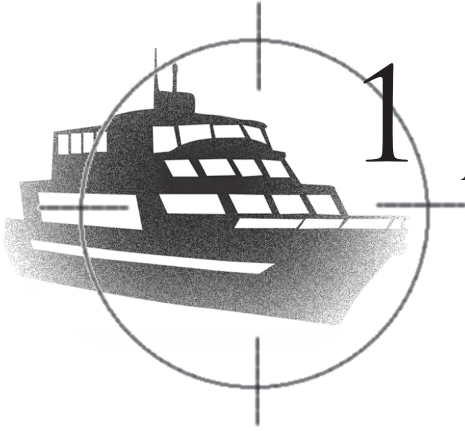
M. J. Mollenhour

ARCTURUS

A Jack McDonald Novel
About Soldiers, Spies, Pirates, and Terrorists with
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*Aboard the Arcturus
Atlantic Ocean, 125 miles northeast
of Miami, Florida
Approaching the Abacos chain,
in the Bahamas' "Out Islands,"
Early July 2007*

Jack slid his hand onto the back-strap of the .45 automatic holstered on his belt, barely concealed underneath his lightweight, buttonup, "I'm on vacation" shirt. He formed his fingers into the precise grip Jack had practiced so many times. The cold, serrated-metal friend filled his hand and answered back. Reassured, Jack stretched over the rail again.

Waves lapped against the *Arcturus*, beating out a certain rhythm, like the thrumming, chugging of an old, reliable engine. Jack eyed the placid Atlantic below suspiciously. Sure, it would grace with its fresh, quickening, salt smell, cooling spray, stunning beauty and pleasures, bestowed on the wicked and the good alike, regardless of their intent—but it might just destroy either, mindlessly, in a heartbeat. *Lap!*

Lapped, Jack said in his thoughts. This ocean *laps* at boats and men. Yet, here he sailed, as so many before, taking his chances with this paradoxically, simultaneously, alien-natural power.

One or two laps from you too hard and people vanish! Jack accused. Been going on for centuries: that hungry ocean and those luckless people, sucked down in a heartbeat, with the ocean closing over them and lapping, lapping, lapping not even leaving a hole or a mark. Vanished.

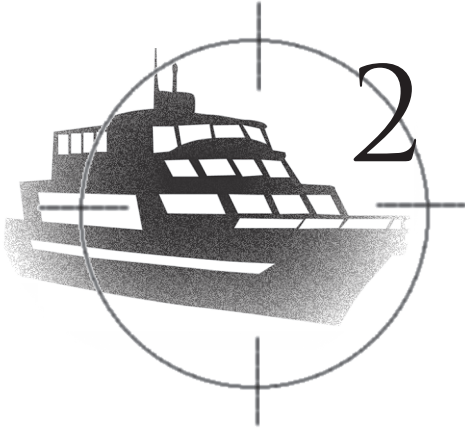
As if to affirm Jack's accusation, the Atlantic impertinently

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

licked again at the boat, smacking the hull to scorn it like a splinter in its finger and warning over and over, endlessly, that the sea might munch the *Arcturus* anytime it pleased.

Simple. Jack McDonald—ex-infantry—didn’t trust the sea. Knew it was fickle, knew it was coldly neutral, like a sociopath. So immensely powerful, like God, only His soulless, material creation with no heart. Unfathomable power without innate mercy: what a monstrous combination!

Jack resigned in disgust from the Army in March, shook hands with his Lieutenants and his own Battalion Commander and friend, drove past the golf course and the old Officer’s Club where he had unwound with comrades, out Gate 1, down Highway 41A, and away from Fort Campbell, Kentucky and the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). Yes, resigning relieved him of the military’s hovering, career “ticket-punching” tedium, but now, like never before, an odd feeling called “strangely out of place” possessed him immediately outside the post. He missed the men of the 1st of the 506th “Currahee” Air Assault Infantry Battalion already. Well, he had his reasons for resigning and it was done. What now?



*Aboard the Corsican Sun
Perdido Cay,
the Abacos chain,
in the Bahamas' "Out Islands"*

The Atlantic's cold, gray waves piled up first against the bay's shallowing entrance. Here, they surrendered most of their strength, and rolled more tamely toward the tiny cove on the bay's far south side. The cove's crystal-clear, blue-green shimmer proclaimed "Pure Caribbean!" even in the pre-dawn dark.

Palms lined the cove's shore. White sand glistened in the moonlight. Yellowtail snapper trolled the 8' depths, sheltering from the Atlantic's power and predators.

The rocket-propelled grenade's explosion shattered this pristine peace, sending the dead and stunned fish floating to the surface. Raucous laughter erupted on the *Corsican Sun*. Cuban-accented Spanish voices cheered and cursed.

"See, I told you," the rocketeer boasted to his three mates, reliving his glory by—once again—pointing the now-empty RPG-7 tube up and out, filling in with his own shouted "Boom!"

They all knew wasting the RPG round on fishing would also net them trouble but they could not argue with the result. As one man swiveled the searchlight across the still-reverberating cove surface, their next meals arose. To Hell with sitting with a pole in your hand.

The Cubans, ages 18 through 41, had been to sea a full week. They'd sat in this same cove for the last three days. Give any men

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

boats, guns, and “toys”; then play “boredom” with their brains, and bizarre behavior begins. Add some meanness and the bizarre twists from benign toward the malevolent.

“Sierra four, Sierra four, over.”

The “fisherman” turned to face the now-crackling radio. “Get that, Hermon,” he commanded, savoring his assumed, temporary celebrity.

“This is Sierra four, over,” Hermon answered his leader, Revaca, on the radio aloft in the nearby helicopter. He’d heard the chopper fly out northwestward earlier and knew Revaca was patrolling.

“We’re up here at 2,000 feet and show a radar contact 80 miles from you, heading generally this way,” his leader, Revaca, advised.

“Do you want us to go check it out?” Hermon suggested.

Silence. *Idiots!* thought Revaca, holding the microphone but shaking his head. *Why me?* After forcing his own bored impatience back under constraint, Revaca delivered his instructions—his reminder.

“No, (*fool*), our job is to secure the cove and fasten the—objects—in place as we were ordered, no more, no less. How could we do that with you chasing around in the ocean?” he could not resist chiding.

“*Si*, what then?”

“Sit where you are. If anything changes, I will let you know. Resume your work when the sun permits, finish up and—let’s all get done and get the Hell out of here. Oh, and remember your radio language! Out.”

“Roger,” Hermon agreed. He turned to address the other three hands who had also heard the good news. “Well, we’ve sat, and smoked, and shit, and even slept all we can; let’s get a fire going on the beach and grill some fish.”

Two men leapt overboard into the shallows and waded, using

ARCTURUS

lines to gently pull the *Sun* closer to the beach, while the other two collected firewood. Nights creep by so slowly when you're bored and dawn remains four hours away.